A FREE GRACE RESPONSE TO KEATHLEY'S MOLINIST SOTERIOLOGY

A Paper

Presented to



Grace Research Room

by Philip F. Congdon December, 2019

Introduction

For many years, Christians have longed for some biblical 'middle ground' between the twin errors of Calvinism and Arminianism. R. T. Kendall noted "the surprising degree of reciprocity that exists between Westminster theology and the doctrine of faith in Jacobus Arminius."¹ One "reciprocal" feature of these theological systems is an inclusion of works in the justification formula. As one who stands unwaveringly for the gospel of grace, this writer unequivocally affirms that justification is by faith alone in Jesus Christ. As the Free Grace Alliance Covenant affirms, "The Gospel of Grace should always be presented with such clarity and simplicity that no impression is left that justification requires any step, response, or action in addition to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ."² The importance of this discussion is obvious, and the need for a biblical alternative is clear.

Kenneth Keathley, professor of theology at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, provides an alternative to classical Calvinist and Arminian formulas in his book *Salvation and Sovereignty: A Molinist Approach.*³ The purpose of this paper is to briefly discuss Molinism, examine Keathley's theological position, and offer a response from a free grace perspective.

<u>Molinism</u>

Molinism is named for Luis de Molina (1535-1600), a Jesuit priest who shared a strong belief in God's sovereign control with Calvinists, and an equally strong belief in human freedom usually associated with Arminianism.⁴ As the 'odd man out' in the ecclesial battle which ensued between Calvinism and Arminianism, Molinism largely faded into obscurity. But as church history shows, theological ideas never really die, they just lie dormant for a few centuries, until resurrected by new debates. In contemporary discussion, a resurrection of Molinism has been led by Christian philosophers such as Alvin Plantinga, Thomas Flint, and William Lane Craig.⁵ To its credit, contemporary Molinism still evokes cries of "Arminian!" from Calvinists, and cries of "Calvinist!" from Arminians.⁶ Of course, what really matters is whether or not it is *biblical*.

The key issue in any discussion such as this is how it resolves the seemingly insurmountable conflict between God's sovereignty and human free will (human responsibility). Calvinism's emphasis on sovereignty renders all events and decisions as *necessary* – that is,

¹ R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 3-4.

² The FGA covenant may be accessed at http://www.freegracealliance.com/covenant.htm.

³ Kenneth Keathley, *Salvation and Sovereignty: A Molinist Approach* (Nashville, Tennessee: B&H Publishing Group, 2010).

⁴ Keathley, 5. It is suggested by some that the actual connection between Molina's teachings and the modern tenets of "Molinism" are rather loose. See "Molina, Luis De" in F.L. Cross, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 928.

⁵ See A. Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977); T.P. Flint, *Divine Providence: the Molinist Account* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); and W.L. Craig, *The Only Wise God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987).

⁶ Keathley, 5-7.

God's knowledge of all that would happen means that nothing else can ever happen. When this is applied to our human choices, it results in *determinism* – that is, God made everything and every person and even every circumstance, so that even our choices are determined ahead of time, and we do not have the ability to choose to do otherwise than has been already determined for us. This position is sometimes referred to as *theological fatalism*.⁷ Calvinism's logical succession of points, commonly known by the acronym TULIP, affirms God's sovereign (absolute) control, but in stating that all *true* believers therefore inevitably continue in the faith (Perseverance of the saints), it ironically made assurance of salvation (and ultimately salvation itself) a result of good works.

Arminians recoiled at the implications of determinism and resolved the conflict by going to the opposite extreme – emphasizing man's free will. Seeking to give real meaning to the warning passages of Scripture, they concluded that mankind is a causal agent in determining his eternal destiny. This led to conditional security – the possibility of losing your eternal salvation through falling away. Ironically, since all ultimately *stay saved* by continuing in the faith, Arminians join Calvinists in viewing assurance of salvation (and ultimately salvation itself) as dependent on works.

Molinists seek to resolve the conflict by pointing to God's omniscience.⁸ It is not God's absolute control, or man's free choice, but God's exhaustive foreknowledge, which solves the riddle. They posit that God had three 'moments' of knowledge (logical, not chronological).

- First, He had "natural knowledge" He knew all things that were true, and all things that could be true if He chose to bring them into existence. Therefore, He knew all possible worlds He could create, all possible beings, and all possible circumstances.
- Second, He had "middle knowledge" He knew what every possible creature *would* do in every possible situation in every possible world (whew!). This is not the same as looking down the corridor of human history to see what a person would do; rather, God's middle knowledge enables Him to know what each person *will freely do* in every possible world.
- Third, He had "free knowledge" that is, God determined to create *this* world, and thus He 'knows' all that will happen based on His free, sovereign decision.

In this way, while retaining His absolute sovereign control, God 'factors in' the free actions of His creatures. This approach simultaneously affirms divine sovereignty and human freedom. Instead of determining all events and decisions by His omnipotence, God simply chose the best possible world based on His knowledge of what free beings would do.

⁷ Ibid, 31. Also see George Bryson, *The Dark Side of Calvinism* (Santa Ana, CA: Calvary Chapel Publishing, 2004), 21-22.

⁸ Ibid, 38-41.

Keathley's Soteriology

Keathley redefines (and renames) the traditional five points of Calvinism, turning a TULIP (Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, and Perseverance of the saints) into ROSES (Radical depravity, Overcoming grace [contra irresistible], Sovereign election [contra unconditional], Eternal life [contra Perseverance], and Singular redemption [contra Limited atonement]. He abandons much of the content and implications of Reformed doctrine, presenting a refreshingly biblical and evangelical approach.

Keathley's soteriology – as revealed in ROSES – is not an expression of Molinism *per se*, since not all Molinists would agree with his five points.⁹ Rather, it is a refreshing statement of salvation truth which applies a Molinist approach, particularly in explaining his view of election.

<u>Radical Depravity.</u> In contrast to the fatalism of Calvinist Total Depravity, Keathley suggests "Soft Libertarianism" and humanity's moral responsibility. He writes:

Humans are ultimately responsible for their moral decisions in a way the other creatures of the earth are not…because, as causal agents, they are in a limited, derived way, the originators of their respective choices. This ability is a gift bestowed by God and is a way in which humans reflect the divine image.¹⁰

While fallen humanity is radically depraved, and is "not able not to sin," this does not mean he is unable to receive the truth of the gospel.

Overcoming Grace. Over against the Calvinistic idea that God either did or did not predestine each person to believe (to the predestined, believing is *irresistible*, while to those not predestined, it is *impossible*), and the Arminian idea that all are able to believe, and simply choose to believe or not to believe (which seems to imply human merit in salvation), Keathley posits an "overcoming grace" model which is both *monergistic* (meaning justification is *totally* a work of God) and grace is resistible. Radically depraved humans do not have the capacity to believe; they only have the ability to *resist*. Keathley writes:

⁹ See Terrance L. Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved? Reassessing Salvation in Christ and World Religions* (Downers Grove, III.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 158-164. Tiessen's discussion is excellent, but does not include Keathley's approach. He identifies two Molinist views: 1) Some propose a form of "accessibilism," the idea that salvation is accessible to those who do not ever hear the gospel, based on God's knowledge of those who *would have* believed had they heard. This approach is articulated by Donald Lake ("He Died For All: The Universal Dimensions of the Atonement" in *Grace Unlimited*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1975), 43): "God knows who would, under ideal circumstances, believe the gospel, and on the basis of his foreknowledge, applies that gospel even if the person never hears the gospel during his lifetime." While not claiming to be a Molinist, and even using the term "foreknowledge," what Lake writes fits within the Molinist view. Tiessen doubts this view, since it requires no actual faith for a person to be saved. 2) Others (most notably William Lane Craig) propose that God sovereignly 'chose' to create this world, in which those who never hear the gospel *would not have responded to it* if they had heard. Both these views undermine the importance of missions, leaving the ultimate destination of every person already determined, based either on what God knows they would have or would not have done! ¹⁰ Keathley, 99.

If you believe, it is because (and only because) the Holy Spirit brought you to faith. If you do not believe, it is only because you resisted. The only thing you are able to "do" is negative.¹¹

Apart from the work of the Holy Spirit, none would believe. Because of the work of the Holy Spirit, all may believe. Grace is truly offered and available to all. The question is no longer "Why do some believe, and others not believe?" Instead, it is "Why doesn't *everyone* believe?!" The answer is found in the free response of radically depraved humans, who – despite the fact that the Spirit draws *all men* – can decide to refuse the offer.

<u>Sovereign Election.</u> Theological explanations of election are rife with problems – either to explain God's character (love) or sovereign control. Supralapsarian Calvinists are logically consistent, but morally repugnant: God decreed both the salvation of the elect and the damnation of the reprobate before the fall. The eternal destiny of every person is arbitrarily determined and ordained from eternity past, and nothing can change it. Eternal destiny is all about God's sovereignty, and nothing about human responsibility. This view does violence to the character of God. As Spurgeon wrote:

Do you believe that God created man and arbitrarily, sovereignly – its all the same thing – created that man, with no other intention, than that of damning him? Made him, and yet, for no other reason than that of destroying him forever? Well, if you can believe it, I pity you, that is all I can say; you deserve pity, that you should think so meanly of God, whose mercy endureth forever.¹²

In an effort to avoid this awful view (and be more biblical, if less Calvinistic), infralapsarian Calvinists place God's decree to elect after the fall. God did not damn the reprobate before the fall, but damned them because they are fallen. In this model, God then elected to save some, and simply passed over the rest.¹³ While solving the ethical dilemma, however, it creates a logical impasse. It is not simply a "mystery" to say God elected some, and yet all are responsible; it's a contradiction.¹⁴ The infralapsarian simply seeks to avoid the inevitable implications of his theological starting point.

Keathley's Molinistic solution is to affirm both sovereignty and human freedom based on "three moments of election."¹⁵ First, God in His *natural knowledge* knows everything that *could* happen, in all possible worlds, in all possible scenarios. Second, God, using *middle knowledge*, from this infinite number of possibilities, knows which scenarios would result in

¹¹ Ibid., 104.

¹² C. H. Spurgeon, "Jacob and Esau," in *The New Park Street Pulpit* (Pasadena: Pilgrim Pub., [1859] 1981), 118, cited by Keathley, 138.

¹³ It is startling how fiercely Supralapsarian Calvinists attack those who refuse to stay true to the theological system, even when it compromises the character of God! A common method is to accuse the infralapsarian of being Arminian. In his endorsement of *The Potter's Freedom* by James White (a supralapsarian Calvinist), a response to Norm Geisler's *Chosen But Free*, Daniel Wallace pejoratively refers to Geisler as "one of evangelicalism's major Arminian apologists," a designation Geisler would no doubt find surprising! Keathley (p48) writes that "one cannot help but smile at Robert Reymond's [supralapsarian] accusing John Gerstner [infralapsarian] of being an Arminian." ¹⁴ Keathley, 14, 148.

¹⁵ Ibid., 150ff.

people freely responding in the way He desires. From the possible options provided by His middle knowledge, God sovereignly chooses which one He will bring to pass. Finally, with His *free knowledge* (or *foreknowledge*), God knows with certainty what will occur.

<u>Eternal Life.</u> The Classical Calvinist doctrine of Perseverance of the Saints injects works into the justification formula by making perseverance an inevitable result of salvation. Arminian doctrine injects works into the justification formula by making perseverance a requirement for *staying saved*. This shared dilemma is reflected in the old saying that "Arminians know they are saved but are afraid they cannot keep it, while Calvinists know they cannot lose their salvation but are afraid they do not have it."¹⁶ Keathley avoids both problems (and is biblical to boot) by stating that a person can know he is saved, and know he will remain saved, based on the finished work of Christ.

Keathley summarizes his position with four points: 1) The only basis for assurance is the objective work of Christ. The finished work Christ is the foundation of assurance; good works merely support and confirm.¹⁷ 2) Assurance is of the essence of saving faith; a certain knowledge of salvation is simultaneous with being saved. Even though doubts may arise, the core conviction remains. 3) Saving faith perseveres; this is more a promise than a requirement. 4) God offers rewards subsequent to salvation for the believer to win or lose.¹⁸

Singular Redemption. Borrowing this designation from Timothy George¹⁹, Keathley states that Christ did not die for all people 'in general,' but rather for *each person in particular*. Over against classical Calvinism, Christ's atonement is *not* 'limited'; it is sufficient for all, while being efficient only for those who believe. Christ's death provided salvation for all humanity, but the benefits are secured only by those who believe, and the benefits are applied at the moment they believe.

A Free Grace Response

There is much to applaud in Keathley's soteriology. He affirms that God desires the salvation of each and every person in the world. Instead of Calvinism's "Total Depravity," in which fallen humanity cannot even believe until regenerated, he presents a "Radical Depravity" in which fallen persons possess the real ability to choose. Instead of Calvinism's "Irresistible Grace," which is only for some, and cannot be rejected, his "Overcoming Grace" affirms the work of the Holy Spirit in drawing all men to faith, while preserving their freedom to reject it. He rejects the requirement of perseverance either for salvation, or for assurance of salvation, and

¹⁶ I. Howard Marshall, *Kept By the Power of God: A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away*, 3rd ed. (London: Paternoster, 1995), 267, cited by Keathley, 164, who notes that in response to the question of the possibility of knowing you are saved, "It is more than just a little ironic that though they travel different routes, many Arminians and Calvinists arrive basically at the same answer – assurance is based on evidence of sanctification."

¹⁷ While I think his spirit is in the right place, the meaning of "support and confirm" is rife with problems; the absence of good works biblically concerns sanctification, not justification. If it is allowed a 'foot in the door' in 'supporting and confirming' assurance of salvation, it will quickly take over! Happily, point #2 seems to correct this potential problem.

¹⁸ Keathley, 187-190.

¹⁹ Timothy George, *Amazing Grace: God's Initiative – Our Response* (Nashville: Lifeway, 2000), 80-83.

recognizes the reality of post-salvation rewards for good works in the believer's life. And he recognizes that Christ died for all mankind, not only a limited group who are 'elect'.

On the other hand, Keathley at times leaves himself open to works in the salvation formula, often including repentance as a requirement of salvation, or allowing that behavior indicates whether or not a person's faith is genuine. His interpretation of Scripture is confusing at times, applying passages to justification which should be applied to sanctification.

The 'weakest link' in Keathley's Molinist soteriology, however, is ironically where he leans on Molinism the most. This is in his discussion of "sovereign election." In the opening lines of the book's Introduction, Keathley 'lays his cards on the table':

What shall a Christian do who is convinced of certain central tenets of Calvinism but not its corollaries? Specifically, what if I am convinced that God elects individuals to salvation but I am also compelled by the evidence of Scripture to reject the notion that Christ died only for the elect?²⁰

It is tempting to avoid egregious elements of TULIP by abandoning them (as Amyraldians denying limited atonement). We sympathize with Keathley's aversion to the Calvinist idea that Christ died only for the elect, for example, since this is biblically insupportable! However, as Bryson asserts,

...I cannot see how or why one could believe in one or more of the five points without also (logically speaking) believing in all of the five points of Calvinism.²¹

In other words, each of the points of Calvinism, when understood and accepted *as framed* within the Westminster Confession (1647), logically demands the other points.²² Each of the points is like a cancer cell, which unless confronted and either eradicated or essentially changed, inevitably spreads the 'disease' of Calvinism. Keathley avoids the cancer in four of the points by redefining (and slightly renaming) Calvinism's tenets. But in his discussion of sovereign election, I believe he has retained a 'cell' of Calvinism which compromises his otherwise refreshingly biblical discussion.²³

The problem with Calvinistic "Unconditional Election" is that, when push comes to shove, it does not do justice to the biblical evidence of human responsibility. Instead of a God who loves the world and sent His Son to pay for the sins of all men, supralapsarian Calvinists frankly admit that grace plays no role in God's decree, and even speak of God's attitude toward

²⁰ Keathley, 1.

²¹ Bryson, 50.

²² Ibid, 50-53. Bryson exhaustively cites Calvinist writers who expound the logical unity and inseparability of the five points of Calvinism. In the blunt words of R.C. Sproul, "To be a four-point Calvinist one must misunderstand at least one of the five points..." (R.C. Sproul, *Chosen By God* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale Publishing House, 1986), 13). See Keathley's quote of J. I. Packer on p.196 as well.

²³ I suspect this may be why some Calvinists who have no inclination of abandoning their Reformed soteriology (and do not share Keathley's positions in *Salvation and Sovereignty*) have still incorporated aspects of Molinism into their explanation of sovereign election. See Keathley, 41, n.21.

the non-elect as one of "eternal hatred."²⁴ Such assertions are unbiblical and an affront to the character of God.

Infralapsarian Calvinists find themselves in an equally troubling position, accepting a premise (God's sovereign selection of who would be given eternal life) which they then try to cover up by affirming a bizarre kind of responsibility which they dub "efficacious permission" or "determinative permission."²⁵ They need to do this to avoid the logical end of their own premise, making God the author of sin. Ware, an infralapsarian, criticizing supralapsarian Calvinists, writes:

It seems to me, that the strain in Calvinism that has been reluctant to embrace the "permissive will of God" simply rejects one of the very *conceptual tools necessary to account for God's moral innocence in regard to evil.*²⁶

What a damning indictment of your theology if you must use "conceptual tools" to avoid logical conclusions which your own theological premises demand! Both Calvinist approaches come to grief because they are essentially the same. As Keathley summarizes,

Infralapsarianism and supralapsarianism are simply nuances of the same approach as long as both begin with God's eternal decrees and reject the notion that God would (or even could) grant any type of libertarian choice to responsible creatures.²⁷

But does Keathley's Molinist account take care of these problems? To be clear: Does a Molinist explanation of God's sovereign election and human responsibility really avoid the ethical dilemma of supralapsarian Calvinism, and the rational inconsistency of infralapsarian Calvinism?

The 'character question' concerns a loving God, who, according to Scripture, "desires all men to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4), and is "not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). If this is true, how can it be reconciled with any sovereign act of God by which He chooses to create a world in which some are knowingly predestined to eternal heaven, and others to eternal hell?

Molinists counter with the idea that God did the best that He could while allowing for human freedom and responsibility. William Lane Craig suggests that God "chose a world having an *optimal balance* between the number of the saved and the number of the damned."²⁸ Keathley adds,

²⁴ Keathley,143, notes that "some supralapsarians such as David Engelsma do not hesitate to speak of God's attitude toward the nonelect as one of eternal hatred."

²⁵ Ibid., 146. Keathley notes, with thinly veiled humor, that "Seeing the term 'efficacious permission' as something other than an oxymoron is a challenge."

²⁶ Bruce A. Ware, *God's Greater Glory: The Exalted God of Scripture and the Christian Faith* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 26. Italics added.

²⁷ Keathley, 147-148.

²⁸ William Lane Craig, "'No Other Name:' A Middle Knowledge Perspective on the Exclusivity of Salvation through Christ," *Faith and Philosophy* 6:2 (April 1989), 185. Italics added.

In other words, God has created a world with a *maximum ratio* of the number of saved to those lost. The Bible teaches that God genuinely desires all to be saved, and even though many perish, still His will is done. Molinism better addresses this apparent paradox.²⁹

Whether or not it deals with it "better" or not, the "apparent paradox" still exists! For what fairly screams from these explanations is this: Would not the "optimal balance" of saved to damned be 'all to none'? If God is choosing the best of all possible worlds, in keeping with His exhaustive omniscience, why not choose one in which *all* are saved? Even if we were to grant that this was not possible, why not choose a world in which *most* are saved? Here, conjecture is the Molinist's only recourse: Craig, for example, suggests that there may have been "possible worlds in which everyone hears the gospel and is freely saved," but suggests that such a world might have "only a handful of people in them," and that perhaps God created a more populated world like ours even though that meant "some people would freely reject Him and be lost."³⁰ One cannot help but sense that Craig is 'feeling around in the dark' for some rational justification for the way things are!

At the end of his discussion, Keathley seems to recognize the persistent unresolved problem. He writes:

Molinism does not provide an explanation as to why God created a world in which it was possible for sin to enter, but it is not necessary to do so. Molinism is a defense, not a theodicy.³¹

This is all well and good, but I submit it leaves the ethical and logical problems facing Calvinism unresolved. Ethically, we want to know why a God who *could* create a world in which all are saved did not do so. If He chose to create a world in which He knows many (if not most) of His creation will never hear the grace gospel, and therefore spend eternity in hell, when He could have chosen to create a world in which all would hear and respond to the gospel, why not choose the latter? This scenario makes biblical claims of wanting all to be saved and none to perish ring hollow.

On the other hand, while pushing the question of "election" into the realm of 'which world God will choose to create' instead of 'which people will God choose to save' is easier to swallow, it remains true that God's choice to create one world and not another absolutely determined who would be saved and who would not. While within this created world our actions and decisions are 'free,' it still seems a fatalistic situation. Keathley seeks to alleviate this perception by quoting Craig:

"It is up to God whether we actually find ourselves in a world in which we are predestined, but it is up to us whether we are predestined in the world we find ourselves."³²

³¹ Keathley, 163.

²⁹ Keathley, 153. Italics added.

³⁰ William Lane Craig, "Politically Incorrect Salvation," in *Christian Apologetics in the Post-Modern* World, ed. Timothy P. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 91-92.

³² Ibid., 154, citing Craig, "No Other Name," 172-188.

Since God's choice according to Molinism is in eternity past, based on God's middle knowledge of possible worlds He could create, such explanations are unconvincing.

The Calvinist falls down the stairs, gets up, dusts himself off, and says, "Whew, I'm glad that's over!" – since every event is absolutely determined by God's sovereign *omnipotent* decree. The Molinist falls down the stairs, gets up, dusts himself off, and says, "Whew, I'm glad that's over!" – since every event is absolutely determined by God's sovereign *omniscient* decision of what world He would create! Have we truly resolved anything here?

Conclusion

Keathley's Molinistic approach as reflected in R-O-S-E-S is refreshingly biblical, and agrees in many ways with grace theology. I suspect this is due more to his commitment to biblical teaching than Molinist explanations of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. And at the one point where he leans most heavily on Molinist explanations, he leaves unresolved problems associated with Calvinism's Unconditional Election.

Although it is not within the purview of this paper, it seems that as long as we retain the Calvinist tenet of sovereign (unconditional) election³³ – meaning that God "chose" who would be saved in some way, shape, or form – we will struggle in vain to do justice to the open invitation for all to believe and receive the free gift of eternal life.³⁴

³³ Ibid., 153-154; Keathley states that Molinism "provides a better model for understanding how simultaneously God's decree of election is unconditional while His rejection of the unbeliever is conditional."

³⁴ For a discussion of "elect" and conditional election, see C. Gordon Olson, *Getting the Gospel Right: A Balanced View of Salvation Truth* (Cedar Knolls, New Jersey: Global Gospel Publishers, 2005), and "Astounding New Greek Discoveries about 'Election'", <u>http://www.mediatetheology.org/uploads/Astounding_Discoveries_on_Election.pdf</u>.