Section: Doctrine of God

**TEACHING NOTES**  **Q18 Part 2**

**Q18. Does God control and have authority over all things?**

Yes; He rules in and over all things. He is in control of all things. God does all that He wills with creation.

**Q18 Part 2**

* **Introduction**

Good evening church. We’re back to build on last week’s teaching, if you missed last week, please ask your table leader for a link to the audio.

Like last week, I’ll quote some historic Christian theologians in this study, and I’m also heavily using and paraphrasing Dr. James Dolezal’s work on this topic tonight.

Once again, this lesson requires both your careful attention and immense amounts of humility.

If you’re like me, you won’t walk away from *one* teaching on some of these things completely understanding all that was said, but God will use this teaching to add to the foundation He’s been laying in all the teaching we’re doing.

As we dive again into the Scripture and this topic, **we must** know and remember that all things exist for God’s purposes. As we have seen in these midweek lessons so far, we are not the ultimate reason for creation or our even own existence. We exist for God, for whatever He has determined—and surely, for His glory. If we get this backwards then not only will this study be difficult, but we will struggle elsewhere with so much of what God has revealed in the Bible.

Let our affirmation be that God has every right, as the Creator, Ruler, and Sustainer of all things, to do what He has willed. We must remember this.

When it comes to us, our abilities, and how we function, we need to be informed by God's word—the high and final authority. We cannot let popular philosophies, our human feelings, or even our perception be the authoritative voice.

As God’s people, we let Him tell us how things are.

**Proverbs 3:5** Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding.

Our study tonight on God’s absolute sovereignty, is critical in our understanding of “*what it means for God to be God and us to be His creatures*” as Dr. Dolezal has said.

Tonight, we are going to focus on

* **God's Sovereignty over Mankind: Each and Every Person to Ever Live**

We’re going to be considering what CAUSES a thing to happen in creation—in general and with humans.

Lift up the computer mouse, speak this sentence, how grass grows. What (or WHO) CAUSES things to happen.

>>What is a Cause and Causal agents<<

New terms. Technical language.

There are

* **Two pillars of truth from Scripture** that are incredibly important for us to know and uphold when it comes to God’s will and our will-----God’s doing and our doing.

These two pillars of truth are:

1. God is absolutely sovereign, and He never sins—His will is supreme, He has preordained all that comes to pass, and He is the first cause of all things. (Pillar one)

And (pillar two)

1. Each human has a real will, genuinely acts accordingly as a second cause, and is morally responsible for all he/she does.

Through church history, faithful theologians studying the Bible have seen our two pillars in the text and have sought to honor God’s word in their teaching of them. …..And that’s what we want to do in this lesson as well.

So, we have the two critical pillars of truth.

* **Biblical View: Divine Concurrence**

In the study of Scripture and theology, these two things being a *reality* is called concurrence. Formally, the biblical doctrine is called *Divine Concurrence*.

Divine Concurrence specifically acknowledges that:

1. God is the first cause of all things;
2. two (or more parties) can act truly and genuinely in the same event; and
3. these acts can produce an outcome *without all parties having the same intent*.

This means: God and the creature can both be ***genuine*** causal agents producing the exact same effect.

We’ll climb into these things and look at Scripture on them, but first we need to see what false views (false alternatives) are prevalent.

* **Two False Views: Deism and Pantheism**

For those *not* affirming the biblical teaching of concurrence, there are two primary manmade false concepts that seek to explain how things happen.

The two false views are forms of Deism and Pantheism.

A summary definition of these are in your notes and I’ll cover them as we go here. I’m quoting and paraphrasing Dr. Dolezal here.

* **Deism**

Let’s first look at Deism. At its core Deism is belief in the existence of a supreme being (a creator) who generally does not intervene in the universe.

The tendency of Deism is to attempt to affirm the real causal agency of creatures and to generally banish God’s causal activity from the world *in order* to ensure (in their minds) that God did not cancel out natural causes.

So, (in their view) in order to guarantee that it really was a cause of creation (like a person) that was doing the causing, God had to step aside (so to speak). In their view, God has to make room for other agents (like humans) to do their work—to operate.

That’s Deism in a nutshell. God would, in this view, be smothering and crowding out His own creation if He were particularly involved in the activities of all that is going on. That’s the Deist conception.

But the biblical truth of concurrence is opposed to Deism. Concurrence understands that *God does not remove Himself in working when creatures work—He* ***and*** *creatures work genuinely and concurrently.*

That’s what the Bible teaches: God does not remove Himself in working when creatures work. ((Rather He ordained their working and is the first cause.))

* **Pantheism**

Next let’s consider Pantheism, the other false view. At its core, it is a belief which identifies God with the universe, or regards the universe as a manifestation of God. The tendency of Pantheism is precisely the opposite (of Deism) in that it so inflates *universal divine agency* that it no longer acknowledges genuine non-divine causes.

Pantheism falsely says, “There is only a divine cause and, therefore, there are no (what we call) second causes or created causes. There is no creature *actually* doing anything in terms of agency.”

But, the biblical truth of Concurrence stands against Pantheism so that we don’t collapse all causality into divine causality and say, “Nothing else (besides God) *truly* acts or does anything.”

Orthodox (meaning: historically, biblically sound) Christians reject both Pantheism and Deism.

Against Deism: if God is not acting causally in the world *at all times* and yet the world continues to exist and operate, then some sort of dualism follows. Basically, you have a set of first principles—you have God and a force outside of God able to sustain and cause *without God*. Therefore, this false view requires that the world now is existing independently of God and moving independently of Him.

God can either depend upon creation’s action to help Him do what He wants to do or God can override creation’s action and cancel out and do what He wants to do. But He cannot be at work in their work. There is independence in the creation.

…This is definitely not biblical.

Set it in motion view.

Against Pantheism, if no creature genuinely causes anything (as second causes), then God is the sole and immediate cause of all good and evil, or there is no *real* distinction between good and evil and all that occurs is just God developing himself through a world process—there really is no creature (or creaturely agent) whatsoever. This false view requires that God is the only genuine actor, therefore, you (creature) act *nowhere*. In this, moral culpability is gone. There is no ‘you’ doing good or evil—

no good deeds, no wicked deeds, no heaven, no hell. …Again, definitely not biblical. Pantheism removes all creaturely agency, moral and otherwise.

We have to stand against both of these manmade alternatives.

Consider this…Pantheism basically says, “Creatures don’t act, only God does.” And Deism basically says, “Creatures act and God stands aside.”

**Notice that Deism and Pantheism share the common false belief that God and the creature cannot *both* be genuine causal agents producing the exact same effect.**

In other words,

for both a Pantheist and a Deist, the *caus-mology* (so to speak) that they both subscribe to is basically the same with regard to agency, which is essentially this: It bears the unbiblical claim that *only one agent can be producing a single effect. It claims there cannot be two agents producing the same effect, at least not without sharing the load by portions.* This would mean that to the extend God acts causally, the creature doesn’t act causally*.* And, inversely, to the extent that the creature acts causally, God doesn’t. That’s the common (and wrong) caus-mology of both Deism and Pantheism.

The Christian doctrine of Divine Concurrence rejects, not *just* Pantheism or Deism, but the caus-mology that they share in common—the false dichotomy that where God acts, the creature can’t or doesn’t, or where the creature acts, God doesn’t.

* **Divine Concurrence Considered**

With that, hopefully can you begin to see why the doctrine of concurrence is so important (still quoting and paraphrasing Dr. Dolezal here):

The doctrine of concurrence upholds the Creator-creature distinction—it upholds the two biblical pillars of truth we identified from Scripture.

Again, these truths are:

God is absolutely sovereign, and He never sins—His will is supreme, He has preordained all that comes to pass, and He is the first cause of all things. (Pillar one)

And each human has a real will, genuinely acts accordingly as a second cause, and is morally responsible for all he/she does. (pillar two)

Look at this from the confession (two references in HN, look at the second for time sake):

All things come to pass unchangeably and certainly in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, who is the first cause. Thus, nothing happens to anyone *[or anything]* by chance or outside of God’s providence. Yet by the same providence God arranges all things to occur according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently.

What this is getting at is: God is the first cause of all things, and (*where man is involved*) man is the second cause—BOTH are genuine causal agents.

Consider that

* **God is the First Cause of All Things**

Look at Acts 17:28 in your notes there.

**Acts 17:28** (ESV)“In him we live and move and have our being.”

In this passage Paul is citing pagans and he’s saying this statement is *actually* correct *when applied* to how **we** *exist and operate* in light of the one true God.

**Acts 17:28** (ESV)“In [God] we live and move and have our being.”

Or as the NASB puts it, “in Him we live and move and exist.”

This passage is so important to what we’re talking about all through this section. It tells us that God is the sovereign one in creation’s existing AND creation’s doing—our existing AND our doing.

What this mean is: When it comes to creaturely causes (the things *we* do as creatures) they are ***caused causes***. We (creatures) are ***moved movers***.

We, genuinely and truly, **are** a second cause. God is the sovereign one, the first cause. “**In [God]** *we* live and move and have our being.” ----By GOD’S CAUSING, *we* exist and genuinely cause.

Consider the biblical truths behind this:

The first thing that should be said of anything that is not God is that *that being* is caused to be. We were and are caused to be by God.

We (creatures) do not *become* self-existent entities.

At no moment do you, detach from God and go off your own way self-sustained and independent.

We depend at every moment of our being for an influx of divine actualism that makes us be. And, likewise you don’t *act* apart from God, who makes you be.

“*In Him*, we live, move, and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

God is the sovereign one in creation’s existing AND creation’s doing. We are seeing here that: All non-divine powers of operation and agency are *caused causes*.

This all sounds very technical I’m sure, but let’s see it in Scripture.

Consider a passage from Isaiah 10.

For historic context, God has used the nation of Assyria as the rod of His anger (so to speak) to chastise the northern kingdom of Israel for their wickedness.

As a tool in God’s hand, Assyria becomes, sort of, inflated and self-important, thinking that they are having the military victory *according to* ***their*** *own strength and* ***their*** *own power*. **So**, God rebukes them with these words.

**Isaiah 10:15**, “Shall the axe boast over him who hews with it, or the saw magnify itself against him who wields it? As if a rod should wield him who lifts it, or as if the staff should lift him who is not wood.”

God can say: “*That’s what you are* *Assyria. You are a tool in* ***my*** *hand. Yes, you are moving. You are doing things.*

*But know your place—understand how this works: You are devastating nations because* ***I*** *have sent you to do that—don’t think that you’re moving independently of me wielding you.*” Thinking (they or we) move apart from God—move independently of God would be like the axe saying, “*Look at the tree I chopped down all by myself! Look at me! I get the praise! Ignore the one wielding me!*” It’s really bazaar, as if the *secondary cause* actually turned itself into *a primary cause* to say, “Look at what ***I*** made the woodsman do to the tree!” That way of thinking is supposed to strike you as madness. God is correcting human pride and wrong thinking.

When creatures think that they act independently of God or that God acts through them because *they* take the initiative, that’s like the axe thinking it rules the woodsman.

This is the point: The axe--the instruments—*do not set themselves in motion*, rather *they are* put in motion by another.

And let us say this, very important: God is not violating the nature of creatures when He causes them to move. That’s the creator-creature distinction. The sustainer-sustained distinction. The Moved Mover reality. It is RIGHT for God to move us as He does.

Theologians of the past rightly said: *A created thing being put in motion by the creator* ***is******wholly in keeping with their nature****.*

God is not violating the nature of creatures when He causes them to move. God sets them in motion **in harmony with their nature.**

When God is at work in and through a rain drop to accomplish His purposes, He is causing rain to do what is in accord with its nature.

When God is at work in and through a sinner to accomplish His purposes, He is causing the sinner to do what is in accord with their nature. He doesn’t violate the will of the sinner when He causes them to do—to move. It’s genuine for them to do what’s according to their nature. They personally *will* to do such things—God doesn’t make them act outside of their design/state/desires.

Do you violate the nature of an axe when you wield it in the woods? No! You’ve actually moved the axe to perform what is proper to its nature. You don’t violate the nature of an axe. You cause it to move in concurrence with its nature. This is a part of the framework to how God acts with created causes.

God works in us (humans) by causing us to be and do—causing us to be and move.

By making us truly be and applying us to ***genuine*** action.

**Acts 17:28** (ESV)“In him we live and move and have our being.”

All of that aligns with the first pillar, in short, God is absolutely sovereign and He is the first cause of all things—including our doing.

* **Real “Second Causes”**

Next, it is important that we understand then the reality of *real* second causes. In the historic Christian confession, see again*: … God… is the first cause…nothing happens to anyone [or anything] outside of God’s providence. Yet [this is the part we’re turning to look at now] by the same providence God arranges all things to occur according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently.*

Here now, we are focusing on the reality that God designed second causes into creation. These can be laws of nature (like gravity),

genuine human will and action,

and so on.

Second causes are real, caused by God’s first cause, and work concurrently with God’s supreme will.

As a human, it is your nature to move—*you are a real second cause*. But the power of moving, just like the power of being, comes from God *since* you ARE a SECOND cause.

This is where our second pillar comes into view.

Again it is that, *each human has a real will, genuinely acts accordingly as a second cause, and is morally responsible for all he/she does.*

The point is, yes you do things, and you truly *will* to do things. That is God’s design—how He made us. But just know that you do what you do in accordance with His sovereign will—**concurrently**.

Also note: not every cause caused by God does *its* causing (horizontally speaking) in the same way.

The fact that every cause is an instrument of God does not flatten out the distinctions between the instruments themselves.

For example, the way that a saw cuts down a tree is brought about differently than the way that I cause you to know something in my teaching tonight.

Is a saw an instrument in the hand of God? Yes.

Is a teacher an instrument in the hand of God? Yes.

Since they are both instruments, are they doing their work (in the horizontal mundane world) the same way? …The answer is no.

God not only causes all causes to do their causing. He also causes them to do their causing with respect to the kinds of things that they are—according to the nature of the created thing.

Let’s see some texts about this where we see *the reality of these two pillars very clearly*.

What I want you to see in these texts is simply this: God’s word teaches the two pillars.

The Scripture, *regarding the exact same operation*, identifies the agency of God and it is not taking away the agency of the creature (or other second causes). God’s word teaches Divine Concurrence.

Remember Divine Concurrence acknowledges that:

1. God is the first cause of all things,
2. two (or more parties) can act truly and genuinely in the same event, and
3. these acts can produce an outcome without all parties having the same intent.

Let’s see these things in Scripture:

* **Divine Concurrence Taught in Scripture**

**Acts 14:17**, “… [God] did not leave himself without witness, for he did good giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons...” Could you give a natural, causal explanation of how *clouds* form and bring rain over land and how when it falls, it causes the germination process to get going?

Yes, you could,

AND yet, God says, “I do these things.”

He’s not cancelling out the second causes—such as these orders of nature He has designed into creation—*He works in and through them*.

**Psalm 104:14** You (God) cause the grass to grow for the livestock and plants for man to cultivate, that he may bring forth food from the earth

Say a seed falls to the ground and the rains come down and you see the little sprouts growing up… you can give a natural causal explanation of these events. That does not cancel out divine causality. *God claims to be causing the exact same operation.* He’s the first cause.

Those are natural causes—not difficult.

Let’s move on to a different type of second cause, **human choices**. Let’s talk about volitional causes—causes willed by man.

**Philippians 2**, says, “…my beloved…work out your salvation with fear and trembling.”

Is that something you are supposed to do? Agency, yes. As a second cause. You are to “work out your salvation.”

Then it says, “…for it is God who is at work in you both to will and to work for His good pleasure.” God is the first cause.

So, is it God or is it you? Yes. Both are genuine causes.

He causes our causing—in this case: our sanctification.

More text on this, **Psalm 18** David talking about overtaking his enemies. “I pursued my enemies and overtook them and did not turn back till they were consumed. … they fell under my feet.” Did David accomplish things as an agent in battle? Great and mighty things, indeed.

He goes on, “For you [God] equipped me with strength for the battle; you made those who rise against me sink under me.”

So, who won the battle?

Did David win the battle? Yes, David won the battle! Did God win the battle? Yes, God won the battle!

Now….Did David do one part and God another part? That’s where confusion for some comes in, but the answer to that is **no**. God is first cause, David is second cause. Both real and genuine causes working concurrently.

God is the sovereign one, the first cause. AND humans genuinely and truly are a second cause. God is not violating the nature of creatures when He causes them to move. God sets them in motion in harmony with their nature.

As we get into the next passage, remember from last week a CRITICAL point, that is: God, (as the first cause) … arranges and governs sinful actions …Yet he does this in such a way that the sinfulness of their acts arises only from the creatures and not from God. Fault/blame/responsibility/guilt of sin is always on the creature—not God. Never God. Scripture says clearly that God is good/perfect/unable to sin/unchangeable.

* **Different Intents**

Most famously perhaps with regard to *will* in the Old Testament, Exodus 7:3 “I will harden Pharaoh’s heart.” God says. And later in Exodus 8:32 “Pharaoh hardened his heart.” Should we split the difference 50/50? Is that how it is?

No. God did it AND Pharaoh did it.

God is first cause, Pharaoh is second cause. To be biblically faithful, we cannot allow one agency to cancel out the other one. Both real and genuine causes working concurrently even with different intents.

Remember the third clarity of Divine Concurrence, it says: the acts (of doers) can produce an outcome *without all parties having the same intent.*

This means there can be *different intents* in the actors (the doers) in concurrence. We see this in this example of Pharaoh and we’ll look at a couple other examples of this from Scripture in a moment.

For this one, God did it AND Pharaoh did it. Pharaoh’s intent was sinful pride of man, and God’s intent was to display His own power and glory.

There are several passages in Scripture like this that show God hardening hearts, or something similar. They there because God is giving us glimpses into His active sovereignty in the actions of men. He wants us to know and see that He is the first cause and we are caused causes.

Our will always genuinely wills (of ourselves, from our own desires, from our heart—it was genuine of Pharaoh to have a hard heart), but God’s intent in these passages is to show He’s sovereign over all.

Look at another example:

Genesis 45:5 “Now do not be grieved or angry with yourselves [Joseph says to his brothers] because you sold me here,” There’s agency; They sold him there.

He continues, “for God sent me before you to preserve life.”

*You* sold me, *God* sent me.

From either perspective, it’s the exact same thing that’s being brought about: Joseph is being taken down to Egypt. Who caused that? Did the brothers cause it? “You sold me,” he says. He puts the responsibility of sin on them. Did God cause it? “God sent me,” he says. And we know, God’s intention was not sinful.

Genesis 50 reflecting on the same thing, “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about the present result and preserve many people alive.” You meant evil, God meant good. **Different intents** in this act. They meant it for evil, God meant it for good! **The sinfulness of any act lies only in the creation**. Humans alone provide the lack of goodness for anything sinful we do.

Are there two intentional acts of agency in the one event of Joseph’s being sent into slavery? The answer is yes. Not Deism. Not Pantheism. Not eclipsing the human agency on the one side and not ruling out the divine on the other.

Look at the most significant example of this in all of Scripture. When we consider the false accusations and death of Christ on the cross…How shall we think of God and man’s involvement in it? God’s word makes it very clear, look at it with me:

Peter speaking to the people of the nation of Israel, declares:

**Acts 2:23** Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you [humans] crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.

It was God’s decree that Christ Jesus would be falsely accused and killed, God is the first cause.

Yet, as the text says, it was fallen men who murdered Christ. They are the second cause. And we know that the fault/blame/responsibility/guilt of sin be NOT IN GOD, but in the creature as they WILLINGLY hated and murdered Christ.

God was GOOD in *His* causing—the salvation of many and His glory………while the humans were SINFUL in *their* causing—hate, disbelief, falsehoods, murder, etc.

We see this account also spoken of in Acts 4, where Christians we praying to God:

**Acts 4:27-28**

[Sinners were] gathered together against … Jesus—[that is genuine will and agency in humans, second causes]

… to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. --[that’s genuine will and agency in God, first cause.]

Sinful humans murdered, according to God’s sovereignty. Two different intents…mankind had sin driving them (their intent was sinful), while God had His glory and the good of His people as His intent (His intent was holy).

Both real and genuine causes, working concurrently, even with different intents. Not Deism. Not Pantheism.

Concurrence/our two truth pillars clearly taught from the word.

[[Exodus 21:12-13 was cut for time this round ]]

Every one of these passages indicates that God is at work in and through **genuine** natural powers and agencies of both nature and humans and, we could add (from other passages), angels.

* **God’s Freedom**

Now, taking this *another* layer deeper, we also see in the historic Christian confession that:

*In his ordinary providence, God makes use of means, though he is free to work apart from them, beyond them, and contrary to them at his pleasure*.

So, we should say that it is not absolutely necessary that God *have or use* second causes. In other words, it’s not like God is limited *unless* He has second causes. He could produce effects like—He could produce the Mona Lisa with no brushes.

That, Da Vinci can’t do.

But, God could do that!

God can immediately produce outcomes (like a painting, or something far grander) that can usually be traced back to natural causes *without any natural causes*.

This is the power of miracles, for example.

How does the virgin Mary become pregnant?…that proves the point of course.

This reality is also what helps us understand regeneration—how God causes us to be born again without our will or our action involved. More on that next week.

Next week we will look at more Scripture to see God revealing the truth of the two pillars and the reality of concurrence.

So, let’s close with a couple points of:

**Practical Implications**

At this point, you are likely feeling some tension with all of this. Verses that speak to MAN’S WILL & MAN’S DOING, and other verses that VERY MUCH raise up GOD’S WILL and GOD’S DOING. You must remember that God’s word doesn’t contradict. The biblical explanation for the tension is concurrence: Both are real and genuine causes working concurrently.

Still, you may be hearing this and still not getting it. But remember…these things take time to understand. Trust me, you need to have patience.

It seems most common that the Holy Spirit gives clarity and understanding over time—not after one or a few teachings or studies.

For myself, it’s taken me years to understand whatever I rightly understand.

But we must also remember that not all of this will make total and perfect sense to us. For God’s ways and thoughts are NOT our ways and thoughts. He is so above and beyond us, that we should not think complex things like this are easily or even totally understandable.

We don’t stop short and throw up our arms in frustration, but we also don’t think we’re so amazing that there is not mystery in some of this.

Look, our pursuit as Christians needs to be to understand what God has revealed in Scripture, as much as possible, in a faithful way, using good stewardship of our time and everything else He has called us too.

So……don’t think you have perfect understanding in all things, AND don’t give up the blessed pursuit to understand and know the LORD increasingly all your days.

Let us humble ourselves before God, and obey what He has called us to.

In our flesh, in pride or laziness, we may be tempted to think, “Well, God’s going to do it all anyways, why should I give effort or obey?” We’ll look at this more next lesson, but in the meantime, let me say, this is a serious error.

God doesn’t stand for us to play games with these things.

God didn’t reveal these things to us, so we would find reason to disobey Him. **He has given us commands, and we must take Him seriously. He never excuses inaction where He has called us to action.**

*If you are feeling tempted not to live every moment with zeal for obeying and honoring the Lord then you need to do business with why you long to respond that way*. If that is our response to God telling us about His sovereignty, then we must repent of that mindset and be biblical with our thoughts and actions.

God’s sovereignly works in such a way that His redeemed hear His commands and act on them as says **Philippians 2:13** (ESV) **13**for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. If you are His, then you will long to obey His commands in Scripture and work hard, all for His glory. We will not do this perfectly, but we will do it as He wills it for us.

I’ll leave us with this again:

**Psalm 97:1** (ESV)

**1** The LORD reigns, let the earth rejoice…!

Let’s pray.