

Some practical problems with Cheung's heresies

by Daniel H. Chew

“But you are full of the judgment on the wicked;
judgment and justice seize you.
Beware lest wrath entice you into scoffing,
and let not the greatness of the ransom turn you aside.
Will your cry for help avail to keep you from distress,
or all the force of your strength?
Do not long for the night,
when peoples vanish in their place.
Take care; do not turn to iniquity,
for this you have chosen rather than affliction.
Behold, God is exalted in his power;
who is a teacher like him?
Who has prescribed for him his way,
or who can say, ‘You have done wrong’?
“Remember to extol his work,
of which men have sung. (Job 36:17-24)

Theologically, it makes a big deal whether God is or is not the Author of Sin. Yet, even if the dust will settle on this topic and my rebuttal to Vincent Cheung's rationalistic hypercalvinism,¹ some might not see the differences between the two views. After all, God is the ultimate cause of sin either way, so does it matter whether it is "direct" or "indirect?" For Arminians like Roger Olsen,² what difference does it make whether God directly caused sin, or indirectly superintends sin?

Theology is not merely abstract. Theology of course must start with the abstract, but it continues into the practical realm, for God is always immensely true and His Word always practical. So, if it is a big deal whether God is the direct cause of sin or the indirect superintendent of sin, then what practical differences would result from the two views?

It is in two practical points that one can see the differences between these two views. The first concerns how one should logically deal with trials and tribulations. The second is in how one should trust in God.

Dealing with trials and tribulations

In the wisdom literature, we read in the account of Job how he struggled with his unjust suffering. Job's three friends (Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar) applied the retributive principle to Job's suffering, and inferred that Job must have sinned because he was suffering. Their

¹ Daniel H. Chew, *God, the Author of Sin, and Metaphysical Distanciation: A Brief Rebuttal to Vincent Cheung's Theodicy*.

² Daniel H. Chew, "Roger Olsen, Calvinism and Vincent Cheung," Blog post at *Daniel's Place* dated Nov 11, 2011

dialogues are basically variants on the accusation that Job must have sinned against God and he needs to repent, while Job insisted on pleading his righteousness before God.

In contrast to Job's three friends, his fourth friend Elihu did not so rebuke Job. Rather, he rebuked Job for presuming he could demand an explanation from God, that God is answerable to him. When God finally responded out of the storm, God similarly rebuked Job for his presumption in questioning Him, exposing Job's total inadequacy in the areas of knowledge and power (Job 38-41). It is thus understandable that God did not rebuke Elihu, while Job's other three friends were rebuked (Job. 42:7-8). Elihu's rebuke of Job is fully in line with God's rebuke to Job, and thus it is to Elihu's words that we want to focus our attention here.

In Job 36:17-24, we see here that Elihu rebuked Job for letting his judgment of the wicked descend into a self-righteous exoneration of himself. In Job's bitter affliction, Job has crossed the line from pleading for justice to **demanding** justice. Job's affliction has turned in this sense into iniquity. Elihu's rebuke, and God's rebuke, is not because Job called for justice and pleaded his cause, but because in his vehement cry for vindication, he has elevated himself to the position of a judge instead of remaining the supplicant.

Thus, we see here that there is nothing wrong with calling for vindication before God. There is nothing wrong with facing trials and tribulations with anguish and calls for relief. All of these are not sinful unless they become demands where we become the judge demanding that God **must** act (or worse still, take matters into our own hands). But if everything is ordained by God, shouldn't the response to trials and tribulations be resignation and trust in God for relief, instead of anger and anguish and cries for relief?

Here, we see one practical difference between Cheung's direct causation model of sovereignty, and the biblical Reformed model of full sovereignty through both primary and secondary means. Under Cheung's model, one should logically approach trials and tribulations with a certain sense of "resignation," trusting in God to bring good out of the trials and tribulations. Since everything is directly caused by God, to be angry at the means is to be angry at God, for the means are mere occasions for God to act.³ But in the biblical model, since the means are not directly from God, but that God superintends all things, then there is nothing wrong with being angry at the means. Anger at sin, anger towards oppression, anguish at suffering — all these are legitimate emotions to be expressed. Cries for vindication from God for what one perceives to be unjust suffering, like in the sufferings of Job, are not sinful in and of themselves. Of course, one has to have faith and trust in God that all things would work together for good (cf. Rom. 8:28), but this trust is not contradictory to having legitimate feelings of anguish and an attitude of questioning. We are after all not Stoics. In Job's case, Job's bitter anguish and suffering coexists with his own faith and trust in God as his redeemer (Job 19); the two are not mutually exclusive.

³ Yes, Cheungians can, and thankfully do, express emotions in their sufferings. But what is the logical rationale for them doing so?

It is thus in this very practical aspect of life that the differences between Cheung's direct causation model and the biblical Reformed model can be in my opinion most clearly perceived. Cheung's model, while it might not lead to fatalism, certainly necessitates a certain soft form of resignation. After all, how can one be angry at the means if God is the one directly bringing about the means? Can one be angry at God? If I know that all things work together for good, then I would infer that persecution would work together for good, so should I be angry at the persecution of Christians around the world? Why should I if God is directly causing it for good?

Perhaps a stronger example here would help. Let us consider a rape victim. According to Cheung's occasionalistic direct causation model, God actively willed the rape, although God is not the agent in the sinful act (thus He did not sin). God willed this rape, in order for greater good to come out of the deed. Since good will come out of this, shouldn't the rape victim be rejoicing because God works all things out for good for the believer (Rom. 8:28), and this rape is thus "beneficial" even for her? Anger and pain, while natural, is irrational in this system.

In Reformed theology, while God wills all things, yet God was not directly involved with the rape. God superintends it for good, but He does so by turning what is pure evil to serve the good. The act is not "willed" by God in the primary, direct sense, and therefore that act of rape is evil in and of itself. God did not dictate the sinful act, but takes the sinful act and uses it for good. As Scripture states in Proverbs 21:1, "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will." The stream of water is already moving, so likewise evil is already being done. But God turns the stream in whatever direction he desires, so likewise what is inherently evil is worked out for good.

Thus, only in the biblical Reformed model can we both trust God and yet have questions and anger at injustices without sinning. We live in a fallen world, not in the realm of God's decrees and sovereign will. Emotions of anguish and bitterness are natural. Instead of striving for either artificiality or irrationality in the Christian life, we should not have any issue with so-called "negative emotions," but rather cultivate faith in God as the deeper anchor for our souls in the many storms of life, so that our faith would bring us through the trials and tribulations that we face in this world.

Trusting God

Being able to rationally be angry and questioning, even while trusting God that all things do happen for our good, is a good thing. But can we actually trust God under Cheung's system? It seems even such trust is undermined if Cheung's system is correct.

In an article entitled "The Lord of Temptations,"⁴ Cheung claimed that God actually tempts and deceives people, in clear contradictions to the explicit didactic teaching of James 1:13-18. Good hermeneutical principles to abide by are that clearer texts interpret the less clear texts, and didactic texts take priority over the narrative texts. Both of these sound

⁴ Vincent Cheung, "The Lord of Temptations." Accessed <http://www.vincentcheung.com/2011/04/25/the-lord-of-temptations/>

hermeneutical principles are violated by Cheung as he reads his hard determinism into the texts of Scripture. The narrative texts of 2 Samuel 24 and 1 Kings 22 are treated as if they reveal the exact actions of God as He directly deceives people, instead of God allowing deception for His greater plans. Whatever the Bible says must not mean what it clearly says in James. Having assumed hard determinism, Cheung believes James cannot be saying what he actually is saying because James is also a hard determinist (like Cheung). White is now black, and black is now white, as Cheung tells us James actually meant the exact opposite of what he wrote in James 1:13-18.

It is one thing to say that God deceives people in the abstract sense. But if God deceives people, then how can one know when God is actually deceiving a person and when He is not? Assuming the Scriptures are true (which is itself uncertain because we do not know if any part of it is also deception), we can only say which biblical episodes show "God's deception" and which don't. But since God does not change, the same god who deceives in the Old and New Testament is the same god who may deceive us today. How do we know where the deception starts, and where it ends?

Thus, trust in this god is eroded. Not only do we lost a rational reason that allows us to be angry at suffering, but trust in this god is also gone, since he can deceive any person at any time.

Conclusion

Cheung's heresy has produced poison fruits: the twin fruits of emotional resignation, and distrust in God. These are not the fruits of a God-centered ministry, and should be rejected as what they are: the works of the devil. May God open the eyes of Cheungians and grant them repentance and faith. Amen.