

Forum

Process Theology and The Absolute God.

Rev. David Silversides responds to Allen Baird's article in the
British Reformed Journal No. 21 (Jan-Mar. 1998).

Allen Baird responds to Rev. Silversides.

Rev. D. Silversides.

Dear Editor,

I am writing in response to Allen Baird's article on "The Absolute God" in January-March 1998 issue of the BRF Journal.

I would like to address a few questions to Mr Baird.

1. Does Mr Baird hold that the elect are justified from eternity (as per Hoeksema ¹ and Hanko ²) or does he accept the Westminster Confession statement, "God did, from all eternity, decree to justify all the elect, and Christ did, in the fulness of time, die for their sins, and rise again for their justification: nevertheless, **they are not justified**, until the Holy Spirit doth, in due time, actually apply Christ unto them" (WCF XI:4), or Belgic Confession XXIII ".... relying and resting on the obedience of Christ crucified alone, which becomes ours, **when we believe in him.**"

Samuel Rutherford states "Now, justification is a real favour applied to us in time, just as sanctification in the new birth: 'And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified' (1Corinthians 6:11). Then were they sometimes not washed We cannot be justified before we believe."³ Rutherford then refers to John 3:18, Romans 8:30, Ephesians 2:3.

2. Does Mr Baird hold that the non-elect angels were ordained "to fall into sin and damnation" (Larger Catechism A19) or does he believe they were damned before they fell, even from eternity?

Assuming the former, does he acknowledge that God, as the "righteous Lord that loveth righteousness" (Psalm 11:7) took pleasure in the holy state and righteous status these angels possessed prior to their fall and displeasure in their unholy state after that fall, though that change of state was eternally decreed by him? And will he not accept that within the fixed eternal decree of God to bring the non-elect angels to damnation there was included the fact that they should be holy and pleasing to God for a season before falling into sin which is displeasing to God?

1. H Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Reformed Free Publishing Association pp.116 & 502ff.

2. H Hanko, *Mysteries of the Kingdom*, Reformed Free Publishing Association, p.219.

3. Samuel Rutherford, *The Trial and Triumph of Faith*, Free Church of Scotland edition 1845, p.91.

3. Does Mr Baird accept Turretin's distinction between God's will of "decree and precept"⁴? For the latter, Turretin refers to Romans 12:2, Ephesians 5:10, Colossians 3:20, Matthew 6:10 and he also calls it God's will of "approbation" or "complacency"⁵, and it refers to what God commands his moral creatures to do rather than what he has decreed shall come to pass.

Consequently, when he deals with the love of God, Turretin distinguishes; "First, there is a love of benevolence by which God willed good to the creature in eternity; second the love of beneficence by which he does good to the creature in time according to his good will; third, the love of complacency by which he delights himself in the creature on account of the rays of his image seen in them. The two former precede every act of the creature; the latter follows."⁶

Similarly Rutherford, "It is indeed, one and the same simple and holy will of God, by which he loved Peter and John from eternity, and chose them to salvation, and by which he so loveth them in time, as of free grace he bestoweth on them faith, holiness, pardon in Christ, and followeth these with his love: and the former is called his love of good will to their person, ere they do good or ill; the latter his love of complacency as to their state, and the Lord's new workmanship in them And the truth is, the love of complacency is not a new act of God's will, that ariseth in God in time, but the declaration of God's love of good will in this effect, that God is pleased to bestow faith and his beauty of holiness, which maketh the soul lovely to God".⁷

"It is true, God loveth the elect before conversion equally as after conversion, in regard of that free love of election. It is a palpable untruth, that the elect, by believing in Christ and being translated from death to life in their conversion to God are equally loved of God before conversion, as after conversion, if we speak of God's love of complacency"⁸ Rutherford draws on John 14:21-23 for this point, "I **will** love him", "my father **will** love him".

4. If God has, within his decree to save the elect, ordained a period of their lives when they shall be under the sentence of his wrath prior to the bestowment of saving faith, then does not Mr Baird accept that it is no more "process theology" to say that God has ordained to show favour to the reprobate for a period of time (in their lives in this world), not in spite of the decree of reprobation, but as the outworking of it? It is unthankfulness for mercies bestowed that so much increases the guilt of the reprobate (Romans 9:22 - "longsuffering").

So Turretin: "The question is not whether God is borne by a general love and philanthropy towards men as his creatures, and also bestows upon them various temporal benefits pertaining to the things of this life. We do not deny that God has never left himself without witness with regard to this (Acts 14:17). And we readily grant that there is no-one who does not owe some gratitude to God and who, whatever he is or can do, is not bound to give thanks to his Creator".⁹

If Mr Baird holds to Westminster orthodoxy in his view of when justification takes place, then why can he not at least open his mind to the possibility that Turretin could be right with-

4. **Francis Turretin**, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, Vol. 1 p.220.

5. **Turretin**: op. cit. pp..221f.

6. **Ibid**, p.242.

7. **Rutherford** op. cit. p.350.

8. **Ibid** p.354.

9. **Turretin** op. cit. pp.396f.

out being a process theologian?

God is absolutely free to display his goodness. Zanchius states, "With regard to the Divine goodness, though the non-elect are not objects of it in the sense the elect are, yet even they are not wholly excluded from a participation of it. They enjoy the good things of providence in common with God's children, and very often to a much higher degree. To which may be added, that the goodness of the Deity does not cease to be infinite in itself only because it is extended more to some objects than to others".¹⁰

Likewise Turretin, "Hence although love considered affectively and on the part of the internal act is equal in God (because it does not admit of increase and diminution), yet regarded effectively (or on the part of the good which he wills to anyone) it is unequal because some effects of love are greater than others"¹¹ (see Matthew 5:43-48, Luke 6:35-36, Romans 2:4. Christ "made under the law" fulfilled Galatians 5:14, as we are required to, without confining love to his neighbour to the elect, and yet without conflict between his two natures).

As to the compatibility of this with God's having neither parts nor passions, although Rutherford touches on it above, permit me a lengthy quote from Dabney, "Our Confession says, that God hath neither parts nor passions. That He has something analagous to what are called in man active principles, is manifest, for He wills and acts; therefore He must feel. But these active principles must not be conceived of as emotions, in the sense of ebbing and flowing accesses of feeling. In other words, they lack that agitation and rush, that change from cold to hot, and hot to cold, which constitutes the characteristics of passion in us. They are, in God, an ineffable, fixed, peaceful, unchangeable calm, although the springs of volition. That such principles may be, although incomprehensible to us, we may learn from this fact: That in the wisest and most sanctified creatures, the active principles have least of passion and agitation, and yet they by no means become inefficacious as springs of action - eg, moral indignation in the holy and wise parent and ruler. That the above conception of the calm immutability of God's active principles is necessary, appears from the following: The agitations of literal passions are incompatible with His blessedness. The objects of those feelings are as fully present to the Divine Mind at one time as another; so that there is nothing to cause ebb or flow. And that ebb would constitute a change in Him. When, therefore, the Scriptures speak of God as becoming wroth, as repenting, as indulging His fury against His adversaries, in connection with some particular event occurring in time, we must understand them anthropopathically. What is meant is, that the outward manifestations of His active principles were as though these feelings then arose."¹²

5. One last question, does Mr Baird accept that if his philosophical reasoning is in conflict with the obvious meaning of Scripture then his supposed logic is wrong? This is crucial. If the answer to this is negative, then what do we have but the serpent saying, "hath God said?" and the old temptation to the proud desire for autonomous knowledge, "Ye shall be as gods".

I appeal, therefore, to Mr Baird and your readers to look up the various Biblical references in this letter and to seek grace from the Lord not to use their minds to impose their presuppositions upon them, but as receptors of revealed truth.

Yours sincerely in the Gospel

David Silversides.

10. Jerome Zanchius, *Absolute Predestination*, chap. 4, position 8, Sovereign Grace Publications p.81.

11. Turretin Op. cit. p.241.

12 R.L. Dabney, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, , Lecture XII, point 4, Zondervan p.153.

Allen Baird Replies to Rev. Silversides

Rev. Silversides is a good man and a faithful minister of Jesus Christ. I have had the privilege of sitting under his ministry several times and have been greatly edified thereby. I have also discussed the matter of the free-offer of the gospel with him extensively on at least one occasion, and am happy to report that although we parted company without any resolution of those differences which clearly exist between us, we still remained - and remain, I hope - on good terms.

However, I have a duty to reply to him now in frank and full terms. His reply to my article on *The Absolute God* was not worthy of him. It utterly failed to interact with the article, never mind answer it, as I will now demonstrate. I therefore view it with disappointment, because of his seeming incapacity to bring progress or solutions to this subject which continues to divide Reformed from Reformed. I will respond to him point by point.

(1) Why in the world does Rev. Silversides waste so much of his reply on a discussion of the subject of eternal justification? I never mentioned the doctrine of justification once in my article, never mind addressed the question of whether or not it is eternal. However, I can say that I have tentatively written an article for the BRJ in which I try and reconcile the 'eternal vs. temporal' justification debaters in the interests of Reformed unity by utilising a more central doctrine which both sides accept: the doctrine of the Trinity. Rev. Silversides will have to evaluate its success for himself.

As far as trying to use Samuel Rutherford to 'prove' the truth of exclusively temporal justification, I think that Rev. Silversides is on very shaky ground. It is equally possible for the 'other side' to quote Rutherford also. E.g.: "Verily before any of the Elect do believe, the wrath of God and all the effects of his Wrath, are removed from their Persons by Vertue of Christ's Satisfaction ... Though we are not justified passively or terminatively, till we do believe, yet our justification actively considered, as it is in God (who is the only justifier) was compleat and perfect, before we had a Being; and in this sense, Faith is not the instrument of our Justification."¹ Or even more explicitly, "But this, i.e., election, is an immanent and eternal act; for no act of God's will is in time, or transient; what God wills, He willed from eternity ... These acts of imputing, and not imputing, are immanent acts in God, and therefore eternal."² I make these quotations to show that whole matter of the time of justification is for Rutherford - and me - a more complex issue that merely making it a matter of being *either* in election *or* in faith.

(2) If it was difficult to ascertain Rev. Silverside's intention in his first point, it is even more of a 'mystery' now. It might have been possible to interpret Rev. Silversides as arguing as follows: "You reject the free-offer because it requires us to believe that God's will changes in time as he firstly loves the reprobate under the preaching of the gospel but then, simultaneously hates the reprobate eternally in election, and finally at the judgement. But you have the same problem. You believe that God hates the elect prior to justification but then loves them after justification. Therefore you are in the same fix as I am in."

Two obvious problems occur with this attempt at confusion. Firstly, and in the context of his immediate argument about fallen angels, how could this argument possibly have rele-

¹ S. Rutherford, *Exercitationes Apologeticae pro Divina Gratiae*, (Amsterdam, 1636), pp. 45 and 43.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 25 and 41. The first part of this quotation is of particular relevance, exploding as it does the myth that God has a will or desire which is temporal and temporary, as Rev. Silversides believes. I will be coming back to Rutherford on this matter later.

vance to angels who are never justified but left in their sin? Secondly, and more importantly, Rev. Silversides' relating of the doctrine of the free-offer with the doctrine of eternal justification demonstrates a very explicit defect in his understanding of justification. When God justifies a sinner, that sinner is transferred *from a state of guilt to a state of righteousness* or *innocence*. This is not equivalent to a translation *from a condition of wrath to a condition of grace*. Rev. Silversides is confusing the forensic or legal aspect of our salvation with the organic. It is very clear from the context that such passages as Ephesians 2:1 are emphasizing the organic rather than the federal, as it proceeds to describe the process of moving from a condition of wrath to grace as being a matter of 'nature' and 'faith.'

(3) This section greatly confused me. I have no idea what Rev. Silversides was trying to do with these quotations from Turretin and Rutherford. All I can say is this. **Firstly**, of course I accept the distinction between God's will of decree and will of precept. No-one who rejects the free-offer from our perspective has ever rejected this distinction.³

Secondly, as far as Turretin's three-fold distinction in the love of God is concerned - benevolence, beneficence and complacency - it is crystal clear from the context that Turretin applies all three sorts of love *exclusively to the elect*. "By the **first**, he elects us; by the **second**, he redeems and sanctifies us; by the **third**, he gratuitously rewards us as holy and just."⁴ Likewise, when Rutherford makes this distinction between love of well-willing (*amor benevolentiae*) and love of complacency (*amor complacentiae*), he refers to them as the love of election and the love of justification respectively, thereby ruling out the notion that either might apply to the reprobate.⁵ How then can either of these authors afford any comfort or aid to Rev. Silversides at this point, since he clearly needs a distinction in God's love which would enable him to allocate one sort to the elect and another to the reprobate?

(4) At least this section mentions Process Theology, which is what my original article was all about. Unfortunately, it abounds in confusion not only as to what the BRF position actually is, but also as to what the authors Rev. Silversides himself quotes were actually saying.

Firstly, Rev. Silversides quotes Turretin and Zanchius to 'prove' that God displays His goodness and mercy to the reprobate in this life by giving them good gifts and favours. **This has never been denied by us**. God shows His mercy *to* the reprobate, but does not have any *for* the reprobate. God *displays* His goodness to all, but *bestows* it only upon the elect. Thus God gives the reprobate *favours*, but no *favour*.

Rutherford understands and accepts these distinctions, even if Rev. Silversides does not. "Common love scarce ammounteth to grace, because *grace is separative*, and singleth out one of many ... His love is infinite in its act, *not in its object* ... *God's grace is not graven in gold*."⁶ Furthermore, they repudiate the notion that Rev. Silversides seems to hold to, (and which Pastor Hanko pressed him with during their debate), that the grace and love of God is somehow *in things*, so that if God gives a reprobate certain temporal favours, like Rutherford's example of gold, then these gifts somehow contain or signify the grace and favour that God has for the person.

³ For example, see David J. Engelsma, *Hyper-Calvinism and the Call of the Gospel* (Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1994), p. 158. Interestingly, this affirmation of a distinction in the will of God is to be found in the middle of an exposition of Turretin's doctrine of the will of God. All who are interested in what Turretin believed on this matter should consult chapter Seven of this book.

⁴ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology: Volume One*, (P & R, 1992), p. 242.

⁵ Samuel Rutherford, *The Trial and Triumph of Faith*, (Odom Publications), p. 349.

⁶ *Ibid.*, ps. 40, 41 and 43.

Secondly, with regard to what Dabney wrote, I utterly reject it as heretical nonsense. Perhaps Rev. Silversides is unaware that Dabney on the free-offer has already been discussed quite recently and extensively in the BRJ. In a former article, I point out that on the matter of the free-offer, Dabney accurately describes and explicitly rejects Turretin's doctrine of the external call (which is highly ironic considering how Rev. Silversides has quoted them both in his reply, apparently under the illusion that they are both in agreement not only with him but each other), relies on a Romish doctrine of analogy, repudiates God's simplicity and impassability, totters on the brink of Nestorianism, and revels in the concept of paradox.⁷ All this he does in the name of the free-offer of the gospel. Rev. Silversides may align himself with such a theologian on such a matter if he wants - I will be staying well away!

(5) Rev. Silversides accuses me of 'philosophical reasoning' and using 'logic.' I accuse him of not reasoning at all, of introducing irrelevancies into the discussion, of not actually facing any one of my points, and of relying instead on selective quotations from past theologians in a reply which does not advance greater understanding of or unity in the truth at all. How he has the audacity to use theologians like Zanchius, Rutherford and Turretin to 'prove' his particular version of the well-meant offer is beyond me. I believe it to be poor scholarship at best, and dishonest at worst. With regard to Zanchius, my article contained extensive and multiple quotations which together spanned half his entire book. Rev. Silversides produces one irrelevant quotation with which I concur anyway. But let him firstly face all the quotations I made. Does he agree with them all? We are not told, because he does not.

I have already quoted from Rutherford to the effect that God only loves the elect and does not love the reprobate merely as a result of the fact that He gives them good gifts and temporal favours. But there is more. Firstly, on the matter of common grace, Rutherford is vehement in his insistence that all grace is only and ever to be found in Christ, and that anything that is given to us without Christ is a curse. "God save me from a draught of water without Christ! Peace and deliverance from the sword, without Christ and the gospel, are linked and chained to the curse of God ... You may have the earth, peace, and the creature, and the devil to salt them to you with the curse of God ... All mercy - that is, graced mercy, is to be sought in Jesus Christ; every mercy is mercy, because it is in Christ."⁸ If Rev. Silversides would have us believe in a common grace, he must also persuade us of a common Christ.

Secondly, on the matter of the free-offer, and the implications it has for our doctrine of God, Rutherford waxes eloquent in stating the essential thrust of my whole article in words which are stronger than anything I would ever dare use. First, he explicitly refutes Rev. Silversides notions on justification. "It is true, the Lord hateth so the persons of the elect for their sins, as he taketh vengeance of their sins on their surety, Christ; but this consisteth with the Lord's loving of their persons to eternal salvation. The truth is, God's affection *ad intra* of hatred and displeasure, never so passeth on the persons of the elect, as on the persons of the reprobate: he had thoughts of love and peace, in secret, from eternity, to his own elect; he did frame a heaven, a Saviour for them, before all time."⁹ In His own eternal being, God never has wrath or displeasure towards the elect, but consistently and singularly loves them. Even in history, His judicial wrath is poured out not upon them but Christ. Only Arminians, says Rutherford, are offended at this.

Again, and central to what my article was all about, Rutherford said this. "Not any protes-

⁷ *British Reformed Journal*, Issue No. 15, (July - September 1996), pp. 42 to 44.

⁸ Rutherford, *Trial and Triumph*, p. 105.

⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 348-9.

tant divines ever taught, that there is a new love in God, or any degree of love in God, that was not in him before. Arminians, indeed, tell us of a new love, new desires, and of ebbing and flowing; love and hatred succeeding one another in God's mind: - these Vorstian blasphemies we disdain." *This is the essence of the matter.* In this and similar sentences, Rutherford shows himself to be utterly against Rev. Silversides', Dabney's and Pinnock's notions about the eternal and immutable God having successive and changing dispositions or affections within Himself. At least Pinnock has the honesty to admit it. Even Dabney recognised his departure from Turretin. Oh that Rev. Silversides would be equally open and fair about these matters! Then we might start to make some progress.¹⁰

As far as Turretin is concerned, the situation is, if anything, worse for Rev. Silversides. "Can there be attributed to God any conditional will, or universal purpose of pitying the whole human race fallen in sin, of destining Christ as Mediator to each and all, and of calling them all to a saving participation of his benefits? **We deny.**"¹¹ Along with Turretin, the BRF say, "**We also deny**"! Although he might wish to change some words, Rev. Silversides must say, "I affirm". But more relevant to my article, Turretin (in conjunction with another Reformed theologian) wrote the following against the Amyraldians in an official Reformed document. "The Scriptures do not extend unto all and each God's purpose of showing mercy to man, but restrict it to the elect alone, the reprobate being excluded, even by name, as Esau, whom God hated with an eternal hatred (Rom. ix. 10-13). The same Holy Scriptures testify that the counsel and will of God change not, but stand immovable, and that God in the heavens *doeth* whatsoever he will (Ps. cxv. 3; Isa. xlv. 10); for God is infinitely removed from all that human imperfection which characterises inefficacious affections and desires, rashness, repentance, and change of purpose."¹² Once again, this is what I was essentially arguing for in my article. And behold, herewith we find that it is contained in a Calvinistic creed, and one written against Amyraldians at that!

In conclusion, I must firstly urge Rev. Silversides to face squarely the quotations given here from Rutherford, Turretin and Zanchius. It is somewhat offensive, to say the least, that so many such as Rev. Silversides try to 'prove' the free-offer by piece-meal quotations which overtly rub against all that the theologian in question ever wrote. This is particularly done with Calvin and Owen, as well as the three mentioned above, and frankly it is not accurate scholarship. I at least will not say that I agree with them at every point, but merely that their general theology of the gospel call is identical to that of the BRF and contrary to men like Rev. Silversides. I really wish that these latter would learn to concede points to the 'opposition' when necessary. It does their cause or case no good by making non-contextual and irrelevant points which are backed up by non-contextual and irrelevant quotes, concluding with the standard rubbish about the "evils of logic" (sic). If something would not be accepted even in secular courts of law and universities, how much more should it be unacceptable in the church of Jesus Christ, which is supposed to be the pillar and ground of the truth?

I secondly beg Rev. Silversides to go back and seriously re-read my article. The issue with

¹⁰ Even non-Reformed scholars like M. Charles Bell freely admit that "throughout his writings, Rutherford unequivocally maintains that it was not the will, desire, or intention of God that everyone be saved." He then explains that it was against such teaching "Amyraut protested." *Calvin and Scottish Theology*, (The Handsel Press, 1985), ps. 72 and 86.

¹¹ Turretin, *Institutes: Volume One*, pp. 395ff.

¹² **Formula Consensus Helvetica: VI.** Cf. A. A. Hodge, *Outlines Of Theology*, (B.O.T., 1972), p. 658. It would be an easy thing to fill a whole issue of the BRJ with quotations from Turretin on this point. Those who wish more information on his doctrine of the gospel call should see footnote 3 above.