

God's Choice and Human Choice

Mako Nagasawa

Dear ***,

(This is an excerpt from my exegesis of Matthew 11:25 – 30, which I would highly recommend people to read; I am very cautious about anyone jumping over biblical exegesis into systematic theology.)

You asked what is at stake in seeing human beings as 'free,' – which is a complicated concept in itself. The much older, classical attempts to define 'freedom' accounted for one's nature first and foremost. One was 'free' if one was able to make decisions according to one's nature. Thus, God was completely 'free' because He is completely loving and good. The idea that 'freedom' means the ability to choose both good and evil indiscriminately was simply not how the discussion was framed. However, after various shifts in thought caused by science and philosophy, we moved away from this understanding. Aquinas in the 1200's merged the God of the Bible with Aristotle's Prime Mover to lay the foundation for an omnicausal God. Existentialism in the 1900's formally reduced us down to actions (existence) and removed any consideration of nature (essence). Our framework for thinking and talking about 'freedom' – whether it be God's or humanity's – is now quite dangerous. For what we now mean by 'freedom' tends to mean *one's will, irrespective of any discussion about one's nature*. Now, we do consider 'freedom' to mean the ability to choose either good or evil quite indiscriminately. In some cases, because one's 'nature' by definition limits one's choices, people hear consideration about one's 'nature' as a hindrance to one's 'will' and 'freedom.' And then we posit God's freedom and human freedom as opposing, without consideration for our natures.

My impression is that, despite many notable contributions in systematic theology, much of the Reformed tradition unfortunately makes this mistake. There is the tendency to articulate God as not inherently related to humanity, or not ontologically (by nature) committed to humanity. For example, I question the tendency of many systematic theology textbooks to first discuss 'God in creation,' and then handle subjects like divine providence, omnipotence, omniscience, etc. and then discuss 'God as Trinity' only at a much later point. It is as if we can treat God as a Singularity when He relates to everyone outside Himself – in some theological systems by His sheer omnicausal power – and only later consider God as Trinity to see how that affects things, or to determine if we can say which Person of the Trinity does what. I find Karl Barth's general approach to systematic theology much more solid, where God must be considered as a Trinity first, because that is who He actually was and is, even before He created anything. To the best that I can tell, the Patristic writers, the Eastern Orthodox tradition, along with Catholics like Hans Urs Von Balthazar and Thomas Weinandy, and Protestants like C.S. Lewis, the Torrance brothers, and sometimes Donald Bloesch, follow this general approach. In this theological method, we can certainly say that God is love, relationality, unity, and so on even before God began to create anything. Before He is even 'holy,' since before creation there is nothing 'common' with which to compare 'holy,' we must say that God is love.

Also, humanity is patterned after the Triune relations within God. Humanity is made in the image of God (Gen.1:28), even though, before and behind that, Jesus is and always has been the true image of God, the firstborn over all creation (Col.1:15) and the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being (Heb.1:3). We might say that humanity was created specifically in the image of 'The Image.' Irenaeus, the earliest theological writer we know of outside of the New Testament authors, recognized this: the pre-incarnate Christ served as a *pattern or model* for humanity. That is, as the Son is related to the Father in the Spirit, internally to the Godhead, so humanity is to be related to God by the Spirit, externally to the Godhead but drawn up to participate in God (e.g. Eph.4:24 – where we 'put on the new self, created *in God*') as God reveals Himself in us. There is an internal pattern of relationship within God that God extends beyond Himself in creating humanity. Conceptually, this is already a Temple-like arrangement, where one indwells another, which makes it all the more significant to discern the 'new Temple' thread not only in Matthew but in all of Scripture. Humanity was designed to be a living Temple, a people indwelled by God. Barth took the bold step of saying that there has always been a certain Humanity of God, a divine Humanity that is within God from which He made and patterned humanity. If these things are so, then we must also say that God's commitment to humanity is unbreakable, because it is patterned after the Father's commitment to the Son. This commitment on God's part gives rise to the biblical language of 'covenant relationship.' God was free to create or not create humanity, but once He did, and Adam and Eve fell into sin, He had to do all He could to redeem us. God was not free to discard us, annihilate us, or otherwise do nothing to save us from our sin. In love, He had already bound Himself to us. God's purpose towards humanity, flowing out of His

loving Triune nature, is to be *for humanity*, as He intended humanity to fully be, that is, as He revealed it in Jesus. Towards humanity, and even towards fallen humanity, God is love. His love may not always feel to us like love; sometimes it feels like a chastisement, a humbling, or a painful revelation, but it is nevertheless love from God's standpoint.

But in much of Reformed systematic theology, in its long descent from Augustine, God and humanity can (should?) be understood independently of each other, a move that I fundamentally question. For example, D.A. Carson says that God 'owes nothing' to humanity, which is fine in and of itself as a statement; I agree that God is not motivated by some sense of duty from *outside Himself*. But isn't He motivated by a sense of love from *within Himself*? If this is so, then how could one articulate God as freely (arbitrarily) loving some sinners but not others, as D.A. Carson and others maintain? Is there a conflict of attributes in God between holiness and love? Even if we postulate both holiness and love as the two core characteristics of God, we would still be at a loss to explain why God applies His holiness towards some (in hiddenness) and His love towards others (in self-revelation). Wouldn't that mean that God, at the core of His character, is simply arbitrary? There lies an inconsistency. Or, others (like B.B. Warfield or A.A. Hodge) can define God as a Being who could have scrapped the whole creation-humanity project into hell after the fall of humanity, but simply chose not to. This assertion is apparently meant to reinforce the idea that God's mercy is an unexplained choice on God's part, that it was not necessitated by anything at all, even the very character of God, and is therefore all the more merciful. Yet if that hypothetical scenario was indeed possible, then once again love would be purely accidental to God, and God cannot be said to be love, inherently, at the very core of His character. He can love, and does love, and might love, but He would not be love in Himself because at no point does God have to love; God would simply be arbitrary once again. But that would again be quite a puzzle to integrate with the Christian assertion that God is a loving, Triune Being who is love in Himself. So one's theological method seems to me to almost determine one's results. The central question in systematic theology is whether we discuss God's *nature* prior to God's *will*, or, for all intents and purposes, not at all.

Coming back to your paper, then, perhaps some good questions to discuss would be: What impact, if any, does it make to first consider the nature of the Triune God and the nature of humanity, before you make statements about how they are acting, and as you read Matthew 11:25 – 30? If you read it with the sense that the hidden/revealed dynamic is a mutually exclusive one that sorts people into two categories by divine verbal command, I suppose there might be a way to still understand God 'loving' the very people from whom He hides Himself, while apparently holding them responsible for their lack of perception. Personally, that stretches the meaning of the word 'love' beyond my ability to recognize it, so it is difficult for me to make very much headway on it. But I'm open to discussing other people's attempts at doing so. Or, if you read Matthew 11:25 – 30 with a Temple Christology where the hidden/revealed presence of God is simultaneous, directed towards all humanity, and makes greater room for human choice, and even calls it forth, then what are the pros and cons of that? I think there is a different convergence between exegesis and systematic theology with my interpretation, but I'm happy to entertain further thoughts on it.

But also, the larger questions would include: What does it mean to take sin seriously in a theological sense? I wholly agree with your conviction that we must take sin seriously. I sensed in your approach the Augustinian-Reformed paradigm that in order to take sin seriously, we must eliminate any possibility of humanity choosing God, and therefore make God the sole agent in restoring relationship with humanity. If that is the case, then we find it difficult to explain why God says He wants all to be saved, but does not actually do so. At that point, we must resort to the concept of 'mystery.' We place a 'mystery' either in the character of God or in the mechanics of salvation. Single predestination tries to preserve some sense of asymmetry and mystery with regards to all sin and unbelief, and I can respect that, although I prefer the Eastern Orthodox articulation. Double predestination, however, flatly denies the implications of God being Triune, and I can hear you being careful about stepping there. My question is: Are you aware of other theological ways to be utterly serious about sin, and yet not within these paradigms?

What if we were to place the 'mystery' somewhere else entirely? When it comes to redemption, following the lead of others I mentioned, I prefer to compare the relation between the Father and Son to the relation between God and humanity for the purpose of understanding our 'freedom': Just as it would be hard to use the word 'irresistible' to describe the relationship the Father has with the Son, so by the same token, it would be hard to use the word 'irresistible' to describe the relationship God has with us, even in redemption. Rather, He designed us in our very nature to lean towards Him, to be inclined towards Him, and to be 'free' in our love for Him, for that is our original human nature. Paul spoke of the internal witness of the conscience in all human beings in Romans 2:12 – 16, which

is a way of saying that we as human beings universally still carry within ourselves a memory of being made in the image of God, which in turn gives rise to our search for justice, meaning, dignity, value, love, connection, spirituality, beauty, order, etc. Sin in this sense is understood to be an irrational violation of our own nature, a tarnishing and a deconstruction of the self that God created. So perhaps, when we are confronted by Jesus and hear the truth about him, does something in our human nature recognize him? After all, he is who we were meant to be: 'All things are from him, and for him, and to him' (Rom.11:36; Col.1:16). This is how our decision to believe in Christ can genuinely be from God and also our choice simultaneously – this is the human choice that brings glory to God, for in believing in Jesus, we are only doing what God designed us to do.

The rejection of Jesus in particular is the rejection of God's offer of a redeemed, fresh (incorruptible), and elevated (glorified) humanity in Jesus' resurrected humanity. Rejection of Jesus can only be understood as a bottomless irrationality on the part of any human being who chooses to do that. Hence, I don't think that it is for God to explain why people choose to reject Jesus. Nor is that my responsibility; for why would I offer any rational reason for an unbeliever to reject Jesus, especially a reason that finds its root all the way back in God's will? It is only for the unbeliever to offer his or her own feeble, indefensible attempt at a justification of why they are rejecting their truest self, others, and God. The character of God and His commitment to us is clear and without any 'mystery.' The only 'mystery' in the theological system lies at the feet of the unbeliever to answer for: Why in the world are you rejecting Jesus?

Well, we are venturing into a field with many rabbit holes to trip and happily fall into, so perhaps it would be wiser to stop here for now. I hope it's been fun for you to read this paper, as it was for me reading yours. Looking forward to talking more.

Warmly,
Mako