

The Doctrine of Concurrency

By

Jack Sawyer

A. God's absolute sovereignty, and His creatures' limited, but real, influences, concurrently and mysteriously *shape all of Biblical/redemptive history*. (The Biblical doctrine of "concurrency")

The course of our study in considering the doctrine of concurrency:

- Defining this doctrine
- Accepting this doctrine, and our limitations in understanding it
- Scriptural evidences of this doctrine
- Living out this doctrine in our moment-by-moment lives

1. A concise, working definition:

a. The doctrine of concurrency = "God from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established." (WCF/Ch 3:1)

1. ¹The Scriptures teach that Divine sovereignty and human freedom co-operate in perfect harmony; that while God is the sovereign ruler and primary cause, man is free within the limits of his nature and is the secondary cause; and that God so controls the thoughts and wills of men that they freely and willingly do what He has planned for them to do." (This is also applicable to all of God's other creatures: Satan, demons, angels, animals etc.)

a. Loraine Boettner could have said: "The Scriptures teach that Divine sovereignty and [creature] freedom co-operate in perfect harmony; that while God is the sovereign ruler and primary cause, [creatures are] free within the limits of [their natures and are] the secondary cause; and that God so controls the thoughts and wills of [all creatures] that they freely and willingly do what He has planned for them to do."

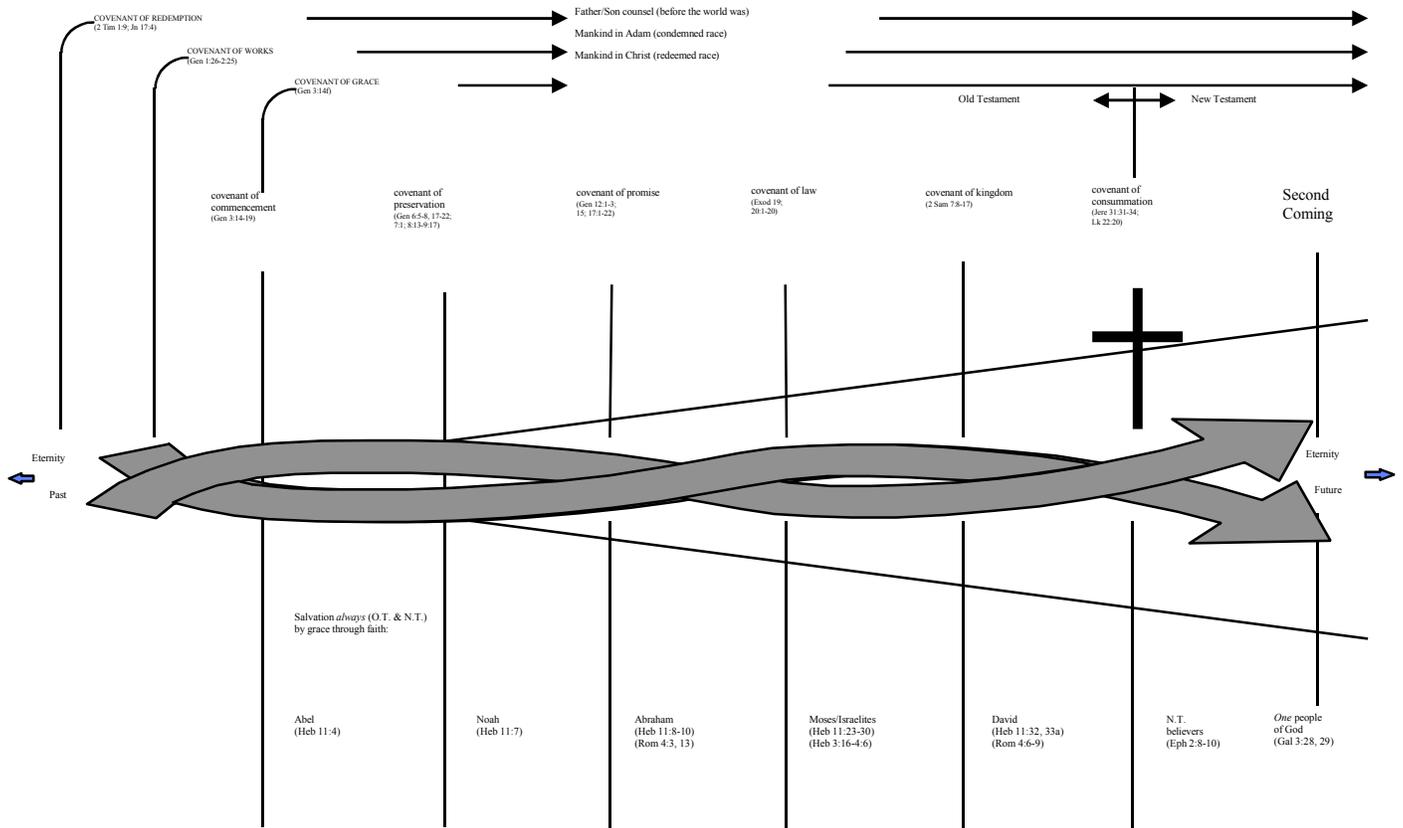
2. This doctrine raises an often-asked question: "If God is absolutely sovereign in everything, how is it that His creatures are influential—and held morally accountable?"

3. *All of Biblical/redemptive history is shaped by an inseparable, mysterious concurrence of unmitigated Divine sovereignty and influential creature accountability.*

a. For the sake of time, I'm going to narrow the focus of our study down to the relationship of God's unmitigated sovereignty to the influential accountability of man.

¹ Boettner, Loraine. *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*. Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed. 1932. 222.

The Doctrine of Concurrency



O.T. believers were saved by grace through faith by trusting in the Christ of *prophecy*.

N.T. believers are saved by grace through faith by trusting in the Christ of *history*.

2. Accepting the doctrine of concurrency, and our limitations in understanding it, involves accepting and understanding an *antinomy*².

a. What is an antinomy?

1. An antinomy is an apparent incompatibility between two apparent truths; it is an *appearance* of contradiction between conclusions which seem equally logical, reasonable or necessary.

b. An antinomy exists when a pair of principles stand side by side, seemingly irreconcilable, yet both undeniable.

1. There are cogent reasons for believing each of them; each rests on clear and solid evidence; but it is a mystery to you how they can be squared with each other. You see that each must be true on its own, but you do not see how they can be true together.

c. An antinomy is neither dispensable nor comprehensible. It is not a figure of speech, but an observed relation between two statements of fact. It is not deliberately manufactured; it is forced upon us by the facts themselves. It is unavoidable, and it is insoluble. We do not invent it, and we cannot explain it. Nor is there any way to get rid of it, save by falsifying the very facts that led us to it.

² Most of the material in this section (that addresses antinomies) was excerpted from the following source. Packer, J.I. *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*. Illinois: InterVarsity. 1961. 18-36.

The Doctrine of Concurrence

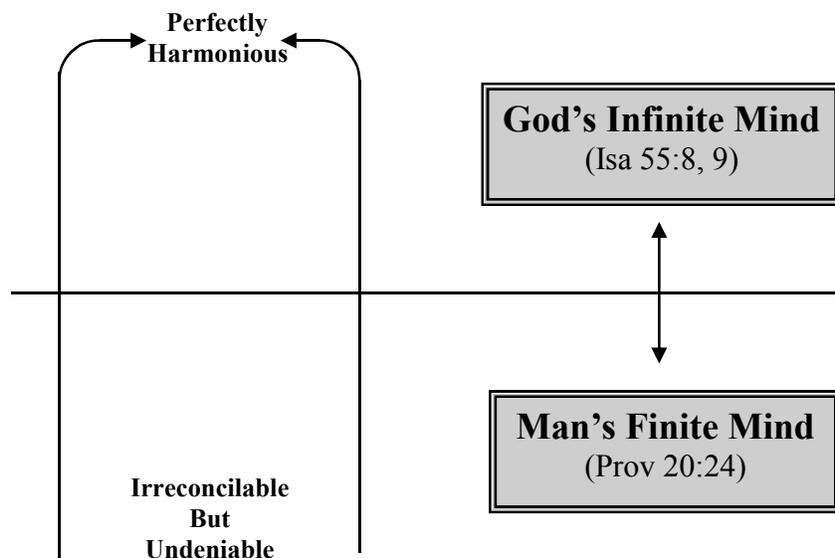
1. Our minds dislike antinomies. We like to tie up everything into neat intellectual parcels, with all appearance of mystery dispelled and no loose ends hanging out. Hence we are tempted to get rid of antinomies from our minds by illegitimate means: to suppress or jettison, one truth in the supposed interest of the other, and for the sake of a tidier theology.
2. Thus, in considering the doctrine of concurrence, *we must honestly acknowledge that man is a responsible moral agent, though he is also divinely controlled; and man is divinely controlled, though he is also a responsible moral agent. God's sovereignty is a reality, and man's responsibility is a reality too.*
3. Since finite men cannot fully comprehend an infinite God, or His ways, we must humbly accept our limitations in fully understanding the mysterious doctrine of concurrence.

Prov 20:24 A man's steps are directed by the LORD. How then can anyone understand his own way?

Rom 11:33 Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!

Isa 55:8-9 "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

Deut 29:29 The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law.



The Doctrine of Concurrency

3. The doctrine of concurrence is indisputably taught in many places throughout the Scriptures.
(*italics* = key words)

2 Tim 1:9 [God] has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. *This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, . . .* (Cov. of Redemption)

Gen 3:6 When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, *she took some and ate it*. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, *and he ate it*.

Gen 50:20 *You intended* to harm me, but *God intended* it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.

Exod 4:21 The LORD said to Moses, “When you return to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders I have given you the power to do. But *I will harden his heart* so that he will not let the people go.

Exod 8:15 But when Pharaoh saw that there was relief, *he hardened his heart* and would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the LORD had said.

Prov 16:1 *To man* belong the plans of the heart, but *from the LORD* comes the reply of the tongue.

Prov 16:9 In his heart *a man plans* his course, but *the LORD determines* his steps.

Prov 19:21 Many are the *plans in a man's heart*, but it is *the LORD's purpose* that prevails.

Acts 2:22-23 “Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. *This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.*”

Acts 4:27-28 Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. *They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.*

Acts 13:44-14:1 On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and talked abusively against what Paul was saying. Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: “We had to speak the word of God to you first. *Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles.* For this is what the Lord has commanded us: “I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.”” When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and *all who were appointed for eternal life believed*. The word of the Lord spread through the whole region. But the Jews incited the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men of the city. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region. *So they shook the dust from their feet in protest against them* and went to Iconium. And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit. At Iconium Paul and

The Doctrine of Concurrency

Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There *they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed.*

Jn 1:12-13 Yet to *all who received him*, to those *who believed in his name*, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but *born of God*.

Jn 15:4-5 *Remain in me, and I will remain in you*. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; *apart from me you can do nothing*.

Phil 2:12-13 Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to *work out your salvation* with fear and trembling, *for it is God who works in you to will and to act* according to his good purpose.

Acts 27:

vss. 1-8:

- As a Roman prisoner, the Apostle Paul was being transported by ship to Rome.
- Due to adverse weather conditions, the ship's crew experienced many difficulties.

vss. 9-10:

9 Much time had been lost, and sailing had already become dangerous because by now it was after the Fast. So Paul warned them,

10 "Men, I can see that our voyage is going to be disastrous and bring great loss to ship and cargo, and to our own lives also."

vss. 11-19:

- Instead of listening to what Paul said, the Roman centurion followed the advice of the pilot and of the owner of the ship—and they sailed on.
- Later, due to severe weather conditions of hurricane proportion, the ship's crew fearfully and desperately scrambled for survival.

vss. 20-26:

20 When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and the storm continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of being saved.

21 After the men had gone a long time without food, Paul stood up before them and said: "Men, you should have taken my advice not to sail from Crete; then you would have spared yourselves this damage and loss.

22 But now I urge you to keep up your courage, because *not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed*.

23 Last night an angel of the God whose I am and whom I serve stood beside me

24 and said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar; and *God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you*.'

The Doctrine of Concurrency

25 So keep up your courage, men, for *I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me.*

26 Nevertheless, we must run aground on some island."

vss. 27-29:

- Still being driven by hurricane winds across the Adriatic sea, the sailors determined that the ship could potentially be close to dashing against some rocks.

vss. 30-34:

30 In an attempt to escape from the ship, the sailors let the lifeboat down into the sea, pretending they were going to lower some anchors from the bow.

31 *Then Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, "Unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved."*

32 So the soldiers cut the ropes that held the lifeboat and let it fall away.

33 Just before dawn Paul urged them all to eat. "For the last fourteen days," he said, "you have been in constant suspense and have gone without food—you haven't eaten anything.

34 Now I urge you to *take some food. You need it to survive. Not one of you will lose a single hair from his head.*"

vss. 35-44a:

- Following these events, all 276 people on board ate together, and after they had eaten, they lightened the ship by throwing the grain in the sea.
- When daylight came, the crew sought to direct the ship toward a bay with a sandy beach—hoping to run the ship aground.
- But the ship got caught on a sandbar, and it was broken to pieces by the pounding of the surf.
- So finally everyone jumped overboard and either swam or floated on pieces of the broken-up ship to land.

vs. 44b:

44 . . . In this way *everyone reached land in safety.*



Meditative Gems

Applicatory inferences: Living out the doctrine of concurrency in our moment-by-moment lives

- **What should a believer do with this antinomy? Accept it for what it is, and learn to live with it³.**

³ The first four †'s in this section were excerpted from the following source. Packer, J.I. *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*. Illinois: InterVarsity. 1961. 21, 35.

The Doctrine of Concurrency

† We must refuse to regard the *apparent* inconsistency as real.

† We must think of the two principles as, not rival alternatives, but, in some way that at present we do not grasp, complementary to each other.

- Regarding this antinomy: Our thought processes are like two magnets whose polarities repel one another when put together; God's thought processes are like the same two magnets whose polarities attract one another when put together.

† We must teach ourselves to think of reality in a way that provides for their peaceful coexistence, remembering that reality itself has proved actually to contain them both.

† C.H. Spurgeon was once asked if he could reconcile these two truths to each other. "I wouldn't try," he replied; "I never reconcile friends."

† Base your acceptance of this antinomy on Scriptural evidence, and not on your finite (and therefore inferior) comprehension of it.

† Instead of making this doctrine a point of contention with God, make it a point of worship.

- Finite creatures should stand in awe at the evidences of the Infinite!—"Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain." (Ps 139:6)

- **How does a believer begin learning to live in light of this antinomy? Learning to live in light of this antinomy is similar to learning how to ride a bicycle:**
 - † The phenomenon of balance is a self-evident reality; understanding it intellectually is not required for experiencing or maintaining it.
 - † A balance can only be experienced or maintained when one gives suitable attention and adjustment to the pull of both demanding sides of gravitation.
 - † Circumstances arise along the way that inevitably require one to temporarily lean one of two directions—while also maintaining one's balance at the center of gravity.
 - † Time and practice are the key to smooth habits of balance.
- **How does a believer manifest true faith in the reality of this antinomy? They learn to live mindful of the moment-by-moment reality that God has not only foreordained *all the ends* in Biblical/redemptive history, but also *all the means to the ends*.**
 - † God sovereignly and mysteriously meets His people in the path of their influential duty.
 - sanctification, evangelism, worship, child-rearing, use of spiritual gifts, making a living, self-protection etc.
 - † God does not act because His people pray, plan, initiate and work but *as* they pray, plan, initiate and work.
 - † God sovereignly and mysteriously weaves the prayers, plans, initiations, and works of His people into the fabric of His purposes.
 - Remember: The revelation of the Christ, to the glory of the triune God, is the predominant, unifying strand in the tapestry of God's revealed Word.

"Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails." (Prov 19:21)