

A Biblical Approach to Theodicy

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Introduction

We approach theodicy from two angles: the authority of Scripture and the need for contemporary relevance. These two approaches should not be set over against each other. They are to be held together. If we believe that Scripture is 'the living and abiding word of God' (1 Peter 1:23), this will influence the way in which we seek to attain contemporary relevance. If we are inclined to lightly set aside the Scriptures with a view to being relevant, our procedure carries with it the implied denial of the 'living and abiding' character of Scripture. If, on the other hand, we are firmly convinced that the Bible is 'the living and abiding word of God', we will not view the Bible as an obstacle to contemporary relevance. Rather, we will see this 'living and abiding word of God' as the foundation of relevance.

Normative Scripture and Apologetics

A real commitment to the normativity of Scripture does not require us to opt out of the apologetic task of presenting a reasonable faith to a sceptical and unbelieving world. It does, however, affect the way in which we will approach the problem of evil. We will not rest content with any suggestion of a dichotomy between a theoretical theodicy and a practical theodicy. A theodicy which is purely theoretical belongs to the scholar's ivory tower. The real test of a theodicy's value is practical: Does it help real people to cope with the problem of evil which they face in their own lives? The problem with the distinction between theoretical theodicy and practical theodicy is that it suggests that the problem of evil can be discussed theoretically without our being involved practically. No matter how much we may try to think about the problem of evil with detached objectivity, there remains the unsettling awareness that the problem is much more than a theoretical matter.

A theoretical theodicy concerns itself with the question of self-contradiction: Do we contradict ourselves when we 'assert... that there is an infinitely good God... an all-powerful Creator... and that there are evils in this universe'¹. While this is a crucial issue, we must not lose sight of the fact that the problem of evil is man's problem. Man faces the problem of evil existentially and practically, since man is evil. The problem of evil is a thoroughly existential problem which confronts man at the very centre of his being. The problem of evil confronts man by the very fact of who he is—man the sinner. The problem of evil is far more serious and comprehensive than the intellectual debate between theism and atheism tends to suggest. Whether or not one is involved in such intellectual debate, one must still face the problem by virtue of one's being a man. Regardless of one's leanings towards theism or atheism, one must still face the problem of evil, for it is a problem from which man cannot escape.

¹ A. Flew, *God and Philosophy*, p. 48.

Man's problem concerns not merely explaining evil but *overcoming* it. The problem of evil is no mere theoretical dispute. Man is 'engaged, intimately and personally, in... the *problem of sin's guilt*' (G. C. Berkouwer, *Sin*, p. 14). If we are to take seriously 'The Biblical A Priori'²—God is not the Author of man's sin—this will mean confessing our own involvement in evil. A biblical approach to the problem of evil affirms both the goodness of God and the sinfulness of man. If, in approaching the problem of evil biblically, we are to use the term 'theodicy' at all, we must be quite clear that the word 'theodicy' is being understood in a particular way. We must take care not to make an overestimation of man's reason, his capacity to fully 'justify the ways of God to men'. Where reason is given a central place, there is always the danger of seeking to justify man's actions to God. If our thinking is to be governed by the gospel proclaimed to us in Scripture, we must use 'not an autonomous reason but an obedient reason... reason in obedience to revelation'.³

Obedient Reason

An obedient reason seeks to 'take every thought captive to obey Christ' (2 Corinthians 10:5). This involves more than the use of our minds. It calls also for the obedience of our lives. In both our thinking and our living, we are constantly faced with the temptation of allowing ourselves to 'be squeezed into the mould of this world' (Romans 12:2). Generally speaking, 'the world' will be quite happy to allow us to continue speaking about 'God' so long as we don't take Him too seriously, so long as He is kept at a distance, so long as this 'God' doesn't present secularized man

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with a fundamental challenge to change his way of living. If, however, we are prepared to settle for the 'God' of natural theology, we are no longer speaking of the living God. This, however, is to remove God to the periphery of human existence, making the matter of His existence a matter of considerable indifference. Such a 'God' is rightly treated as a puzzle in an intellectual game. Obedient reason will not, however, rest content with reducing the living God of the Bible to a rather contentless concept. We cannot simply settle for an affirmative answer to the question, 'Does God exist?' without asking the further question, 'Who is God?'. When faced with a rather characterless Supreme Being, who might aptly be described as the 'unknown God' (cf. Acts 17:23), we must boldly proclaim the gospel of the God who has made Himself known.

An obedient reason will not proceed on the basis of arguments based on man's unaided reason. Arguments that leave us with the kind of vague God-concept expressed in the common statement, 'There must be something somewhere' must be clearly distinguished from the apostolic 'argu(ing)... *from the scriptures*' (Acts 17:2). When a man protests, 'I'm not an unbeliever' in an attempt to avoid being drawn more deeply into conversation concerning the gospel of Jesus Christ, we may rightly say that this vague God-concept has inoculated him against receiving the fuller and richer teaching of the Scriptures. His protest is an expression of a

² cf. G. C. Berkouwer, *Sin*, pp. 27-66.

³ D. G. Bloesch, *The Ground of Certainty: Tozoard an Evangelical Theology Of Revelation*, pp. 7-8.

proud unwillingness to receive instruction from the Scriptures and thus be led into a real knowledge of the living God. Although such a man has no 'God' but the 'unknown God', he speaks as though he was 'wise and understanding' (Matthew 11:25). Trying to give the impression that he 'knows it all', he refuses to become a 'babe' who comes to Jesus Christ and learns from Him (Matthew 11:25, 28-29). In the face of this kind of thing, obedient reason must, on the basis of the Scriptures, 'destroy arguments and every proud obstacle to the knowledge of God' (2 Corinthians 10:5). If we are over-impressed by a man's appeal to a vague God-concept, we are not doing him any service. If, on the other hand, we see through his superficiality and, as 'ambassadors for Christ', we proclaim to him 'the message of reconciliation and call him to 'be reconciled to God' (2 Corinthians 5:19-20), we are doing him a real service.

Reconciliation and Theodicy

The message of reconciliation must be at the heart of any biblical approach to theodicy. Man is not described in Scripture as essentially ignorant and in need of a series of arguments which, once he has grasped them, will enable him to say, 'Now, I know'. The basic biblical picture of man is one of man the sinner who stands in desperate need of reconciliation to the holy God. The God who meets man's need for reconciliation is not a 'God' who keeps His distance and keeps His silence. Rather, He is the God who has come near to us in Jesus Christ, the God who, in Scripture, has declared His love to us. If we are to speak of a 'biblical theodicy', the emphasis must be on the word 'biblical' if we are to avoid the impressions generally associated with the word 'theodicy': a 'God' who is remote rather than near through the incarnation, a God who remains distant rather than actively revealing Himself through the Scriptures. When we put the question 'Who is God?' to an exponent of natural theodicy, intent on 'justifying the ways of God to man', we are generally presented with an empty, abstract God-concept which says nothing of 'the great love of God ... revealed in the Son'.⁴ When, however, we address this question to the Scriptures, we receive warm testimony to the love of God: 'Who is a God like thee, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression...' (Micah 7:18). The God of Scripture is the God of our salvation. He is the God who 'delights in steadfast love', the God who has 'compassion upon us', the God who 'tread(s) our iniquities under foot', the God who 'cast(s) all our sins into the depths of the sea' (Micah 7:18-19).

If we are to think biblically about theodicy, Jesus Christ must be at the forefront of our attention. As we turn our attention to Jesus Christ, we discover that divine redemption is the foundation of a truly biblical 'theodicy'. In Jesus Christ, we discover that the usual method of theodicy is reversed. The justification of God by man is found in the justification of men by God. The gospel is the Christians 'theodicy'. The gospel provides the proper context for affirming that God is good in His dealings with sinful man. We make this affirmation of God's goodness to sinners not on the basis of an argument addressed to our minds. Our basis is the gospel which addresses the whole of our life, calling for the confession of our sins. We do not affirm our faith in the divine love for sinners on the basis of a theoretical argument. The foundation of our faith is a historical event—the Cross: 'while we were yet sinners Christ died for us' (Romans 5:8). The gospel may, then, be viewed as the 'Divine Theodicy', God's defence of Himself through His mighty work of

⁴ *Church Hymnary*, 3rd Edition No. 415.

salvation. This use of the term 'theodicy' is a complete reversal of every human theodicy in which we have man's defence of God through his reason. Focusing our attention on our Saviour Jesus Christ, we find ourselves compelled to ask not 'How can God permit evil in the world?' but 'How can God have such love for a sinner like me?'

Divine and human theodicies

In emphasizing the 'Divine Theodicy' is a complete reversal of every human theodicy, we observed that the justification of God by man is found in the justification of man by God. We may go on from here to note that, in Scripture, the doctrine of justification is characterized as justification by faith. In view of the repeated emphasis in Scripture on the necessity of faith for salvation, we must be wary of any tendency toward a theodicy built around the speculative notion of universal redemption. In reacting against universalism, however, we must take care not to lose sight of the true universality of the gospel. The gospel is addressed to all. The invitation to come to Jesus Christ is extended to all. The offer of salvation is proclaimed to all. The call to faith is preached to all. This is, nevertheless, a very different thing from the idea of universal redemption. G. C. Berkouwer

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makes this point well: 'this universality is nowhere made into an objective state of affairs . . . this universality of the gospel is like an arrow directed at a target, and no one is excluded, not even the worst of sinners'.⁵ Kerygmatic universality does not make the response of faith redundant. Rather, it calls for the response of faith from all. The gospel's call for faith must be stressed over against a doctrine of universal reconciliation in which the gospel becomes 'the positive announcement of an unassailable end, upon which the human decision of faith or unbelief has no bearing'.⁶

Universalism

The doctrine of universalism is often presented in the form of a 'purgatory' doctrine. William Barclay, who described himself as 'a convinced universalist'.⁷ defended his universalist position thus: 'God has eternity to work in... an eternity of persuasion and appeal until the hardest heart breaks down and the most stubborn sinner repents. As I see it, nothing less than a world is enough for the love of God' (p. 61). Critical of this 'purgatory' notion, S. H. Travis points out that it is 'quite different from Jesus' message of present salvation to be received or lost in immediate response to his preaching'.⁸ When faced with such speculative notions, it is important that we 'learn... not to go beyond what is written' (1 Corinthians 4:6) in Scripture.

Whatever the precise formulation of his doctrine, the universalist will emphasize that universalism offers hope and comfort to the bereaved. While this argument may hold a certain

⁵ *Divine Election*, p. 240.

⁶ G. C. Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ*, p. 411.

⁷ cf. *Testament of Faith*, pp. 58-61.

⁸ *I Believe in the Second Coming of Jesus*, p. 204.

emotional appeal for those who are frequently called upon to counsel the bereaved, we must be quite clear about this: this hope and comfort for the bereaved is only gained at the expense of seriously distorting the biblical teaching. Emphasizing that 'the biblical witness to the love of God... never announces it as... a static eschatological fact', and issuing the apt warning that 'it is extremely dangerous to think and talk about "the love of God" and what "follows" from it outside of the gospel', G. C. Berkouwer exhorts us to resist the 'persistent and almost irresistible inclination to go outside the proclamation of the gospel'.⁹ There is no universalist 'necessity'. There is 'only one "necessity"—the necessity that confronted Paul as he faced the future: "Necessity... is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" (1 Cor. 9:16)'.¹⁰

Preaching and the Problem of Evil

The faithful preaching of the gospel is really the most appropriate and most effective Christian response to the problem of evil. The gospel is God's own response to the problem of evil. If our preaching of the gospel is to be modelled on God's own response to sin, it must have a whole history behind it and a whole theology undergirding it. Christian theology and the history underlying it has always had its fair share of 'cultured despisers'. The history of divine redemption recorded in the Old Testament Scriptures is, for them, something of an embarrassment. The doctrines of incarnation and atonement meet with their scorn. Seeking an alternative to the living God of the Bible, they construct a theodicy based on a deistic notion of God. This approach, it is claimed, is more philosophical, more in line with reason. This type of theodicy is less convincing than its exponents would lead us to believe. Their 'God' has not involved Himself with the history of mankind. He has not taken upon Himself the full burden of human rebellion against Him. The question that keeps pressing itself upon a theodicy with no history of redemption, no incarnation, no atonement is this: Has such a 'God' taken the problem of evil seriously at all? No matter what the theological reductionists may say, we must say with Paul: 'I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith' (Romans 1:16).

If, in our preaching, we are to echo the concerns of the unashamed Apostle, we must be unashamed to preach the *saving power of God* and the *call for faith*. If we are to share the apostolic foundations for faith, our preaching must be grounded in 'the holy scriptures' (Romans 1:2). A biblical approach to theodicy must have an irreducible content which we dare not devalue for the sake of contemporary relevance. Where relevance becomes our major concern, we will end up with irrelevance because we have modified the Christian message so that it no longer treats the problem with the seriousness of a fully-orbed biblical faith. Emphasizing the inseparable connection between christology and theodicy, G. C. Berkouwer stresses that 'the abstract questions of theodicy fall away in the shadow of the event of the cross'.¹¹ At the cross, we find God's answer to the problem of evil. It is not a theoretical answer. It is the answer of His saving power. Nobody who has come to appreciate God's response to evil in the cross of Jesus Christ can ever think of God in terms of 'an "uninvolved heavenly holiness" ' (p. 254). No matter what the modern equivalent of 'Jews demanding signs and Greeks seeking wisdom' may

⁹ *The Return of Christ*, pp. 412, 422-123.

¹⁰ *The Return of Christ*, p. 423.

¹¹ *A Half Century of Theology*, p. 255.

say, we will continue to 'preach Christ crucified' in the firm conviction that it still pleases God 'through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe' (1 Corinthians 1:21-23).

It is important that the connection between christology and theodicy finds expression in preaching which refuses to separate the saving power of God from the call to faith. Critical of 'Barth's christological theodicy', which is 'closely related to his universalistic doctrine of election', G. C. Berkouwer points out that this view could lead to a proclamation lacking in urgency:

'The Scriptures... do not know of such an objectivized notion of the world in Christ. The gospel of redemption is proclaimed in the world as an appeal to faith. It is never a mere informing about a new state of affairs... It must not be objectivized into a proclamation that all is now right with the world'.¹²

By emphasizing that the gospel of redemption is proclaimed as an appeal to faith, Berkouwer insists that an experiential knowledge of God's salvation provides the proper context for the Christian response to the problem of evil:

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'Having received forgiveness, man cannot possibly speak of God and the world in abstract categories. Theodicy has usually run around in the shallowness of the human endeavor to find an explanation where only justification and forgiveness can provide a perspective'.¹³

A theodicy which treats the problem of evil with genuine seriousness will concern itself with bringing man into a real experience of the divine grace and mercy by which sin is forgiven and the sinner is restored to fellowship with God.

The Problem of Evil and the Experience of Salvation

We must emphasize the importance of an experiential knowledge of God's salvation. We must, however, take care not to give the impression that the Christian response to the problem of evil is experience-based in the sense that nothing can be said to those who have not had the experience except, 'You'll understand once you've had the experience'. The gospel comes to us in our experience and is to be worked out in our experience. We must, however, never lose sight of the fact that the gospel is not derived from our experience. It comes to us from outside of our experience, from above, as a Word from the Lord. A right emphasis on experience will keep us from becoming content with an abstract theodicy which does little or nothing to lead us into an everdeepening and truly satisfying experience of the grace of God. On the other hand, we must be wary of an unhealthy emphasis on experience which focuses more attention on the experience than it does upon the Saviour. We must seek the right balance if there is to be genuine growth in 'the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ' (2 Peter 3:18). Where there is

¹² *The Providence of God*, p. 265.

¹³ *The Providence of God*, p. 260, emphasis original.

such spiritual growth, the problem of evil is really being dealt with by God in the most important place of all—the spiritual battlefield of our lives.

A right emphasis on a real experience of God's salvation is most important if discussions concerning the problem of evil are to adequately stress the existential character of the problem. The deepest question in theodicy is not merely a theoretical inquiring about God's existence. It is a question which arises out of the anxiety of the human heart—Does God care? A real gospel theodicy is an affirmation of the goodness of God to sinful man. The attempt to discredit God by blaming him for the world's evil is not overcome by vague statements such as 'There's more good in the world than evil' but by the knowledge that comes through faith in the God who 'did not spare his Son but gave him up for us all' (Romans 8:32). This emphasis on knowledge of God through faith in Christ is essential if theodicy is not to get bogged down in shallow superficialities. As we seek to take seriously modern man's questions concerning the problem of evil, we must take care not to be drawn into a superficial distinction between an 'answering theology' and a 'kerygmatic theology'. The kerygma is God's answer to the problem of evil. We dare not imagine that we can lay aside our commitment to the gospel and discuss the problem of evil with philosophical detachment. We need not deny the need to face the issues honestly, allowing our faith to be tested as we do so. Nonetheless, we must speak as Christians, as those who have found Christ to be the answer to our own personal problem of evil, as those who approach the problem of evil with the kind of moral and spiritual seriousness which is intent on winning others for Christ.

This unashamed apologetic intent must be maintained in view of the evangelistic character of God's response to evil. He is not content to provide man with a theoretical argument designed to answer the question, 'Does God exist?'. He calls for our total response to His mighty act of salvation by which He answered—once and for all—man's questions regarding the problem of evil by disarming the principalities and powers and making a public example of them, triumphing over them in Christ's death on the cross (Colossians 2:15). This way of seeking to lead people in the entirety of their existence to faith in Christ is not a popular way. Modern man, with his preference for questions rather than answers, would prefer to go round in circles, looking at the problem from all sorts of different angles, rather than take seriously the possibility that there is a God-given answer to the problem of evil. It may be easier to go with the mood of the day. We will, however, be more faithful to our Christian commitment if we never lose sight of the fact that God—the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ—is the living God. He is not merely one option among others, which we can take or leave as we choose. He is not merely a concept with which we can do what we like, picking and choosing those aspects of His character which we like and dismissing the rest. While we dare not compromise our Christian faith, we should not hide behind it, refusing to take seriously the questions people are asking. If we compromise our faith, we will have no Gospel answer to give. If, on the other hand, we do not listen to people's questions, our testimony, though sound, may be sadly missing the point.

Concluding Applications

In the market-place of ideas, we must frankly acknowledge that no theodicy, whether biblical or deistic, is particularly popular. The world of today seems to be characterized by complacency

rather than anxiety. The question raised by life in modern society would appear to be not so much 'Does God care enough to take man seriously?' but 'Does man care enough to take God seriously?'. When complacent modern man hears of the problem of evil, he tends to shrug his shoulders apathetically—'So what. I'm getting on well enough'. Many people dismiss the problem of evil as a problem for Christianity with its doctrine of God. They meet a Christian and confront him with the statement, 'You mean to say you believe in God. Look at the state of the world'. They leave the Christian and complacently set about acquiring a comfortable lifestyle with little further thought about the state of the world. If such people, however they were to define their own personal outlook, were to think a bit more deeply, they might be forced to

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realize that the problem of evil is not merely a problem to cast in the face of a poor unsuspecting Christian in order to dampen his evangelistic zeal. The humanist who tries to establish a moral code must face the problem of evil. The moment he wishes the world or his own life was morally better than it is, he confronts the problem of evil. Similarly, the existentialist who seeks to lead people into authentic living faces the problem of evil the moment he accepts the idea that one way of life is morally more authentic than another way of living. In short, the problem of evil is a problem for everyone who refuses to accept a nihilistic outlook on life. Ultimately, this means it is a problem for everyone for there is no-one who lives as though nothing matters. However vague and undefined, everybody lives according to some kind of ideal. Many people do not speak in terms of the problem of evil yet they face precisely this problem the moment they recognize a gap between their own ideals (whether or not they are viewed as God-given) and their own failure to live up to those ideals. It is in this situation that the critic of religion, scornful of any and every kind of theodicy, must be forced to face the question of the validity of making any kind of moral judgements on the basis of an atheistic world-view. Perhaps, as the critic faces this issue, he may begin to see that the problem of morality for atheism may well be a greater problem than the problem of evil for religion. As such reflection creates an openness for religion, we must take care not simply to replace a vague distaste for religion with a vague preference for a religious outlook—'Belief in God makes most sense of the universe'. Rather, we must point clearly to the Lord Jesus Christ as God's Answer to the problem of evil.

As we involve ourselves with the world's questionings, there will undoubtedly be times when our faith is under severe threat. In such times as these, we must recall the words of Peter when Jesus asked the twelve: 'Do you also wish to go away?'. Peter said, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life' (John 6:67-68). The words of Jesus are the words which make sense of our painful experience when nothing seems to make sense. The question, 'Does God care?' is a question that many people rarely think about when things are going their way. When things go wrong, the question arises from their hearts, 'Does God care?'. A. J. Gossip, in the first sermon following his wife's death, said, 'You people in the sunshine may believe the faith, but we in the shadow must believe it. We have nothing else'. This is not to suggest that faith is our crutch. It is, however, to emphasize the reality of the living God, the God who meets us in our need. When we are most conscious of our need, the Lord is most powerfully present to meet us in our need. Whether we are speaking to the comfortable or the distressed, the educated

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or the uneducated, we must ask God that our words will truly be an echo of Jesus' words, words of eternal life.

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