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Inerrancy and Free Will: Some Further Thoughts

Professors D. and R. Basinger here take further some of the points made in their essay in The Evangelical Quarterly in July 1983 in the light of the comments offered by Professor Norman Geisler in October 1985.

In an earlier article in this journal, we claimed that one cannot consistently affirm the total inerrancy of Scripture and yet *also* utilize the Free Will Defense as a response to the problem of evil.¹ Recently, Norman Geisler² has challenged this claim. It seems to us that his comments provide a suitable springboard for furthering the discussion on this important issue.

Our initial argument ran as follows. Modern proponents of inerrancy, we argued, emphatically deny that the writers of Scripture were reduced to impersonal instruments. They argue rather that the writers' 'thinking and writings were *both* free and spontaneous on their part and divinely elicited and controlled'.³ The basis for this contention is their belief that

(1). Human activities (such as penning a book) can be totally controlled by God without violating human freedom.

But (1). has implications for the problem of evil. One of the most popular ways of defending God's goodness in the face of moral evil is to claim that such evil is the result of free human choices and hence is our responsibility *rather than* God's. But human choice can only absolve God of responsibility for evil if God cannot totally control human actions—i.e. if (1). is not true. Therefore, one cannot both utilize a free will defence and be a proponent of inerrancy. A choice must be made.

The crux of our argument, Geisler rightly points out, is that 'if God can infallibly guarantee the inerrancy of a book which was freely written by human authors, then he could also have

¹ David Basinger and Randall Basinger, 'Inerrancy, Dictation and The Free Will Defense', *Evangelical Quarterly* 55:3 (July, 1983), 177–80.

² Norman Geisler, 'Inerrancy and Free Will: A Reply to the Brothers Basinger', *Evangelical Quarterly* 57:4 (1985), 347–53.

³ J. I. Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 80.

infallibly guaranteed that no free being would ever do evil.⁴ But he then goes on to make some dubious inferences.

First, he argues that if our argument is sound, then evangelicals must *either* give up their belief in free will to preserve their belief in the inerrancy of Scripture *or* continue to believe in free will and give up their belief in inerrancy. But this is incorrect. If we had argued that human freedom, itself, and total divine control were incompatible, then his inference would follow. But by explicitly granting the truth of (1). for the sake of argument, we explicitly granted that evangelicals can believe *both* in free will *and* inerrancy. Our argument was rather that if (1). is true, then it cannot be claimed that human freedom *absolves* God of responsibility for evil, as the FWD claims. And this contention in no way presupposes that one must choose between *inerrancy* and *free will*. It only points out an implication of holding both.

Second, Geisler believes he is criticizing our argument when he claims that 'just because God *could* have prevented all evil does not mean that he *should* have. Maybe he had some good purpose for allowing evil.'⁵ But this criticism also misses the point. We never argued that the proponent of inerrancy must believe that God should remove all evil if he can. Again, we only argued that if God *could* prevent all evil without violating human freedom, then the fact that moral evil occurs as the result of free human choice cannot in any case be said to *absolve* God of responsibility for it as the FWD claims.

In fact, Geisler has identified the very core of the theodicy which is open to the inerrantist. The inerrantist cannot maintain that freedom *necessitates* even the possibility of evil since, given (1)., God could have created any number of worlds in which humans have freedom but never make choices resulting in moral evil. So why then do we find moral evil in the world God did choose to actualize? The answer for the inerrantist *must* be, to quote Geisler, that '[God] had some good purpose for allowing evil'. But what could such a purpose be? Why would God create a world containing freedom and evil when he could have created any number of worlds containing freedom but no evil? He did so, to quote the most famous proponent of this theodicy, Leibniz, because God must create the 'best' world and 'the best course is not always the one which tends toward avoiding evil, since it is possible that the evil be accompanied by a greater good.'⁶ In

⁴ Geisler, 349.

⁵ Geisler, 351.

⁶ Leibniz, *Theodicy*, in W. Rowe and W. Wainwright, *Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), 178.

short, the inerrantist's response to moral evil must be that each and every instance of such evil is a necessary component in the world God chose to create, a world which is *better* on balance than any world containing less evil or no evil at all.

Many, however, have found this type of best-of-all-possible-worlds theodicy troubling. For example, if (1) is true—if God can totally control the free actions of individuals—then he could bring it about that *all* people *freely* choose to accept him. So why didn't he? The answer must be that a world in which some *freely* choose to reject God is better than any world in which all *freely* choose to accept him. But this contention, of course, is hard to reconcile with nonpredestinarian soteriology. Moreover, questions related to God's justice arise. If every occurrence—including every instance of moral evil—has been decreed by God as a perfect component in his plan, then how, it is asked, can we as humans be judged for that evil which we bring about? After all, God could have brought it about in every case that we *freely* chose to do what was right. It is easy to see, accordingly, why an Arminian or moderately Calvinistic proponent of inerrancy might feel some desire to reject this theodicy and embrace a free will theodicy in its place.

However, proponents of inerrancy cannot have it both ways. They can affirm (1) and a best-of-all-possible-worlds theodicy or deny (1) and affirm a free will theodicy. But it is not possible to affirm (1) and be a free will theodist.

There remains, however, one line of response for the proponent of inerrancy. Our argument presupposes that proponents of inerrancy affirm (1). But need this be the case? Geisler thinks not. That is, he denies that people who believe that God infallibly guaranteed that the writers of Scripture freely produced an inerrant work must also believe that God can infallibly guarantee that all individuals will always freely do what he wants. 'Just because God can infallibly guarantee what some men (biblical authors) on some occasions do without coercion, does not necessarily mean God can do the same for all men at all times . . . It may have been that because only some men freely chose to cooperate with the Spirit so that he could guide them in an errorless way. Or it may have been that the Holy Spirit simply chose to use those men and occasions which he knew would not produce error.'⁷

But is this true? Can God infallibly guarantee that any single human action will *freely* occur if he cannot totally control all *free* human action—i.e., if (1) is false? We believe not. If (1) is false,

⁷ Geisler, 352.

then God can, of course, still infallibly guarantee anything he wants—e.g., an inerrant Scripture—if he is willing to take away human freedom. And it may, of course, still happen to be the case that certain people freely do exactly what he wants. It might, for example, have been the case that the writers of Scripture just happened to freely write exactly what God wanted them to. But if (1) is false, then God can never *guarantee* that any human will freely do what he wants. He could, for example, not have *guaranteed* that a totally inerrant Scripture written *freely* by humans would be produced. It would have not have been within his control. Thus, to deny (1) will not help the most majority of evangelical inerrantists who, like Packer and Geisler, believe that the ‘free and spontaneous’ writing of Scripture was ‘divinely elicited and *controlled*.’

Accordingly, we believe our challenge stands: Those who believe God infallibly guaranteed an inerrant Scripture written freely by humans cannot also utilize the FWD to absolve God of responsibility for evil. They must instead affirm some form of best-of-all-possible-worlds theodicy.