

# THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled. (2 Corinthians 10:3-6)

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## A Biblical Theodicy

by W. Gary Grampton\*

Ronald Nash has written that “the most serious challenge to theism was, is, and will continue to be the problem of evil.”<sup>1</sup> Warren believes that “it is likely the case that no charge has been made with a greater frequency or with more telling force against theism of Judeo-Christian [Biblical] tradition” than the complication of the existence of evil.<sup>2</sup> And David E. Trueblood has boldly maintained that the obstacle of evil and suffering in the world is “evidence for the atheist.”<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, the Biblical writers themselves address the issue of God and evil. The prophet Habakkuk complained, “You [God] are of purer eyes than to behold evil, and cannot look on wickedness. Why do You look on those who deal treacherously, and hold Your tongue when the wicked devours” (1:13)? And Gideon asked, “O my lord, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this [hardship] happened to us” (Judges 6:13)?

If, according to the Bible, God, who is omnipotent and benevolent, has eternally decreed all that ever comes to pass, and if He sovereignly and providentially controls all things in His created universe, how is He not the author of evil? How

can evil exist in the world? How do we justify the actions of God in causing evil, suffering, and pain? This is the question of “theodicy.” The word, which supposedly was coined by the German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716), is derived from two Greek words (*theos*, God, and *dike*, justice), and has to do with the justification of the goodness and righteousness of God in the face of the evil in the world.

As we will see, however, the problem of evil is not the compelling argument it is made out to be. In fact, as Gordon Clark has said, “whereas various other views disintegrate at this point, the system known as Calvinism and expressed in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* offers a satisfactory and completely logical answer.”<sup>4</sup> The answer, as we will see, lies in the Christian’s epistemological starting point: the Word of God.

Throughout the centuries there have been numerous quasi-Christian attempts to deal with this issue. Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of the Church of Christ, Scientist, simply denied that evil exists; that is, evil is illusory. More recently E. S. Brightman and Rabbi Harold Kushner opt for a finite god. Their god is limited in power or intelligence; hence, he cannot be blamed for evil in the world.

<sup>1</sup> *Faith and Reason* (Zondervan, 1988), 177.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas B. Warren, *Have Atheists Proved There is No God?* (Gospel Advocate Co., 1972), vii.

<sup>3</sup> *Philosophy of Religion* (Harper and Row Publishers, 1957), 231.

<sup>4</sup> *God and Evil* (The Trinity Foundation, 1996), 7.

Zoroastrianism and Manicheanism, on the other hand, explicitly posit an ultimate dualism in the universe. Good and evil have existed both co-eternally and independently, in the form of finite deities. Neither has yet destroyed the other. This accounts for the mixture of good and evil in our world. Leibniz rationalistically contended that God was morally bound to create "the best of all possible worlds." Since there is evil in the world, God must have seen that this was the best of all possible worlds he might have created.

These theories, of course, fall far short of a Biblical theodicy. The Bible makes it very clear that evil is not illusory. Sin is real; it brought about the Fall of man and the curse of God upon the whole cosmos.<sup>5</sup> Neither is God to be viewed as a less than almighty and all-knowing deity. He is the *ex nihilo* Creator of the universe. Moreover, the fact that God is the Creator and Sustainer of all things rules out any form of dualism.<sup>6</sup> God brooks no competition.

Leibniz is also in error. He speaks of God's moral responsibility to create the best out of a number of possible worlds, each of which is more or less good. Leibniz has things in reverse. God did not choose this world because it is best; rather, it is best because God chose it. God's choices are not determined by anything or anyone outside himself. Calvin clearly understood this principle when he wrote: "For God's will is so much the highest rule of righteousness that whatever He wills, by the very fact that He wills it, must be considered righteous. When, therefore, one asks why God has

so willed you are seeking something greater and higher than God's will, which cannot be found."<sup>7</sup>

Likewise, Leibniz's view also tends to eliminate man's responsibility for sin by representing sin as little more than a misfortune that has befallen him. Again, the Bible is very clear that man is responsible for his sin. In David's prayer of repentance, for example, in *Psalms* 51, he puts the blame, not on God, nor his mother, nor on Adam, all of which are links in the chain leading to his sinful actions. Rather, David places the blame squarely upon the sinner: himself.

Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo, also pondered the nature of evil. In his *City of God*, and elsewhere, he maintained that since God has created all things "good" (*Genesis* 1:31), evil cannot have an independent existence. Evil is the absence of good, as darkness is the absence of light. Evil, then, is the absence of good; it is not the positive presence of something. This being the case, said Augustine, evil cannot be the *efficient* cause of sin; it is a *deficient* cause in the creature. Evil, being the absence of good, or the presence of a lesser good, is the result of the creature's turning away from the commands of God to a lesser good: the will of the creature. Herein is the essence of evil: It is the creature, not God, who is the creator of sin. But this does not give us a solution either. As Clark wrote, "Deficient causes, if there are such things, do not explain why a good God does not abolish sin and guarantee that men always choose the highest good."<sup>8</sup>

Arminianism, as a quasi-Christian system, also fails to give us a solution. Arminian theologians attribute the origin of evil to the free will of man, rather than the will of God, positing a dualism of sorts. In his freedom, Adam chose to sin, apart from God's sovereign will. Adam had a "liberty of indifference" to the will of God. God "merely

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<sup>5</sup> Even if evil were illusory (which it is not), the illusions would exist and have to be accounted for as evil illusions.

<sup>6</sup> In actuality, the philosophic system called dualism is absurd. If there were two co-eternal and co-equal deities, we could not say that one was good and one evil. That is, without a superior standard to determine what is good and evil, good and evil cannot be predicated of anything. But if there is such a superior standard (that is, something above the two deities), then there is no ultimate dualism.

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<sup>7</sup> *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Westminster, 1960), III:23:2.

<sup>8</sup> *God and Evil*, 9.

permitted" man to sin. The idea, however, of God's "permitting" man to sin does not solve the problem. Clark explained: "Somehow the idea of God's permitting evil without decreeing it seems to absolve God from the charge that He is the 'author' of sin, but one must be careful, both with respect to the logic of the argument and to the full Scriptural data. God 'permitted' Satan to afflict Job; but since Satan could not have done so without God's approval, the idea of permission hardly exonerates God. Is perfect holiness any more compatible with approving or permitting Satanic evil? If God could have prevented, not only Job's trials, but all the other sins and temptations to which mankind is subject—if He foresaw them and decided to let them occur—is He less reprehensible [on this view] than if He positively decreed them? If a man could save a baby from a burning house, but decided to 'permit' the baby to burn, who would dare say that he was morally perfect in so deciding?"<sup>9</sup>

Such a non-Christian view of permission and free will cannot coexist with omnipotence. Neither is the Arminian view of free will compatible with God's omniscience, because omniscience renders the future certain. If God foreknows all things, then of necessity they will come to pass; otherwise, they could not be "foreknown." God foreknew, even foreordained, the crucifixion of His Son by the hands of sinful men. The godless men who carried out the act are responsible for their sin (*Acts* 2:22-23; 4:27-28). Could they have done differently? Could Judas Iscariot not have betrayed Jesus Christ? To ask the questions is to answer them.

Christian theology does not deny that Adam (and all men after him, for that matter) had a "free will" in the sense of "free moral agency." Men are not rocks or machines. All men think and choose in this sense of the term; otherwise, they could not act. Men choose to do what they want to think and to do; in fact, they could do no other than choose.

What Christian theology does deny is that man has the "freedom of indifference." His ability to choose is always governed by factors: his own intellections, habits, and so forth. All his choices are determined by the eternal decrees of God.

This is not only true with regard to post-Fall man, it was also true of Adam prior to *Genesis* 3. The major difference, and it is major, is that post-Fall man, who still maintains his moral agency, has lost that which Adam originally possessed: the ability to choose what God requires. Fallen man, in his state of total depravity, always chooses to do that which he desires, but his sinful mind in rebellion against God, dictates that he always chooses evil (*Romans* 3:9-18; 8:7-8; *Ephesians* 4:17-19). The ability to choose good is only restored through regeneration.

Man, then, is never indifferent in his willing to do anything. God has determined all things that will ever come to pass. God's sovereignty does not undermine but rather establishes the responsibility of man. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* (3:1; 5:2, 4), correctly states that: "God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established. Although, in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first cause, all things come to pass immutably and infallibly; yet, by the same providence, He orders them to fall out according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently. The almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness of God, so far manifest themselves in His providence, that it extends itself even to the first Fall, and all other sins of angels and men, and that not by a bare permission, but such as has joined with it a most wise and powerful bounding, and otherwise ordering and governing of them, in a manifold dispensation, to His own holy ends; yet so as the sinfulness thereof proceeds only from the creature,

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<sup>9</sup> Gordon H. Clark, *First Corinthians* (The Trinity Foundation, 1975, 1991), 156-157.

and not from God; who, being most holy and righteous, neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin.”

God, says the *Confession*, is the sovereign first cause of all things, many of which occur through the free acts of man. Man is free from the control of molecules in his brain, but not from the decrees of God. The end that is decreed by God must never be separated from the means that He has also decreed, as second causes. God, wrote Clark, “does not arrange things or control history apart from second causes.... God does not decree [the end] apart from the means. He decrees that the end shall be accomplished by means of the means.”<sup>10</sup>

This is the reason, according to the *Confession*, that God is not to be considered “the author or approver of sin.” God is the sovereign first cause of sin, but He is not the author of sin. Only creatures can commit and do commit sin. This view taught by the *Westminster Confession* is the Calvinistic concept of determinism. The word *determinism* often carries with it an evil connotation, but this should not be the case. The word *determinism* expresses a very Biblical and high view of God, and it gives us the only plausible theodicy. God determines or decrees every event of history and every action of all his creatures, including men.

Moreover, that which God decrees is right simply because God decrees it; God can never err. God, says the Scripture, answers to no one: “He does not give an accounting of any of His words” (*Job* 33:13). He is the lawgiver (*Isaiah* 33:22; *James* 4:12); man is under the law. God is accountable to no one; He is *ex lex* (“above the law”), whereas man is *sub lego* (“under the law”). The Ten Commandments are binding on man, not God. The only precondition for responsibility is a lawgiver—in this case, God. Thus, man is necessarily responsible for his sin because God holds him responsible; whatever God

does is by definition just; and God is completely absolved of the accusation that He is the author of sin.

The determinism expressed in the statements of the *Westminster Confession* is not the same thing as fatalism or behaviorism. In fatalism, god, or the gods, or the Fates, determine some if not all outcomes, apparently apart from means. In behaviorism, the actions of men are determined, not by God, but by chemicals in their brains and muscles.

Someone will object, Is not murder sin and contrary to the will of God? Then how can it be that God wills it? The answer is found in *Deuteronomy* 29:29: “The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.” Here Moses distinguishes between God’s decretive will (“secret things”) and His preceptive will (“those things which are revealed”). The decretive will (God’s decrees) determines what must happen; the preceptive will (God’s commands) is the law which men are obliged to obey. The decretive will is largely hidden in the mind of God; it is absolute and determined by Him alone; it is not for man to know unless God reveals it. The preceptive will, on the other hand, is wholly revealed in Scripture. It is that will of God for man by which he is to live. Hence, it is for us and our children to know and to obey. The word *will* is ambiguous. It would be better to speak of God’s commands and his decrees. Man is held accountable for his disobedience to God’s commands, not God’s decrees. Man cannot disobey God’s decrees, for God is sovereign. In the example used earlier, God from all eternity decreed Christ’s crucifixion, yet when it was carried out by the hands of sinful men, it was contrary to the moral law, that is, God’s commands.

Standing on the “rock foundation” of the Word of God as our axiomatic starting point (*Matthew* 7:24-25), we have an answer to the problem of evil. God,

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<sup>10</sup> Gordon H. Clark, *What Do Presbyterians Believe?* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1956, 1965), 38.

who is altogether holy and can do no wrong, sovereignly decrees evil things to take place for his own good purposes (*Isaiah* 45:7). Just because He has decreed it, his action is right. As Jerome Zanchius wrote: "The will of God is so the cause of all things, as to be, itself without cause, for nothing can be the cause of that which is the cause of everything. Hence we find every matter resolved ultimately into the mere sovereign pleasure of God. God has no other motive for what He does than *ipsa voluntas*, His mere will, which will itself is so far from being unrighteous that it is justice itself."<sup>11</sup>

Sin and evil therefore exist for good reasons: God has decreed them as part of His eternal plan, and they work not only for His own glory, but also for the good of his people. With this Biblical premise in mind, it is easy to answer anti-theists, such as David Hume, who argue that the pervasiveness of evil in the world militates against the existence of the Christian God. Hume, for example, argues as follows:

1. A benevolent deity will prevent [all] evil from occurring.
2. An omniscient, omnipotent deity is able to prevent [all] evil.
3. Evil exists in the world.
4. Therefore, either God is not benevolent, or He is not omniscient or [not] omnipotent.<sup>12</sup>

One problem with Hume's argument is his starting point. His first premise is false. Assuming, for the sake of argument, that Hume can coherently define *good*, *evil*, and *benevolent*, it does not follow that a benevolent deity will prevent all evil from occurring. Hume assumes that a benevolent deity is benevolent toward all his creatures, but Scripture

explicitly denies that premise. All things work together for good, not for all God's creatures, but only for those who are called according to his purpose.

Solving the problem of evil is a matter of adopting the correct starting point. With the Bible as our axiomatic starting point, the existence of evil is not a significant problem at all. In fact, the existence of evil is far more problematic in the unbeliever's worldview. Without a coherent standard of right and wrong, evil and good, how can one even define *evil*? The problem of evil cannot be coherently formulated on non-Christian grounds. And if Christian grounds are assumed in order to pose the problem, Christian grounds, that is, the Scriptures, explain evil's purpose in the world. "All things work together for good to those who love God and are called...."

Finally, a Biblical theodicy maintains, as the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (3:5; 5:1) says, that all that God decrees and providentially brings to pass are "all to the praise of His glorious grace... [It is] to His own glory." Robert Reymond correctly states that "the consentient view of all Scripture is that God's supralapsarian purpose in creating the world is that He would be glorified (*Isaiah* 43:7, 21; *Ephesians* 1:6-14) through the glorification of His Son, as the 'first-born among many brothers' (*Romans* 8:29), and the Lord of His church (*Philippians* 2:11; *Colossians* 1:18). Creation's *raison d'être* then is to serve the redemptive ends of God."<sup>13</sup>

Hence, it is logically consistent that the Fall of mankind had to occur if God is to be ultimately glorified through the glorification of His Son. That is, God's foreordination of the Fall, and His providentially bringing it to pass, are necessary. He

<sup>11</sup> Cited in Gordon H. Clark, *An Introduction to Christian Philosophy* (The Trinity Foundation, 1993), 113-114.

<sup>12</sup> David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, in God and Evil*, edited by Nelson Pike (Prentice Hall, 1964).

<sup>13</sup> Robert L. Reymond, *God and Man in Holy Scripture* (unpublished syllabus, Covenant Theological Seminary, 1990), 126, 127, 142.

has purposed it for His own glory. The apostle Paul speaks to this in *Romans* 5:12-19. There we read that Adam and Christ are federal heads of two covenantal arrangements. It is necessary to postulate that if Adam had successfully passed his probation in the Garden (that is, the covenant of works), he would have been confirmed by God in positive righteousness. He would have passed from the state of being *posse peccare* (possible to sin) to the state of *non posse peccare* (not possible to sin). Adam's righteousness, then, would have been imputed to all of his descendants (that is, the entire human race). And all mankind would have gratefully looked to him, not Christ, as Savior. For all eternity, God would then share His glory with His creature: Adam. Ironically, the obedience of Adam would have led to idolatry. Therefore, that alternative world is logically impossible. Only the actual world, in which the Fall of man occurred, is logically possible and redounds to the glory of God alone. Had Adam obeyed, Jesus Christ would have been denied His role as "the first-born among many brothers" and the Lord of His church. And the Father would not receive the glory for His work through the Son. It seems, then, that this supralapsarianism view of the purpose of creation is in agreement with a number of the Puritans who referred to the *Genesis* 3 event as "the fortunate Fall."

Not only is the only logically consistent universe one in which evil exists for God's purposes, but God's people will be far more blessed because of the incarnation and Christ than they could ever have been blessed by an obedient Adam.

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