

An Analysis of Moser's View of Salvation that Requires an Active, Severe Role for Humans

ETS, Midwest, Wheaton College, March 10-11, 2017

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[With] brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind (1 Pet. 3.8), He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message...so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it (Titus 1:9 NIV)

Introduction

The goal of this paper is to analyze Paul Moser's view of salvation that "requires an active, if severe, role for humans in their salvation"¹ in which the the key activity of human faith that saves is a voluntary cooperative response.² To accomplish this goal, I will summarize his view, evaluate it, and then, in light of this analysis, conclude with some summary implications. My sources are his books *The Severity of God: Religion and Philosophy Reconceived* (2013) and *The Evidence for God: Religious Knowledge Reexamined* (2010).

I. Summary of the view that salvation requires an active, severe role for humans

A. We begin with severity of God in the experience of humans

God's severity, as well as His kindness (Rom 11.22) comes to expression in the human experience of severe difficulties, not the least of which is death. Candor requires that we acknowledge it and "ask what, if anything, is the best response to the severity of human life. The answer depends, of course, on the nature of this severity," which this book explains by attending to "severity on both sides of the God-human relationship: severity as caused or at least allowed by God, and severity as experienced by humans"³ who have "failed by the standard of divine love" but for whom divine love seeks to give redemption by "making life difficult, or severe, for the sake of encouraging humans, without coercion, to enter into a cooperative good life with God."⁴

B. Cooperation with God for the good life

A principle of cooperation, a dominant theme of the book, is mentioned repeatedly and governs a wide range of ideas including the author's view of the power of God in salvation, Gethsemane, religion, and philosophy. He says, "Paul's driving assumption is that God seeks to give life to humans and uses means that serve that purpose (at least *so far as humans cooperate*)."⁵ What Moser means by human cooperation in divine redemption is that humans, with the ability to reject or accept God, willingly accept Him.⁶ For Moser, the free gift of redemption "includes stress, struggle, and severity in the face of conflicting powers and alternative priorities."⁷ Thus, this book accents "the role of severity in redemption, and in our response, the *importance of human volitional cooperation with God*, even when rigorous and unsettling."⁸ Notably, this book "contends that divine severity points us to the volitional crisis of

¹ Severity, 138

² Ibid., 157

³ Ibid., 2

⁴ Ibid., Preface

⁵ Ibid., 140 (italics mine).

⁶ Ibid., 83

⁷ *Evidence*, Preface

⁸ Ibid., 5 (italics mine)

Gethsemane,”⁹ which “calls for reconceiving various problem areas in religion and philosophy,”¹⁰

C. Now, salvation by grace apart from works

The author claims to defend salvation by grace that requires “an active, cooperative role for humans in their salvation,” which is an indispensable action, but “not an action that earns salvation; it is active in receiving salvation.”¹¹ Of course, “humans can resist, even stubbornly resist, redemption on God’s terms. Nothing necessitates that humans cooperate with God.”¹² Man’s need given his failure to love does not obligate God to offer redemption, “but God, out of graciousness, offers redemption anyway.”¹³ God intervenes with rigorous, even severe, divine challenge [that is] very different from divine coercion [because] it leaves human agency intact.¹⁴

That nothing necessitates human cooperation goes with the interesting application of hope to God. In the NT God’s “aim or hope is to free people from bondage to what does not give a life of freedom”; that God alone can provide.¹⁵ God may not be successful because He created free agents.¹⁶ Some people fear losing their autonomy. So, we should make a distinction “between autonomy as independence of God and autonomy as capability to choose for or against a life of [love]. The latter autonomy is genuinely good and would be preserved by a God worthy of worship, but the former autonomy is arguably not good at all, and clinging to it will only “bring trouble in its wake.”¹⁷ Nonetheless, (given this autonomy), Moser goes on to state that “Paul excludes from grace human works of any sort that involve a human’s satisfying a debt.”¹⁸ We simply must make the important distinction between action that earns salvation and action that receives already constituted salvation.¹⁹ Hence, the driving assumption: “God seeks to give life to humans and uses means that serve that purpose (at least *so far as humans cooperate*).”²⁰

D. The moral example of Gethsemane and Calvary

God uses means to serve His purpose of giving salvation by grace apart from works to cooperative humans. How does He do this? It is through the garden and the cross that manifest self-giving love. The key then is that “humans are to become self-giving in the way God is (and Jesus is).”²¹ Remarkably, this is without the punishment of Jesus on the cross! It may surprise some to discover that the severity of God and the suffering of Christ have nothing to do with what Moser calls the speculative idea that Jesus was punished by God on behalf of others. He

⁹ Ibid., Preface.

¹⁰ Ibid., 6

¹¹ Ibid., 8

¹² Ibid., 6

¹³ Ibid., 18

¹⁴ Ibid., 20

¹⁵ Ibid., 40

¹⁶ Ibid., 41

¹⁷ Ibid., 83

¹⁸ Ibid., 143. The language is a bit tricky. Consider how different it is to say, “Paul excludes from grace any sort of human works because thereby they involve a human’s satisfying a debt due to be paid to God.” My question here is how can Moser avoid justification by works in this scenario in which God depends on man’s autonomous act of receiving?

¹⁹ Ibid., 139

²⁰ Ibid., 140

²¹ Ibid., 21

says, “Paul proclaims the cross of Jesus Christ as the place where human rebellion against God is mercifully judged and forgiven by God. This does not mean that God punished Jesus, a reportedly innocent man before God. No New Testament writer teaches otherwise, contrary to some later, more speculative theologians.”²² To be sure, there is remarkable divine severity in the crucifixion, but it is not “ultimately from God” who “chose to punish Jesus to save humans from the just deserts of their sins” because “This interpretation is highly controversial... it lacks clear support in the NT, and ...it raises serious questions about divine justice.”²³

So what did Jesus come into the world to do? Moser says, “According to Paul, God sent Jesus into this world to undergo, willingly, suffering and death at human hands. God in Paul’s story, mercifully *deems this intervention adequate for dealing justly with human rebellion*. In this respect, Jesus paid the price on behalf of humans for divine reconciliation.”²⁴ He manifests the power and wisdom of God (cruciform wisdom²⁵) “as an agent humbly and reverently cooperating with God” and thus Moser says, “A striking example of humble cooperation with God appears in the Gospel reports of Jesus in Gethsemane,” and this teaches us that “The proper Gethsemane and human approach to God willingly puts God’s perfect will first, even if serious human want must thereby yield, including a human want to continue earthly life.”²⁶

Notably, the cruciform wisdom of God “seeks to encourage a resistant human will to welcome God’s self-sacrificial will and to cooperate with it, come what may” and this “puts humans under a divine challenge to undergo a volitional makeover toward God’s perfect will. This makeover calls for our gladly receiving our need of and dependence on God’s life-giving power” as God seeks “to avoid solidifying human resistance...as long as humans are genuine candidates for redemption (one can be too uncooperative).²⁷ Therefore, in salvation, a God worthy of worship must award a key role to human self-sacrifice to God, after the model of Gethsemane.”²⁸ Thus, the receptivity of faith involves submission to the will of God and the purpose of the garden and the cross is to provide, through severity, a challenging example to encourage ungodly and resistant people to accept God’s self-sacrifice in Christ and to thereby receive lasting life.

II. Evaluation of the view that salvation requires an active, severe role for humans

It is time now to consider the support on which Moser rests his view of salvation in which “the key activity of human faith that saves is a voluntary cooperative response”²⁹ in the

²² Ibid., 25.

²³ Ibid., 41

²⁴ Ibid., 25 (italics mine)

²⁵ Ibid., 31

²⁶ Ibid., 30. Moser gives no support for his claims and thus nothing here to evaluate, but a brief word of counter is in order. Consider Romans 3.21-26 on grace, redemption, and propitiation in context of the point of the Passover lamb and blood as protection from the wrath of God executed by the death angel to set Israel free from bondage, in the context of the Levitical sacrifices that demanded death of a substitutionary sacrifice to establish fellowship with God, and in the context of Isaiah 53 that describes the suffering of the servant of the Lord by God’s crushing hand. These lines of thought (and many others like them) are reflected in the NT. For example, Peter rests his view of Christ who bore our sins on the tree (i.e. was punished for our sins on the cross) on Isaiah 53. Notably, it pleased the Lord to bruise His servant when He laid upon Him the iniquity of us all (cf. Zechariah...I will smite the shepherd and scatter the sheep...is the Lord’s doing).

²⁷ Ibid., 31-32

²⁸ Ibid., 49

²⁹ Ibid., 157

exercise of genuinely good autonomy as capability to choose for or against a life of love.³⁰ In *Severity*, the only support presented is the philosophical argument that God's redemptive purpose would be undermined if He extinguished human wills because that would mean that "humans themselves would be extinguished as candidates for genuine moral relationships and companionship with God" so "God's aim must be to give deep, volitional deliverance" and as a drowning person "needs to cooperate with the rescuer" likewise humans in trouble "need to cooperate with the rescuing power [of God] on offer."³¹ But what is his support for the claim that this entails the exercise of human autonomy to choose for or against God? This becomes the question of biblical support for his view that man in the fall has not drowned but is drowning. He makes a biblical case for this principle of cooperation in his *Evidence for God* in a rebuttal of Plantinga's view of sin and grace.³² I will only cover some of the points to sample in brief how Moser handles these Scriptures and a few others.

A. John 6.44

Moser claims that the Gospel of John resists Plantinga's Calvinist understanding of John 6.44 regarding divinely selected and caused regeneration (i.e. election and efficacious calling).³³ In support of his notion of good autonomy,³⁴ he states that human freedom to reject or embrace God's drawing is taught in The Gospel of John.³⁵

Interestingly, Moser explains the notion of drawing in 6.44 by reference to 12.32 *without comment on 6.44*. So, before going further, we want to know what John 6.44 teaches in its context. Jesus speaks to people who do not believe in Him (6.36) and says, **All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out** (6.37). Coming to Christ is interchangeable with believing in Him. So, contrary to Moser, Jesus speaks here of a "favored" people that are given to Jesus and who will come to Him. To give eternal life to these "given ones" is the will of the Father in sending the Son, specifically, **that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day** (6.39). Not a surprise, the Jews grumbled (6.41-42). Then Jesus countered their grumbling (6.43) and explained in 6.44 that the Father's drawing is required for coming to Him and believing in Him for without the Father's drawing no one has the ability to believe: **No one can come to me [believe in me] unless the Father who sent me draws him**. Next, He connects drawing (of 44a) with the given ones He will raise up (v. 39) by adding in 44b: **And I will raise him up on the last day**. People were given to Christ before He came into the world and everyone of them will come to faith in Christ for Jesus will not lose any of them. Everyone given to Christ (the favored, His elect, those given to Him before the foundation of the

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 83

³¹ *Ibid.*, 13-14

³² *Evidence*, 131-134. My concern is not with the difference between Moser and Plantinga on the validity and necessity of argument that is the larger context. What Moser does in these pages is offer a refutation of Plantinga's view of sin and grace. Here Moser reveals the grounds of his principle of cooperation in his rejection of the reformed view of election and efficacious calling. So, the grounds of this rejection are important to test for their credibility.

³³ In *Warranted Christian Belief* (2000), Plantinga finds scriptural support for "divinely selected and caused regeneration" in Jesus's remark in John 6:44: **no one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him** (269). He is arguing that the apostle's words about the natural man, the man in the fall without the Holy Spirit, **does not accept and cannot understand** the things that come from the Spirit (1 Cor 2.14) teach that "we human beings won't come to see the depth of our own sin and our need of salvation without regeneration" (269).

³⁴ *Severity*, 83

³⁵ *Evidence*, 131

world, Jn 17; Eph 1.4) will come to faith, receive eternal life and resurrection glory.³⁶ As Aquinas quoting Augustine puts it, John 6.45 like 6.44 teaches that God's intention cannot fail and if He intends "while moving, that the one whose heart He moves should attain to grace, he will infallibly attain to it."³⁷ Contrary to Moser, when 6.44 is considered in its context, it teaches divine election in conjunction with divinely caused regeneration. More fully, it teaches efficacious calling by which people without the power or ability to believe are given that ability, exercise it willingly in coming to Christ, and receive Christ's infallible promise of resurrection unto eternal life.³⁸

Regarding John 12.32, it tells us nothing of human freedom in general nor of the kind that involves the ability to reject or embrace God's drawing. In fact, the word draw in 12.32 suggests quite the opposite since it means "to drag" (fish nets; a sword) that indicates that the people drawn do not have the power to reject this drawing. Connected with 6.44, this text tells us that being drawn to faith means that a person who has no ability to believe, who is not free to embrace Jesus Christ, is given that ability, and exercising it, he receives eternal life.³⁹ The apostle Paul confirms the truth that the fallen natural man is unable to willingly submit himself to Christ (Rom 8.7: **For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot**). He has drowned morally. Therefore, he cannot help his rescuer but willingly believes if and only if God draws him by the power of the gospel. He is not coerced to come; the human person is not extinguished; his heart is changed; he is freed from sin, thus seeing the glory of God in the face of Christ, He desires and willingly embraces Him (2 Cor 4.6). After all, as Moser puts it, we must know the nature of the severity, the depth of our predicament, and the extent of our failure to find the right answer; we get the nature of our predicament from Jesus and Paul on the natural man's moral inability to choose for God while he continues to be a moral agent who responsibly, willingly, and willfully chooses against God.⁴⁰

B. For Moser, for God to be worthy of worship man must be able to receive or reject Him

Man must have the ability to receive or reject God's salvation or the divine desire for the salvation of all (2 Pet 3.9) would be reduced to a harmful deceit or at least a pathetic notion of want. "In sincerely offering the gift of faith and salvation to all (and not just the favored), God would want none to perish but everyone to come to repentance (see 2 Pet. 3:9; cf. Rev. 3:20). This divine want would be free of harmful deceit; otherwise, its source would not be worthy of

³⁶ Finally, Jesus adds hearing and learning from the Father to the notion of drawing. Being drawn means to be taught by God in such a way that they hear from Him and learn from Him. **Everyone to whom God gives hearing ears and a learning heart comes to faith in Christ: Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me** (45b).

³⁷ Aquinas quoting Augustine (*Summa Theologica*, Q. 112, Art 3, reply to Obj 2) explains how the gift of grace exceeds every human power. The gift is from God "and thus it has a necessity-not indeed of coercion, but of infallibility-as regards what it is ordained to by God, since God's intention cannot fail, according to the saying of Augustine, in his book *On the Predestination of the Saints*, that by God's good gifts whoever is liberated, is most certainly liberated. Hence if God intends, while moving, that the one whose heart He moves should attain to grace, he will infallibly attain to it, according to John vi 45: Every one that hath heard of the Father, and hath learned, cometh to Me." Moser opposes this atypical "reformed" thinker, Aquinas, when he says, nothing necessitates that humans cooperate with God (*Severity* 6-7).

³⁸ If this is true, then the following statement by Moser is false: Nothing necessitates that humans cooperate with God (*Severity*, 6-7). It is thus also false to argue that "a defensible approach to salvation by divine 'grace,' including divine redemptive severity, requires an active, cooperative role for humans *in their salvation*" (*Severity*, 8, italics mine).

³⁹ I fill this out in addendum A. In addendum B, I discuss Moser's claim that if God did not give humans the freedom to receive or reject His salvation and if He regenerated "just some favored people in moral and spiritual bondage" then He "would show a kind of selective love incompatible with genuine love of all people, including enemies" and thereby show Himself to be imperfect and not worthy of worship.

⁴⁰ For a classic contrast to this biblical doctrine of man's responsibility and moral inability, see the addendum C on Kant's mantra: "if I am responsible, I must be able."

worship. As it happens, the necessary role of human freedom in loving God has a tragic result: it results in the gracious divine want and invitation being unsatisfied in the case of some humans. The inherent risk of rejection is thus realized, tragically, by some humans in the actual world. We would have a kind of harmful deceit (or at least a pathetic notion of want) if God (i) reported his wanting the salvation of all people, (ii) could cause all people to have saving faith, but (iii) failed to cause all people to have saving faith.”⁴¹

However, if the Scriptures state that God choose some people to be saved (2 Thess 2.13: **But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth**) while leaving others in their sin (Rom 11.7: **What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened**), and if Scripture also teaches that God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezek 18.32: **For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord GOD; so turn, and live**) but desires all to come to repentance (2 Pet 3.9), then those who live under the authority of Christ by His word are to accept both that God desires the salvation of all while He decrees the salvation of some. How could we then give credence to Moser’s claim that the teaching of a “divine want” would be a “harmful deceit”? There is no concealing of truth since both truths are openly and clearly affirmed by Scripture.

So, what do we make of these words of Moser: “We would have a kind of harmful deceit (or at least a pathetic notion of want) if God (i) reported his wanting the salvation of all people, (ii) could cause all people to have saving faith, but (iii) failed to cause all people to have saving faith. What constrains the conclusion that the combination of these three things would at least entail “a pathetic notion of want”? It might be pitiable if God tried to accomplish the saving of all but failed miserably. But the point of His decree is that He accomplishes exactly what He sets out to accomplish, the saving of His elect; the saving of everyone that He gave to Christ and for whom Christ was sent into the world to save (see above on Jn 6.37-45). There is no trying and failing. So the third item becomes “but God did not intend to accomplish all that He desires, He did not cause all people to come to Christ in faith” and we have a more reasonable entailment. Now from the combination of these three things (with # 3 clarified) and given that God tells us that all three are true, then a) they must all be true without contradiction, even if they appear to us to be contradictory.⁴² And b) the difficulty we have in trying to see how these things dovetail has nothing to do with anything pitiable about God. What is pitiable is our discontentment with what God has revealed, while we delve into the hidden things that belong to God (Deut 29.29).

As Aquinas says, God has willed to manifest His goodness in men: in respect to those whom He predestines, by means of His mercy, in sparing them; and in respect of others, whom he reprobates, by means of His justice, in punishing them. This is the reason why God elects some and rejects others. To this the Apostle refers, saying (Rom. ix. 22, 23): What if God, willing to show His wrath (that is the vengeance of His justice), and to make His power known, endured (that is permitted) with much patience vessels of wrath, fitted for destruction; that He might show the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He hath prepared unto glory (Rom. ix. 22, 23): and (2 Tim. ii. 20)..... Yet why He chooses some for glory, and reprobates others has no reason [revealed to us], except the divine will. Whence Augustine says [on Jn 6.44]; Why He

⁴¹ Ibid., 132

⁴² On paradoxicality in Scripture, see “The Legitimacy of Paradox as a Theological Model: Case in Point, Fallen Man does not have Free Will but He has Full Responsibility,” ETS, Midwest, Ashland, Ohio, March 20, 2009, Richard A. Ostella.

draws one, and another He draws not, seek not to judge, if thou does not wish to err.⁴³ Aquinas is hardly a typical Protestant or Reformed thinker.⁴⁴

C. On Gethsemane: was Jesus free to accept or reject God's will?

Moser says that the Gospel of John "assumes a typical free human response of receiving or rejecting God's gracious salvation" and "God did not cause Jesus to obey" for Jesus said, "I lay down my life of my own accord" (Jn 10.18).⁴⁵ It is a simple *non sequitur* to conclude from these words that God did not cause Jesus to obey that likewise He does not cause the "favored" to believe or to be faithful. It is an even further stretch to think that this text supports the notion that "God graciously gives humans the freedom to receive or reject God's salvation."⁴⁶ This idea has to be read into the text; it cannot be drawn out from it.

Still more can be said by some basic distinctions. First, Jesus is not a fallen sinner in Adam. He did not need to be given a new heart toward God, made alive to God, and enabled to willingly obey God. By contrast, the natural man fallen in Adam has his mind set on the flesh and Paul says (Rom 8.7), the natural man cannot submit himself to God, which is just to say, he cannot believe since faith includes the essential ingredient of submission to God. But Jesus had the Holy Spirit upon Him in everything He did; He had the ability to obey God and that was His daily food: **My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work** (Jn 4.34). Second, Jesus did not have the ability to reject God's will because He was God incarnate in the flesh. Yet we must affirm that He was perfectly free when we define freedom as the ability to do good, and perfect freedom as the ability to do good only. Those *freed* from sin are freed for righteousness (Rom. 6:18). In his natural state fallen man is free from righteousness and to be truly free is to be free for righteousness. *Ability to reject God is not an aspect of freedom!* For Adam before the fall and saints on earth today, it is ill-fitted to include the fact of ability to sin within the notion of their freedom. The ability to sin shows that their freedom is not yet complete as it will be in heaven for surely it will not be heaven if **the freedom of the glory of the children of God** (Rom 8.21) includes the fact that they have the ability to sin and remain in heaven only as long as they do not exercise it.⁴⁷

III. Implications⁴⁸

1. The essence of man

On the essence of man, even in the fall, Moser mirrors much of Kant's emphasis in his *Religion* (1793) that the essence of man, including the natural man, is freedom, "otherwise, the

⁴³ *Summa Theologica*, Q. 23. Art. 5

⁴⁴ Aquinas, who is hardly a typical Protestant, goes on to discuss how no complaint of injustice can be raised to God's election of some and His passing by of others (ST. I. Q. 23. Art. 5): Neither on this account can there be said to be injustice in God, if He prepares unequal lots for not unequal things. This would be altogether contrary to the notion of justice, if the effect of predestination were granted as a debt, and not gratuitously. In things which are given gratuitously a person can give more or less, just as he pleases (provided he deprives nobody of his due) without any infringement of justice. This is what the master of the house said; Take what is thine, and go thy way. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will? (Matt. xx. 14, 15).

⁴⁵ *Evidence*, 131. But Moser's choice of text seems ill-fitted to his purpose because this passage does not discuss God seeking love from humans.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 132

⁴⁷ For a comparison of freedom, self-determination, and responsibility see addendum D.

⁴⁸ More things may be put on this list such as the need to distinguish between texts that deal with the natural man in the fall and those that deal with the renewed and recreated man; between justification and sanctification, between a coerced will and a will that chooses differently because God has efficaciously given the person a new heart.

use or abuse of man's power of choice in respect of the moral law could not be imputed to him."⁴⁹

2. The power of God

Moser's conception of the natural man's freedom means that "human wills can block the realization of God's redemptive effort."⁵⁰

3. The death of Christ on the cross

God did not punish Jesus on the cross in the place of His people to endure the eternal suffering they deserve. Therefore, the death of Christ is not efficaciously the death of death. For Moser, God is not so severe that He has Jesus experience His wrath. Jesus experienced the suffering and pain of crucifixion to provide us with a moral example to follow, and if we submit to Him in self-sacrifice like His, God will count *that* as adequate for our justification. Notably, this is one way that Moser reconceives historic Christian faith. He takes a "new reliable direction" on the atonement to recast the old moral example theory of the death of Christ in a new context of salvation by human cooperation with God. My friend, Patrick MacMahon (PhD: painter and home decorator) compares this effort with retreading an old tire. Okay, you now have a new tire, a retread, but isn't it really an old tire that will never last as long as a new one?

4. Contributing to salvation

At this beginning of the Christian life, an action of man that functions independently of God (with good autonomy) namely, his cooperation with God, makes a decisive contribution to his salvation.

5. Justification by works⁵¹

Although Moser takes great pains to deny that cooperative human receptivity is a meritorious deed, in the end, it seems that that is exactly what it is because it is an autonomous human deed upon which God depends in His effort of trying to save people. In Moser's outlook, this may be a deeply significant way that God suffers.

This autonomous act is not sufficient to save because also necessary is God's power that transforms from spiritual death to life. But God's power is not sufficient to save either; required is man's right use of his freedom even though he is in spiritual death. This is a synergistic, co-work. In the Reformed view, God's power is both necessary and sufficient to transform from death to life. It is a monergistic act; one work, not a co-work, and from this gift of spiritual life comes a living active willing faith, as Jesus said, all given to me, and drawn by the Father, come to me (like Lazarus from the tomb, raised, he thus willingly obeys) and receive eternal life.

6. Indicative and imperative

Moser thus reverses the indicatives of God's work in salvation with the imperatives of the Christian's working out of salvation. In his critique of Ridderbos,⁵² Moser needed to read further to appreciate "how much the new life is a work of God," as Ridderbos says "the heart is moved to this faith by the same creative word of God as that by which he caused the light to shine on the darkness of the primeval time," and that word is "the word of divine power by which God calls into being the things that do not exist and by which he works what he commands (Rom 4.17; 9.11, 25; 1 Thess 5.24).⁵³ It is this effectual, efficient divine calling (Rom 1.5-7; 8.30) which now takes place through the gospel and by which God has called the church to faith itself as well as to

⁴⁹ *Religion within the Bounds of Reason Alone*, 16. See addendum C on Kant's defense of moral ability.

⁵⁰ *Severity*, 160. See addendum E on God's power conditionalized

⁵¹ See addendum F on justification *through* faith

⁵² *Ibid.*, 149

⁵³ *Paul, An Outline of His Theology* (1975), 235

the whole of the new life by faith and “through which God’s electing grace is realized.”⁵⁴ Ridderbos claims that to omit God’s creative work in salvation is to reduce human faith to a work; that is the significant point that Moser misses in his treatment of Ridderbos.

Moreover, discussing Paul’s indicative and imperative, Ridderbos makes the point that “the imperative rests on the indicative and that this order is not reversible” for “in each case the imperative follows the indicative by way of conclusion.”⁵⁵ It appears that at points where Moser conflates the enslavement of the natural man and the new obedience of the new man that precisely there, and in that way, he reverses the indicative and the imperative and introduces a works legalism at the beginning of the Christian life.⁵⁶

Therefore, the focus of faith for those renewed by the resurrection power of God is on God’s promise and His power in fulfilling it: because He *guarantees* that I will make the difficult and sometimes severe journey to heaven (this guarantee is one indicative among numerous others, cf. Rom 4.16; Phil 1.6), then I have the duty to work out my salvation with a sense of awe (to take up this imperative and many others like it, Phil 2.12-13). So, I take up my duties awe-struck at the fact that God is working in me and guarantees that He will continue this work until He completes it and I arrive safely in the heavenly city of God.

To the praise of the triune God now in His church and forevermore, amen

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ *Paul, An Outline of His Theology* (1975), 253-255

⁵⁶ It is helpful to note that a renewed man has ability to respond to the imperatives of the Christian life and it is especially helpful to keep in mind that the command to work out salvation (the imperative) rests on the work of God, what He has done in Christ and therefore continues to do in His given ones (the indicative).

Addendum A, on Moser's treatment of John 6.44, 12.32, and 3.16

Although Moser failed to consider 6.44 itself in its context, we still need to ask if he is correct in saying that 12.32 teaches that drawing in John's Gospel "suggests both universality of drawing and human freedom to reject or to embrace the drawing. Accordingly, Jesus remarks that 'when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all (pantas) [people] to myself'"⁵⁷ (Evidence, 131). He gets universality and human freedom from this text. The word "all" of course could be a universal term with limited scope such as "all nationalities" without referring to all people universally. Notably here, the word "people" has to be supplied and there is reason in the context to think of the unusual presence of some Greeks (12.20) that led Jesus to comment on His coming death as a grain of wheat that must die to bear much fruit presumably not only in terms of OT Jewish particularism but also in terms of national universalism. Thus, by His work on the cross, Jesus will draw people from every nation to Himself. This tells us nothing of human freedom in general nor of the kind that involves the ability to reject or embrace His drawing. In fact, the word draw suggests quite the opposite since it means to drag that suggests that the people drawn do not have the power to reject this drawing. Connected with 6.44, this text tells us that being drawn to faith means that a person who has no ability to believe, who is not free to embrace Jesus Christ, is given that ability, and exercising it, he receives eternal life with the promise of resurrection glory. This prompts one to think that if we connect the parts of John together as a whole we will see that it teaches that God causes some people to believe but not others to believe. Moser emphasizes the claim that faith is man's doing, but according to Jesus, man in the fall does not have the ability to reject or embrace, because he does not have the ability to embrace it. When God gives that ability, they embrace Jesus and receive the promise of being raised to eternal life.

Finally, it is difficult to see how John 3.16 confirms the idea of fallen people having the ability to embrace the gospel. It gives the promise that all who believe will receive eternal life; it does not speak to the gift of faith mentioned in the 6.44 context; nor does it speak to the inability of people to believe. But with 3.17, it does confirm the efficacy of drawing because 3.17 states God's determined will, His intention, to save the world. If we think of the world like a tree that is pruned for its preservation, we can understand that the world will be saved to inherit the new earth in resurrection glory while many branches will be cut off. All who are given to the Son will come to Him in faith because God will draw them from all nations to make up the redeemed world of heaven's glory.

Addendum B, Moser's complaint regarding preference for some

Moser claims that if God did not give humans the freedom to receive or reject His salvation and if He regenerated "just some favored people in moral and spiritual bondage" then He "would show a kind of selective love incompatible with genuine love of all people, including enemies. As a result, God would lack moral perfection and thus worthiness of worship, and would be inconsistent in commanding humans to love all of their enemies. As worthy of worship, God, of course, would be at least as loving as humans." Thomas Aquinas responds to a similar complaint in *Summa Theologica* (ST I, Q. 23. Art. 3): "God loves all men and all creatures, inasmuch as he wishes them all some good; but he does not wish every good to them all. So far, therefore, as He does not wish for some this particular good-namely, eternal life-He is said to hate or reprobate them." Moreover, Aquinas reminds us that we need to define genuine love of all people. Does God love all people by sending the rain and the sunshine on the just and unjust alike, as Jesus taught? Yes, and in doing this He shows a common love that is genuine toward all people, but are we to think that He wishes every good to them all? No, it is self-evident that He neither intends nor wishes every good to everyone, the disproportionate nature of His gifts among men is all too obvious. Is it not better to say with Paul that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love Him and have been called according to His purpose (Rom 8.28). This call certainly issues in salvation: all the called by this special preferential call justified and glorified (Rom 8.30). They have been called by God through the power of the gospel from alienation to fellowship (1 Cor 1.9; Rom 1.5-6), and from blindness to seeing (2 Cor 4.6). Love is seeking the good of someone; God seeks to work all things for the good of His people; that is genuine love too. Both common love and preferential love are genuine.

What makes a selective preferential love "lack moral perfection" and what makes a special selective love "inconsistent" with God's command of humans to love all their enemies? Is God required, obligated, or under moral obligation to show love and mercy to all His enemies? Surely not. If He shows any undeserving enemy love and mercy, it will be a free act of His good pleasure. Surely, with his emphasis on freedom, Moser can acknowledge that God is perfectly free. God's free grace will surely come to expression in a way that maintains His justice while justifying some ungodly people.

What is going on in the command to us to love our enemies like Christ loved us as enemies when He died for us? Would God be less loving than humans if He commands us to love all our enemies while

⁵⁷ Evidence, 131

He does not? But He tells us to lovingly do good to all men with special preferential love for those of the household of faith (Gal 6.10). In this sense, He tells us to love our enemies as He does with special preferential love for His family.

Surely, when we consider that sinful people who only deserve His just wrath are shown manifold blessings like the rain and sunshine given commonly to all and even justifying grace to some who like the rest are totally unworthy of the least of His favors, then we have no grounds for questioning the genuineness of His common love for all people and His saving love for His elect.

Addendum C: Kant's mantra: if I am responsible, I must be able

In his infamous book on the philosophy of religion (*Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, 1793), Immanuel Kant gave philosophy and theology a definition free will that has the status of a commandment indelibly codified for all time on tablets of stone. His definition is intuitively simple and profoundly toxic. On one hand, if I am responsible for my actions, then I must be able to choose to do what is right or to do what is wrong. On the other hand, for Kant (and in many subtle ways for his disciples), belief in autonomous free will is an ultimate controlling belief (a presupposition) in his interpretation of Scripture and Christianity. For example, according to Kant's reading of Scripture, it is of the essence of man that the antecedent to every act is an expression of freedom; otherwise, "the use or abuse of man's power of choice in respect of the moral law could not be imputed to him nor could the good or bad in him be called moral" (p. 16). Thus, the tablet of stone for much of modern philosophy and theology has these inscriptions: "If I am responsible, then I must be able" and "duty demands nothing of us that we can not do" (p. 43). His ultimate controlling belief leads Kant to some extraordinarily toxic views: restoration from the fall by self-conversion, the Son of God as a personification of the perfect humanity located in each person and justification by faith in the good that one finds within and freely chooses to incorporate as a maxim or rule of life (pp. 40-48). A contemporary example of this same toxicity is the open-theist use of free will as the controlling belief that leads ultimately to a redefinition of the biblical teaching about God (as Frame shows in *No Other God*, pp. 119-122).

Accordingly, "good versus bad autonomy" is a distinction without a difference because autonomy as capability to choose for against a life of love is a matter of independence of God. Granted, Moser states that trying "to sustain lasting flourishing on their own" is an independence that "will bring trouble in its wake" because man cannot save himself; he must have God's help. This good autonomy is necessary but not sufficient for salvation because God must provide and give it by grace. However, God's grace is necessary but not sufficient for salvation as well because for man to be a free agent and for God to be worthy of worship, man must exercise his good autonomy by cooperating with God. Clearly, Moser argues for a place of human autonomy in salvation, which raises the crucial question: "what makes it good in such a way that a God worthy of worship would preserve it?" Can this notion of good autonomy be defended philosophically and biblically? A philosophical justification depends on the criteria by which we know that a God worthy of worship is one that preserves this kind of good autonomy. The criteria must come from Scripture. God must tell us that He preserves this kind of genuinely good autonomy. Then the question boils down to the places in Scripture that speak to man's condition in the fall. It all boils down to the single question, does the natural man, man in his natural state in the fall before God bestows upon him a definitive renewal, have the ability to choose for or against life, to reject or believe the gospel? We have already shown that John 6.44 (and all the passages directly associate with it) teaches that the natural man does not have the ability to believe. Required is God's drawing that is both necessary and sufficient to enable the formerly unable to come to Christ. Moreover, God's drawing guarantees the actual coming to Christ in faith. God sets the slave to sin free and he thus exercises the freedom of the new self in the obedience of faith. As church member Patrick McMahon puts it: good and bad autonomy is like good and bad arsenic; do you even want a small amount let alone a huge amount that God depends on in saving you and without which His saving program is unsuccessful. Of course, the idea of not succeeding involves a denial of His sovereignty as the Lord of all who has planned all things and brings all things to pass providentially. Also, if we think of autonomy not only as asserted independence but also as "self-law," then how can the exercise of self-law be good and genuine obedience to God?

Addendum D: a comparison of freedom, self-determination, and responsibility

It helps to compare freedom to the notions of self-determination and responsibility. To be self-determined is to be able to do what you want according to your nature without being forced or coerced. People are responsible for what they do according to their natures. Responsibility does not require ability (despite Kant's "if I am responsible I must be able") since people who cannot obey the ten commandments from the heart are still responsible; their inability is not an excuse for their sins but an index of how truly and deeply sinful they are. Freedom is the ability to do good only. The ability to do good or evil is not needed for freedom, self-determination, or responsibility whereas being able to do what you want

according to your nature and unforced is necessary for freedom, self-determination, and responsibility. But is the ability to do good from the heart a requirement for self-determination or responsibility? No, it is not required for either though it is required for freedom as its central component. In this model, freedom means to be able to do good as something you want to do as the overflow of your heart, and to do so willingly. In His freedom, Jesus did not have the ability to do good or evil because He did not have the ability to do evil, but He was able to do what He wanted according to His holy nature, unforced, and He was able to do good as the overflow of His heart.

	Able to do good or evil	Able to do what you want according to your nature, unforced	Able to do good from the heart
Needed for freedom?	No	Yes	Yes
Needed for self-determination?	No	Yes	No
Needed for responsibility?	No	Yes	No

Addendum E: on God's power conditionalized

For Moser the key activity of human faith in God is a voluntary cooperative response to divine involvement of various sorts in one's life: a response of presenting oneself cooperatively to God, with trust, *to receive God's life-giving power of resurrection from the dead* (Rom. 6: 13, 16). Such faith is an *affirmative human response to God's call to be transformed from spiritual death to new life* in companionship with God.⁵⁸ Clearly the principle of cooperation per Moser means that why one man receives life-giving power of resurrection from the dead to be transformed from spiritual death to new life, whereas another man does not, is to be found in man. It is not in God because God provides it for all equally and God, on Moser's view, does *not* exercise life-giving resurrection power, raise people from spiritual death and *thereby enable them* to receive Him. Not so because the freedom to reject or receive Him is not determined either way by God. According to Moser, God does not transform people from spiritual death to new life to enable them to believe and receive the benefits of salvation. Instead, for Moser, the decisive factor that differentiates one person from another is that one cooperates with God, exercising the freedom he already has in unbelief. Both have the freedom and ability to accept or reject; the one that uses his freedom to accept God's power thereby receives it, and is thereby transformed by God from spiritual death to life.

Thus, at this beginning of the Christian life, an action of man that functions independently of God, namely, his cooperation by willingly and freely submitting himself to God, makes a decisive contribution to his salvation. This is what reformed theology denies and what Plantinga denies in his discussion of John 6.44. It is what Moser pointedly affirms throughout *Severity* by his principle of cooperation.⁵⁹

Now we can understand why many reformed thinkers complain that this kind of cooperation in salvation leaves the decisive contribution to a man's salvation and is therefore something that the man does independently of God. Then salvation is synergistic, a co-work in which a man is saved by his independent contribution, by his free exercise of his ability to reject or accept God, which Moser calls genuinely good autonomy. A human accepts and through this action God's saving power goes to work in him transforming him. God's saving power does not affect which way a man chooses to exercise his freedom so that choice is essentially an autonomous act (specifically as a saving act). This autonomous act is not sufficient to save because also necessary is God's power that transforms from spiritual death to life. But God's power is not sufficient to save either; required is man's right use of his freedom even though he is in spiritual death (it is a synergistic, co-work). In the reformed view, God's power is both necessary and sufficient to transform from death to life. It is a monergistic act (one work, monergistic, not

⁵⁸ Severity, 158

⁵⁹ What he seems to do often however is to cite passages about the ability of a renewed person and apply them to the unbeliever, the natural man, the man in Adam. At these points, he conflates scriptural teaching on salvation and sanctification.

a co-work) and from this gift of spiritual life comes a living active willing faith...all given to me, and drawn by the Father, come to me (like Lazarus from the tomb, raised, he thus obeys). Moreover, Jesus says, and all who come inherit eternal bodily resurrection life.

F. On justification *through* faith

1. A core difficulty

When I attended church as a teenager, I heard the preacher say, “you can do nothing for salvation, it is a free gift received by believing in Christ.” Repeatedly, when I heard this, I would say to myself, “but believing is doing something.” This brings up a core difficulty in the doctrine of justification in that faith itself is an act of obedience. According to Paul, unbelievers do not obey the gospel (Rom 10.16) and final judgment will fall **on those who do not obey the gospel** (2 Thess 2.8). Surely, believing is obeying. It is Paul who tells us that faith works by love (Gal 5.6) and it is Paul who speaks of the obedience of faith in Romans (of faith's obedience 1.5; 16.26).

Therefore, it is with good cause that we wonder how Paul can state the antithesis so definitively. We might put it this way, how can Paul put faith in an antithetic relation to works when faith itself is an act of obedience to a law and thus is a law-work itself? Granted, the apostle never calls faith a work of the law (whether written in the heart or in Scripture) but we do hear him talk about the duty to believe (Acts 16.31) and repent (Acts 17.30). How can justification be by faith not works when faith is obedience to a duty, command, or law of God?

Moser claims that the answer is in the non-meritorious nature of faith as a human work. The works negated by Paul refer to merit in contrast to faith in this respect. However, the human act of faith is a matter of cooperation with God that determines why one person is justified and another is not for God's reckoning depends on human receptive activity.⁶⁰ It is a receptive volitional action that is the opposite of merit works and therefore that is not merit qualified. According to Moser, God must do his part, but an autonomous human act of receiving by faith is necessary for justification.

2. A simple solution

The obedience of faith must be put into the right perspective. Contrary to Moser, obedience of any kind does not and cannot justify (as an autonomous human act that God depends upon), even obedience of faith (as WCF, justification is not by anything done by the justified, not by “the act of believing, or any other act of Christian obedience” (XI, 1b). For a simple solution, we must recognize that justification is not technically *by* faith.

a. Technically it is not justification by faith but by God

It is God who justifies. Note the references to God's action (through): 3.30 (who [God] will justify), 4.5 (him who [God] justifies), 4.6 (God counts righteous), 4.8 (God will not count his sin).

b. Technically it is not justification by faith but by blood: we have now been justified by his blood (Rom. 5:9 ESV). The righteousness of God flows to us through the faithfulness of Christ by His sacrificial death as propitiation that satisfied God's wrath against us (Rom 3.25).

c. Technically it is not justification by faith but through faith

Romans 3.30 helps give perspective here. It clarifies the meaning of justification by faith with its emphasis on God **who will justify...by faith...and through faith**. Technically, it is not faith that justifies; faith has no declarative power; it has no saving power; faith has no redeeming or propitiating power. God propitiates, redeems, saves, declares righteous, and justifies. By faith means through faith as His instrument through which He counts, reckons, imputes righteousness to the ungodly. If we emphasize faith as an act of obedience, then it would be included with the obedient works of the law, commandments, and duties that do not justify. In this light, what can we say of faith? Faith as obedience does not contribute anything to justification, no more than any other act of obedience to the law contributes to justification. It does not make God a debtor to the one who obeys.

d. Technically it is not justification by faith but through faith as the gift of God.

Therefore, the “simple” solution, which is a *profound* solution, is that justification is not by works or any good deed even that of believing. Instead, it is by God through the faithfulness of Jesus, through His redeeming-propitiating blood, and through faith that is given to the ungodly by God's efficacious call.

Faith functions apart from works because it is beyond human ability. We have to note how the duty to believe is in the same category of all duties that humans have to God. The duty to believe (to obey God in faith, to submit to God) is in the same category with all other duties for which man is fully responsible but totally unable to perform. In other words, all people in the fall are under sin (Rom 3.9) as slaves to sin and as such they suppress the truth in unrighteousness and nothing good, not even the good of trusting in God. They not only do nothing good (3.9-18 with chapters 1-2), they are also unable to obey

⁶⁰ Ibid., 155

the law and they are unable to submit to it or to God (Rom 8.7).⁶¹ Thus, if Paul has the aspect of faith as a law-work, or obedience to a command of God in mind in his antithesis, then justification apart from works includes even the works of faith. Unmistakably, the commands to believe and repent do not allow us to infer from them to the conclusion that fallen sinners have the ability to believe or repent.

So, because of total depravity a contribution of obedience, even the obedience of faith, could justify no more than any other duty could be obeyed for justification. Justification can be by faith without law because the justified sinner is incapable of any act of obedience. The issue is not the nature of faith as a law-work versus law-works generally; the issue is the impossibility of faith. Its very existence as an act of obedience cannot have its origin or source in the justified sinner. *Its nature as obedience is irrelevant to justification because when it comes into existence, it is not something that the sinner contributes to his justification.* As God's gift it has a special instrumental function among the duties that man is incapable of performing but is enabled to do by God's recreating grace.

Ultimately, then we return to the place of submission to God in worship and proclaim His worthiness of worship because we are justified by grace. As the WCF puts it, "the justified are those whom God effectually calls, and to whom He imputes the obedience and satisfaction of Christ by faith, which faith they have not of themselves, it is the gift of God" (XI, 1a) because the only instrument of justification is faith and "saving faith is a gift of grace, whereby the elect are enabled to believe to the saving of their souls" (XI, 2) for it is "the work of the Spirit of Christ in their hearts" (XIV, 1).

⁶¹ This inability regarding the natural man in his fallen condition is something that Moser rejects and seeks to defeat by argument in *Evidence*. He reveals his thinking most plainly in interaction with Plantinga.