

TOWARD THE WORSHIP OF GOD AS *ACTUS PURUS*

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God is Actus Purus, which is to say that He is eternally all that He can be. Potentiality is a trait of creatures, not God. The concept of Actus Purus was first articulated by Aristotle in his argument for the unmoved mover, and through its history, the church has considered this notion a valid articulation of the absolute perfection and preeminence of God over all things. This paper, then, explores the exegetical footing of Actus Purus. It also will seek to understand its implications for systematic theology. Careful exegesis will demonstrate that the doctrine of pure actuality is deducible from Scripture by good and necessary consequence. It is an instrument that helps to sound the unbounded perfection of God and arrive at a more settled understanding of His meticulous sovereignty. In short, pure actuality conveys that life cannot but belong to God, because He decrees, wills, knows, and does everything entirely from Himself.

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Introduction

There is an unfathomable chasm between God and creation. The soul can therefore only rise toward God by first supporting itself on the created order, where the Divine perfections are stamped.¹ Christian theology, on the other hand, faces a monumental challenge in seeking to articulate the fundamental perfection and primacy of God over His creatures. After all, He is the eternal and infinite Creator of a temporal and finite world. More than that, He is Being, from whom all existence is derived; Sustainer, through whom all things are upheld; and End, to whom all things are (Rom 11:36). In other words, God moves and changes all things without being moved or changed by anything. He is always active, always in repose; He seeks

¹ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick, Oxford World Classics (New York: Oxford, 2008), V.i. (I), 72. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, trans. Anton C. Pegis (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1955), 1:30.2. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 2:130. William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, trans. John Dykstra Eusden (1629; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968), 83.

without ever losing; He gathers to Himself though He has no need; “in Him are the constant causes of inconstant things.”²

One way in which theologians have expressed this notion is in the term *actus purus*, or pure actuality. Succinctly, this designation refers to God “as the fully actualized being, the only being not in potency.”³ This simply means that “[God is] absolutely perfect and the eternally perfect fulfillment of himself.”⁴ Unlike creatures, who have passive potential awaiting actualization, God is eternally all that He can be. Gisbertus Voetius stated, “If there were potency in God, there would exist in him something imperfect or perfectible for which an act would be perfective, through which perfective act some higher perfection would encroach upon God.”⁵ Potentiality, then, is a trait of creatureliness. If God had any passive qualities, He would not be perfect. Instead, He would be mutable.⁶ And a mutable God would be no God at all (Ps 102:26–27; Rom 1:23; Jas 1:17). Therefore, God is *actus purus*.

The concept of God as absolute actuality was first conceived by Aristotle in his famous argument for an eternal unmoved mover.⁷ Scholasticism, accordingly, grafted it into its theological olive tree.⁸ And even through the Reformation and post-Reformation eras, Christian thinkers considered the notion a valid strategy in the quest of the redeemed mind to express the absolute perfection and preeminence of God over all things.⁹

The objective of this study, then, is to explore whether the doctrine of pure actuality stands on firm exegetical footing, and to ascertain its implications for systematic theology. To that end, I will begin by examining three key texts that have been historically moored to the doctrines of aseity and immutability, both of which are corollaries of pure actuality (Exod 3:13–14; Acts 17:28; and Rom 11:36). In the second section, I will define and examine the doctrine of pure actuality in light of the exegetical conclusions at hand. Finally, in the third section, having thus established a biblical warrant for the doctrine, I will demonstrate its impact upon two divine attributes (namely immutability and eternity), and the doctrine of predestination, as a way to illustrate its relevance for the discipline of systematic theology.

² Augustine, *Confessions*, I.iv.(4), I.vi.(9), 5, 7.

³ Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 24.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Gisbertus Voetius, “God’s Single, Absolutely Simple Essence,” in *The Confessional Presbyterian* no. 15 (2019), 13.

⁶ Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, 84. Voetius thus called passive potency “the root of mutability” (Voetius, “God’s Single, Absolutely Simple Essence,” 14).

⁷ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Z.XII.6–10; cf. Etienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 46. He explains that Aristotle was by no means arguing for the God of Scripture. Though for Aristotle the unmoved mover stands alone as being first, he is not necessarily alone as unmoved mover (divinity). Discussions on the role of Aristotelian philosophy in Christian theology lie beyond the scope of this study. My aim instead is to take the concept of pure actuality as it has been passed down to and by the church, and examine it according to its own merits.

⁸ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:156–57.

⁹ As Muller points out, “the underlying assumptions governing the doctrine of God during the eras of the Reformation and Protestant orthodoxy are very little different from those governing the discussion during the Middle Ages” (*Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3: *The Essence and Attributes of God* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003], 3:97).

Careful exegesis will demonstrate that the doctrine of pure actuality is no mere philosophical speculation.¹⁰ Rather, it is an instrument that helps us sound the unbounded perfection of God and arrive at a more settled understanding of His meticulous sovereignty. In short, pure actuality conveys that life cannot but belong to God, because He decrees, wills, knows, works, and does everything entirely from Himself.¹¹ As the positive counterpart of the doctrine of Divine simplicity, pure actuality is necessary for the constitution of “a baseline, a controlling grammar for all our thoughts and beliefs about God,” without which we would run the risk of worshipping “that which is not the unsurpassable and most absolute being.”¹² Whether God is *actus purus*, then, is a matter of worship, a matter of faith, and thus a matter of utmost importance.

Establishing an Exegetical Foundation

Admittedly, theologians and philosophers of the past often thought that reason is able to demonstrate conclusively that God is *actus purus*. After all, if He is that than which nothing greater can be conceived, then potentiality is antithetical to His nature. That is because potentiality would suggest the presence of something perfectible in God.¹³ On the other hand, pure actuality can be discovered via the doctrine of the Trinity. In the eternal processions of the Son and the Spirit, God's knowing, willing, and loving are presented in Scripture as fully in act, independent of any outside influence, and eternally immutable.¹⁴ God's absolute actuality,

¹⁰ This was a common charge brought against Reformed theologians by both Socinian and Remonstrant writers. Simon Episcopius, a leading Arminian at the Synod of Dort, wrote:

You have to drench your mind with the whole metaphysics, before you understand what composition is, and then, ‘Is there composition from existence and essence?’, and ‘What is it?’, and ‘Is there composition from act and potency?’, ‘What is that?’ ... Thus the Remonstrants leave these decisions to their academic teachers and to all those for whom it is permitted to wrestle in this dry dust and slay themselves. (Simon Episcopius, *Apologia pro confessione sive Declaratione sententiae eorum, qui in Foederato Belgio vocantur Remonstrantes, super praecipuis articulis religionis Christianae* (1629), 41–42, cited in Voetius, “God's Single, Absolutely Simple Essence,” 18.)

Voetius goes on to respond (*ibid.*, 20),

We deny that the teaching is materially and in itself philosophical, even though one could say that it is formally such, insofar as one presents simplicity and vindicates it from the opponents' pseudo-philosophical tricks by using philosophical or scholastic terms. One could also raise the same objection against the teaching about all God's attributes, even those that the Socinians and Remonstrants themselves propose; and likewise the teaching on the Trinity, teaching on the person and natures of Christ against Eutychus and Nestorius—in fact, even almost all of theology.

The question, therefore, is not whether one employs metaphysical principles in order to draw theological conclusions. That is inevitable. Rather, the question is whether one's metaphysical principles drive exegesis, or whether one's exegesis shapes his metaphysics. Cf. J. V. Fesko, *The Trinity and the Covenant of Redemption* (Geanies House, Great Britain: Christian Focus, 2016), 231.

¹¹ Petrus van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology, Volume 2: Faith in the Triune God*, ed. Joel R. Beeke, trans. Todd M. Rester (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2019), 2:232.

¹² James E. Dolezal, *All That Is in God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Classical Christian Theism* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2017), 58.

¹³ Voetius, “God's Single, Absolutely Simple Essence,” 13–14.

¹⁴ Cf. Steven J. Duby, “Divine Action and the Meaning of Eternity,” in *God of Our Fathers: Classical Theism for the Contemporary Church*, ed. Bradford Littlejohn (Lincoln, NE: The Davenant Press, 2018), 92; Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:308. Bavinck writes that eternal generation demonstrates that God

therefore, lies at the bosom of the bosom of the Christian faith, the doctrine of the Trinity.

Beyond this, a number of individual passages so strongly suggest that God is utterly pre-eminent over creation, that they are well worth erecting as scriptural pillars to uphold the doctrine of pure actuality: these are Exodus 3:13–14; Acts 17:28; and Romans 11:36. These texts have been traditionally considered to be prooftexts for the doctrines of divine aseity and immutability. As this study will show, however, both aseity and immutability result from the fact that God is pure act. The exegesis of Exodus 3:13–14; Acts 17:28; and Romans 11:36 will therefore serve as the standard by which to demonstrate the doctrine's validity.

Exodus 3:13–14

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים הַזֶּה אֲנִי בָא אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתִּי לָהֶם אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם שְׁלַחְנִי אֵלֵיכֶם וְאָמַרְוּ לִי מִה־שְּׁמוֹ מָה אֵמַר אֲלֵהֶם: וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אֲהַנֶּה אֲשַׁר אֶהְיֶה וַיֹּאמֶר כֹּה תֹאמַר לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲהַנֶּה שְׁלַחְנִי אֵלֵיכֶם:

Then Moses said to God, “Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I will say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you.’ Now they may say to me, ‘What is His name?’ What shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM”; and He said, “Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”

Along with scenes such as the floating axe head (2 Kings 6:6) and the Jewish youths unscathed by the fire (Dan 3), the episode of the burning bush has stamped itself upon the pages of history as further demonstration that though some things work necessarily (as water wets the skin and fire gives off heat), yet both their action and their existence are entirely dependent upon God's influence.¹⁵ If He should remove it, they would cease to act or exist. In other words, the lordship of God extends down to the molecular level.

To be sure, it was a “marvelous sight” (v. 3) to see a bush aflame without being consumed; and a terrifying sound to hear the voice of God call out from the midst of it (vv. 4, 6). Nevertheless, receiving the Divine commission to deliver Israel horrified Moses even more. The prospect of returning to the government that had sought to kill him (2:15) and the slaves who had once rejected him (2:14) seemed dismaying.

Perhaps feigning humility and inadequacy, Moses began to raise objections. Though educated in the wisdom of the Egyptians (2:10), he claimed unfitness to

is a plenitude of life, for He is by nature generative (*γεννητικῆ*) and fruitful (*καρποποιος*), knowing, loving, and willing eternally without the need for creation. It should be noted, moreover, that the generation of the Son does not consist in an ontological movement on the part of the Son from a state of potency to a state of perfect actuality. That would be true if one were to suggest that the Second Person was begotten by a single act and then released from His ‘genesis.’ Nevertheless, the generation of the Son is at once always complete and eternally ongoing; i.e., it is an eternal generation (cf. John 1:18; Heb 1:5). *Ibid.*, 2:310.

¹⁵ Cf. John Owen, *Display of Arminianism*, in *The Works of John Owen* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1965), 10:24; cited in Christopher Cleveland, *Thomism in John Owen* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 42.

present himself in Pharaoh's court (3:11). God answered by promising to be with him, and offering him a sign that could only be received by faith: he and the people would worship at the mountain of God (v. 12). In other words, the sign from heaven would be the success of the mission.¹⁶

This statement was only a prelude to what God was about to reveal to Moses concerning the eternal and omnipotent character of His nature. Nevertheless, Moses responded with another objection. This time he focused on the people to which he would go (v. 13). Moses would say to them, "The God of your fathers has sent me to you," and he anticipated their response: "What is His name?"

The question does not necessarily suggest that the Israelites were ignorant of the name Yahweh. Moses does not utilize the interrogative מִי ("who"), which only requires identity, but מַה ("what"), which calls for an explanation of the object's essence.¹⁷ Ever since the time of Enosh, people had been calling upon that Divine name (Gen 4:26). In the book of Genesis the name Yahweh appears approximately 150 times, and some proper names of Israelites predating this occasion had it embedded upon them—e.g., Abijah and Ahijah (1 Chr 2:24–25).¹⁸ In verse 15, moreover, Moses is instructed to go to his brethren in the name of Yahweh, implying that this was no obscure name, but one that they already knew as the name of the God of their fathers. Therefore, the Israelites' question would have been one of essence, as when Jacob—and years later Manoah—asked about the angel's name (Gen 32:29; Judg 13:17).

This is consistent with the OT notion of name, which was often used to describe a person's existence, character, or reputation (cf. Deut 7:24; 9:14; 1 Sam 24:21; 25:25).¹⁹ Keil and Delitzsch wrote, "'What is His name?' presupposed that the name expressed the nature and operations of God, and that God would manifest in deeds the nature expressed in His name."²⁰ In other words, to borrow Abigail's words concerning her worthless husband Nabal, "as his name is, so is he" (1 Sam 25:25). James Murphy thus aptly paraphrased Moses' question: "What is the principle of thy being or movement of thy will which is now to display itself to thy people?"²¹

The Divine answer to Moses, אֲנִי אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה ("I AM WHO I AM"), is so theologically and metaphysically fecund that some have referred to it as the cradle of

¹⁶ Phillip Graham Ryken, *Exodus: Saved for God's Glory* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 93–94.

¹⁷ Walter C. Kaiser, "שָׁמַיִם," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2 volumes, edited by R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 2:934; cf. "מַה," in Ludwig Koehler et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994–2000), 551; "מַה," Wilhelm Gesenius and Samuel Prideaux Tregelles, *Gesenius' Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2003), 451; "מַה," Francis Brown, Samuel Rolles Driver, and Charles Augustus Briggs, *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 552.

¹⁸ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:143; cf. "יהוה," Willem VanGemeren, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 1295; "יהוה," Francis Brown, Samuel Rolles Driver, and Charles Augustus Briggs, *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 217; "יהוה," Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997), 522.

¹⁹ Kaiser, "שָׁמַיִם," *TWOT*, 2:934.

²⁰ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, "The Pentateuch," in *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*, trans. Rev. James Martin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 1:442.

²¹ James G. Murphy, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (New York: I. K. Funk & Co., 1881), 30.

all Christian metaphysics.²² Though Elohim speaks to God's might, and Shaddai to His omnipotence, Yahweh is derived from His essence or existence.²³ The stringing of two Qal imperfect first person singular forms of the verb "to be" denotes ever-present, uninterrupted activity—a phrase suggesting that God's active existence can only ultimately be described by the present tense.²⁴ Thus, Andrew Willet argued that אֲנִי אֵלֹהִים ("I AM") signified "all the difference of time, both past, present, and to come; as this name is expounded, which was, which is, and which is to come, Rev. 1.8."²⁵ Similarly, the ancient Rabbis believed that Yahweh was saying here, "I that have been, and I the same now, and I the same from time to come."²⁶ Therefore, the phrase means that God is, as John Owen put it, "eternal ... always the same, and so never what he was not ever."²⁷ He thus declared Himself to Moses a necessary being, existing of Himself, independent of any others,²⁸ "a verb, not a noun."²⁹

To be sure, I AM WHO I AM is not a name in itself, but the explanation of the name Yahweh, as v. 15 suggests: "God, furthermore, said to Moses, 'Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'the LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.' This is My name forever, and this is My memorial name to all generations.'"³⁰ From that moment on, that name was to symbolize God's perfect covenant faithfulness to Israel, which was grounded upon the unchangeable nature of His essence. The extended passage of time since His dealings with the patriarchs had validated His claims to immutability, as faithfulness can only be demonstrated through long periods of time.³¹

This helps answer the objection that Exodus 6:2 implies that the name Yahweh was not disclosed until this point in history.³² As shown above, the Hebrews surely

²² Cleveland, *Thomism in John Owen*, 30. To be sure, there is not a name that belongs properly to God. That is because, in the words of Francis Turretin (*Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3 vols., trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1993], 1:183–84), He is, "both a being singular in the highest sense, and in his own nature distinct from everything whatsoever." He is therefore, in that sense, utterly nameless—hence the rebuking of both Jacob and Manoah after asking about His name. That said, Scripture still assigns Him various names, because God accommodates Himself to us, and our knowledge begins from a name. Cf. also Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:104–105.

²³ Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:184; cf. Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, 84; Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:140.

²⁴ John I. Durham, "Exodus," *Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 39.

²⁵ Andrew Willet, *Hexapla in Exodum* (London, 1608), 32, cited in Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:233.

²⁶ Cited in Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:234.

²⁷ John Owen, *Works*, 12:71.

²⁸ Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:184.

²⁹ Fesko, *The Trinity and the Covenant of Redemption*, 236.

³⁰ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:143; T. Desmond Alexander, "Exodus," *Apollos Old Testament Commentary* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2017), 89.

³¹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:143–44.

³² For instance, Mark Smith writes, "The divine self-identification acknowledges both the equation of this deity with 'the God of the fathers' and the fact that the proper name of the deity had not been revealed before" ("Exodus: Volume 3," *New Collegeville Bible Commentary, Old Testament* [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011], 95). However, cf. responses by Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 98–102; Thomas Joseph White, "Exodus," *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 57–58. Kaiser sees the Niphal reflexive verbs, coupled with the implied *Beth essentiae*, as key to the correct rendering of this text: "I manifested myself in the character of [Beth Essentiae] El shaddai but in the character [Beth Essentiae] implied] Yahweh, I did not make myself known to them." Kaiser, "אֵלֹהִים," *TWOT*, 2:934.

knew the word. What they did not know, at least experientially, was the meaning of it. After all, the divine promises concerning the multiplication of seed, the exodus, the promised land, etc. were not fulfilled during the lifetime of the patriarchs.³³ But now that time had vindicated God's claim to changelessness, He had come to tell His people, "I am who I am, YHWH, the unchangingly faithful One, the God of the fathers, your God even now and forever."³⁴

The Dutch theologian Petrus van Mastricht noticed in this response both a rebuke to the curiosity of the Israelites—who would be inquiring about God's essence and essential name (which, being spiritual and infinite is imperceptible to creatures)—as well as a graceful answer to Moses. In other words, He was saying, "You want my name, that it might somehow represent my essence? It is 'Being.'"³⁵ And by Being, Christian theology means that all perfections found in creatures must be attributed to God in an absolute sense, thus leading us to think of Him as "absolute reality, the sum total of all being, the purest and simplest actuality."³⁶ So, Exodus 3:14 establishes that in God there is no real distinction between His attributes and His essence, for they are identical with one another. For God to be faithful is for God to be. He cannot, on the other hand, receive new features of being, because He never transitions from a state of passive potential to perfect actuality. Augustine thus rightly prayed, "In you it is not one thing to be and another to live: the supreme degree of being and the supreme degree of life are one and the same thing."³⁷ All this is intimated by the name I AM (אֲנִי־אֵלֶּהּ).

Acts 17:28

Ἐν αὐτῷ γὰρ ζῶμεν καὶ κινούμεθα καὶ ἔσμεν

For in Him we live and move and have our being

This profound saying came from the lips of the apostle Paul as he reasoned with the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers in Athens about the coming judgment and the need for faith in the resurrected Christ. In this famous sermon at Mars Hill, Paul had opposed the Greeks' false distinction between the Supreme Being and a Demiurge who had fashioned the material world (v. 24a).³⁸ Moreover, he had rejected their assumption that God dwells in man-made temples (24b), and that He is thus "served by human hands" (v. 25a). After all, God is the One who "gives to all *people* life and breath and all things" (v. 25b). Paul was thus alluding to the perfection, pre-eminence, and independence of God. He cannot lose anything, for if He did, He would no longer be perfect. Conversely, He cannot gain anything, for if He could, that would imply a need for something outside of Himself to reach full actualization. Perfection, after all, admits no degrees.

³³ Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:185.

³⁴ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:143–44.

³⁵ Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, 2:74–75.

³⁶ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:121.

³⁷ Augustine, *Confessions*, I.vi. (10), 8.

³⁸ Everett F. Harrison, *Interpreting Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 285.

Further, Paul opposed the notion that the Greeks had sprung from the soil of Attica, and were thus distinct from all the nations of the earth (v. 26).³⁹ He alluded to God's common grace in providing the nations with "appointed times" for emergence and development (cf. Dan 2:36–45), as well as areas to occupy—all under the wise guidance of His Divine providence.⁴⁰ As Joseph Fitzmyer observed, "The historic limitations set upon humanity, the times and places where they dwell, are all the object of divine determination."⁴¹ Similarly, Joseph A. Addison wrote that in verse 26, "Paul claims for the Most High the right to govern, and indeed the actual control of the vicissitudes of nations, whether temporal or local, as a part of his great providential plan or purpose."⁴² In other words, God rules over creation in a meticulous fashion.

The reason for this gracious grant to the nations (of land and epochs) is recorded in v. 27: "That they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him." Here was a lively portrayal of the wretched condition of the Gentiles, who had been "excluded from the commonwealth of Israel," and were thus "strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (Eph 2:12). There was no special revelation to save them, only general revelation to render them without excuse. Paul did not lay out the reasons for their suppression of the truths that general revelation communicates day in and day out, though he developed the thought in Romans 1:18–21.

Paul thus illustrated the validity of his point with two quotations from heathen poets (v. 28). The words of the first quotation, ἐν αὐτῷ γὰρ ζῶμεν καὶ κινούμεθα καὶ ἐσμέν ("For in Him we live and move and have our being"), came from a poem attributed to Epimenides the Cretan.⁴³ For the eminent theologian R. C. Sproul, this was "the most profound sentence found anywhere in sacred Scripture," since it answers the three greatest questions of all philosophical endeavor—namely the questions of life, motion, and being.⁴⁴

As Paul explained, not only is God the source of life, but He is also the ultimate cause behind every creaturely motion. By motion, Paul was not referring merely to acceleration, speed, or movement from one physical location to another, but—as the ancient Greeks understood it—to change.⁴⁵ Moreover, the apostle grounded our creaturely (and therefore derived and dependent) being upon God, apart from whom

³⁹ F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 357–58; Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 634.

⁴⁰ Cf. Harrison, *Interpreting Acts*, 286; Carl R. Holladay, *Acts: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 344.

⁴¹ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 609.

⁴² Joseph Addison Alexander, *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, 2 vol. in 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1956), 618.

⁴³ Quoted by Paul. Cf. Bruce, *Acts*, 359; Carl R. Holladay, *Acts: A Commentary*, 345; I. Howard Marshall, "Acts," *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Nottingham: IVP Academic, 2008), 305–6.

They fashioned a tomb for thee, O holy and high one—
The Cretans, always liars, evil beasts, idle bellies!
But thou art not dead; thou livest and abidest for ever;
For in thee we live and move and have our being.

The fourth line of the preserved quatrain also includes the phrase cited in Titus 1:12. There is some ambiguity as to the true author behind the words.

⁴⁴ R. C. Sproul, *Acts* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 314–17.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 316.

we would not exist. According to Paul, then, there is a concurrence of God to every creaturely action.

Admittedly, the natural mind is often tempted to deny this truth in order to absolve God of the guilt of sin. However, as Stephen Charnock pointed out, to make the actions of creatures independent of God is to turn creatures into sovereign beings.⁴⁶ He thus proposed a helpful solution: “We cannot imagine the concurrence of God to the good actions of men since the fall, without granting a concurrence of God to evil actions; because there is no action so purely good but hath a mixture of evil in it” (cf. Eccl 7:20).⁴⁷ In other words, even from the pious works of earthly creatures one finds that God concurs to every action under the sun, including the evil. Even the saints’ best works, after all, are polluted with sin. As nothing can exist without Him, then, so nothing can operate independently from Him.⁴⁸

But how does God remain untainted by sin? Charnock calls attention to the important distinction between “the substance of an act” and “the sinfulness of that act.” No act in regard to its substance is evil—that is, God’s law forbids no corporeal action considered in itself. Instead, the morality of an action is rooted not in its substance, but in its object, circumstances, and the constitution of mind in the one performing the act.⁴⁹ For instance, to form words by the motion of one’s tongue is in itself a good thing.⁵⁰ However, to form words to curse God is evil—not due to the movement of the tongue, but due to the disposition of the mind.⁵¹ “The action,” then, “is not the sinfulness, nor the sinfulness the action ... sinfulness is a deformity that cleaves to an action.”⁵² The tumor is not the brain, nor the brain the tumor. The tumor attaches itself to the brain to cause it harm, but it is of an altogether different substance. This makes moral evil merely parasitic on what is good—that is, the goodness of the being of a person.⁵³

This simple distinction allows one to draw a number of important affirmations. For one, we affirm that God directs every action of the creature, whether good or evil (as this passage teaches), without implying in any way that He has a hand in sin. Moreover, we affirm that God cannot acquire any new states of being from His creatures, for His creatures are subordinate to Him with regard to life, movement,

⁴⁶ Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 2 vols. in 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 2:157.

⁴⁷ Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 2:157. The English theologian Theophilus Gale (1628–1678) made a similar argument in his *The Court of the Gentiles*, 4 parts, *Part IV of Reformed Philisophie* (London: for John Hill at the Black Lyon in Fleet-street, and Samuel Tidmarsh at the King’s-Head in Cornhill, 1678). Gale drew a distinction between *modally* sinful actions and *intrinsically* sinful actions. Modally sinful actions are the good actions of pious people, which are unintentionally mixed with sin and evil. Intrinsically evil actions, on the other hand, are those that are intended for evil, so that they are in themselves irreparably evil. Cf. Paul Helm, *Human Nature from Calvin to Edwards* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2018), 130.

⁴⁸ Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 2:156.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:157.

⁵⁰ Similarly, Gale explained that the body is morally indifferent until utilized to further the wicked intentions of the mind. Cf. Gale, *Court of the Gentiles*, IV.iii.5. Cited in Helm, *Human Nature*, 128.

⁵¹ Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 2:157–58. Summarizing Gale’s similar explanation, Helm writes, “Taking up a knife and stabbing is not in itself an evil act, but it becomes evil when employed in an attack upon a neighbor” (*Human Nature*, 130).

⁵² Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 2:158.

⁵³ Helm, *Human Nature*, 128; cf. Gale, *Court of the Gentiles*, IV.iii.5.

and existence. Therefore, whatever actions creatures undertake are always preceded by a Divine action. “We love,” writes the apostle, “because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19). Succinctly, Acts 17:28 demonstrates that God is always active in His being, moving all things without being moved by anything.

Romans 11:36

ὅτι ἐξ αὐτοῦ καὶ δι’ αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτὸν τὰ πάντα
αὐτῷ ἢ δόξα εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας, ἀμήν.

For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.

Having seen the reality of Israel’s future salvation, and thus the vindication of God’s perfect righteousness, beginning in v. 33 of Romans 11 Paul sounds a hymn exalting the inscrutable nature of God’s ways, as well as His aseity and meticulous sovereignty.⁵⁴ The three-strophe doxology includes three rhetorical questions implying three negative answers. The positive counterparts to each question allude to God’s preeminence and independence.⁵⁵ “Who has known the mind of the Lord?” (v. 34a) testifies both to the incalculable depth of His knowledge and the paltriness of human understanding. “Who became His counselor?” (v. 34b) suggests that God alone, independent of any human erudition, “devised the plan of which providence is the execution.”⁵⁶ And, “Who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to him again?” (v. 35) reminds us that God is in no way indebted to the creature. As Paul had made clear throughout his book, man is depraved and corrupt; but even if he were perfect, “he could [still] bring nothing to God by which to procure His favour, because as soon as man begins his existence, he is already by the very law of creation so bound to his Maker that he has nothing of his own.”⁵⁷ Before this all-Sovereign One, then, the only appropriate response of the creature is to bend its knees in reverence and adoration.

In the following sentence, Paul sums up the purpose of all creaturely existence: ὅτι ἐξ αὐτοῦ καὶ δι’ αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτὸν τὰ πάντα (“For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things”).⁵⁸ In other words, as Lloyd-Jones put it, “It is all of God

⁵⁴ Douglas Moo writes, “This expression of praise falls into three strophes: v. 33, containing three exclamations about God’s wise plan; vv. 34–35, featuring three rhetorical questions that emphasize human inability to understand God’s ways; and v. 36, containing a declaration about the ultimacy of God that calls forth a final doxology.” Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 740.

⁵⁵ John Murray, “The Epistle to the Romans,” 2 vols in 1, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968), 2:107.

⁵⁶ Murray, *Romans*, 2:107.

⁵⁷ John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. Ross Mackenzie (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), 261.

⁵⁸ The direct allusion to the Trinity that some have found here—ἐξ αὐτοῦ referring to the Father, δι’ αὐτοῦ to the Son, and εἰς αὐτὸν to the Spirit—lacks support (though there may be an indirect hint to it). Nowhere else in Scripture is the Spirit singled out as the Divine Person to whom are all things. These ascriptions are rather predicated of God as the Godhead. On the other hand, τὰ πάντα (“all things”) does

— in thought, in concept, in execution.”⁵⁹ A. W. Pink, on the other hand, pointed out that the first clause signified that “His will is the origin of all existence;” the second, that “He is the Creator and Controller of all;” and the third, that “all things promote His glory in their final end.”⁶⁰ Whatever happens in creation, then, happens according to the Divine will (that is, the will of decree). Consequently, we must affirm that no created thing can precede the will of God—which is the Divine essence. According to Paul’s assertion, then, we are to understand God’s will as the final cause of “all things.”⁶¹

A key objection to this notion is that even the reason of the will’s operation is a cause.⁶² If one were to remove that cause in order to establish the fact that God’s will is uncaused, that would seem to suggest that God acts irrationally. The solution lies, however, in that God wills everything by a simple and eternal act. The end and the means are thus joined together so that the willing of an end cannot be said to be the cause of the willing of the means to achieve that end. In other words, as the Scholastics would put it, God does not will this because He wills that. Rather, He wills this to be because of that.⁶³ Therefore, God determines and executes His plans without any decrease in His liveliness and dynamism.

The only appropriate response to such marvelous truths is to give glory to God. And Paul does that precisely: αὐτῷ ἡ δόξα εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας, ἀμήν (“to Him be the glory forever. Amen”), thereby unveiling the purpose of Romans: that God may be glorified.⁶⁴ Concerning this last sentence, Calvin stressed the need to heed its context, as Paul’s emphasis must not be lost on the reader. God is here claiming for Himself absolute authority, and declaring that “nothing beyond His glory is to be sought in the state of mankind and of the whole world.”⁶⁵ Because He is both the Source of life and the Sustainer of life, He is consequently the End of life.

Defining God as *Actus Purus*

The term “actuality” is used to describe “that which is real, existent, perfect or complete action or operation.”⁶⁶ The term “Potency,” on the other hand, “refers to the possible, to essence (as distinct from existence), to the imperfect and the

not seem to refer merely to everything concerning salvation, but to all reality in both the physical and the spiritual realms. Cf. Murray, *Romans*, 2:107. Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 429.

⁵⁹ D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: An Exposition of Chapter 11 To God’s Glory* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2005), 288.

⁶⁰ A. W. Pink, *The Sovereignty of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 108.

⁶¹ So Turretin writes, “As the will of God is the cause of all things, so it can have no cause of itself. It is as certain that there can be no cause of the will of God out of himself, as it is that nothing can be prior to him. For if his will has a cause, there is something which preceded it.” Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:231.

⁶² The argument is found in Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947), Ia.19.5, 106–107.

⁶³ *Ibid.* Another way to phrase this would be to say, “God wills this on account of that, but not on account of that, wills this.” Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:231.

⁶⁴ Cf. Thomas R. Schreiner, “Romans,” 2nd edition, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018), 620.

⁶⁵ Calvin, *Epistles*, 261.

⁶⁶ Muller, *Dictionary*, 20.

incomplete, and therefore to the faculty that can perform an action or operation.”⁶⁷ Actuality cannot therefore be defined apart from potentiality, unless God, who is *actus purus*, be the subject.

Perhaps the most well-known explanation of pure actuality comes from the pen of Thomas Aquinas.⁶⁸ In his famous five ways for proving God’s existence, Thomas established that whatever is in motion needs to have been actualized by something prior to it, because only that which is in act can cause other things to reach actualization. Though passive potency is often chronologically prior to actuality, then, properly speaking, actuality precedes potency. Now to be sure, nothing can move or actualize itself. To say that a thing can be both mover and moved, in the same respect and in the same way, would involve a plain contradiction.⁶⁹ Therefore, without a first mover who is Himself unmoved, there would be no subsequent movers. This first mover is thus from Himself. He is pure act without mixture of any potency. He is being through essence,⁷⁰ the underived Creator of all things, the absolutely first being, whom we call God.

With this in mind, theologians throughout history have concluded that God is, in the words of Owen, “always actually in being, existence, and intent operation.”⁷¹ That is to say, in Him there is no real distinction between a faculty and its operation. Conversely, a creature endowed with operative faculties, like intellect and will, is in a sense *in actu* simply by being what it is, regardless of whether its faculties are in operation; this is the condition of primary actualization (*in actu primo*).⁷² On the other hand, “The condition of the being in the actual exercise of its faculties is the condition of secondary actualization” (*actu secundo*).⁷³ In God, however, this distinction is not real, but merely formal or rational.

Therefore, because the Scripture is—to borrow the words of Herman Bavinck—“anthropomorphic through and through,”⁷⁴ it distinguishes between the Divine will, knowledge, or love, and the exercise of these faculties. It is important to keep in mind, however, that since God is *actus purus*, His will is nothing but Him willing, His knowledge nothing but Him knowing, His love nothing but Him loving, and His life nothing but Him living. Therefore, He is in the most proper sense of the term, “the living God” (Deut 5:26; Ps 42:2; Isa 37:17; Dan 4:34; Matt 16:16; Acts 14:15); “the fountain of life” (Ps 36:9; cf. John 5:26); “the fountain of living waters” (Jer 2:13; cf. John 4:10).

⁶⁷ Muller, *Dictionary*, 20.

⁶⁸ *ST*, Ia.2.3, p. 13. Cf. Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, 2:83–84; Voetius, “God’s Single, Absolutely Simple Essence,” 13–14.

⁶⁹ As an example, Thomas writes that what is actually hot cannot also be potentially hot, though it may be in fact potentially cold. This means that it is impossible that a thing could be both mover and moved in the same respect and in the same way or, i.e., that it should move itself (*ST*, Ia.2.3, 13).

⁷⁰ Cf. Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, 2:84.

⁷¹ Owen, *Works*, 12:71.

⁷² Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*, 150.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:95.

Contemporary critics, nonetheless, say that if God is truly an unmoved mover, He can only be “rigid dead substance,” wholly inactive and immobile.⁷⁵ As James Dolezal explains, however, “the very opposite is the case. The God of classical theism is not unmoved because He lacks actuality and dynamism, but because He is *pure* unbounded act and dynamism and thus cannot be moved to some additional state of actuality, power, or liveliness.”⁷⁶ Similarly, Muller writes, “Immutability does not indicate inactivity or unrelatedness, but the fulfillment of being.”⁷⁷ God is therefore, as Charnock put it, “nothing but vigor and act.”⁷⁸ Life is in Him “originally, radically, therefore eternally,” and He has by His nature “that life which others have by his grant” (cf. 1 Tim 6:16).⁷⁹

Summary from Textual Analysis

The argument for pure actuality is nothing more than the argument for God as the only One who truly possesses life, the One who does all things entirely from Himself. Reason confirms this since God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived, and potentiality implies imperfection. But more importantly, our study of Exodus 3:14; Acts 17:28; and Romans 11:36 demonstrates that the doctrine of pure actuality stands on a robust exegetical foundation. In other words, pure actuality is deducible from Scripture by good and necessary consequence.

Exodus 3:14 stresses the fact that God is eternal and immutable in His essence, and that while creatures have derived being, He is Being *par excellence* whose essence and existence differ not from one another, but are perfectly identical. Thus, for God to be holy, or faithful, or righteous, is for God to be. Acts 17:28, on the other hand, shows that God is not only the source of every creature's life, but in His perfection He is also the One who actively sustains all things and providentially moves all things without being polluted by sin. Lastly, Romans 11:36 also points to the perfect sovereignty and primacy of God. He is ever active in the world, bringing all things to their intended end for the glory of His own name.

⁷⁵ Isaak A. Dorner, *Divine Immutability: A Critical Reconsideration*, trans. Robert R. Williams and Claude Welch (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 137; Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, trans. G.W. Bromiley et al. (London: T&T Clark, 2009), II/1, 492–94.

⁷⁶ James E. Dolezal, *All That Is in God*, 17n13. Emphasis in the original. Dolezal is responding to the charge of mutualistic theists who, along with process theists and open theists, argue that in order for God to have “real relationships” with His people, He must somehow be mutable. For instance, Bruce Ware writes that God “may *literally change* in emotional disposition and *become angry* over increasing moral evil and flagrant disobedience, or he may show mercy in relation to repentance or urgent prayer. And, this may occur in historical interaction with his human creation even though he knows, from eternity past, precisely what would occur and what his response would be” (*God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000], 92. Emphasis added.). As this study would suggest, Ware has failed to recognize the absolute actuality of God; therefore, he denies His absolute immutability: “Scripture does not lead us to think of God as unchangeable in every respect (absolute immutability)” (73). Cf. Dolezal's *All That Is in God* for refutation of Ware's views.

⁷⁷ Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*, 24.

⁷⁸ Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:289.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

The Implications of the Doctrine of Pure Actuality

Having noted the exegetical validity of pure actuality, it would only be proper to illustrate its impact upon the formulation of other doctrines. God's absolute actuality is in fact pertinent both to theology proper and to soteriology. Therefore, in this section, I will demonstrate how some recent theological discussions on eternity and immutability can be resolved merely by the assumption that God cannot but always be all that He is, namely, a pure act of life. On the other hand, some brief comments regarding the doctrine of predestination will help demonstrate its relevance to soteriology.

Divine Immutability

In his *Treatise of Divinity*, the puritan lay theologian Edward Leigh systematized the five ways in which a reasonable creature may be changed:

1. In respect of existence, if it exist sometimes and sometimes not.
2. In respect of place, if it be moved from one place to another.
3. In respect of accidents, if it be changed in quantity or quality.
4. In respect of the knowledge of the understanding, as if it now think that to be true, which before it judged to be false.
5. In respect of the purpose of will, if it now decree to do something, which before it decreed not to do.⁸⁰

Christians throughout history have affirmed that God cannot be changed in any of these ways. Augustine, for one, saw immutability as a necessary corollary of God's self-existence as revealed in Exodus 3:14. He wrote, "That which is said to 'be,' and not only said to be, but truly 'is,' is changeless: it abides forever, it knows no change, no element of decay, it neither advances, for it is perfect, nor goes back, for it is eternal."⁸¹ Elsewhere he argued that if God were not immutable, He would not be God.⁸² In fact, he even described his enmity against God prior to conversion in terms of his rejection of Divine immutability: "Yet I preferred to think you mutable rather than hold that I was not what you are."⁸³

However, it is not uncommon for contemporary theologians to reject immutability as traditionally defined in the church. For example, T. F. Torrance asserted, "God is always Father, not always Creator."⁸⁴ He explained, "While God was always Father and was Father independently of what he has created, as Creator he acted in a way that he had not done before, in bringing about absolutely new events—this means that the creation of the world out of nothing is something new even for God. God was always Father, but he *became* Creator."⁸⁵ Thus, for Torrance

⁸⁰ Edward Leigh, *A Treatise of Divinity* (London, 1646), II.v, 44–45. Cited in Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:315.

⁸¹ Augustine, *Ten Homilies on the First Epistle General of St. John*, in *Augustine: Later Works*, vol. 8, trans. John Burnaby (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955), 289.

⁸² Augustine, *On Grace and Free Will*, 2:6.

⁸³ Augustine, *Confessions*, IV.xiv.(26), 68.

⁸⁴ T.F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being, Three Persons* (London: T&T Clark, 1996), 207–9, 241.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* Emphasis added.

(according to the aforementioned list by Leigh), God has changed by acquiring a new quality, a state of being as Creator. In this regard, God has thus undergone a transition from inactive potency to act. He has moved from “potential Creator” to “actual Creator.”

If God is to be seen as eternally and immutably in act, as this paper has shown, Torrance's idea must be rejected. Instead, believers ought to start from the premise that God cannot but have always been Creator. This is not to say, however, that creation is as immutable and eternal as God. For that reason, the distinction is made between the effective principle in creation (*principium agenda*), which is the divine essence itself, and the produced effect (*effectum productum*), namely creation.⁸⁶

There is a change in the *effectum productum*, as creation moves from nonexistence to existence, but there is no change in the *principium agenda*, God, since He eternally and unchangingly wills to produce creation by a simple act.⁸⁷ The change in this case is not in God, but outside of Him.⁸⁸ Muller thus writes, “The *potentia Dei* does not by its operation add anything to God, but only brings about new relations *ad extra* as it operates to actualize the finite order.”⁸⁹ In other words, God wills changes without any changes in His design.⁹⁰ As Turretin said, “It is one thing to grant a cause on the part of the act of willing, another on the part of the thing willed.”⁹¹ Scripture can thus refer to the Lord Christ as “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Rev 13:8; KJV). While everything about, around, and outside of God changes, then, He remains the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb 13:8).

Divine Eternality

Pure actuality also helps shed light into recent discussions about God's eternity. Some contemporary writers have rejected the classical atemporalist view on the basis that, to use Garrett J. DeWeese's words, “it cannot make sense of God's causal activity in the actual temporal order.”⁹² Hence, Jurgen Moltmann writes, “Without a pre-existing timeline on which to place the beginning of creation, creation would have been co-eternal with God and would have appeared to be a necessary counterpart to God.”⁹³ Hoping to do away with a view of Divine eternity that would

⁸⁶ Muller, *Dictionary*, 148.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Bavinck provides the following helpful summary: “The light remains the same even though it breaks up into different colors (Augustine). Fire does not change whether it warms us, illumines us, or consumes us (Moises Maimonides). And grain remains grain even though, depending on the stage in which it comes to us, we call it seed, or food, or fruit (Basil)” (*Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:158).

⁸⁹ Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:317.

⁹⁰ Augustine, *Confessions*, l.iv. (4), 5.

⁹¹ Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:231. Cited in Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:317.

⁹² Garrett J. DeWeese, *God and the Nature of Time* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 159.

⁹³ Jurgen Moltmann, *God and Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*, trans. Margareth Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 83–86, 116–17.

result in the positing of an eternal creation, Moltmann thus opts for a view of God whereby He undergoes successions in His life.⁹⁴

However, the undergoing of succession entails the kind of motion that God as the unmoved mover cannot undergo, as that would involve a transition from inactive potency to actuality. Turretin explained, “He is not always the same from whom almost every moment something anteriorly is removed and by whom posteriorly something is added. . . . The succession and flow of the parts of duration (which exist successively) necessarily involve a certain species of motion (which cannot be applied to God).”⁹⁵ In other words, if God were to undergo successions in His life, He would be ever-changing.

To combat that idea, theologians draw a distinction between the actuality of God, and the “egressions” or “breaking forths” of that actuality to bring diverse effects at various times.⁹⁶ This is what Augustine referred to when he pointed out that the Father’s speech at Jesus’ baptism was determined from eternity by God’s will, but “made temporal” in the time-space continuum.⁹⁷ God is therefore like an architect who from eternity holds a blueprint of the form of what He intends to build, and then affects His work over time. In these egressions, God is not transitioning from passive potency to actuality, but is rather directing His essence to the execution of His *ad extra* works.⁹⁸ Once more, the change is outside, about, and around God, but not in Him. While God is pure actuality, His creation stands, in relation to Him, *in potentia*. This makes creation entirely dependent upon God to reach actualization.

The Doctrine of Predestination

As it is widely known, the doctrine of predestination stands as one of the chief tenets of the Reformed faith. One of its principal articles, moreover, is the belief that one ought to look no further than God’s will as the ultimate cause for either the election or the reprobation of men;⁹⁹ for, as Paul wrote, “He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires” (Rom 9:18).¹⁰⁰ This is precisely the point against which Arminianism reacts so strongly.

⁹⁴ DeWeese also rejects the classical atemporalist position, opting for a “relatively timeless” or “omnitemporal” view of God. This allows him both to reject and endorse some of the arguments for timelessness. A direct critique of his position is beyond the scope of this paper. Cf. “Atemporal, Sempiternal, or Omnitemporal: God’s Temporal Mode of Being,” in *God and Time: Essays on the Divine Nature*, ed. Gregory E. Ganssle and David M. Woodruff (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002), 49–61.

⁹⁵ Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:202.

⁹⁶ Steven J. Duby, “Divine Action and the Meaning of Eternity,” 96.

⁹⁷ Augustine, *The Confessions, Book XI*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Maria Boulding, in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (New York: New City Press, 1997), XI.6.8–8.10, 289–93.

⁹⁸ Duby, “Divine Action and the Meaning of Eternity,” 96.

⁹⁹ Peter Sammons, “The Decree of Reprobation and Man’s Responsibility: The Role of God’s Use of Secondary Causality,” Ph.D. diss. (The Master’s Seminary, 2017), 118.

¹⁰⁰ In this regard, Calvin famously stated, “Therefore, if we cannot assign any reason for His bestowing mercy on His people, but just that it so pleases Him, neither can we have any reason for His reprobating others but His will. When God is said to visit mercy or harden whom He will, men are reminded that they are not to see for any cause beyond His will.” John Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the*

In their first article of *affirmation*, the followers of Jacob Arminius sought to redefine the doctrine of predestination as indicating that God has eternally determined to save “those who ... shall believe on his Son Jesus, and shall persevere in this faith and obedience of faith ... and on the other hand, to leave the incorrigible and unbelieving in sin and under wrath.”¹⁰¹ In other words, something outside of God—namely man’s faith, obedience, and perseverance, or else his incorrigibility and unbelief—moves Him either to elect or reprobate men.

Pink thus explained, “Perverters of this truth [predestination] invariably seek to find some cause *outside* God’s own will, which *moves* Him to bestow salvation on sinners.”¹⁰² In doing so, they undermine the perfection and all-sufficiency of God, for they make Him liable to change, and to have His own counsels “disturbed,” in the words of van Mastricht, “subjugated to a master, as it were.”¹⁰³ Nevertheless, because of God’s pure actuality, nothing in creation can be greater or prior to His will, which is always in act and never in potency. After all, whatever is *in potentia* is also caused, and therefore dependent upon its cause to reach actualization.

The will of God cannot thus be said to be dependent upon any external causes, whether instrumental, impulsive, or final.¹⁰⁴ This is why Jonathan Edwards wrote that our language concerning God’s decree is ultimately improper, though no “more improper than all our other ways of speaking about God.”¹⁰⁵ The doctrine of predestination, nevertheless, must be defined under the assumption that all the decrees of God are harmonious.¹⁰⁶ And, as this study has shown, they are harmonious precisely because they entail one simple and eternal act, which is identical with the divine essence.

Conclusion

In closing, this paper has demonstrated that the concept of pure actuality is not a fruitless mental exercise, nor a mere philosophical speculation. Rather, pure actuality is deducible from Scripture by good and necessary consequence. It helps the church understand and articulate the perfection and primacy of God over creation. To say that God is *actus purus* is to say that, properly speaking, life belongs to Him alone. It is to suggest that He is always on the move, and no event in human history has been, is, or ever will be outside of His absolute control.

Christian Religion, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 2:947.

¹⁰¹ Gerald Lewis Bray, *Documents of the English Reformation 1526–1701* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1994), 453–54.

¹⁰² A. W. Pink, *The Sovereignty of God*, 58. Emphasis in the original. To be sure, Pink also grounded the decree of reprobation upon God’s will. He writes, “[God] fits the non-elect unto destruction by His fore-ordaining decrees. Should it be asked *why* God does this, the answer must be, To promote his own glory.” *Ibid.*, 96–97.

¹⁰³ Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, 2:462.

¹⁰⁴ Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:468–69; T. Aquinas, *ST*, Ia.19.5, 106–107.

¹⁰⁵ Jonathan Edwards, “Concerning the Divine Decrees in General, and Election in Particular,” in *Remarks on Important Theological Controversies, The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Edward Hickman (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2017), 2:527.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

Granted, this Divine action is not always perceptible to creatures. The psalmist thus cried, “Arouse Yourself, why do You sleep, O Lord?” (Ps 44:23). The book of Habakkuk, however, reminds us that God is always at work, regardless of whether we can perceive His hand.¹⁰⁷ That is because He is *actus purus*.

The doctrine of pure actuality, therefore, helps clarify many theological issues. It furnishes the theologian with an indispensable tool for his arduous labor in the Lord’s vineyard; namely, the conceptual framework to presuppose that whatever else God might be, He is self-sufficient, sovereign, from Himself, and the absolutely first being. On the other hand, it is precisely because God is pure act that the joys of heaven will always wax but never wane, that the saints’ bliss in heaven will remain fervent forever without ever abating. Charnock summarized this truth so beautifully that it would only be fitting to quote him at large in closing:

When the glory of the Lord shall rise upon you, it shall be so far from ever setting, that after millions of years are expired, as numerous as the sands on the sea-shore, the sun, in the light of whose countenance you shall live, shall be as bright as at the first appearance; he will be so far from ceasing to flow, that he will flow as strong, as full, as at the first communication of himself in glory to the creature. God, therefore, as sitting upon his throne of grace, and acting according to his covenant, is like a jasper-stone, which is of a green color, a color always vigorous and flourishing; a pure act of life, sparkling new and fresh rays of life and light to the creature, flourishing with a perpetual spring, and contenting the most capacious desire; forming your interest, pleasure, and satisfaction; with an infinite variety, without any change or succession; he will have variety to increase delights, and eternity to perpetuate them; this will be the fruit of the enjoyment of an infinite and eternal God; he is not a cistern, but a fountain, wherein water is always living, and never putrefies.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Duby, “Divine Action and the Meaning of Eternity,” 91.

¹⁰⁸ Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:299.