Salvation and Sovereignty: A Review Essay

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K en Keathley, Vice President for Academic Affairs at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, proposes in this volume a compromise approach to resolve the tension between divine sovereignty and human freedom, particularly with regard to soteriology. This book has an interesting history, having been begun as a coauthored project when Keathley was a faculty member at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, at the encouragement of NOBTS President Chuck Kelley. After Hurricane Katrina, circumstances led to Keathley completing the book alone, assisted by a Lilly Foundation faculty grant and a sabbatical leave at his new place of service.

Keathley employs two tools in the book to address these complex issues. As the book's subtitle suggests, Keathley proposes a Molinist approach to salvation and sovereignty. In addition, Keathley utilizes Timothy George's "ROSES" acronym[2] as opposed to the classical "TULIP" acronym associated with the Reformed Synod of Dort. ROSES provides an interpretive grid for the book, with a chapter dedicated to each letter of the acronym. Molinism provides the theological perspective that is brought to interpret the content of each letter in the acronym.

The book begins with some broader issues that are propaedeutic to Keathley's discussion of the ROSES paradigm. He first offers a biblical defense of Molinism. The author can be praised for perhaps the clearest explanation of Molinism that I have seen. Sometimes Molinists attempt to explain their position with such dense and opaque language that one wonders if they really understand the position themselves. However, Keathley's explanation is understandable, and he builds a tenable case from Scripture in support of this perspective. Keathley presents Molinism as a middle way between Arminianism and Calvinism.

Like Bohr's model of the atom, Molinism is a heuristic device, a plausible theological construct to help us conceptualize what appears from a human perspective to be inconceivable – how God can be absolutely sovereign and humans can have genuine libertarian freedom at the same time. Molinism is not demanded or required by Scripture, but as Keathley points out, it is consistent with Scripture at many points.

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[2]The ROSES acronym is spelled out in Timothy George, *Amazing Grace: God's Initiative, Our Response* (Nashville: Convention Press, 2000).

Keathley's affirmation, however, that God "perfectly controls all things" (20) and exercises "meticulous control over all things, including all big things, little things, and things done by other free agents (21-25), is difficult to reconcile with his affirmation that God is not the Author of evil (26-27). Keathley attempts to reconcile this apparent contradiction by asserting that God allows evil only by "permission" (27). While many would agree that God allows evil by permission rather than by ordaining it, that notion is not consistent with the claim that God controls every detail of everything. To say that God's sovereignty means that "nothing is outside of His control" is one thing; to say that "God's sovereignty entails that He controls everything that happens" is another. If God controls every small detail, it is hard to imagine how He could escape the blame for all sin, evil, and suffering.

Keathley's discussion of why foreknowledge does not entail freedom-destroying necessity, built on the distinction between contingency and necessity, is important and superbly written. Keathley crushes the confusion of theological fatalism that God's foreknowledge logically entails that those foreseen events must happen by necessity. The confusion between the modal status of contingency and necessity is the Achilles' heel of many Reformed thinkers, including Jonathan Edwards. Keathley builds a convincing case that God foreknowing the free choices of His creatures in no way destroys their libertarian freedom. God foreknows with certainty, but that imposes no causal necessity on the people involved. God simply foreknows which choice they will make, without causally forcing them to make that choice.

In discussing whether God desires the salvation of all people, Keathley explores four options: (a) Universalism – God is love and wills to save everyone; (b) Double predestination through Supralapsarianism or Infralapsarianism– God is sovereign and wills the salvation of only the elect; (c) God has two wills – hidden and revealed; and (d) God has two wills – antecedent and consequent. Keathley provides reasons why the first three options are not acceptable, and affirms the fourth option. God's antecedent will is the gracious desire for the salvation for all people; the consequent will is His just judgment of those who refuse put their trust in Him. Without going into the detailed arguments that Keathley presents, each is presented compellingly and expressed with clarity.

Having addressed these foundational issues, Keathley turns to address the five points of his ROSES acronym. The "R" stands for "*Radical Depravity*," in contradistinction from "Total Depravity." Keathley asserts that belief in universal and radical human depravity is a biblical belief affirmed by all evangelical Christians. However, he argues, the Reformed concept of total depravity is more aptly described as a version of determinism, including versions of what has become known as compatibilism or soft determinism. Keathley provides telling arguments from Scripture against determinism, and contrasts hard and soft determinism. He traces the influence that the determinism of atheist Thomas Hobbes had on Jonathan Edwards' Law of Choice (that we always choose whatever our strongest desire or inclination is at that moment).

As an alternative to determinism, Keathley advocates libertarian freedom, in particular the soft libertarianism, which, as he notes, I have advocated (69-70).[3] Keathley offers a minor quibble with my definition of soft libertarianism as "the ability to do otherwise in any given decision" (70). Instead, Keathley suggests that he does not agree that soft libertarianism extends to "any given situation" (70). Keathley apparently does not realize the fact that he has shifted from my word "decision" to his alternative word "situation." His alternative proposal is that our libertarian freedom is limited to "will-setting moments" (70, 76). He illustrates that we cannot reverse our decision in midair after we have jumped over a cliff. Keathley evidently overlooked my assertion (immediately adjacent to the material he quoted) that soft libertarianism and concomitant agent causation exercised a "creaturely freedom to choose within limited alternatives." In fact, the acknowledgement of limited options to be exercised in free choices is a defining characteristic that differentiates soft libertarianism from hard libertarianism. Therefore, Keathley's distinction does not appear to have merit.

Keathley applies the four stages of human experience outlined in the Formula of Concord of 1577 (Adam as originally created, humanity as fallen, the present condition of believers, and the saints in glory) to the soft libertarian account of human freedom. In so doing, Keathley reveals correctly at least three foundational problems with the Reformed account of freedom: (a) since all human actions are the result of prior causes, God is the only remaining agent who is responsible for evil, (b) some Reformed determinists scandalously assert that God Himself is determined by His own nature and thus deny even that God has libertarian freedom, and (c) sanctification appears to be synergistic, requiring human participation.

The "O" of ROSES represents "*Overcoming Grace*" as an alternative to "Irresistible Grace." Keathley applies what Richard Cross describes as an "ambulatory model" of Overcoming Grace to illustrate how grace can be monergistic but resistible. In this analogy, a sick or injured patient is placed in an ambulance and is taken to the hospital. The patient is incapable of aiding in his rescue; he is totally dependent on the EMT personnel to lift him into the ambulance. However, Keathley asserts, the patient can still refuse to be taken to the hospital. Applied to salvation, a person is saved entirely (monergistically) by grace, and yet could resist or reject it. The weakness of this illustration from both practical and biblical perspectives is that more is required of the patient. In a real ambulance/hospital situation, the patient must sign a consent form before receiving the salutatory life-saving care. Theologically, no evangelical Christian should question that salvation comes by grace alone from God (Eph. 2:8-10). However, the Bible does not say that God saves those who merely do not resist the conviction of the Holy Spirit, but requires in addition a positive affirmation of Jesus as Savior and Lord before the sinner is declared justified. Virtually every salvific formula in Scripture requires a positive response and affirmation by the believer, not merely

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[3]When I presented my paper "Agent Causation: How to Be a Soft Libertarian" in March 2005, I don't believe I was aware that this nomenclature had previously been utilized (in reference to human freedom, as opposed to the political theory by the same name). I have since discovered that Gary Watson used the term as early as 1999 in his article "Soft Libertarianism and Hard Determinism," in *The Journal of Ethics* 3 (1999), 351-65; and later by Albert R. Mele, *Free Will and Luck* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

that the sinner refrain from refusing God's grace (Mark 16:15-16, John 1:12, 3:14-16, 20:31; Acts 2:36-40, 8:36-37, 16:30-31, Rom. 10:9-10; Heb. 11:6; 1 John 5:1).

With strong scriptural support, Keathley effectively explodes the suggestion that some Reformed writers claim that non-Calvinist accounts of salvation make faith to be a work. In addressing the idea that faith is a gift given only to the elect, Keathley explores three alternative Calvinist models – the nonconversionist model, the conversionist regeneration precedes conversion model, and the conversionist effectual call model. Third, Keathley explains why the notion that faith is a virtue to be rewarded is also mistaken. Finally, Keathley provides twelve lines of argument to demonstrate that the Overcoming Grace model he affirms is superior to the Reformed accounts of election.

Keathley then turns to the "S," which represents "*Sovereign Election*" as the alternative to "Unconditional Election." Keathley contrasts the two major Calvinist perspectives on election – *supralapsarianism*, which affirms double predestination, in which God before creation ordains both the elect and the reprobate; and *infralapsarianism*, in which God ordains the elect but the reprobate are allowed only by permission. The asymmetrical relation of God to election and reprobation in the infralapsarian position is an attempt to avoid the accusation of God being the author of evil by consigning the overwhelming majority of the human race to eternal torment in hell. Although Keathley notes that Molinism has affinity with the infralapsarian position,[4] he asserts that in the final analysis one cannot affirm the infralapsarian perspective without denying key tenants of classical Calvinism. Infralapsarianism is logically incoherent, according to Keathley, because it asserts that God causes every event but is not accountable for every event. Keathley suggests that Molinism is superior to these two Calvinist approaches because it avoids these significant logical and theological problems. However, Keathley resorts to an appeal to mystery in addressing the logical problem of what philosophers call the "grounding objection" against Molinism. Additionally, since he insists that God is in "complete control" of all things (157) and exercises "meticulous control" over all worldwide events, all decisions of human agents, and even all minor things such as "every roll of the dice, every flip of the coin, [and] every seemingly random event" (22-25), it is difficult to separate Keathley's Molinism from these Calvinist views of sovereignty, their insistence on unconditional election, and the concomitant problems entailed in these affirmations.

The "E" of the acronym is for "*Eternal Life*," as a revised nomenclature to "Perseverance of the Saints." The material in this chapter was presented by Keathley at the John 3:16 Conference at First Baptist Church of Woodstock, Georgia in 2009, and is included in a chapter of the book *Whosoever Will: A Biblical-Theological Critique of Five-Point Calvinism*. In this chapter, Keathley addresses two key issues: how we can know we are genuinely saved, and how secure is one's salvation. In addressing the first issue, Keathley explores three options: (a) the Roman Catholic position that assurance of salvation is not available, (b) the position of the Reformers that assurance is an essential element within

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[4]Keathley made a similar point in a paper entitled "A Molinist View of Election, or How to Be a Consistent Infralapsarian" at the Building Bridges conference in 2007, which was included in *Calvinism: A Baptist Dialogue*, ed. Brad J. Waggoner and E. Ray Clendenen (Nashville: B&H, 2008), 195-216.

saving faith, and (c) the Puritan position that assurance may be logically deduced, though in practice they struggled with assurance because perseverance must be proven out by good works. The confidence in assurance of salvation by many Calvinists was further undermined by the doctrine of temporary faith, as promulgated by Theodore Beza and William Perkins, which suggested that God tantalized the reprobate with a "taste" of grace without any intention of saving them, a view so cruel that one commentator described it as "divine sadism" (171). It is ironic the children of the theological reformation, who insisted on salvation by *sola gratia*, would evolve into a view of salvation by works. Keathley opts for the stronger assurance position affirmed by the original Reformers.

Keathley provides a more thorough discussion of the second issue of how secure is one's salvation. He addresses several versions of three basic answers to this question: (a) the Augustinian and Arminian answer that apostasy is possible, (b) the Calvinist and Free Grace view that apostasy is not possible, and (c) the mediating views that apostasy is threatened but is not possible. The Augustinian position holds that God regenerates more than He elects, so ultimately God does not save some regenerate believers because they are not elect. The Arminian position is that only those who persevere will be saved, but believers could later renounce their faith.

Keathley lists three options within the Calvinist/Free Grace approach. First, Barthian Calvinist theology asserts implicit universalism – all people are ultimately saved through Christ. Second, the "once saved, always saved" doctrine of the Free Grace position asserts that salvation is provided by God's grace alone. Good works are expected by the believer, but they are secondary and confirmatory of the irrevocable salvation granted by God. Third, the "evidence of genuineness" position asserts that good works confirm a genuine confession of faith, and those who never exhibit good works never had saving faith. Within the mediating views perspective, position, Keathley first addresses the "irreconcilable tension" view of Gerald Borchert and D. A. Carson, who appeal to mystery or "compatibilism" (which Carson unfortunately applies to the issue of assurance, further muddling a word which means different things when applied to several different issues). In the "means of salvation" approach that Thomas Schreiner and Ardel Caneday voiced in their commentary on Hebrews,[5] the warning passages in Hebrews are interpreted as genuinely threatening believers with the loss of eternal life. One is not saved without maintaining good works, for "a transformed life is evidence of and necessary for salvation."[6] With William Lane Craig, Keathley asserts that the "means of salvation" view abandons key beliefs of Reformed theology, and that the middle knowledge aspect of Molinism provides a more coherent account of perseverance. Keathley proposes a variant of the "evidence of genuineness" view which affirms four key tenets: (a) the only basis for assurance is the objective work of Christ; (b) assurance is the essence of saving faith; (c) saving faith perseveres as a promise rather than as a requirement; and (d) believers are rewarded according to their faithfulness and good works. Keathley's approach seems to do justice to both the biblical assurances to the believer and the warnings to persevere to the end.

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[5]Thomas Schreiner and Ardel Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2001), 283-84, cited in Keathley, 183.

[6]Ibid.

Finally, Keathley addresses the "S" of "*Singular Redemption*" as opposed to "Limited Atonement." The author surveys three perspectives on the extent of the atonement: the general atonement view, the limited atonement view, and Singular Redemption (or Unlimited Atonement) view. The general atonement view, held by Wesleyan Arminians, affirms the governmental view of the atonement in which salvation was obtained for all persons on the cross but is not secured for anyone until it is personally appropriated. The limited atonement view, held by high Calvinists such as John Owen and John Murray, holds that the atonement is "particular" in that Jesus died only for the elect. Keathley drives home the point that a shortcoming of the limited atonement view is that it is inconsistent with the "well meant offer of the gospel" to unbelievers. In fact, a person holding to the limited atonement cannot consistently say to an unbeliever that "God loves you" or "Christ died for your sins." The singular redemption view, held by Amyrauldian Calvinists and Reformed or Classical Arminians, is (like limited atonement) based on the penal substitution view of the atonement. In this perspective (also advocated by Keathley), Jesus' sacrifice on the cross provided atonement that is sufficient for everyone, but is efficient only for those who believe.

Salvation and Sovereignty is an excellently written work with the rare quality of dealing with complex theological issues with clarity. His survey of different options on the various theological issues is presented fairly and is particularly useful. Although I do not personally subscribe to Molinism, Keathley provides an interesting and attractive case for the Molinist position. He succeeds in at least making a strong case that Molinism is consistent with Scripture and with sound doctrine. Although as a non-Molinist I disagree with some of the tenets that Keathley asserts, I give this book my highest recommendation. This is a must read that every theologian and every pastor will want to think through and keep as a valuable resource.