

## **Autonomy, Self-sufficiency & the Gospel**

By **[Paul David Tripp](#)**

### **Our Sovereign Fantasy**

Like children, we all buy into a fundamental and very tempting delusion. Our weakness in this area is what gave an opening to the serpent in the Garden, and by it that same enemy still seeks to prey upon us today. There are two helpful ways of expressing and thinking about this delusion, although in practice these two forms are so closely related as to produce what is essentially a single fantasy.

The first and primary form of this delusion is autonomy. To be truly autonomous is to be independent, self-determining, and self-ruling. To possess autonomy is to have the right to do with your time and resources whatever you will. It means you can set your own rules and chart your own course, that you're in charge of your own life and nobody has the authority to tell you what to do.

It doesn't take much reflection to see how irrational and even absurd this notion is. Imagine if all the drivers in Philadelphia, where I live, began to drive as if they actually thought they were autonomous. Imagine the chaos and carnage that would ensue as the desires of one driver collided head-on with the desires of another driver, throughout the city!

Autonomy is a delusion that seduces all of us. Every time I treat my wife, children, or friends in a way I shouldn't treat them, in order to advance my own purpose, I'm operating out of the delusion of autonomy. Every time I take for myself glory that belongs to God, I'm claiming autonomy. Every time I willingly step over one of God's boundaries with a word, a thought, a choice, or an action, I'm acting as if my life belongs to me. Autonomy is a dangerous fantasy that at various times and in various ways deceives us all.

Another way to think about this same basic delusion is in terms of self-sufficiency. To be self-sufficient is to have everything you need within yourself to be what you were designed to be, and to do what you were designed to do.

To assume we're self-sufficient is no more rational than to assume we're autonomous. Obviously, a newborn child is the opposite of self-sufficient; while young children and teens clearly have their own limitations. But what about a mature, accomplished adult? What about you? Can you be self-sufficient?

Here's a test. Consider all the things you've done in the last twenty-four hours that required the assistance or contributions of others. Did you sleep indoors? Travel in a vehicle? Use electricity? Wear clothing you didn't make? Read? Eat food you didn't kill or grow? Get water from a faucet? Would any of that have been possible without the involvement of countless other people?

We were designed to live in worshipful dependence upon God and in humble, interdependent community with other people. Self-sufficiency may be a nonsensical delusion, but it's a powerfully seductive and dangerous one. Yet every day we act as if we're far more independent than we actually are. Every time you're too proud to ask for help, you buy into the fantasy of your self-sufficiency. Every time you reject someone who's trying to confront you with a wrong, you're believing the lie of your self-sufficiency. Every time you act as if you know more than you actually know, you accept the delusion of your self-sufficiency.

## **The Confrontation of Nature**

God designed this world in such a way that it serves as a constant reminder of his presence, his character, and his glory. Even as creation reminds us of these divine attributes, it does something else. It confronts our delusions of autonomy and self-sufficiency. The doctrine of creation reveals the delusion of autonomy for the foolishness it is. Think about the logic here. If there is a Creator and you are his creature, the work of his hands, then there's no such thing as autonomy.

I am a painter by avocation. When, after months of work, I finally complete a painting, who does that painting belong to? The answer is easy and obvious. It belongs to me because I created it. Does the beauty or sophistication of the thing created change who owns it? No. If somehow my next painting were judged by every art critic in the world to be the single best painting in history, it would still be mine, and I could still do with it whatever I pleased. In the same way, we belong to God, however amazingly well-constructed we are or imagine ourselves to be.

You cannot embrace both the doctrine of creation and the illusion of personal autonomy. The first cancels out the second. The Bible begins by declaring that the entire physical world (including humans) is the product of God's creative artistry. It follows from this that we're owned by him. Therefore, he alone has the right to tell us how we should participate in the existence that is his creation.

The doctrine of creation also exposes the lie of self-sufficiency. You can plant the healthiest seeds available, but if God doesn't send the rain your plants will die. You're dependent on God for your very life and breath. If he would withdraw his hand, this orderly world would explode into chaos. Look how a drought or a flood can bring a region to its knees. Look at all the examples of how the goods of one part of the world are desperately needed by another part of the world. The more

you consider the interdependent operation of the various elements of creation, the clearer it is that no aspect of God's creation is truly self-sufficient, including you. Especially you.

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