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# Divine Agency and Divine Action

Soundings in  
the Christian Tradition

Volume II

William J. Abraham

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WILLIAM J. ABRAHAM

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*To Cyril O'Regan*



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## *Contents*

Introduction: Orientation	1
1. The Stamp of the Infinite: Divine Agency and Divine Action in Paul	7
2. Bearing with the Divine Wisdom of the Ages: The Divine Inspiration of Scripture	24
3. Actions, Agents, Agency, and Explanation in Athanasius	42
4. Divine Action and Pneumatology in the Cappadocians	62
5. Divine and Human Action in Salvation in Augustine	80
6. Agency and Action in Christ in Maximus the Confessor	98
7. Divine Action in Symeon the New Theologian	118
8. Blood, Bone, and Body: Divine Action in the Eucharist in Aquinas	138
9. Divine Action in the Christian Life in Teresa of Avila	158
10. Divine Action in Predestination in John Calvin	176
11. Divine Concurrence and Human Freedom in Luis de Molina	198
12. Epilogue	217
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	227
<i>Index</i>	231



# Introduction

## Orientation

One central mistake that recurs in treatments of divine agency and divine action in Christian theology is this: we think that some general concept of divine action, or some general theory of divine action derived therefrom, will suffice in understanding the particular network of divine actions in creation and redemption that are at the core of the Christian faith. At the very least, it is thought, this exercise will solve “the problem of divine action” once and for all and allow us to get on with theology proper. If we could only get hold of a generic concept of action or a general theory of providence we could then, it is hoped, go on to apply one or both of these fruitfully to all those more “special” and particular divine actions that have been so central to the Christian faith.

The major rival to this way of proceeding is represented by those who think that one specific divine action, say, creation or incarnation, can provide the pivotal clue to understanding divine agency and divine action more generally. Somehow the grammar of creation, for example, will solve the only significant issues that need to be tackled in Christian theology as it relates to divine action. In this instance there is a move from the particular to the general, a refocusing in the opposite direction from that of shifting from the general to the specific.

As I have argued at length against the first of these proposals—by far the more popular proposal of the two on offer—in volume I,<sup>1</sup> it will suffice here initially to state briefly why I think this first way of thinking is a dead-end for Christian theology.

First, it is simply not the case that the concept of action as applied initially to human agents can be captured in a set of necessary and sufficient conditions. The concept of action is an open concept; there are various sufficient conditions but there are no non-trivial necessary conditions. Thus the whole idea of taking a concept of action—one necessarily derived from analysis of human action—and then applying it analogically to God collapses immediately.

<sup>1</sup> William J. Abraham, *Divine Agency and Divine Action: Exploring and Evaluating the Debate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

Second, even if we did have a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for the concept of action, this strategy would not help much in helping us understand the particularities of divine action. Consider a banal analogy. I am sitting in my favorite pub in Dublin and my neighbor Jimmy O'Reilly tells me that our mutual friend, Paddy Murphy, has performed a very important action on my behalf. I am agog with curiosity and excitement. What has he done for me? Then I am told that the essential thing to note is that he has performed an intentional action. This is the essence of an action, "intentionality," so it is the essence of what he has done for me. I pause in exasperation, hoping to hear more. O'Reilly has nothing more to say to me. He has given me the necessary and sufficient feature of any human action and thus of Murphy's action on my behalf. However, this tells me next to nothing about what Murphy has done. I know that he has done something; and I know that he has done it intentionally rather than inadvertently, or unconsciously, or under duress, or by chance. But I have no idea what he has really done for me. The only way forward is for O'Reilly to spell out in detail what in particular Murphy has done for me. With this in hand I can then go on to find out why Murphy has been so generous; and I can, if need be, begin to revise my account of the character of Murphy compared to what I have known about him before.

This is precisely how the matter stands with respect to divine action. Any necessary and sufficient conditions we might lay down for understanding the concept of action as applied to God will not really tell us how to read claims about what God has actually done on our behalf. All that such a theory can tell us is something like this: if we analyze the concept of action as applied to God as requiring necessary conditions "n" and sufficient conditions "s," then we can expect conditions "n" and "s" to be satisfied when we think of any specific action predicated of God. However, this will not help us make much progress on understanding, say, the difference between divine speaking and divine inspiration. This may seem a banal observation until we explore how failure to observe the difference has wreaked havoc on Christian doctrines of Scripture. We shall see the importance of this in Chapter 2.

For understanding this we must descend to the specific actions predicated of God in the Christian tradition. We need to start at ground level, so to speak, and go to work. Even then we need to be careful about building taxonomies or "models" of divine action, in that these too quickly get us entangled in metaphysical and epistemological concepts and worries that can warp our thinking from the outset.<sup>2</sup> We need to know a decent array of divine actions

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Eugene Teselle, "Divine Action: The Doctrinal Tradition," in *Divine Action: Studies Inspired by the Philosophical Theology of Austin Farrer*, ed. Brian Hebblethwaite and Edward Henderson (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 71–92. Teselle moves much too quickly to models of divine action and the metaphysical possibilities developed in debates about divine action. However, to be fair, this is exactly what happens in the tradition as we shall see.

that Christians claim to have happened, say, that God has created us in his own image, that he has become incarnate in Christ, that he baptizes us with his Holy Spirit, that he forgives us our sins, that he promises eternal life in the world to come, and on and on. We do not need agreement on the catalogue we build but we need a generous survey of the domain. This is precisely why I shall start in with Paul and see where this strategy takes us. Then we can begin to look at the problems Paul's claims about divine action evoked for him and how he went about solving them.

Of course, once we make this move, we are up to our necks in theology. To repeat, we cannot begin to get hold of what God has done without careful attention to the actual actions predicated of God in the Christian tradition. These are inescapably theological claims that have led across the centuries—and continue to lead today—to reflection on their meaning, significance, and coherence with other claims we want to make. So we can then proceed to explore why God may have done what he has done; and we can press forward in developing, say, an account of the nature or character of God. We have to turn to theology proper in order to make substantial progress. It is not that we engage in conceptual analysis of action and then do theology; we have to do theology to make progress in conceptual analysis. Even then, such work may be ad hoc and very provisional. As we shall see, it readily spills over into fascinating metaphysical and epistemological moves that can be both daring and daunting in the extreme.

There is a deeper reason for adopting this approach at this point in the history of theology. The first mistake I have mentioned has so gripped our semantics and intellectual sensibilities that we need drastic medicine to cure us of its consequences. We live in an intellectual bubble where we think that if only we could get one more general theory of human action then we would understand divine action. Somehow, this would help us overcome the conceptual and epistemological worries that bedevil the discussion. To change the metaphor, we have developed a form of mental cramp which forbids one to take seriously the rich array of divine actions that show up in the Christian tradition. To get out of the bubble, to get relief from the cramp, we need to enter anew into the rich resources of Christian theology and be mentored afresh. It is not enough to stare down the opposition and get on with our work; we need help in getting on with our work; and help comes when we immerse ourselves in the complex traditions of Christian theology.

The medicine I offer is to be found in a careful review and evaluation of the particularities of divine action that show up in the tradition from Paul to Louis de Molina. I began with no grand scheme beyond my own best intuitions in making the choices I have made. Even so, a list made up of figures as influential as Paul, Irenaeus, Origen, the Cappadocians, Athanasius, Maximus, Symeon the New Theologian, Aquinas, Teresa of Avila, John Calvin, and Louis de Molina constitute a formidable team of players. The actions explored (they

range from such actions as the divine inspiration of Scripture, through transubstantiation in the Eucharist, to predestination and divine concurrence) are enough to give us plenty to nourish our impoverished intellects and imagination. The theologians I bring to the table provide us with a rich array of first-order claims about specific divine action together with extensive second-order reflection.

There is an additional payoff from paying careful attention to crucial instances of divine action. We can surely agree that the heart of Christian theology involved very substantial claims about divine action from creation to eschatology. Consequently there is a vast array of material available on various divine actions across the history of theology. What distinguished this treatment of divine action is the careful attention given to specific cases of divine action. The payoff is that this approach sheds new light on a host of theological proposals that have grown stale because of familiarity. Thus we can gain fresh insight into such well-worn themes as divine inspiration, transubstantiation, and predestination. Equally important, we encounter fresh ways of thinking about long-standing issues related to Christology, pneumatology, grace and freedom, and the like. Hence we can make available fresh ways of reading the history of theology that might otherwise go unnoticed. Hopefully, we can also open up new ways to tackle old problems.

In order to forestall an obvious objection, note that this project is not some rearguard effort to develop a conservative theology that merely repeats what has been said in the past. If we agree with this or that account as we find it in the tradition, then it is not enough merely to appeal to the tradition. We need to be able to see why we in our situation are persuaded that the tradition was on the right track. Hence there is a deep critical element involved in our endeavors. This is not to say that tradition lacks epistemic weight; it simply limits the weight that can be given to it. Moreover, it will become perfectly clear that certain ways of resolving the problems that show up in the tradition fail because of incoherence, lack of relevant evidence, mistaken inferences, failures in judgment, and the like. We cannot simply microwave what we find and serve it up for our theological dinners. Just as historians are called to engage in historical criticism, the theologian working carefully within the history of theology is called to engage in doctrinal criticism. However, good critical work can yield deep agreement with the tradition as much as it can yield significant dissent.

This takes me to a comment on the second problem that played a much less significant role in the first volume, namely, the move to hold that one particular divine action, say, creation *ex nihilo*, would either give us the clue to all other action predicates applied to God or provide the foundations for understanding divine agency and divine action more generally. The obvious semantic problem with this move is that we will surely need to distinguish divine creation from the host of other actions predicated of God. Hence it is

surely odd to think that this will allow us to figure out what to make of, say, divine forgiveness or divine incarnation in Jesus. There are irreducible differences that will block this kind of move relatively early in our deliberations. To use a different example, many have thought that the vision of the incarnation as involving the union of divine and human in Jesus is the way to work up an account of the ontology of Scripture and thus resolve problems in debates about the divine inspiration of Scripture. Just as we have the union of the human and the divine in the incarnation, we also have the union of the human and the divine in the divine production of Scripture. However, it is surely a massive stretch to think we can run this analogy without encountering obvious difficulties.<sup>3</sup> I once had a student who insisted that the proper inference to be drawn from this analogy was that there was a fourth Person in the Trinity. He failed to note the obvious problems this would generate for the doctrine of the Trinity. The more obvious worry is that this analogy will continue to perpetuate a vision of the inerrancy of Scripture that simply does not work given what we know historically of the origins and content of Scripture. At this point I do not offer this as a knock-down argument but merely as an indication of the immediate difficulties this strategy must meet. If this fails, think of what light the action of divine incarnation might throw on any divine action predicate we choose; I suggest that we will quickly see what is wrong with the whole strategy.

Even so, working on the strategy of moving from one divine action—creation *ex nihilo*—to understanding divine agency and divine action more generally led me to see that certain domains of divine action have had a role in evoking debate about divine action that I had long overlooked. I have in mind the crucial place of debates about grace and freedom in worries about divine action. The claim that God creates the free actions of human agents, that divine efficacious action goes all the way across the world in providence and all the way to the bottom in the free decision to receive salvation, brings this into the sharpest focus imaginable. If a theologian does not think that attributing the free actions of human agents to God is a problem then we need to have a recall and bring them back to school until they do so. The crucial place of doctrines of grace in salvation became clear to me in the work of grammatical Thomists like Herbert McCabe and Denys Turner and in the version of grammatical theology that shows up in the work of Kathryn Tanner.<sup>4</sup> I remain unpersuaded by their proposals both methodologically and materially, but it was a revelation to see how far the problem of grace has been the lead dog when it comes to discussion of divine action.

<sup>3</sup> For a recent treatment of the issue along these lines see Stephen Fowl, "Scripture," in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 345–61.

<sup>4</sup> I discuss their respective contributions in Chapters 10 and 11 of volume I.



Originally, I had planned to take the soundings all the way up to the present. This course of action would have enabled me to track some crucial figures in the transition that led to the cultivation of the cramp that I aim to eliminate. Thus it would have allowed me to include a chapter on Immanuel Kant, clearly a pivotal figure in the impoverishment that I lament and excoriate.<sup>5</sup> It would also have allowed me to tackle the problems that show up in Frederick Schleiermacher, Karl Barth, liberation theologies, and Pentecostal theologies. However, I decided that just as I ended Volume One with material informed by the debate about freedom and grace, then it would be fitting to end this volume on the same topic by tackling the proposals of Louis de Molina. Perhaps until we crack this problem, crucial problems related to divine action will never be resolved. Obsession with issues related to grace and freedom are another source of mental cramp that we need to dissolve once and for all. For my part I am convinced the problem of grace and freedom can be resolved by proper attention to the language of causation as related to divine and human agency. In this volume I show that when we look carefully even at the debate between Augustine and Pelagius, the problem may not at all be as acute as the commentary tradition insists it is. Augustine gives us more room to breathe than either his own or later theories of predestination tend to allow. Whatever we think of what I say about the problem of grace and freedom both historically and conceptually, it is high time that we prevented it from dominating our thinking. We need to keep our eyes on the full range of divine action that show up in the Christian tradition. As I show in what follows, the insights of Athanasius on divine action in creation and in Christ deserve far more attention than does the attention we give to Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas on grace and freedom.

There is another reason why we do not need to take the soundings all the way up to our own time. We do not need to go this far in order to get access to the medicine that we need. I think there is enough here to heal our souls and open up our minds to a better future in theology. Given that taking the medicine is much better than talking at length about the medicine, we can move immediately to the first dose. At the end we can come back around and make some general comments on what we have learned by stepping back and reviewing what we have learned from the raft of theologians who shall detain us in what follows.

<sup>5</sup> I have provided a lengthy review of divine agency and divine action on Kant in "Divine Agency and Divine in Kant," forthcoming. The work of Benedict Spinoza also deserves attention at this point, not least because he saw so clearly the moral problems related to certain claims about divine action in Scripture and the historical problems thrown up by historical investigation.

## The Stamp of the Infinite

### Divine Agency and Divine Action in Paul

Paul of Tarsus provides the first written accounts of the central claims about divine agency and divine action in the Christian tradition. His place in the tradition is so secure that various scholars have posited that he is effectively the first Christian, radically departing from the much simpler message of Jesus and inventing the basic Christian narrative about Jesus.<sup>1</sup> This is not how he is seen either canonically or historically by the church. Clearly we have radically different evaluations of the content and significance of Paul. This should not surprise us for Paul's life and his vision of divine action involve a challenge to any secular or naturalistic reading of his letters. Half a century ago, Wayne Meeks readily captured the way in which Paul can undercut a common mode of intellectual self-confidence.

Our vaunted objectivity, the universality of our reasoning, the efficacy of our methods, are all in question. The aim of the modernist project that, beginning in the eighteenth century, came to dominate the writing of history in the nineteenth and twentieth century, was to free ourselves, by the sheer power of our rationality and the austerity of our method, from traditions and dogmas and the institutions that sustained and lived by them. Thus, by seeing the past as it really was, we thought to find a secure starting place for knowing and valuing. We discovered meaning to be always dependent on context. We found identity to be a social process. And we learned that we could not avoid involving ourselves whenever we attempted to assess historical events and personages in a non-trivial way.<sup>2</sup>

Accepting most of the force of this observation but setting aside any final evaluation of its content, my aim in this chapter is to chart what Paul has to say about divine agency and divine action. What specific divine actions does

<sup>1</sup> For a recent articulation of this thesis see James D. Tabor, *Paul and Jesus: How the Apostle Transformed Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Wayne A. Meeks and John T. Fitzgerald, eds., *The Writings of St. Paul: Annotated Texts, Reception and Criticism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1972), 691–2. I plan to take up the debate about divine action and historical investigation in a later volume.

he identify? Do some specific actions get more attention than others? How does he identify God as the agent of various divine acts? What second-order comments does he make about divine agency and divine action and about our access to divine agency and divine action?<sup>3</sup>

We can begin with an account of Paul's call to be an apostle to the Gentiles.<sup>4</sup> According to his companion Luke, Paul, a Jew brought up and trained in a rigorous Pharisaic school of Judaism, set out on a journey from Jerusalem to Damascus in order to secure legal action against a network of Jews who had become followers of Jesus. Convinced that they had misread the role of divine action in Jesus and that they posed a serious threat to the faith of his ancestors, his aim was to bring them back to Jerusalem for appropriate reprimand. En route a light from heaven flashed around him, he fell to the ground, and heard a voice he named as "Lord," which interrogated him: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" The source and agent of the voice identified itself in turn in a twofold manner, first, by way of the name of Jesus, and second, by way of a definite description, that is, the one "whom you are persecuting." Both designations are puzzling in the extreme. For Jesus, whom Paul had assumed to be justly punished and executed and was therefore dead, was not only present directly in an utterly mysterious contemporary encounter with Paul but also present in the people whom Paul was persecuting. Immediately Paul was given orders by the same agent to get up and enter Damascus where he would be told what to do. Blinded by this stage even though his eyes were physically open, he was led by the hand to Damascus where he remained without sight and neither ate nor drank.

Read straight up, this is an astonishing experience which should not be run through casually. The crucial divine action involved is that of divine speaking represented by interrogation and command. The agent is identified both as the Lord and as Jesus. The speech acts of the Lord were preceded by flashing lights; they were expressed in an audible voice heard only by Paul and not by his companions; and they were accompanied by the loss of physical sight. For his part Paul fell to the ground, remained remarkably docile, and has all the appearance of a passive human agent overwhelmed by a show of divine strength and person-relative revelation.

The promise of further instruction from the Lord was no less remarkable in its execution. A Christian disciple in Damascus, called Ananias, had a vision in which he was told to go to a specific street and house in Damascus where he

<sup>3</sup> For purposes of economy I shall limit my account to what Paul covers in what is generally accepted as his authentic letters, that is, First Thessalonians, Galatians, First Corinthians, Second Corinthians, Romans, Philippians, and Philemon. While this is the standard consensus among contemporary biblical scholars, it is by no means a secure consensus.

<sup>4</sup> I follow here the various reports found in Acts 9:1–19, Acts 22:4–16, Acts 26:9–18, and Gal 1:13–17. For a succinct summary of the similarities between these accounts see Daniel J. Harrington SJ, *Meeting St. Paul Today* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2008), 9–11.

should look for a man from Tarsus called Saul, which was Paul's common name at the time. Simultaneously, Paul in prayer was experiencing a vision in which he saw a man named Ananias come, lay hands on him, and thereby regain his sight. Knowing Paul's reputation Ananias was skeptical of such a prospect. The rejoinder from the Lord to Ananias was as simple as it was effective. Paul was an instrument chosen to bring the Lord's name before the Gentiles, kings, and the people of Israel. In turn this would be a vocation that would involve much suffering. When Ananias eventually met Paul as anticipated, he made it clear that he had been sent by the Lord Jesus, the one who had appeared to Paul earlier. Ananias laid hands on Paul, acting as a human agent in the regaining of his sight and his being filled with the Holy Spirit. Something like scales fell from Paul's eyes, he regained his sight, was baptized, ate some food, and regained his strength.

We already have a network of dramatic phenomena related to divine action on our hands: a divine voice, a most unusual agent, unexpected physical phenomena, a vision, and a double miracle. These are precisely the kind of phenomena that set our teeth on edge in and around the topic of divine action. The shards of modernity still lingering within our breast tempt us to dismiss the whole story as infested with superstition and credulity; our postmodern impulses tempt us to look for the power play and the hidden drive to authority that must lie beneath the surface. Ananias' skeptical worries arise for different reasons. What is reported in his vision about Paul does not fit with his background beliefs; what immediately comes to his mind is the evil Paul has done to the saints in Jerusalem. Even God is held to an informal standard of evidence in which the narrative of divine action cannot ignore the human-historical narrative that everybody knows to be the case. Ananias' problem is one of coherence: what God is saying does not fit with what he already knows to be the case. The resolution of his skepticism does not involve debates about divine intervention and miracle; it rests on the reception and recognition of the intentions and purposes of God in the life of Paul as it relates to the spread of the Gospel. Even then, he will need more than a mere articulation of potential coherence within a narrative of divine action; what he is open to believing about divine action is confirmed in his subsequent encounter with Paul in Damascus.

As far as divine action is concerned, this account of Paul's call is complemented by his own way of identifying the divine actions that fit with what happened to him. Thus he speaks of having been appointed to be an apostle<sup>5</sup> and of being set apart and called.<sup>6</sup> Correlative with this we are not surprised that Paul claims that he has been given authority by God to build up rather than tear down believers in Corinth,<sup>7</sup> that he has been given a specific sphere of

<sup>5</sup> Gal. 1:1; cf. 1 Cor. 1:1.      <sup>6</sup> Gal. 1:5.

<sup>7</sup> 2 Cor. 10:8; 13:10. Paul insists that this authority to speak on behalf of God is accompanied by "a demonstration of the Spirit and of power." See 1 Cor. 2:4.

influence,<sup>8</sup> that he was an ambassador through whom God was making an appeal,<sup>9</sup> and that he has been given a ministry of reconciliation.<sup>10</sup> He also dared to say that he, together with Silvanus and Timothy, had “been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel.”<sup>11</sup> This gave them a distance from the demands of human agents but only to bring into play an accountability before God “who tests our hearts.”<sup>12</sup>

Within this vocation Paul received specific person-relative special revelation to go to Jerusalem to meet with other Christian leaders in a private meeting. As he noted: “I went up in response to a revelation.”<sup>13</sup> More generally, Paul was the subject of divine action described in terms of visions and revelation whose contents were not shared in any great detail.<sup>14</sup> These were of such an exceptional character that they were laden with spiritual danger. Initially Paul reported the antidote to this acute danger in terms of the evasive passive, that is, “a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to prevent me from being too elated.”<sup>15</sup> The context makes clear, however, that God was intimately involved, for when Paul appealed for release from this constraint, the Lord responded: “My grace is sufficient for you for power is made perfect in weakness.”<sup>16</sup>

Beyond such personal revelation Paul also insisted that he had been given non-personal relative revelation, revelation that we might name as public or universal in that it was intended for everyone. The shocking and abrupt way in which Paul expressed this claim in his letter to the Galatians deserves to be quoted at length.

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel—not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you another gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed! As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed! Am I now seeking human approval or God’s approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ. For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.<sup>17</sup>

One way to think of this claim is to see it as a claim on the part of Paul to be among the prophets, that is, one who has special access to the will of God because of his call and of his having received a word of revelation from God. Such a reading dovetails naturally with the suffering that Ananias prophesied

<sup>8</sup> 2 Cor. 10:13.

<sup>9</sup> 2 Cor. 5:20.

<sup>10</sup> 2 Cor. 5:18.

<sup>11</sup> 1 Thess. 2:4.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Gal. 2:2.

<sup>14</sup> 2 Cor. 12:2.

<sup>15</sup> 2 Cor. 12:7.

<sup>16</sup> 2 Cor. 12:9.

<sup>17</sup> Gal. 1:6–12.

he would undergo, with the challenges to his status as an apostle, and with the acute spiritual temptations to which he was subject.

Divine action in the life of Paul was not just confined to his dramatic call and his long-term vocation as an apostle; it also shines through in both his specific and in the more general accounts of his life and work. Thus he insists that his competence comes from God. "...our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, the Spirit gives life."<sup>18</sup> He looked to God to direct a way to visit the church in Thessalonica.<sup>19</sup> When he arrived in Troas a door had been opened for him in the Lord;<sup>20</sup> God rescued him and his associates from deadly peril.<sup>21</sup> When his co-worker, Epaphroditus, became so ill that he nearly died, Paul described his recovery in terms of divine mercy in action: "...God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, so that I would not have one sorrow after another."<sup>22</sup> Anticipating a painful visit to Corinth, he was worried that when he arrived God would humble him before the church because of extensive moral failure of its members.<sup>23</sup> Clearly divine actions such as these, while they are named quite specifically take place in, with, and through the course of his experience and encounters with others. Thus divine action naturally spreads into the course of life as a whole. No matter whether Paul faced scarcity or plenty, he could do all things through him who strengthened him.<sup>24</sup> In a memorable passage he put the issue clearly as follows. "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose."<sup>25</sup>

Divine action in call and ministry in the church is not confined to Paul. Just as God had called and worked through Paul among the Gentiles, God had made Peter an apostle to the circumcised. These specific calls fitted into a wider divine strategy in the life of the church. Hence Apollos and Paul are both servants with work assigned to each by the Lord.

I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each. For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building.<sup>26</sup>

God commanded that special agents like these who were set apart full-time for the proclamation of the Gospel should earn their living by the Gospel.<sup>27</sup> However, it is not likely that all who were appointed to a special ministry in the church shared this privilege. This is manifest in the additional network of agents appointed by God in the church. "...God has appointed in the church

<sup>18</sup> 2 Cor. 3:6.

<sup>19</sup> 1 Thess. 3:11.

<sup>20</sup> 2 Cor. 2:12.

<sup>21</sup> 2 Cor. 1:10. The details are not specified.

<sup>22</sup> Phil. 2:27.

<sup>23</sup> 2 Cor. 12:21.

<sup>24</sup> Phil. 4:13.

<sup>25</sup> Rom. 8:28.

<sup>26</sup> 1 Cor. 3:5-9.

<sup>27</sup> 2 Cor. 9:14.

first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues.”<sup>28</sup>

As Paul and others preach the Gospel those who hear and receive their message are also subject to a diverse array of divine action. Thus believers in Thessalonica are described as chosen by God<sup>29</sup> and called into the kingdom of God.<sup>30</sup> The Corinthian believers have been called by God “into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord”;<sup>31</sup> God has shone into their hearts “to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”<sup>32</sup> The Roman believers are “called to belong to Jesus Christ.”<sup>33</sup> God demonstrated his love for them in that while they were sinners Christ died for them.<sup>34</sup> They were justified by the grace of God as a gift, “through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood effective through faith.”<sup>35</sup> They were the recipients of the love of God poured out into their hearts through the Holy Spirit that had been given to them. Similarly, the Galatian believers had received the Holy Spirit through believing what they heard rather than by doing the works of the law, so much so that God supplied the Holy Spirit and worked miracles among them.<sup>36</sup> More generally God sent the Spirit of his Son into the hearts of believers whereby they cry “Abba! Father!” and receive a spirit of adoption in which the Spirit bears witness to their spirits that they are children of God.<sup>37</sup> Elsewhere Paul speaks of God giving the Spirit as a guarantee of future blessing in the life to come.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, his general aspiration for believers is that the God of peace sanctify them entirely.<sup>39</sup> The final outcome of this range of divine action in the lives of believers is captured in his vision of those in Christ as a new creation: “So if anyone is in Christ; there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything has become new. All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ...”<sup>40</sup>

Living the life of the new creation does not mean that everything is plain sailing for those who have believed, repented, and been baptized. Intimate divine action comes into play as they suffer with and for Christ and as they struggle with the moral requirements of Christian discipleship.

[T]he Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>28</sup> 1 Cor. 12:28.

<sup>29</sup> 1 Thess. 1:4.

<sup>30</sup> 1 Thess. 2:12.

<sup>31</sup> 1 Cor. 1:8.

<sup>32</sup> 2 Cor. 4:6.

<sup>33</sup> Rom. 1:8.

<sup>34</sup> Rom. 5:8.

<sup>35</sup> Rom. 3:23–25.

<sup>36</sup> Gal. 5:3.

<sup>37</sup> Gal. 4:6 and Rom. 8:16.

<sup>38</sup> 2 Cor. 5:5.

<sup>39</sup> 1 Thess. 5:23. Cf. 1 Thess. 4:3.

<sup>40</sup> 2 Cor. 5:17–18.

<sup>41</sup> Rom. 8:26–27.

In times of emotional and relational stress, as happened in Paul's worries about his relationship with the Corinthian congregation, God consoles through the agency of others.

For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted in every way—disputes without and fears within. But God, who consoles the downcast, consoled us by the arrival of Titus, and not only by his coming, but also by the consolation with which he was consoled about you, as he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more.<sup>42</sup>

Paul clearly believes that divine assistance is given more generally in the church to bring about genuine harmony. Thus he prays: "May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>43</sup> More specifically, given the thorny problem of table-fellowship as it related to a pious commitment to vegetarianism on the part of some Christians, "Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them."<sup>44</sup> Even faith itself is dependent on divine action. "For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned."<sup>45</sup> In this instance we observe a remarkable coordination between divine action and human action. Believers are expected to think with sober judgment about their place in the church, yet such thinking is exercised within the measure of faith assigned to them by God. The context of this reference to divine action suggests that Paul may be thinking of faith here as a divinely given awareness of the gifts distributed by the Holy Spirit within the body. Elsewhere he makes it clear that he sees divine action as essential to coming to faith itself, that is, in salvation. "Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation in fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure."<sup>46</sup>

Thus far we have looked at a range of specific divine actions that is naturally articulated in the call of Paul, in the ministries of his co-workers in the church, and in the lives of his converts scattered across the congregations to which he wrote. We have taken a set of soundings so that we can begin to get a sense of the wide range of actions predicated of God. We are working from below rather than from above; that is, we are interested in the very particular action predicates that show up. It would be tedious to rattle off a list of all the action

<sup>42</sup> 2 Cor. 6: 5–7.

<sup>43</sup> Rom. 15:5–6.

<sup>44</sup> Rom. 14:3.

<sup>45</sup> Rom. 12:3.

<sup>46</sup> Phil. 2:12–13.



predicates deployed at this point: create, call, appoint, redeem, direct, humble, shine into human hearts, justify, sanctify, send the Spirit, raise Jesus from the dead, reconcile, and so on. However, it is crucial to grasp the significance of this exercise.

In the twentieth century the drive to develop various general theories related to such discourse has been well-nigh irresistible. We can think of hermeneutical theories that depict talk of divine action as mythological. Or we can think of semantic theories that posit a generic account of religious language that treats such discourse as expressions of intention to lead an agapeistic way of life, or as expressions of emotion, or as *sui generis* and therefore not factual or explanatory, or as disguised expressions and bids for power. There is no simple, decisive way to rule out general semantic theories of the sort just identified; virtually any expression deployed by, say, Paul can be uprooted and made to do whatever work the theologian wants it to do. So one can take the sentence, "God raised Jesus from the dead," and use it to express the sentence, "The early disciples of Jesus came to a new and life-changing perspective on the significance of Jesus." Moreover, we can expect that general theories of religious discourse, like the poor, are always likely to be with us. What I want to do by highlighting the particularity of divine action predication as we find it in Paul is to bring all such exercises under strain. They fail to do justice to the radical specificity of what Paul actually says. They cannot capture the cognitive content and usage of the very particular claims about divine action that we encounter.<sup>47</sup>

The same applies in the drive to secure a general account of the necessary and sufficient conditions of action discourse and then use that to understand particular divine actions. So suppose we arrive at a strong consensus that all actions necessarily involve conscious intention on the part of the agent who performs them. This will not begin to do justice to the distinction, say, between create and redeem, or between test our hearts and raise Jesus from the dead as applied to God. It is specific actions like these that are the life blood of theology and that are vital for the life and action of the ordinary believer. Being informed that these actions are all carried out intentionally does next to nothing to help us with how to think through the full meaning and significance of the divine actions that are central to theology. Any general concept of divine action that we might abstract from a paradigm case of divine

<sup>47</sup> It is hard to improve on the sensitivity of E. P. Sanders' remarks on Rudolf Bultmann's seminal (and in its own way illuminating) attempt to read talk of divine action in Paul as really expressing a certain understanding of existence. He concludes: "What he (Paul) really thought was just what he said: that Christ was appointed Lord by God for the salvation of all who believe, that those who believe belong to the Lord and become one with him, and that in virtue of their incorporation into him they will be saved on the Day of the Lord." See E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1977), 523.