

# Forum

## More on Process Theology and The Absolute God.

Further to Rev. David Silversides, (See BRJ No.23) BRJ subscriber Mr. Sam Bell presses the enquiry further as to Mr. Allen Baird's thesis of BRJ No. 21.

**Mr. Allen Baird responds to Mr. Bell.**

Dear Editor,

I wish to pursue some issues arising from the article entitled "The Absolute God," by Allen Baird, in the Issue No. 21 of the Journal. I refer in particular to the section on pages 4 to 6, where some statements made by Rev. David Silversides in the 1995 debate entitled "Common Grace - Is It Scriptural?" are quoted and discussed. Having attended the debate referred to, and having given its subject matter considerable thought, I have three questions which I would like to see treated in more detail.

### Logic

On page 4, Mr. Baird challenges the following statement by Rev. Silversides. "God is unchangeable in Himself. That means that all His attributes are unchangeable and therefore the attribute of grace or love is unchangeable in God. That does not mean that the manifestation of grace must be unchangeable in its objects."

If I have understood Mr. Baird correctly, he responds with the following argument. *God is unchangeable. God and his attributes are the same. One of God's attributes is love. Therefore, from everlasting to everlasting, God's love (or lack of it) towards any individual must be unchangeable.*

I am not convinced that the conclusion necessarily follows from the premises. Let me repeat the premises, and substitute an inference of my own. *God is unchangeable. God and his attributes are the same. One of God's attributes is love. Therefore, God's attribute of love is unchangeable.* This more cautious deduction is surely beyond dispute. But what exactly does it mean, and what may we now infer from it? I suggest that we might, in the first instance, merely deduce that God has



always been love, and always will be love. That is, we deduce that God, in His attribute of love, is unchangeable in Himself. We need not necessarily deduce how, to whom, or when He expresses this immutable aspect of His being. But then we might reason further, with Mr. Baird, that if God's love is unchangeable, then surely His love *to any object* may neither cease nor vary from eternity to eternity. But why, I ask, is the latter inference a *necessary* inference? Why must the unchangeability of God's love extend precisely so far as *its direction to particular objects*, when the words may bear another less demanding meaning?

Then again, having deduced so much from the unchangeableness of God's love, why not deduce more? Does not God manifest Himself to men in *providences*, as well as in dispositions? Are then His providences unchangeable? Having given prosperity to a man, can He reduce him to poverty and still be the unchangeable God? To argue so would patently be absurd. But why, then, is Mr. Baird's logic compelling in the one instance and not in the other? Of course, both prosperity and poverty may be providentially arranged by God for a man's good, and thus be in conformity with His loving purpose for the man; but that is not the point. The question is, just how far should God's essential unchangeableness be extrapolated to His dealings with men, and what, *logically*, requires the line to be drawn at one point rather than another.

On page 4, Mr. Baird seeks to demonstrate the absurdity of Rev. Silversides' view by arguing that it must arise from one of three foundations, each of which is clearly false. For example, "... the manifestation of God to the creature does not have to be the same as God in Himself *if it is the case that God ceases to be God when He manifests Himself to the creature ....*" The wording betrays an unwarranted presumption: that God's dealings with men are to be equated with His essence. Is it not plain that the manifestation of God to the creature is *not* the same thing as God in Himself?<sup>1</sup> The fact that God is love in Himself is essentially distinct from the fact that He loves *me*. For example, I do not worship God's love towards me, though I worship the God who is love. Again, I do not have to exist for God to be God. Neither must God love *me* for God to be love. Why, then, must the unchangeability of God's love necessarily entail that *he forever love me*?<sup>2</sup>

The article continues to make deductions which seem to me less than secure.

1. There is an ambiguity about this wording which is to be regretted. The casual reader might well take "the manifestation of God to the creature" to mean "the revelation of God to the creature". It is rather God's relation to the creature in disposition and dealings which we are considering. While God's dealings must be consistent with His nature, we must consider His dealings as distinct from His nature, if we are ultimately to avoid pantheism.
2. I am not disputing the plain testimony of Scripture regarding the certain perseverance of God's electing love to His people, only the soundness of the logical deduction on which Mr. Baird relies so heavily in his rejection of Common Grace.



Consider, for example, the Canons of Dordt (page 5), which relate the unchangeableness of election to God's unchangeable nature. But this follows because we know that, in the decree, God determined to save a definite people *eternally*. His election is unalterable because the thing He decreed was an *eternal* state. The unchangeability of God ensures the unchangeability of whatever he decrees, in this case the eternal salvation of a definite people. None of this makes it impossible that God might also decree, unchangeably, some temporary states, as He does with the providential circumstances of men. In other words, the inference drawn by the Canons of Dordt does not *necessarily* transfer to the arena in which Mr. Baird would use it. But I must move on.

## Scripture

On page 5, Mr. Baird challenges another statement by Rev. Silversides. "There is nothing that conflicts with the unchangeableness of God to say that He may and indeed does eternally and unchangeably decree a sequence of dispositions." Leaving aside some further examples of dubious reasoning, let us consider Scripture.

Mr. Baird refuses to acknowledge that God purposes sequences of dispositions. Consider the following:

*They have moved me to jealousy with that which is not God; they have provoked me to anger with their vanities: and I will move them to jealousy with those which are not a people; I will provoke them to anger with a foolish nation. (Deuteronomy 32:21).*

*Because they have forsaken me, and have burned incense unto other gods, that they might provoke me to anger with all the works of their hands; therefore my wrath shall be kindled against this place, and shall not be quenched. (2 Kings 22:17).*

*Rejoice not when thine enemy falleth, and let not thine heart be glad when he stumbleth: Lest the LORD see it, and it displease him, and he turn away his wrath from him. (Proverbs 24:17,18).*

These and numerous other Scriptures speak in terms of God's anger or wrath or displeasure being aroused in response to the deeds of men. Here, it seems to me, we have sequences of dispositions writ large.

Now it is true that God is not taken by surprise by the deeds of men. It is also true that we must not ascribe passions to God, as if His anger were not fully within his sovereign and holy control. And it is true that Scripture regularly employs anthro-



pomorphic language, in which God's dealings are described in the language of the dealings of men. But when every care has been taken to avoid all plainly erroneous thoughts, these Scriptures still say what they say. They say that God was "moved to jealousy, that He was *provoked* to anger", and that His "wrath shall be kindled". That is, they indicate that God's anger and wrath wax and wane in righteous response to the deeds of men. If God is so described to us, is it not because the Spirit of God intends that we should think of Him in this way? And if we are to think of God in this way, is it not because there is some sense in which these things are *true* of God? And if not, where will this leave our doctrine of Scripture? Clark Pinnoch's belief, quoted on page 3, that God "experiences temporal passage, learns new facts when they occur and changes plan in response to what humans do," is unmitigated heresy, but the fact that God is revealed to us as responding to what men do, in both disposition and deed, cannot conveniently be brushed under his heretical carpet.

I have no doubt that Mr. Baird understands the texts I have quoted in a manner consistent with his position, and will be able to provide an interpretation accordingly. But when he has completed his exegesis, I shall be glad to know how it differs from the conclusion that God was *not* "moved to jealousy", that He was *not* "provoked to anger", and that it is *impossible* that God's "wrath shall be kindled".

## Scripture and Logic

This brief consideration of, first logic, and then Scripture, compels me to ask a further question. Does logic govern our interpretation of Scripture, or does Scripture govern our use of logic? I trust we shall agree that, while the former is in a sense true, the latter must take priority. I have a high regard for the role of reason in theology, but I also believe that reason must be brought into conformity with Scripture, rather than the reverse. It is from Scripture that we learn what is logical and reasonable. And we certainly cannot find contradictions where Scripture finds none.

This, of course, is easy to say. The practicalities are more difficult, and lead me to some considerations which I will not pretend fully to have resolved.

Real contradictions are impossible, a truth which ultimately we derive from Scripture. But if I come across a statement in Scripture from which I deduce "A is true", and another from which I deduce "A is not true", then there may be two possible resolutions. Either I have interpreted one or other of the texts incorrectly, or one or other of my deductions from them is wrong.

If I am sure that my interpretations of the apparently conflicting texts are correct, then I am obliged to let Scripture subdue my erring faculty of reason, and, much as it may offend my *sense* of logic, I must accept that there is no actual contradiction.



I will then strive to understand how the texts are consistent, acknowledging the possibility that my mind may struggle to do so, and that there may even be aspects of the subject which the mind of no man will ever fully resolve. This is the path I am tentatively proposing to Mr. Baird. I believe it is a path familiar to him, for often he must urge it upon Arminians who cry "Contradiction!" when we speak of the predestination of God and the responsibility of men, reasoning that the responsibility of men makes the predestination of God impossible.

Alternatively, my interpretations of the apparently conflicting texts may be incorrect. If I examine them more closely I may find that I have misinterpreted one or the other. A new interpretation will alter my deductions so that the conflict is avoided. No doubt Mr. Baird would press this path upon me, as I have often pressed it upon Arminians, who insist, for example, that Hebrews 6:6 teaches the possibility of losing salvation. It is easy, however, to take the *wrong* path. Arminians do so when they seek novel and perverse interpretations of predestinarian texts in order to reconcile them with their unscriptural logic.

The difficulty lies in the interplay between these considerations as we seek to understand Scripture. We must struggle with both logical and linguistic considerations. Just what meaning can the words of a text bear? The words themselves may leave considerable scope for differing meanings. The process of bringing the context to bear, keeping in mind the commentary of Scripture as a whole, considering the relationship of the text to diverse doctrines, and keeping our reasoning subject to other scriptures over which we may have had equal struggles, introduces a degree of subtlety and complexity to the resolution of issues such as Common Grace which is scarcely acknowledged in the confident syllogising of Mr. Baird.

## Conclusion

Notwithstanding the perplexity such considerations have caused me in struggling to understand this subject, I am increasingly confident of two things. First, the case against Common Grace relies heavily on a deductive reasoning whose validity has not been properly justified, and whose conclusions take insufficient account of the import of a number of scriptures. Second, Rev. Silversides has, by distinguishing things which differ, and by subordinating reason to Scripture, presented a case which has yet to be answered.<sup>3</sup>

Yours faithfully, Mr. Sam Bell.

Dunadry, Co. Antrim N.I.

*Mr. Baird responds.....page 32 following.....*

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3. For the sake of completeness, I refer to the third and final statement by Rev. Silversides which Mr. Baird addresses in his article. "[God] can show mercy as, when, how, and to the extent, and for as long as He sovereignly pleases." I find Mr. Baird's response unsatisfactory for reasons similar to those I have already explained. But Rev. Silversides' statement originally arose as he tried to show that his view, far from denying the sovereignty of God, actually exalts it. In that context I think the statement is inappropriate, because it begs the question. It can only exalt the sovereignty of God if the nature of God leaves Him free to exercise this sovereignty, and that is precisely what is in dispute.



## Mr. Allen Baird responds to Mr. Bell.

This response to my article on *The Absolute God* was a pleasure to read for me, not only because of its clear and honest nature, but most importantly because it takes us to the heart of the matter and confronts those issues which require confrontation. As with my answer to Rev. Silversides' reply, I will try and answer each point as Mr. Bell - whom I also have the privilege of knowing - raises it.

### (1) Logic

Firstly, I will tackle the relation between the *nature* of God's love and the *objects* of God's love. Mr. Bell and I are both in agreement that the attribute of divine love partakes of all the usual incommunicable attributes of God, one of which is immutability. According to this attribute, it is not only affirmed that God in actual fact does not change, but also that He could not change, and is therefore beyond all possibility of change. But the question I require Mr. Bell to face is this. With respect to what *in God* is He unchangeable? My position, and the position I assumed during the course of my argument, was that God is immutable not only with regard to His *existence* but also with regard to His *will*. The two cannot be separated in God: God's *will* is simply *God* willing.

Notice I am here emphasising God's immanent will. With regard to the creation, it is a transient and external, and is not so much *in God* as *from God*. *Nevertheless, the decree or will of God regarding objects external to Himself is immanent in God.* This is true of the election, which is God's eternal choice in love of various human persons. It is therefore the unchangeable will of God that various creaturely *objects* would partake in His love. Indeed, to properly understand the decree is to acknowledge that not only did God will to reveal a certain love for certain human creatures at a certain point in time, but that He actually loved them in His decree prior to their creation. Hence, the numerous passages of Scripture which explain that the reason for God's election of certain humans was His (logically) prior love of them.

What I want the readers to take from all this is the truth that nature and objects of God's love are united by the fact that both are *in God*. Of, course, we do not actually 'exist' until we are born. 'Existence' is a notoriously problematic idea which cannot be explored here. But even Mr. Bell will acknowledge that Jesus Christ died to really and fully atone for Christians' sins even though they might not be born for another two-thousand years. Suffice to say that we must have 'existed' in some sense for God to love and elect us, and for Christ to die for us. Therefore, there is a correlation between the unchangeable nature of God's love and the unchangeable objects of God's love, because both exist *in God* as far as His immanent will is concerned. And it is about this immanent will that the 'common grace' controversy centres on.



Hence, God's love, or lack of love, must be unchangeable towards individuals *because both are in God*. Therefore, when Mr. Bell says that although we can deduce that God, in His attribute of love, is unchangeable in Himself, we "need not necessarily deduce how, to whom, or when He expresses this immutable aspect of His being", he forgets that God expresses a love to certain exclusive humans in time because of His prior love for them *in Himself*. But this love is still *in God*. It does not exist outside God, because of the very fact that it is immutable and therefore beyond time. And because this prior love of God's is immutable *in Himself* regarding its objects, God can only reveal Himself in time as the immutable God who exclusively loves certain humans, and them alone. That is who He is! All this is simply to say that 'common grace' contradicts immutable election.

Secondly, with regard to Mr. Bell's comments about providence, could I say the following. The sudden switch from God's love *in Himself* (i.e. the decree of election) to the subject of God's external works of providence demonstrates, I think, a fundamental confusion in Mr. Bell's thinking with regard to the eternal God's relation to time. God is not *in providence*. Rather, it is something that is external to and from Him. Certainly, God gives a knowledge of *Himself* in providence and the creation ('general revelation') but even this clearly includes His incommunicable attributes, even the invisible things of God's divinity and eternity (Rom. 1: 20). Therefore, in answer to Mr. Bell's rhetorical challenge, I assert that there is a real sense in which God's providences are unchangeable. Not only are they unchangeably willed from God, but they reveal the unchangeable God from whom they come, who unchangeably willed that they would.

Nothing in my article even suggested that the essence of God was to be equated with His dealings with men. Indeed, this is the very mistake made by those who believe in 'common grace,' as they falsely deduce that God loves someone merely because they are wealthy or happen to hear the gospel. Rather, firstly, I was equating *the essence of God with the dispositions of God*, and saying that both are equally immutable and eternal, contra all talk of 'sequences of differing dispositions' *et al*. And secondly, I was arguing that it is this same God (i.e. the eternal and immutable God) who is manifested in time, meaning not only that the God who is manifested in time must be eternal and immutable if He is to be the same God as the one who wills in eternity, but also most emphatically that this God does not become temporal and changeable simply because He is related in a world that is temporal and changeable. Again, this is exactly the mistake made by 'common grace.' But because in temporal revelation God does not become the revelation (i.e. the creation or the Bible or the human nature of Christ), He remains the eternal and unchangeable One who is revealed.



Thirdly, I would like to focus on Mr. Bell's use of the Scripture which teaches us that God is Love. These verses are to be found in 1 John. Two important points follow from these verses. Firstly, although God is love in Himself, this love was manifested in the sending or temporal mission of the incarnate Son (4:8-9). Oh that the 'common grace' brigade would take these verses to heart! The love that God has, indeed is, in Himself, is revealed in time in the *redemptive* activity of the Son, which is the gospel (1 Cor. 15:3-4). Therefore, *another love of God is another gospel*. We can only perceive or know what the love of God is because of Christ (1 John 3:16).

Secondly, we see that John is not afraid of using some 'mere human logic' in his reasoning about God (1 John 4:16). All of God is love; some people remain in a condition of love; therefore, there are some who remain in God, and God in them. And we know that we remain in God, and loved by God, because of the giving of the Spirit. The love of God is therefore a Trinitarian affair, encompassing the work of the Father in election (1 John 4:19), as well as the Son and Spirit. Each of the three persons are love because they are God. To have the love of God is to be united to (to 'abide' in) the Triune God. This is why the nature and objects of God's immutable love cannot be separated: the objects of God's love partake of His nature in the gospel (II Pet. 1:4), and this gospel is Triune, having eternal, historical, and internal aspects.

Therefore, when Mr. Bell says that God's love 'in Himself' and God's love 'towards me' are 'essentially distinct' he needs to be very careful. Certainly, we never become the same 'thing' (his choice of words) as God Himself. But it equally needs to be stressed that we are united to the same God in time (through representative atonement and regeneration) as the God who eternally and really places His electing love upon us. To use some important theological jargon, the ontological Trinity *is* the economic Trinity, and the economic Trinity *is* the ontological Trinity.

## (2) Scripture

Now we are getting down to business. Mr. Bell quotes some passages of Scripture which suggest that God does purpose sequences of dispositions in Himself which are 'aroused in response to the deeds of men.' Concerning them, let me make the following points. Firstly, they are not verses which set out to provide for us the basis of a theology of the immutability of God. Other verses *directly* address this issue, and should be turned to first, but any inferences made from these verses on the matter are indirect, and therefore secondary. Secondly, these verses are part of the problem rather than the solution, at least for one who holds to the orthodox/classic concept of the nature of God, as Mr. Bell does. Certainly, they should be *incorporated* in a solution, but cannot give the *answer to* the problem.

Let me turn to those verses which, in my opinion, constitute the Biblical foundation for the theological doctrine of the immutability of God.



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*Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.*  
(James 1 : 17).

*I am the LORD, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.*  
(Malachi 3 : 6).

Firstly, in James 1:17, not only change is denied to God, but even the 'shadow' of change, i.e. change to the least degree or in the least manner. In contrast to the sun, the source of earthly light, God is not subject to 'eclipses' or interceptions to and sequences in the spiritual light of the revelation of His own nature. Secondly, Malachi uses the logical word 'therefore' to show the link between Jehovah's immutability internally and externally, as I was arguing for earlier. But the Scripture is just as emphatic in emphasising God's immutability for the divine *will* as it is about God's *nature*. (Remember that God's will and nature are one and that *God's will always has an object*).

*God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent: hath he said, and shall he not do it? or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good?* (Num. 23:19; cf. 1 Sam. 15:29).

*My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure.* (Isa. 46:10; also cf. Heb. 6:17-18).

It might be replied that these verses speak of God's 'decretive will' rather than His 'preceptive will.' Firstly, we should remember that these distinctions refer to two aspects of the one will of God rather than two wills. Secondly, while this might be true for the second verse above, it is not true for the first, which emphasises what God has *said* and *spoken*. Thus, not only what God is 'in Himself' is immutable, but also what He is to His creatures.

But the verses which Mr. Bell quotes seem to point us in an opposite direction. What shall we then do? Arbitrarily choose one group at the expense of the other? Let me suggest a way out. We are faced with two seemingly contradictory theological hypotheses. The first one, the 'free-offer' hypothesis, asserts that God is disposed toward performing things which never come about and changes His dispositions in reaction to human actions. The 'non free-offer' hypothesis asserts that God does not change His dispositions towards the same objects and that He performs that which He is disposed to do. These two hypotheses are contradictory to one another and therefore cannot both be true. Both hypotheses claim Biblical support, and Mr. Bell provided the sort of texts which people of his opinion would rely on. As a possible way forward, I wish to suggest the following method for testing



which hypothesis is correct. This suggestion is based on the presuppositions that Scripture is a unity and that Scripture interprets itself. I know that both Mr. Bell and Rev. Silversides accept these basic assumptions. I propose that *that theological hypothesis is correct, firstly, which is built on the largest number of clear and relevant texts, and secondly, which explains the greatest number of difficult texts.* In other words, *that hypothesis is true which can be used to solve the most problems and leave the least.*

Now, according to my obviously biased opinion, the 'non free-offer' hypothesis wins hands down for the following reasons. Firstly, the 'free-offer position' self-consciously and deliberately collapses into and relies on the notion of paradox, which by definition is an inextricable conundrum, with no problem solving use at all. Hence Rev. Silversides' attack on my 'logic.' Secondly, the 'free-offer' position relies heavily on texts which do not directly speak about the issues in question, and which therefore have to be given a secondary place in exegesis. Mr. Bell would not dare to take the texts he quoted literally, whereas I can take all the texts I quoted at face value, knowing also that they speak directly about the matter under discussion.

Therefore, despite Mr. Bell's claim that his texts 'still say what they say,' he still has to proceed to qualify this assertion with a 'there is some sense.' But I am not careful to say that when Mr. Bell asserts that, in his opinion, the immutable and unchangeable God actually *does* alter His disposition in response to the actions of man, he is agreeing exactly with what Pinnock believes, his claim to the contrary notwithstanding. And furthermore, Mr. Bell uses exactly the same sort of texts to prove it as Pinnock does. Doubtless he will protest this. But in that case I demand to know how he differs from Pinnock and on what exegetical basis. I am still convinced that Pinnock is merely a consistent advocate of the 'free-offer' hypothesis.

### (3) Scripture and Logic

'Logic' and 'Scripture' cannot be juxtaposed as two parallel things as Mr. Bell does. He presents a false dichotomy. Logic itself is contentless. Contra to what some seem to think, there are not truths of logic against which truths of Scriptures may be placed. In theology (as far as I understand it), content is provided by Scripture while method is provided by logic, among other things. Hence, the *grammatico*-historical method of exegesis. What I have tried to do is not set logic up over against Scripture - whatever that means - but set clear and central texts over above obscure and peripheral texts, and connect the two by a process of deduction. This is what Mr. Bell refers to as my "confident syllogising".

Let me insist that I have a good Teacher in this method. Consider some of the exegesis of Christ. Example one: in Matthew 22:32 Christ deduces the truth of the doctrine of the resurrection of the body from the mere tense used in one text of Scripture. Example two: in Matthew 22:45 Christ deduces the Lordship of the



Christ by use of a mere personal pronoun. Example three: in Luke 5:23 Jesus demonstrated the logical equivalence of two seemingly diverse statements in order to allow the Pharisees to deduce His divinity. Paul's epistles are full of logical reasoning (e.g. Romans 4:1-2, 6:1-2, 8:1; 1 Cor. 15:19 etc.), but I have taken too long already. 'Unscriptural logic' is no logic.

What I say to Arminians when they think that it is contradictory to simultaneously assert divine sovereignty and human responsibility is that it is not even a seeming contradiction once they understand that the two are not the same. If I was to have said, 'God is sovereign and God is non-sovereign' then they would have a real case. I honestly think that Mr. Bell is making complex that which is not. Certainly, I would be the first to admit that there are many large and difficult issues at the circumference of the 'free-offer' controversy, but that the heart of the matter is relatively straight-forward and on the surface of Scripture.

#### (4) Conclusion

Premise 1: All that is in God is God.

Premise 2: All that is God is eternal and immutable.

**Conclusion 1:** Therefore all that is in God is eternal and immutable.

Premise 3: The disposition of God is in God.

**Conclusion 2:** Therefore the disposition of God is eternal and immutable.

Premise 4: That which is eternal and immutable permits no succession or change.

**Final conclusion:** Therefore the disposition of God permits no succession or change.

*This is exactly the 'non free-offer' hypothesis.*

The only way someone can get around this conclusion is by denying one of the premises. It is becoming clearer and clearer to me, especially after analysing the replies of Rev. Silversides and Mr. Bell, that those who hold the 'free-offer' position actually **do** deny some of them, and are starting to admit more and more overtly that they do. I particularly suspect Rev. Silversides of denying the fourth premise in favour of the notion either that God is not timelessly eternal but merely everlasting, or that God can allow Himself to change by decreeing it, or both. I suspect Mr. Bell of denying the third premise because of his frequent paralleling of the disposition and deeds of God, i.e. the decree and providence, thus confusing *ad intra* and *ad extra*. If this evaluation is correct (and I would like the two gentlemen to deny it if it is not) then I must end where I commenced in the original article. The controversy over the free-offer of the gospel is a fight for the nature of God. I challenge the two objectors to start here, to be clear and consistent here, and then to return to the subject of the gospel call. They will find that the matter suddenly becomes at once very important and very clear.

*Allen Baird.....Queen's University, Belfast.....1998.*