



Essays in Honor of
F. Alan Tomlinson

MIDWESTERN JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY

Fall 2016

Vol. 15 No. 2

***Chance and the Sovereignty of God: A God-Centered Approach to Probability and Random Events.* By Vern Sheridan Poythress. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014. 357 pp. Paperback, \$25.00. ISBN: 978-1-4335-3695-3.**

“The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD” (Prov 16:33 ESV).

How ought we understand unpredictable events in light of the biblical testimony about God’s relationship to creation? This question underlies Dr. Vern Poythress’ recent book, *Chance and the Sovereignty of God: A God-Centered Approach to Probability and Random Events*.

Dr. Poythress is a well-known New Testament scholar, having served for the past 40 years at Westminster Theological Seminary, where he is currently Professor of New Testament Interpretation and Editor of the *Westminster Theological Journal*. Perhaps less well known is the fact that, prior to his graduate work in biblical studies, Dr. Poythress earned a Ph.D. in mathematics from Harvard University and taught mathematics at the collegiate level. And from early in his life Dr. Poythress has been interested in the relationship between theology and science and mathematics: his Th.M. thesis was titled “An Approach to Evangelical Philosophy of Science” (1974) and one of his early published essays was a chapter titled “A Biblical View of Mathematics” in a compendium of essays applying the Van Tillian framework (1976). Over the most recent decade Dr. Poythress has made common cause, in different ways, with both Van Til and Abraham Kuyper by producing an impressive corpus that seeks to demonstrate the Trinitarian foundations of language, logic, philosophy, mathematics, science, and sociology. *Chance and the Sovereignty of God* expands this corpus by developing a “God-centered approach to probability and random events” (5).

The book is divided into four parts. In Part I (“The Sovereignty of God”) Poythress lays the conceptual foundation for the book. He begins with the presuppositionalist affirmation “that God is the ultimate source for knowledge” (19) and concludes that on account of God’s instruction to us in the Bible, we can find answers to questions about the meaning of “so-called ‘chance’ events” (20). He goes on to demonstrate from Scripture the meticulous sovereignty of God, including God’s control of unpredictable events, disasters and suffering, human choice, and even

small random events. Poythress then progresses to consider the meaning of chance in light of God's sovereignty, arguing persuasively that the popular understanding of chance as *luck* is precluded by a proper view of God's transcendence and imminence. Our understanding of chance must instead be based on the idea of chance as *unpredictability*. Specifically, we must recognize that what we experience as chance events "are unpredictable and inexplicable for human beings, but not for God" (96), who is present and in control of all events, working them together for good.

Having established a biblical understanding of chance, Poythress proceeds in Part II to argue for "God as the Foundation for Chance." He begins by establishing that "God in his wisdom has given us the whole tapestry of regularities and unpredictabilities and their connections with one another. This tapestry, along with many other features we see in creation, reflects his wisdom and his character" (101). But these regularities and unpredictabilities not only reflect God, they are grounded in him: "The wonderful interlocking between the general and the particular has its ultimate foundation, its ultimate archetype or original pattern, in God himself" (107). God is thus the foundation for chance: he created the world so as to reflect the unity and diversity in the Trinity (108) and he created and governs the world by speech that finds its basis in intra-Trinitarian communication (107, cf. 58).

In Part III ("Probability") Poythress undertakes the task of defining probability and describing how it is estimated. Those acquainted with probability theory are aware of the many complexities that attend such a definition. But Poythress handles these complexities deftly by offering a creative synthesis that effectively reduces to three essential and complementary perspectives, mirroring John Frame's tri-perspectival approach to ethics. Equally skillful is the subsequent exposition of fundamental concepts of probability and estimation; all readers should be able to grasp the fundamentals with reasonable effort, regardless of previous exposure.

The final section, Part IV ("Probability and Mathematics"), is the most technical, as Poythress furthers his discussion of the concept and computation of numerical probability. Here his discussion consistently begins by establishing intuition before moving to computation, which greatly aids comprehension. Again, a reader need not have previous exposure to apprehend the material; Poythress provides an excellent

introduction. Nonetheless, those who despair of mathematics can be forgiven for skipping ahead to the concluding chapter.

Two facets of the book, woven throughout and elaborated in appendices, complement Poythress' principal project described thus far. While principally concerned to develop a God-centered view of chance, Poythress also endeavors to engage alternative views (particularly the views of chance implicit in the natural and social sciences) and to explicate the practical implications of the doctrine he develops. Both contribute meaningfully to the work. The former aids in clarifying his project by comparison and contrast; the latter aids in establishing its relevance.

Because of its subject matter, *Chance and the Sovereignty of God* is liable to be misunderstood by various audiences that bring their own expectations to the book. Two suggestions may help readers fully appreciate the work on its own terms. First, it is important to read with the nature of Poythress' principal project in constantly view. His project is fundamentally one of practical theology in the Kuyperian tradition, seeking to extend Jesus' lordship to every sphere of life. The book is not intended to be an exhaustive defense of meticulous providence, a self-contained introduction to statistics or a comprehensive philosophy of probability or mathematics. As he has made clear elsewhere, Poythress does not imagine he is speaking a final, definitive word; rather, he desires to lay a foundation on which others can build. Second, it is helpful to understand the book in the larger context of his corpus on the Trinitarian foundations of human knowledge. Elsewhere Poythress uses a familial analogy to explain the relationship between his "God-centered approach" books; it follows from this analogy that a single book can be understood in isolation, but is best understood in its broader context. Awareness of the arguments developed elsewhere in the corpus will both clarify and add persuasive force to the argument developed in this particular book.

Chance and the Sovereignty of God is a valuable addition to Poythress' corpus. In it he presents a well-reasoned, biblically-grounded understanding of the nature and measurement of unpredictable events and he plausibly grounds both in the Trinity. Generalist readers as well as mathematicians and theologians will find much to stimulate their thinking about the nature of chance and the foundations of probability.

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