

Critical Issues Commentary

A Biblically based commentary on current issues that impact you

The Tyranny of False Causes

by Bob DeWaay

*Many are the plans in a man's heart,
But the counsel of the Lord, it will stand.
(Proverbs 19:21)*

*And all the inhabitants of the earth are
accounted as nothing, But He does ac-
cording to His will in the host of heaven
And among the inhabitants of earth; And
no one can ward off His hand Or say to
Him, What hast Thou done? (Daniel
4:35)*

*Forever, O Lord, Thy word is settled in
heaven. Thy faithfulness continues
throughout all generations; Thou didst
establish the earth, and it stands. They
stand this day according to Thine ordi-
nances, For all things are Thy servants.
(Psalm 119:89-91)*

*Also we have obtained an inheritance,
having been predestined according to His
purpose who works all things after the
counsel of His will. (Ephesians 1:11)*

How often we find our beliefs about causes to be wrong. We encounter a problem, invest time and effort to solve the problem only to find that the object of our efforts was not the cause of the problem at all. Several such incidents in my life have caused me to contemplate the following contrast: the tenuous nature of our knowledge of cause and effect compared to the certainty of God's knowledge and decrees. God has given us the ability to learn enough about the nature of the world to function adequately. However, He has withheld from us the ability to know all things and solve all our problems. Why? Because He wants us to learn to honor and trust Him. God is the ultimate, primary cause of all things and only God can save us.

"False" Causes

I must admit that my title is an

oxymoron. There exists no such thing as a false cause, because a cause that is not the grounds of the effect is no cause at all. But erroneous beliefs about causes do exist. These occur when we sincerely believe something to be a cause and base our decisions and actions on this belief, but our belief turns out to be false. These false beliefs can have horrific consequences. For example, pagans at various times of history have practiced child sacrifice to various gods, thinking that their sacrifices caused various benefits such as rain or fertility.¹ Children were sacrificed and sure enough, the spring rains came. Such beliefs about causes are obviously destructive.

We often discover false beliefs about causes in our own lives. This recently happened to me. For years I battled a seasonal skin condition on my lower legs. I was sure it was caused by a fungus. I would apply medication and eventually the condition would be gone, particularly in the summer. So for years this process went on, costing quite a bit of money. Recently when it got worse, I went to the doctor hoping to get more potent medication. I found out that the condition was not caused a fungus at all, but was eczema most likely caused by allergies. The reason it went away in the summer was because of humidity. It is made worse by dryness living in Minnesota, there is little humidity in the winter. My false belief about cause and effect was such that some of the treatments I had applied were making the problem worse. For example, I regularly used very strong soaps in hopes of mitigating the supposed fungus problem. It turns out that the soaps may have partially caused the allergic reaction.

Everyone has had similar experiences. Some of them can be

humorous. When my son was about 4 or 5 years old I had an argument with him about the cause of certain balloons floating while others did not. Our bank had a helium tank and balloons so that helium filled balloons could be given to children who accompanied their parents to the bank. He often came home with one of these floating balloons. One day he told me that it was the string attached to the balloon that made it float. I was frustrated in my attempts to correct him. Nothing I said would convince him that the string did not cause the balloon's buoyancy in air. Finally I took a scissors and cut the string off of his balloon. He watched in utter amazement as the stringless balloon floated to the ceiling.

Evidently he had come to his belief based on simple observation. Every balloon that we had blown up ourselves for him had been left stringless and did not float. Every balloon that came from the bank had a string and did float. It was easy to form a cause and effect association with strings and floating when none existed. This is the basis of many false beliefs, though most of them are far more complex than balloons with or without strings.

False beliefs about cause and effect can be damaging in many ways, including financially. I recently discovered why we had been experiencing water damage in our church sanctuary despite our having the roof repaired many times. Two areas of the sanctuary are below flat roofs which are surrounded by walls. This creates a swimming pool effect when the snow melts in the spring. Water inevitably finds its way into the sanctuary and destroys plaster. For years we would call various roofers who applied many fixes to no avail. Recently we finally found out why this continued to happen. In 1979 insulation had been blown into large crawl spaces between the ceiling and the concrete outer roof. There is a large system of roof drains that collect the water. These drains run through

the crawl space. We now know that the insulation did two adverse things: it kept the snow from melting gradually throughout the winter and draining from the roof a little at a time and it kept the pipes in the crawlspace below freezing. The results were that when the late winter sun would melt the snow on the roof, the resulting water would funnel into pipes that were out of the sun and below freezing. We finally discovered the cause of the problem was water freezing in a pipe that caused it to break. Water came pouring in. It took twenty years to discover that the insulation was the source of the problem.

False “Causes” and Spiritual Bondage

As frustrating as our everyday experiences are, spiritual mis-beliefs are far more damaging. Our relationship with God and whether we obey and honor Him are influenced by false beliefs about causality.

This is powerfully illustrated by the book of Job. Job’s comforters believed that victims of calamity were more unrighteous than others who were not such victims. They interpreted Job’s situation based on this belief. Job generally shared their belief except he did not believe that he was more wicked than others who were not suffering like him. So for him he had no explanation. He did believe that the wicked were punished, but he did not believe he was wicked. So why his misery? He had no way to know and demanded an audience with God to find out. What Job and his friends did not know was that though Job was righteous (**Job 1:1-5**), God had nevertheless given Satan permission to bring these calamities upon Job. The righteous sufferer motif is found throughout the Old Testament and culminates in the New Testament with Jesus as the suffering Messiah. Having no place for a righteous sufferer in their beliefs, the characters in Job could not understand God and His dealings with man. Misbeliefs about cause and effect have been promoted and utilized by various TV faith teachers. One of them² taught

for years that he was analogous to Elijah and the poor people watching his show were like the widow at Zarephath. If they would give their money to the prophet (TV preacher) they would receive great financial benefit. He was bringing in hundreds of millions of dollars, preaching little but this same message. To reinforce the idea that it worked, testimonials were read over the air. For example, letters from people who sent in \$100 and then got a better job or an unexpected inheritance. They supposed that giving \$100 to this false teacher was the cause of whatever benefit came later. What people did not realize was that out of hundreds of thousands of listeners, there would always be enough people who get a better job or some unexpected money in any given time frame to keep the illusion going. Suppose ten thousand people send in \$100 dollars. All that is needed is for ten of them to get a promotion or some other favorable financial event in their lives who report this to the evangelist. The ten letters read over the air convince another ten thousand people to send in \$100. It is more than probable that ten out of ten thousand would have had something favorable happen, even if none of them had sent their money to the preacher. This is especially true in a prosperous country like America. The insidious thing is this: the false belief about cause and effect convinces many to believe the lies of the false teacher.

In recent articles I have discussed false spiritual warfare teachings. These also serve as examples of the tyranny of false causes. Once Christians buy into the notion that the destiny of their loved ones, the spiritual well being of their city, and the general popularity of Christianity is determined by demons ruling in the heavenly places, then the unbiblical spiritual technologies that are promoted to remedy these problems seem plausible. It is one thing to view the unsaved as being lost because of their sin nature, rebellion against God and rejection of the gospel. It is

another to view them as noble minded and innocent people who would gladly serve Christ and honor God if only the principalities and powers over the city were bound by the incantations and utterances of Christians. If we believe that those who are saved will be so because of God’s action through the gospel, then we will preach the gospel. If, as many foolishly believe, God’s eternal purposes in Christ through the gospel are going to be thwarted by unseen demons if Christians do not have extra-biblical revelations about the names and natures of such beings, then we will view the power of the Holy Spirit working through the gospel to be ineffective in saving sinners.

According to Paul, the gospel itself is part of the effective armor of God (**Ephesians 6:12**). The eternal purposes of God are being brought to light through the Gospel. The wicked powers that are opposed to God are confronted by God’s eternal purpose through the gospel and their ultimate inability to thwart any of God’s decrees is exposed. Consider what Paul said about this:

*To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God, who created all things; in order that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and confident access through faith in Him (**Ephesians 3:9-12**).*

Notice that for Paul, to preach the riches of Christ to the Gentiles and thus bring to light God’s eternal wisdom, is to cause the wisdom of God³ to be made known through the church to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. God’s purposes are eternal. God always

planned to save Gentiles through the substitutionary death of His Messiah. This was taught in the Old Testament (see **Isaiah 49:6**) As the wicked spiritual powers of darkness see God save their former subjects, the Gentiles, through the simple gospel of Christ, they are confronted and confounded by the manifold wisdom of God. They can do nothing to stop God from fulfilling His purposes.

Much popular evangelical theology teaches just the opposite. According to that teaching, God wants to save Gentiles, but He cannot because the rulers and authorities have control over the city. This control causes the Gentiles to remain lost. The gospel does not penetrate the minds of the lost as long as these powers are in place over the cities. Christians must go to spiritual warfare seminars and learn the names, natures, and operating principles of these spiritual forces and begin to bind them. They must form ecumenical movements and come into unity with all forms of Christianity, even those who compromise the gospel, and together bind the strong man over the city. When all of this is accomplished, then the lost will come streaming to God, their sin nature notwithstanding. God's eternal purposes in Christ supposedly have been thwarted and stymied throughout thousands of years of history. They have no hope of fulfillment except at the end of the twentieth century when the church gets sophisticated enough to take control over the heavenlies.

Therefore Paul and the modern church are at odds. Paul reminded us that God created all things, even the authorities and rulers who are now opposed to His purposes, and that He by His grace has chosen to use converted sinners like Paul as the means of making known His saving purposes in Christ. God's action through the gospel causes sinners to be saved. God's purpose in doing so is eternal. Though existing from all eternity as certain, God's purpose is carried out in history through Messiah and those whom He chose, anointed

with the Holy Spirit, and sent forth with the gospel. The spiritual powers of darkness cannot stop one sinner, whom God has chosen, from being saved through the gospel and being added to the church, even if such a sinner is living a hellish life in the most evil and wicked city on the face of the earth. This glorious power of God through the gospel confronts wicked powers and reminds them of their ultimate powerlessness in the face of God's eternal purposes.

The tyranny of false causes puts people in spiritual bondage. Rather than rejoicing with Paul in our *confident access through faith* that we have in Christ, we cringe at the evil that we think is being wrecked upon us and our loved ones by demonic powers that keep God's purposes from being fulfilled in our lives. Rather than trusting God as the ultimate and primary cause, we hope to understand and manipulate secondary causes (those of the created order), not realizing how many false beliefs we have about these secondary causes.⁴ We become like Job's comforters, or at best Job, believing in God but confused and distressed about whether or how our lives fit into His purposes. We imagine that if only we could know all things and have the technology to manipulate them, we could have a better life. If I am right, our lack of knowledge is part of God's purpose to motivate us to trust Him. We shall use the Garden of Eden to illustrate this.

The Knowledge of Good and Evil

I have asserted in several previous articles that **Hosea 4:6a** (*My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge*) is the most misused verse in the Bible. I keep seeing evidence that this assessment is correct. The misuse of this verse effectively creates the impression that God is in agreement with Satan in the Garden of Eden. It is as if secret knowledge was the key to being like God and being in control of all of life. Anyone with any regard for the integrity of Scripture should be willing to look at the context in Hosea and see just what knowledge the

people lacked that was destroying them. **They did not know God and had rejected His Law! (Hosea 4:1 & 6b)**. The false teachers who twist this verse claim that the knowledge people lack is knowledge of secondary causes. That is they see life as gaining information about cause and effect and manipulating causes for our own benefit. They teach supposed principles of health, prosperity or spiritual warfare that we must learn and implement to create our own well being on the face of the earth. The real problem, the one being addressed in Hosea, is a lack of knowledge of God and trust in Him.

The problem with pinning our hopes on knowledge about secondary causes and manipulating these to our own benefit is that, as finite beings, we can never have comprehensive knowledge and absolute certainty about the cause and effect process in this fallen world. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the Garden, signified God's sovereign right of rulership and man's dependence on Him. God would allow humans, through their God-given faculties, to know what He chose to reveal to them and what they could legitimately learn about the world He made. But they could not know everything. The secret things were in God's domain and they needed to trust Him about them.

The temptation to transgress the one law they had been given was a temptation to seek deity: *For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil (Genesis 3:5)*. I used to think that the tree of good and evil signified the experiential knowledge of evil. The text does not support that, since they were tempted to gain something that God had but they did not that would make them like God. However, God did not have experiential knowledge of evil. The answer, therefore, lies in understanding good and evil as a figure of speech called merism in which two extremes are used to designate the whole. A common Old Testament example of this is heaven

and earth when used to designate the whole of creation. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil signified **all knowledge**.⁵ The temptation was to transcend creaturely status and have direct knowledge of all things, without dependence on God.

The irony is that though they did gain experiential knowledge of evil, their knowledge of all things was now unreliable. They had been deceived by the serpent and now were subject to possible deception in all of their knowledge. They no longer **knew** God in the most important manner of all, the one Hosea lamented about, they did not know Him relationally. They were alienated from the true life of God and now knew lots about the world in their loss of innocence, but their knowledge could not save them. It was a cruel burden filled with lies, deception and a curse.

As fallen humans we think we know things to be a certain way, but they often are not and our false beliefs hold us in bondage. The only answer is in the knowledge of God we have in Christ: *seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence (2Peter 1:3)*. As Adam and Eve sinned through being dissatisfied with the knowledge of God and what He chose to reveal, we are called as Christians to resist this temptation and be satisfied with our relationship with God in Christ and everything pertaining to life and godliness that have been granted to us. According to Peter we have true knowledge. Adam and Eve also had everything pertaining to life and godliness granted to them in their relationship with God, but gave it up seeking to become like God having all knowledge. The temptations today are similar. Christians grow dissatisfied with what has been revealed and granted to us in Christ and lust for the uncertain knowledge the world offers, hoping to use it to solve their spiritual problems.

Primary and Secondary Causes

The cosmic process of cause and

effect is exceedingly complex. But God has given us the faculties to partially understand the created order and to use our God given abilities to survive. I was trained in science first, before I knew anything about theology. The complexity and magnificence of the created order led me to believe there was a Creator. But it was the knowledge of Christ through the gospel that saved me. I am not suggesting that we cannot learn anything about cause and effect in the universe. I am suggesting that such knowledge is partial, subject to possible error, and entirely inadequate in itself to solve our greatest problems. The greatest problem facing the human race is aging and death, which are the results of original sin. Knowledge of cause and effect has never resolved this problem. Such limitations and the resulting frustration ought to drive us to God, who alone knows all things.

All Christians must admit that God is the primary cause of all things. He created the whole universe out of nothing. The resultant system of secondary causes (that we study in various sciences such as physics) exists because of God's will to create it and sustain it. We get into trouble when we seek autonomy by ignoring God as the primary cause and putting all of our hopes in knowing and manipulating secondary causes as best we can. We are tyrannized by our own false beliefs and often do not even know it. We find out we have been wrong (as in my examples cited before) often enough to make us wonder what other ideas we cherish might be proven false. This is not to drive us to despair, but to drive us to dependence on God.

For example, if we really believe that God loves us and has our best interests in mind, then what could be more comforting than the notion that He is in complete control of His own universe and is directing all things to an end that includes our glorification? That is exactly what **Romans 8:28-30** teaches. The very minutia of life are under God's providential control.

Even the forces of wickedness cannot thwart God's eternal purposes. This truth is sadly under emphasized in the modern evangelical church. Many I have spoken to about it seem to feel that God's sovereignty offers no hope. They have more hope in their own abilities to make things work out by pushing the right buttons and causing their own desired effects. They also think it absurd to believe that God is in control of all things and causing them to work to our benefit when the world is so chaotic and evil.

For all who feel that way, I urge you to meditate on the Scriptures quoted at the beginning of this article. As Christians we are going to have to reconcile something. We have two options: 1) we reconcile the clear teachings of the Bible with the fact that the world appears out of control and believe that God is working through it all and will fulfill His promises and bring about justice in the end. 2) We reconcile our claims to believe the Bible with the fact that we obviously do not when it comes to passages such as those referred to at the beginning of this paper. In them God claims to be in sovereign control of all things. Why do we not want to believe this? If only we knew how liberating the truth can be. It makes much more sense to trust the promises of God who works all things after the counsel of His will than try to solve our own problems using our finite knowledge of cause and effect.

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End Notes

1. For example, in Old Testament times children were sacrificed to Molech, Lev. 18:21; 20:2-4; Jer. 32:35.
2. Robert Tilton whose false practices were eventually exposed by a secular news documentary.
3. Paul taught that the Gospel is God's wisdom: *For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe* (**1 Corinthians 1:21**).
4. See, R. C. Sproul, *The Invisible Hand Do All Things Really Work for Good?*, (Word: Dallas, 1996) chapter 10 Primary and Secondary Causes 97-106. Secondary or proximate causes are those exerted by created beings or natural forces in the universe. God who created the universe out of nothing is the primary cause of all things.
5. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Word-book of the Old Testament*, Vol. 1 (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980) 367: commenting on Genesis 2:9, 17 By eating its fruit man came to know in a way comparable to the knowledge of God. This important reference may also be taken as the figure of speech known as merism to indicate objective awareness of all things both good and bad.