HOW CAN GOD BE JUST AND ORDAIN EVIL?

by John A. Battle

The Bible says God will punish sinners who disobey his laws. All Christians assume this. Paul does as he asks a rhetorical question in Romans 3:6, "Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world?" That fact is certain! But the issue that brought forth this strong response is more troubling. Is God fair to judge the world, if he has made the world like it is?

> But if our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? (I am using a human argument.) Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world? Someone might argue, "If my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?" (Rom 3:5-7 NIV)

Paul is upholding God's sovereignty and almighty plan. God has ordained all things, including our fall, our sin, and our salvation. He has done all this to glorify himself, to "bring out his righteousness more clearly," to "enhance his truthfulness and increase his glory." Yet his opponent complains that such a plan punishes the sinner unfairly. How can the sinner be responsible for his sin, if God has ordained it for his own glory? Paul rejects such logic, yet the question still plagues many today.

And a related, perhaps more profound, question strikes the believer: How could God in his goodness and power create and uphold a world where there is sin, evil, and suffering? Does not he then share in the responsibility and guilt? The attempt to answer this question has been given the name theodicy, which derives from two Greek words *theos* (God) and *dike* (justice). The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines this word as "the vindication of the divine attributes, especially justice and holiness, in respect to the existence of evil; a writing, doctrine, or theory intended to 'justify the ways of God to men.'"

Recently C. S. Rood has written of this question, pointing to the novels *The Plague* by Albert Camus and *The Brothers Karamazov* by Feodor Dostoyevsky as containing "perhaps the most powerful polemic against belief in a loving God in the whole of literature."[1] After dealing with some modern attempts to reconcile a loving God with suffering and evil in the world, Rood takes refuge in the mystery of the mind of God: "Our only resort is to a God who is far beyond all human thought and imagining. . . . A God who can be fully comprehended is no God, and we cannot expect to be able to understand his mind as if we were greater than he."[2] As we approach this question, we must do so with humility and care. Charles Hodge has warned of the two great errors into which we might fall--denying the reality of evil on one hand, or denying the power of God to prevent evil on the other.[3] He suggests a third alternative: "to rest satisfied with the simple statements of the Bible."[4]

Augustine's Solution

Before his conversion Augustine of Hippo struggled with this problem. He believed that, since evil could not come from God, evil must exist as a separate, eternal substance apart from God.[5]

> I said, "Who made me? Did not my God, who is not only good, but goodness itself? Whence then came I to will evil and nill good? . . . Who set this in me, and engrafted into me this plant of bitterness, seeing I was wholly formed by my most sweet God? If the devil were the author, whence is that same devil? And if he also, by his own perverse will, of a good angel became a devil, whence, again, came in him that evil will whereby he became a devil, seeing the whole nature of angels was made by that most good Creator?" By these thoughts I was again sunk down and choked.[6]

Augustine found his answer when he came to the understanding that sin is not a substance with its own existence, but rather is only a perversion of a creature's will turned aside from God to lower things.[7] Thus, in a phrase often quoted--and misquoted--later, he could say, "whatsoever is, is good,"[8] and "Evil has no positive nature; but the loss of good has received the name 'evil.'"[9]

For Augustine the other side of the equation was God's total sovereignty. Thus even the devil and his demons are completely under God's control. Demons can do nothing "unless where they are permitted by the deep and secret providence of God, and then only so far as they are permitted"; God "delegates power" to the demons, to "give expression to their hostility to the city of God."[10] The sin arose in their own hearts, as they turned their attention and desire from the highest good, God, to a lesser good, themselves. They (and men as well) were good, but changeable. Augustine eloquently describes this difference between God and his creatures:

> We say that there is no unchangeable good but the one, true, blessed God; that the things which he made are indeed good because from him, yet mutable because made not out of him, but out of nothing.[11]

What caused the angels to sin at first? Augustine maintains that God cannot cause sin. What did cause it? There was no cause at all; their own will made their action bad; "nothing is the cause of the bad will."[12] He explains,

> I ask at once, what made the first will bad? For that is not the first which was itself corrupted by an evil will, but that is the first which was made evil by no other will. [If caused by a good will,] who is so left to himself as to say that a good will makes a will bad? For in this case a good will would be the cause of sin; a most absurd supposition.[13]

> Let no one therefore, look for an efficient case of the evil will; for it is not efficient, but deficient, as the will itself is not an effecting of something, but a defect. For defection from that which supremely is to that which has less of being, this is to begin to have an evil will.[14]

God allowed sin in order to show his attributes and thus glorify himself. God did not prevent angels from sinning, "deeming it to be more befitting his power and goodness to bring good out of evil than to prevent the evil from coming into existence."[15] Augustine viewed our fallen universe as thus more beautiful than it would be otherwise:

> As the beauty of a picture is increased by well-managed shadows, so, to the eye that has skill to discern it, the universe is beautified even by sinners, though, considered by themselves, their deformity is a sad blemish.[16]

For those who might be perplexed at this sovereign prerogative of God, Augustine would advise, "Where we are not so well able to perceive the wisdom of the Creator, we are very properly enjoined to believe it."[17]

As Charles Hodge points out,[18] Augustine's philosophical wrestlings with the problem of evil have had less of an impact on subsequent generations than have his biblical and theological arguments, as those employed in his debates with the Pelagians. Yet even in the above quotations, we can see his final resting in the wisdom and sovereign goodness of God.

Definitions of Aquinas

In his *Summa Theologica* the thirteenth century scholastic theologian Thomas Aquinas frequently dealt with this question. To a large extent he agreed with Augustine, and he formulated much more precisely the terminology used. He clearly distinguished between the created nature and action of creatures, which is good and caused by God, and the fault or sin of creatures, which arises in themselves only.[19] Here is an example of his approach, with an apt illustration of a limping man:

> These passages [Isa 45:5, 7; Amos 3:6] refer to the evil of penalty, not to the evil of fault. . . . The evil which consists in the defect of action is always caused by the defect of the agent. But in God there is no defect, but the highest perfection. . . . Hence, the evil which consists in defect of action, or which is caused by defect of the agent, is not reduced to God as to its cause. . . . But the evil which consists in the corruption of some things is reduced to God as the cause. And this appears as regards both natural things and voluntary things. . . . So God is the author of the evil which is penalty, but not of the evil which is fault. . . . Whatever there is of motion in the act of limping is caused by the moving power, whereas what is awry in it does not come from the moving power, but from the curvature of the leg. And, likewise, whatever there is of being and action in a bad action is reduced to God as the cause, whereas whatever defect is in it is not caused by God, but by the deficient secondary cause.[20]

Thomas distinguishes five types of will in God, which fall into two general categories: his antecedent will (his desire, revealed in his commands), and his consequent will (his absolute will, revealed in his providence). His antecedent will is only for good, while his consequent will includes the evil of penalty, but never the evil of fault.[21] God willed absolutely that he would

permit sin, yet the sin arose directly not from God's will, but the will of the creatures; God willed this in order to achieve a higher good.[22]

It is interesting to note that Aquinas agreed with Augustine that God predestined the saved and reprobated the lost for his own glory. This position would be considered staunchly Calvinistic today!

> But since the very act of free choice is traced to God as to a cause, it necessarily follows that everything happening from the exercise of free choice must be subject to divine providence. For human providence is included under the providence of God, as a particular under a universal cause. . . . God wills all men to be saved by his antecedent will, which is to will not absolutely but relatively . . . ; and not by his consequent will, which is to will absolutely. . . . God wills to manifest his goodness in men: in respect to those whom he predestines, by means of his mercy, in sparing them; and in respect of others, whom he reprobates, by means of his justice, in punishing them. This is the reason why God elects some and rejects others. . . . Yet why he chooses some for glory and reprobates others has no reason except the divine will. . . . God and nature and any other agent make what is best in the whole, but not what is best in every single part, except in order to the whole. . . . Hence many good things would be taken away if God permitted no evil to exist.[23]

Thus Aquinas agrees that it "is part of the infinite goodness of God, that he should allow evil to exist, and out of it produce good."[24]

Our Reformed Heritage

Martin Luther, John Calvin, and the other Reformers all stressed God's sovereignty, his absolute control over all events, including sinful and evil events. For this they were criticized by many, but they sought to keep theology biblical and God-centered. In a fine passage Calvin plead for a godly reserve in evaluating God's purposes:

> But we must so cherish moderation that we do not try to make God render account to us, but so reverence his secret judgments as to consider his will the truly just cause of all things. When dense clouds darken the sky, and a violent tempest arises, because a gloomy mist is cast over our eyes, thunder strikes our ears and all our senses are benumbed with fright, everything seems to us to be confused and mixed up; but all the while a constant quiet and serenity ever remain in heaven. So must we infer that, while the disturbances in the world deprive us of judgment, God out of the pure light of his justice and wisdom tempers and directs these very movements in the best-conceived order to a right end. And surely on this point it is sheer folly that many dare with greater license to call God's works to account, and to examine his secret plans, and to pass as rash a sentence on matters unknown as they would on the deeds of mortal men. For what is more absurd than to use this moderation toward our equals, that we prefer to suspend judgment rather than be charged with rashness; yet haughtily revile the hidden judgments of God, which we ought to hold in reverence?[25]

Some Protestants sought to "soften the blow" by making God's reasonings more clear to men. Such a one was John Milton, who wrote of the fall of Satan and of Adam and Eve, placing the blame squarely on their shoulders:

> . . . I made him just and right,
> Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall.
> Such I created all th'Eternal Powers
> And Spirits, both them who stood and them who failed;
> Freely they stood who stood, and fell who fell.
> Not free, what proof could they have giv'n sincere
> Of true allegiance, constant Faith or Love,
> Where only what they needs must do, appeared,
> Not what they would? What praise could they receive?
> What pleasure I from such obedience paid,
> When Will and Reason (Reason also is choice)
> Useless and vain, of freedom both despoiled,
> Made passive both, had served necessity,
> Not me. They therefore as to right belonged,
> So were created, nor can justly accuse
> Their maker, of their making, or their Fate;
> As if Predestination over-ruled
> Their will, disposed by absolute Decree
> Or high foreknowledge; they themselves decreed
> Their own revolt, not I: if I foreknew,
> Foreknowledge had no influence on their fault,
> Which had no less proved certain unforeknown.
> So without least impulse or shadow of Fate,
> Or aught by me immutable foreseen,
> They trespass, Authors to themselves in all
> Both what they judge and what they choose; for
> I formed them free, and free they must remain,
> Till they enthrall themselves: I else must change
> Their nature, and revoke the high Decree
> Unchangeable, Eternal, which ordained
> Their freedom, they themselves ordained their fall.[26]

Note the clauses "I made him just and right," "freely they stood who stood, and fell who fell," "they themselves decreed their own revolt, not I," "they themselves ordained their fall." It is clear from these statements, and from the entire epic, that Milton sought to satisfy our sense of justice and reconcile God's sovereignty and love with our sin and misery. He expressed this same desire in the beginning of the work:

> . . . What in me is dark
> Illumine, what is low raise and support;
> That to the height of this great Argument

I may assert Eternal Providence,
And justify the ways of God to men.[27]

This twin goal of maintaining God's sovereignty ("asserting eternal providence") and satisfying our human sense of justice ("justifying the ways of God to men") has not been easy. Some would say that Milton may have gone too far favoring the second goal. However, a careful reading of the section shows he agreed with Reformed teachings.

Writing at the same time as Milton was the Puritan pastor and teacher Stephen Charnock, who in his massive work on the attributes of God, demonstrated that "the goodness of God is not impaired by suffering sin to enter the world, and man to fall thereby."[28] God's goodness created Satan and Adam with free wills, the ability to worship and obey God freely and joyfully. This was a great gift, above anything received by the animals. Therefore, "as the unbelief of man doth not diminish the redeeming grace of God (Rom. 3:3), so neither doth the fall of man lessen the creating goodness of God." Charnock counseled his readers to try to see God's goodness in the greater good attained (Rom 11:32), or at least to admit their ignorance and wonder (Rom 11:33).

The Westminster Confession

Those of us in the Presbyterian tradition have a special heritage in the Westminster Confession of Faith, that great Puritan document of the seventeenth century. Unlike many of the more philosophical arguments of the church fathers, this Confession is thoroughly biblical, and avoids much of the metaphysical speculation found elsewhere. In three separate chapters the Confession clearly spells out God's relation to evil in this world. In Chapter 3, "Of God's Eternal Decree," we read,

God from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass:[a] yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin,[b] nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.[c][29]

This is an important point—that God ordains all things, yet is not the author of sin, nor does he violate the free will of his creatures, nor the effectiveness of means.

Especially explicit is Chapter 5, "Of Providence," which details God's relation to sin in his creation:

The almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness of God so far manifest themselves in his providence, that it extendeth itself even to the first fall, and all other sins of angels and men;[a] and that not by a bare permission,[b] but such as hath joined with it a most wise and powerful bounding,[c] and otherwise ordering, and governing of them, in a manifold dispensation, to his own holy ends;[d] yet so, as the sinfulness thereof proceedeth only from the creature, and not from God, who, being most holy and righteous, neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin.[e][30]

Notice that, while God rules over even sinful actions, "ordering and governing over" them, yet he does not approve or originate sin. He does not simply permit sin to arise; he "bounds" it, so that the sinner expresses his sin in the way God intends and to the ends he has designed. The Scripture passages cited by the Assembly divines give clear examples of God's governing over and pre-ordaining sinful events; these include Joseph's being sold by his brothers, David's numbering the Israelites, and especially the trial and crucifixion of Jesus. In each case sinners were responsible for their own sins, which arose in their own sinful hearts and were freely willed by them. Yet all those events were ordained of God in order to bring about his higher plan.

The third important passage in the Confession is in Chapter 6, "Of the Fall of Man, of Sin, and of the Punishment Thereof."

> Our first parents, being seduced by the subtilty and temptation of Satan, sinned, in eating the forbidden fruit.[a] This their sin, God was pleased, according to his wise and holy counsel, to permit, having purposed to order it to his own glory.[b][31]

Here the Assembly divines chose the word "permit" for the first sin of Adam and Eve. We should understand this permission in the light of the previous citation, as including God's powerful governing and bounding, and, as it says here, to the purpose of "his own glory."

Why Are We Here?

As in the past, so today many people are bothered by the idea that God cares more for his own glory than for his creatures' happiness. Modern theologians are seeking new solutions, often similar to those used in the past. In the current annual volume of *The Great Ideas Today* John Polkinghorne, a distinguished nuclear physicist, Anglican clergyman, and president of Queen's College, Cambridge, has contributed a significant article seeking to reconcile Christian theology with modern science.[32] Polkinghorne offers newly available evidence from the physical sciences that our present universe contains several basic laws which allow life to exist; the slightest fluctuation in these laws would have produced a universe hostile to all life. This is a remarkable evidence of design in the universe. Starting with this observation, Polkinghorne adapts his theology to the modern understanding of an evolutionary universe, and sees God's hand in the freedom not only of moral agents but of material forces. Moral and physical evil, in his opinion, are the inevitable by-products of this freedom:

> Theologically, an evolutionary universe can be understood as a creation which is allowed by its Creator to make itself. God is neither the Cosmic Tyrant, causing every event by direct fiat alone, nor the Indifferent Spectator, just watching it all happen. The God who is both loving and faithful has given to creation the twin gifts of a due regularity (necessity) and a due independence (chance). Cosmic history is not the execution of an inexorable divine blueprint, but the exploration of creaturely potentiality. This insight--that creation involves God allowing the created other to be truly itself--is a very important concept in much twentieth-century theology. It affords some understanding of the problem of evil and suffering, for a world allowed to be itself and to

make itself must necessarily be a world of blind alleys and ragged edges as well as fruitfulness and fulfillment. Exactly the same cellular biochemical processes which enable some cells to mutate and bring about new forms of life will also permit other cells to mutate and become cancerous. God does not bring about the act of a murder nor the incidence of a cancer, but both are allowed to be in a creation given the gift of being itself.[33]

This viewpoint, as Charles Hodge pointed out earlier, eases the difficulty by altering the traditional understanding of both evil and God's power to prevent it. Instead of attributing evil to God's judgment against the sin of our first parents, it sees it as a necessary part of a developing creation. It seeks to make us more comfortable with the existence of sin and evil, and to make God more acceptable to those don't like the more harsh (or robust) theology of Paul, Augustine, Aquinas, or Calvin.

Why do we experience sin and evil? Although God planned all these things, yet we cannot lay the blame on him. We sinned voluntarily; we desired to rebel. Bryan J. Leech put is well in his hymn "Kind and Merciful God":

Kind and merciful God, we've neglected your Word
    And the truth that would guide us aright;
We have lived in the shade of the dark we have made,
    When you willed us to walk in the light.

And why did God ordain this sin? In humility we must

rest satisfied with the simple statements of the Bible. The Scriptures teach, (1) That the glory of God is the end to which the promotion of holiness, and the production of happiness, and all other ends are subordinate. (2) That, therefore, the self-manifestation of God, the revelation of his infinite perfection, being the highest conceivable, or possible good, is the ultimate end of all his works in creation, providence, and redemption. (3) As sentient creatures are necessary for the manifestation of God's benevolence, so there could be no manifestation of his mercy without misery, or of his grace and justice, if there were no sin. . . . Sin, therefore, according to the Scriptures, is permitted, that the justice of God may be known in its punishment, and his grace in its forgiveness. And the universe, without the knowledge of these attributes, would be like the earth without the light of the sun.[34]

We need a perspective change. Christianity asserts that the highest good is not our happiness; it is not even our holiness; it is the manifestation of God's attributes.

The glory of God being the great end of all things, we are not obliged to assume that this is the best possible world for the production of happiness, or even for securing the greatest degree of holiness among rational creatures. It is wisely adapted for the end for which it was designed, namely, the manifestation of the manifold perfections of God. . . . It may, in conclusion, be safely asserted that a universe constructed for the purpose of

making God known, is a far better universe than one designed for the production of happiness.[35]

With our imperfect knowledge we need to rest in faith. Our God is sovereign, just, wise, loving, and perfect in all his ways. The words of A. A. Hodge provide a fitting conclusion to this subject:

> The apparent incongruousness of the facts, and hence the difficulty of the problem, we admit. But we have seen God because we have seen Christ, and we have learned to read all the course of providence in the light of the Cross. Since the baptism of Pentecost we have been convicted of sin and of a guilt we are utterly unable to gainsay or remove. We have been convinced that the finite can never measure the Infinite, and that self-convicted sinners can never judge the integrity of the All-holy. In the light of Calvary we have an impregnable assurance that the Father of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is unlimited in wisdom and in power, and that he can do no wrong. Bowing our heads in unquestioning submission to his sovereign rights, and with confidence in his absolute perfection, we exclaim, in the face of all apparent anomalies: "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? Or who hath been his counselor? Or who hath first given to him and it shall be recompensed to him again? For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen" (Rom 11:33-36).[36]

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[1] C. S. Rood, "Questions People Ask: 4. The Problem of Evil and Suffering," *The Expository Times* 107:2 (Nov. 1995) 35 n. 1.

[2] Ibid., p. 39.

[3] Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (1871; reprinted, London: James Clarke & Co. Ltd., 1960), I:430-35.

[4] Ibid., p. 435.

[5] Augustine, *Confessions*, 4:24; 5:20; 7:4. All quotations of Augustine, Aquinas, and Milton taken from the *Great Books of the Western World* (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1952); cf. a more recent confrontation of Christianity with Dualism in C. S. Lewis, "God and Evil," (1941; reprinted as Ch. 1 in *God in the Dock*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970), pp. 21-24.

[6] Ibid., 7:5.

[7] Ibid., 7:22.

[8] Ibid., 7:18.

[9] *City of God*, 11:9. Note Charles Hodge's criticism of this approach, *Systematic Theology*, 2:158-59.

[10] *City of God*, 7:25; 10:21.

[11] Ibid., 12:1; see also 14:13.

[12] Ibid., 12:6

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid., 12:7

[15] Ibid., 22:1.

[16] Ibid., 11:23.

[17] Ibid., 12:4.

[18] *Systematic Theology*, 2:157.

[19] *Summa Theologica*, 1:8:1; 1:19:9; 1:20:2; 1:49:2; 2/1:79:1, 2, 3; 2/1:80:1; 3:74:1.

[20] Ibid., 1:49:2.

[21] Ibid., 1:19:6, 9, 12; 1:23:4; 1:114:1; 2/1:79:2.

[22] Ibid., 1:8:1; 1:22:2; 1:48:2; 1:93:1

[23] Ibid., 1:22:2, 4, 5; 1:48:2.

[24] Ibid., 1:2:3.

[25] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*; ed. by John T. McNeill; trans. from 1559 Lat. ed. by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 1:211-12.

[26] John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 3:98-128.

[27] Ibid., 1:22-26.

[28] Stephen Charnock, *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God* (1853 ed.; reprinted Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1979), 2:231-32. All references to Charnock in this paragraph are from these pages.

[29] *WCF* 3:1; Scripture references cited by the writers of the Confession are (a) Eph 1:11; Rom 11:71; Heb 6:17; Rom 9:15, 18; (b) Jas 1:13, 17; 1 John 1:5; (c) Acts 2:23; Matt 17:12; Acts 4:27-28; John 19:11; Prov 16:33.

[30] *WCF* 5:4; cited Scripture proofs are (a) Rom 11:32-34; 2 Sam 24:1, cf. 1 Chr 21:1; 1 Kgs 22:22-23; 1 Chr 10:4, 13-14; 2 Sam 16:10; Acts 2:23; 4:27-28; (b) Acts 14:16; (c) Ps 76:10; 2 Kgs 19:28; (d) Gen 50:20; Isa 10:6-7, 12; (e) Jas 1:13-14, 17; 1 John 2:16; Ps 50:21.

[31] *WCF* 6:1; cited Scriptures are (a) Gen 3:13; 2 Cor 11:3; (b) Rom 11:32.

[32] John Polkinghorne, "The Modern Interaction of Science and Theology," in *The Great Ideas Today*: 1995 (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1995), pp. 34-54.

[33] Ibid., pp. 47-48.

[34] Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:435.

[35] Ibid., p. 436.

[36] A. A. Hodge, *Evangelical Theology* (1890; reprinted Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), pp. 37-38.