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A Multidimensional Perspective on God's Will and Evil

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Introduction and Statement of the Problem

The so-called “problem of evil” is one that has perplexed mankind for millennia. Atheists and agnostics refer to the existence of evil as sufficient proof that the God of the Bible does not exist.¹ For example, the “Epicurean paradox” or “Riddle of Epicurus” is a familiar version of the skeptic’s quest. Lactantius attributes this conundrum to Epicurus in *De Ira Dei*: “God,” he says, “either wishes to take away evils, and is unable; or He is able, and is unwilling; or He is neither willing nor able, or He is both willing and able.”

Expressed in another form:

1. If God were truly omnipotent, he would be able to prevent evil.
2. If God were truly omnibenevolent, he would prevent evil.
3. Evil exists.
4. Therefore, a truly omnipotent and omnibenevolent God does not exist.

Over the years I have encountered those skeptical of Christianity that, in one way or another, have followed this line of reasoning. I know of at least one individual who, in his rejection of the faith, began his departure due to what he believed was an irreconcilable contradiction in affirming the veracity of the Bible in light of the existence of evil.

The question of how a good and omnipotent God can coexist with suffering and evil is one that also perplexes Christians. Wellum observes:

The problem of evil, however, is not just an issue that non-Christians raise and which rightly requires a full-blown biblical-theological answer; it is also a problem for Christians, in at least two ways. First, it is a problem in regard to our daily lives, questions, and struggles, what has been labeled the emotional or religious problem of evil. Christians too, live in a fallen world ravaged by sin, and even though we may not question in exactly the same way as the non-Christian how God and evil can exist simultaneously, we often wrestle with the relationship of God's sovereignty to evil and wonder why specific evils happen to us and others. . . .

1. Ronald Nash writes, “every philosopher I know believes that the most serious challenge to theism, was, is, and will continue to be the problem of evil.” (*Faith and Reason*. Grand Rapids, MI, 1988), 177.

Second, the problem of evil is a problem for Christians in the sense that *within* Christian theology, given different conceptions of divine sovereignty, human freedom, and God's providential rule over the world, there is an ongoing debate as to which theological viewpoint is more biblical in its theologizing about the relationship of God and evil.²

This was the question that also perplexed Augustine early in his quest for the truth:

Side by side with his desire to discover where the truth lay and how best to arrive at it, was his need to find an answer to the problem of evil in the universe. This troubled him more than any other single question.³

John Frame clothes this dilemma in modern dress when he asks:

Why should the display of God's power and good name require the employment of that which is totally opposed to everything that God is? Cannot God display his power without contradicting His goodness? Cannot God display his name without making little babies suffer pain? How can a good God, through His wise foreordination, make someone to be evil even when God hates evil with all of his being?⁴

Within the limited confines of this paper I will attempt to give a brief overview of the problem of evil, while proposing that a multidimensional approach to understanding the biblical data offers the most satisfying solution.

Toward a Definition

What exactly is evil? How do we define it? We are generally more attuned to the question of suffering. After all, everyone suffers and therefore knows how to define what it means to suffer. But what about evil? R. C. Sproul attempts a definition when he writes:

Historically, evil has been defined in terms of privation (*privatio*) and negation (*negatio*), especially in the works of Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas. The point of such definitions is to define evil in terms of a lack of, or negation of, the good. We define sin, for example, as any want of conformity to, or transgression of, the law of God. Sin is characteristically defined in negative terms. We speak of sin as disobedience, lawlessness, immorality, unethical behavior, and the like. So that, above and beyond the problem of evil always stands the standard of good by which evil is determined to be evil. In this regard, evil is parasitic. It depends upon a host outside of itself for its very

2. Stephen J. Wellum, "God's Sovereignty Over Evil," in *Whomever He Wills: A Surprising Display of Sovereign Mercy*, Ed. Matthew Barrett and Thomas J. Nettles (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2012), 231–32.

3. G. R. Evans, *Augustine on Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 8.

4. John M. Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God: An Introduction* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1994), 152.

definition. Nothing can be said to be evil without the prior standard of the good. Nevertheless, as much as we speak of evil as a privation or negation of the good, we can't escape the power of its reality.⁵

John Frame, however, appears to balk at this Augustinian approach:

Whatever we may say about the relative distribution of good (i.e., being) throughout the universe, Scripture is clear that that distribution is in God's hands. God is as responsible for the lacks and privations (if we wish to call them that) as he is for the good being of the universe. God works all things after the counsel of his own will (Eph. 1:11), as Augustine later in his life came to recognize. This includes sins and evils (Gen. 50:20; Luke 22:22; Acts 2:23; 4:28; Rom. 9:1-29).⁶

However, in my mind one may still define evil as "a privation of good" while retaining a belief in God's sovereignty.⁷ John Calvin, following Augustine, wrote that, "There is nothing positive in sin and evil."⁸ Accordingly, the original rendition in French adds: "evil and sin are nothing in themselves but only a disorder or corruption of what ought to be."⁹

Therefore, I'm content at this point in my understanding to define evil as that which stands in contrast to, and is the privation of, the revealed holiness of the Bible's Triune God. Ontologically, evil can have no positive or efficient cause, but only a negative or deficient one.¹⁰

Different Forms of Evil

The nature of evil has been understood by theologians and philosophers according to different types.¹¹ For example, there is the *deductive problem of evil* whereby critics attempt to

5. Robert Charles Sproul, "The Problem of Pain," TableTalk, (June 2006).

6. Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God: An Introduction*, 156.

7. By *sovereignty* I mean that God is in complete control over all the happenings of the created order.

8. John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 169.

9. *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, 169, fn 2.

10. This is not to say that God does not use evil to achieve his purposes.

11. For an excellent overview see Ronald Nash, *Faith and Reason*, 177ff. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988).

demonstrate that Christianity is logically incompatible with the existence of evil. If this were true, Christianity would necessarily be proven false. Less ambitious is the *inductive problem of evil* which proposes that the existence of evil “likely” proves Christianity untrue. This is in keeping with the popular maxim, “I cannot believe in a good God when there is so much evil and suffering in the world.” *Moral evil* is that which arises from the actions of depraved humans. This includes sins of omission (things neglected) and commission (things done). On the other hand, *natural evil* is that which takes place within nature, such as the occurrence of hurricanes and earthquakes, those things outside of human control which primarily relate to the curse placed upon the world due to sin. And then there is *gratuitous evil*, that form of suffering that, as Trau defines it, “seems to exceed necessity, and any suffering which seems to serve no purpose at all.”¹² As one may suspect, these are not necessarily hard and fast categories.

Sin, Evil and Suffering

What is the relationship between suffering and evil? Further, what is the relationship between suffering, evil and sin? All suffering is one way or another related to sin and evil, for in a perfect, sinless world there would be no suffering.¹³

A personal example may be in order. On December 24, 2015 my fourteen year old daughter, Giana, and I left our home in search of a tree for Christmas. As we drove along a rural road in search of the tree farm, we were struck head-on by a drunk driver. We were both severely injured; Giana more so. In fact, she succumbed to her injuries six months later. The loss left her mother and me devastated. Did the crash involve sin, suffering and evil? Absolutely! The other

12. Cited in Nash, *Faith and Reason*, 209.

13. Even those who will suffer eternity in hell do so because of sin. This begs the question, “does hell, which by definition includes suffering, necessitate that the eternal state will be less than perfect?” No, because hell is the final and complete judgement of sin by God. As difficult as this is for us to comprehend, this is in keeping with his holiness (Deut. 32:4). However, questions like these also point to the fact that there are elements within these queries that are outside of man’s limited understanding (Deut. 29:29). In the end, we trust God with the assurance that his ways are always just and consonant with his holy nature (Gen. 18:25; Isa. 6:3; 55:8).

driver was sinning in operating his vehicle while intoxicated. Was God there? Absolutely! In fact, his sovereign control is such that I may confidently believe that Giana lived all the days that were ordained for her (Psalm 139:16; cf. 2 Tim. 4:7). Yet, God did not “make” this man drink alcohol until his BAC was nearly .25%. The driver made a sinful choice, one that took the life of a young girl. Even though this tragedy is woven in the tapestry of God’s perfect plan, the fault is always with the one who freely sins.

God Not the Author of Evil

That God may either use or ordain evil does not make him the author of it. Douglas Groothuis addresses this issue within the context of privation when he writes:

Moreover, evil is not metaphysically necessitated; in fact, evil is dependent on a prior and original goodness. . . . Evil is a lack or privation of goodness. It is not evil for a rock not to be able to see, since it is not in the nature or purpose of a rock to possess vision. But it is an evil for a human being to be blind, since seeing is part of the original purpose for human beings. Evil is dependent on goodness in a parasitic way. Evil is not a thing or a substance in and of itself, but the warping and twisting of an antecedent good, which results in a lack of proper goodness.

The upshot is that God is not the author of evil. He did not directly cause or create evil in the same way he created the universe. There are several biblical passages that claim God brought evil upon some person or group (Isaiah 45:7) but these do not mean God created something evil ex nihilo. On the contrary God brings judgment against evildoers by thwarting their plans and punishing them. Their own evil is the cause of God's actions. God is responding to the spoilage of his creation by bringing judgment.¹⁴

Groothuis alludes to an important point: when God is said to be a cause behind evil (or calamity) the context invariably includes judgement for sin. More on that later.

Therefore, we must not lose sight of the fact that nowhere in the Bible do we see God portrayed as the author of that which is evil. He is neither blamed for moral evil nor does he take pleasure in it. Evil is brought about through the free agency of fallen creatures. We must never come to a place where we think that we are not responsible for the evil that we do, or that God takes pleasure in such evil, or is to be blamed for it. The fault always lies with the creature, not the Creator (James 1:13-16).

14. Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 626–27.

Inadequate Solutions to the Problem

Throughout history, Christian thinkers have attempted to reconcile the coexistence of the omnipotent, omnibenevolent God of the Bible with suffering and evil. Many of these attempts fall short to one degree or another. For example, the most commonly cited solution comes under the heading of *free will*, the favorite of pew-sitter and pundit alike.¹⁵ This explanation proposes that evil is the result of the unencumbered free choices of rational creatures. God does not, *in any sense*, foreordain these free acts and therefore bears no responsibility for them. This defense sounds feasible at first blush. However, it does not conform to the totality of the biblical evidence. Individuals are, indeed, free moral agents in that they make choices. However, they do not possess the kind of liberty that's usually proposed by free-will theists. Rather, to put it in theological Latin terms, fallen humanity is *non posse non peccare*, that is, “not able not to sin.”

This is not to say that people cannot do good from a creaturely perspective; they are created in God's image and thus reflect his communicable attributes, albeit imperfectly (Gen. 1:26-28; cf. 3:14-4:14). However, operating out of their depraved estate, they can do nothing that is metaphysically good before a holy God (Gen. 6:5; Job 15:16; Psa. 14:1-3; Jer. 17:9; Matt. 15:19; John 10:26; Rom. 1:28ff.; 3:9ff.; Eph. 2:1-3). In that regard, moral creatures do not possess the power of contrary choice and will always act in keeping with their innate desires. The sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation made clear that the biblical position as it relates to man's will is one of bondage, not freedom.¹⁶

Furthermore, Scripture does commonly attribute the seemingly free actions of man to God's sovereign foreordination. As Frame explains:

Scripture does teach—in fact, it denies—free will in the sense that it is used by the free-will defense. From this view of freedom, man's free choices are not in any way foreordained or caused by God. But Scripture frequently speaks of God determining our

15. One of the most succinct expressions of the free-will defense within the Evangelical camp has been formulated by philosopher Alvin Plantinga in his book *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977).

16. See for example Martin Luther's readily available tome, *On the Bondage of the Will*.

free choices (see Gen. 50:20; Acts 2:23; 4:27; also 2 Sam. 24:1, referring specifically to evil choices; also Proverbs 16:9; Luke 24:45; John 6:44, 65; Acts 2:47; 11:18; 13:48; 16:14; Romans 8:28ff.; 9; Eph. 2:8-9; Phil. 1:29). And certainly the free choices of human beings are included among the general statements of Romans 11:36 and Ephesians 1:11.¹⁷

Theologian Wayne Grudem adds that:

There are literally dozens of Scripture passages that say that God (indirectly) brought about some kind of evil. . . . Christians often are unaware of the extent of this forthright teaching in Scripture. Yet it must be remembered that in all of these examples, the evil is actually done not by God but by people or demons who choose to do it.¹⁸

It is noteworthy that the Apostle Paul, in Romans chapter 9, while explicitly addressing evil, does not explain away the issue by referencing free will. Rather, he engages in an uncompromised defense of God's absolute sovereignty:

14 What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be! 15 For He says to Moses, "I WILL HAVE MERCY ON WHOM I HAVE MERCY, AND I WILL HAVE COMPASSION ON WHOM I HAVE COMPASSION." 16 So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy. 17 For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "FOR THIS VERY PURPOSE I RAISED YOU UP, TO DEMONSTRATE MY POWER IN YOU, AND THAT MY NAME MIGHT BE PROCLAIMED THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE EARTH." 18 So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires. 19 You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?" 20 On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, "Why did you make me like this," will it? 21 Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use, and another for common use? 22 What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? 23 And He did so in order that He might make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory, 24 even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles.¹⁹

Other less common yet inadequate solutions to the problem of evil include those that deny its existence (Hinduism and Christian Scientism); limit God's power²⁰ (cf. Harold S.

17. Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God*, 161.

18. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 322–23.

19. Romans 9:14–24. Unless otherwise noted, all citations are from the *New American Standard Bible*. Electronic edition. La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1986.

20. Including the heterodox doctrine of "Open Theism."

Kushner's popular book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*²¹); propose that God's creation, albeit fallen, is nonetheless "the best possible world" (as popularized by philosopher G. W. Leibniz); contend suffering and evil are required character-builders (the *Irenaean view*).²²

Toward a Multidimensional Solution

It seems to me that any proposed solution to the problem of evil should involve a multidimensional method.²³ At the heart of this method is what has been termed "compatibilism," defined by D. A. Carson as follows:

The Bible as a whole and sometimes in specific texts, presupposes or teaches that both of the following propositions are true:

1. God is absolutely Sovereign, but his sovereignty never functions in such a way that human responsibility is curtailed, minimized, or mitigated.
2. Human beings are morally responsible creatures—they significantly choose, rebel, obey, believe, defy, make decisions, and so forth, and they are rightly held accountable for such actions; but this characteristic never functions so as to make God absolutely contingent.²⁴

Carson seems to affirm a multidimensional approach when he writes:

If compatibilism is true and if God is good—all of which the Bible affirms—then it must be the case that God stands behind good and evil in somewhat different ways; that is, he stands behind good and evil asymmetrically. To put it bluntly, God stands behind evil in such a way that not even evil takes place outside the bounds of his sovereignty, yet the evil is not morally chargeable to him: it is always chargeable to secondary agents, the secondary causes. On the other hand, God stands behind good in such a way that it not

21. New York: Schocken Books, 1981.

22. For succinct overview of these inadequate positions, along with a few others, see John Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God*, pp. 155-70 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1994).

23. In approaching the things of God, we are, as C. S. Lewis described us in his essay, *The Poison of Subjectivism*, "Flatlanders," two-dimensional creatures trying to understand three-dimensional objects. "Flatlanders attempting to imagine a cube," he wrote, "would either imagine the six squares coinciding, and thus destroy their distinctness, or else imagine them set out side by side, and thus destroy the unity." (*Christian Reflections*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967).

24. D. A. Carson, *How Long O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006), 179.

only takes place within the bounds of his sovereignty, but it is always chargeable to him, and only derivatively to secondary agents.²⁵

Some Calvinists will not be satisfied with Carson's definitions.²⁶ Within the Reformed camp there will always be those who draw the theological line in different places along the continuum. Gordon H. Clark adopts a strongly deterministic view when he writes, for example, that "I wish very frankly and pointedly to assert that if a man gets drunk and shoots his family, it was the will of God that he should do so."²⁷ It seems to me that Clark's position may be crystalized to, "if it happens, it was God's will." But what does that really mean? A more advanced and nuanced explanation is in order if one is to avoid an inaccurate understanding of God's relationship to sin, not to mention the assassination of his character!

Permissive Will?

One disputed aspect of God's will as it relates to sin and evil is what has been termed by theologians as his permissive will (or decree). At this point in my understanding, I embrace a permissive, or passive decree as that which best coheres with the biblical data.

Biblical Examples

God's permissive will is seen in his dealings with the patriarch Job. He gave permission to Satan to visit Job with a panoply of affliction (Job 1:12; 2:5-6). Indeed, "to the Hebrew mind God is the ultimate (i.e., final) cause of all occurrences,"²⁸ even those he permits. This is evident

25. Carson, *How Long O Lord?* 189.

26. John Frame thoughtfully writes that when it comes to this issue we ought to express "caution in our choice of vocabulary, and . . . think carefully before condemning the vocabulary of others. It is not easy to find adequate terms to describe God's ordination of evil. Our language must not compromise either God's full sovereignty or his holiness and goodness." (*Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2013), 298.

27. Gordon H. Clark, *God and Evil: The Problem Solved* (Unicoi, TN: The Trinity Foundation, 1996), 27.

28. Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987), 1.307.

when we read that Job attributed his suffering to the sovereign hand of God (1:21-22). This ordination does not, however, obviate the idea of permission or make it an unnecessary nuance, as some claim.²⁹

Another example is found in Luke 7:30 which states that the Jewish leaders “rejected God’s purpose for themselves” (τὴν βουλήν τοῦ θεοῦ ἠθέτησαν εἰς ἑαυτοῦ). Also relevant is Acts 14:16 where we read that God “permitted all the nations to go their own ways.” The word translated “permitted,” an aorist active indicative form of the verb ἔάω, refers to an allowance or permission. It is, according to Louw and Nida:

. . . to allow someone to do something—‘to allow, to let, to permit.’ ἔάω: ὃς ἐν ταῖς παρωχημέναις γενεαῖς εἶασεν πάντα τὰ ἔθνη πορεύεσθαι ταῖς ὁδοῖς αὐτῶν ‘in the past he allowed all people to go their own way’ Ac 14:16; οὐκ εἶασεν αὐτοὺς τὸ πνεῦμα Ἰησοῦ ‘the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them to go’ or ‘the Spirit of Jesus prevented them from going’ Ac 16:7.³⁰

One more example ought to suffice. In Romans 1:24, 26, and 28, in reference to the reprobate, we read that “God gave them over” In each of these three verses the aorist active indicative παρέδωκεν (to hand or give over) is used, clearly with a permissive sense. Many more examples of permissive language could be cited. If the Bible uses the language of permission in describing how God sometimes relates to his creation, why should we be reluctant to do so? Whether they believe the idea of permission to be relevant to the overall debate, the burden of proof rests on those who deny it to directly interact with these texts.³¹

29. For example, John Calvin in *The Institutes*, II, iv, 3; III, xxiii, 8. Cf. John Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 287.

30. Louw, Johannes P. and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 163.

31. One other passage of note is found in Luke 22:31-32 where Jesus informs Peter that Satan has demanded to sift him as wheat. While the word “permission” isn’t in the Greek text, it is strongly implied, hence its addition in the NASB.

God's Revealed Will and That Which He Hates

A permissive decree coheres with God's expressed disdain for sinful behaviors, such as the practice of homosexuality (Lev. 18:22; Rom. 1:26-27). That God allows humans to engage in such practices—giving them over to the depraved banquet of their sin—affirms the real disobedience of moral agents without logically denying his sovereignty.

This understanding coalesces with the theological concept of God's *revealed will*, that which he either commands or forbids. Biblical examples abound, such as engaging in abominable acts (Deut. 12:31); idolatry (Deut. 16:22); arrogance, deceit, wickedness, strife, and murder (Prov. 6:16-19). God's revealed, or preceptive, will can be broken, for example, when one person murders another. Yet, God is not rendered powerless. He changes situations and hearts according to his desires (Gen. 50:20; Prov. 21:1).³²

There is, therefore, a necessary distinction to be made between God's decree to send Jesus to redeem sinners as compared to his will as it relates to the heinous acts of serial murder Ed Gein.³³ The words of Jeremiah 32:35 transcend mere anthropomorphism when they state that the atrocities committed by ancient Judah were neither "commanded" by God nor abominations that had even "entered [his] mind." Moreover, contrary to the scholastic doctrine of his impassibility, God is said to experience a sense of sorrow over the tragic consequences of sin (1 Chron. 21:15; Matt. 23:37).³⁴

32. While his revealed will may be violated, God's ultimate purposes cannot (Job 42:2).

33. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ed_Gein, accessed February 15, 2019. I would ask the question of the hard determinist: were each of the unspeakable actions committed by Gein, down to the sickening sexual details, the will (and ordination) of God *in the same sense* as that which relates to the decree to send Christ to redeem sinners?

34. This does not, in my opinion, make the creation independent of God. Nothing is ultimately independent of God as all things subsist in him, including the actions of moral agents (cf. Col. 1:17).

Ezekiel 33:11 in Light of 1 Samuel 2:25

Indeed, God's will is not simple, it is complex. One example of that complexity is introduced in Ezekiel 33:11:

“Say to them, ‘As I live!’ declares the Lord GOD, ‘I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn back, turn back from your evil ways! Why then will you die, O house of Israel?’

God takes “no pleasure in the death of the wicked.” Yet we read in 1 Samuel 2:25 that the Lord *desired* to put the sons of Eli to death. John Piper explains:

But there are times when God . . . intends for human evil to run its course. For example, God meant to put the sons of Eli to death. Therefore he willed that they not listen to their father's counsel: “Now Eli was very old; and he heard all that his sons were doing to all Israel, and how they lay with the women who served at the doorway of the tent of meeting. And he said to them, “Why do you do such things, the evil things that I hear from all these people? No, my sons; for the report is not good which I hear the Lord's people circulating. If one man sins against another, God will mediate for him; but if a man sins against the Lord, who can intercede for him?” But they would not listen to the voice of their father, for the Lord desired to put them to death” (1 Sam. 2:22-25).

Why would the sons of Eli not give heed to their father's good counsel? The answer of the text is “*because* the Lord desired to put them to death.” This makes sense only if the Lord had the right and the power to restrain their disobedience—a right and power that he willed not to use. Thus we must say that in one sense God willed that the sons of Eli go on doing what he commanded them not to do; dishonoring their father and committing sexual immorality.³⁵

God *Ex Lex*?

For Gordon Clark to declare that it was God's will should a man get drunk and shoot his family is, in my opinion, irresponsibly simplistic.³⁶ The complexity that's demanded with such a subject as God's relationship to sin and evil, not to mention suffering, is warranted—even if it is to accommodate the minds of finite men. As John Calvin states:

35. John Piper, “Are There Two Wills in God? Divine Election and God's Desire for All to Be Saved” in *The Grace of God and The Bondage of the Will*, eds. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995), 1.117.

36. See John Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God*, 166-68, for his concerns with the *ex lex* defense, namely, that while God stands outside of the law, the law nonetheless reflects his nature.

If anyone objects that it is absurd to split God's will, I answer that this is exactly our belief, that His will is one and undivided; but because our minds cannot plumb the profound depths of His secret election to suit our infirmity, the will of God is set before us as double. . . . Yet God's will is not therefore at war with itself, nor does it change, nor does it pretend not to will what He wills. But even though His will is one and simple to Him, it appears manifold to us because, on account of our mental incapacity, we do not grasp how in divers ways it wills and does not will something to take place. . . . When we do not grasp how God wills to take place what He forbids to be done, let us recall our mental incapacity, and at the same time consider that the light in which God dwells is not without reason called unapproachable. . . . Although to our perception God's will is manifold, He does not will this and that in Himself, but according to His diversely manifold wisdom, as Paul calls it (Eph. 3:10), He strikes down our senses until it is given to us to recognize how wonderfully He wills what at the same moment seems to be against His will.³⁷

In commenting on Genesis 50:20 and the greater context of Joseph's betrayal, Paul Helm adds these helpful words:

There is the level of human intention, the wicked intentions of Joseph's brothers. And then there is a higher level, the level of God's intention, which often does not coincide with the human intention, and in this case most certainly did not. Joseph's being sent into Egypt was both the result of God's good intention, His intention to preserve His people during a time of famine, and the brothers' evil intentions, to do away with Joseph. How these intentions mesh together is a marvel, a mystery, the outcome of divine goodness and wisdom. But Scripture affirms that they do, and that this is one, important way for us to think of God's relation to evil.³⁸

While the quotes cited above do not explicitly refer to permission, Gordon H. Clark gives an interesting rebuttal to this concept when he offers the following illustration:

Picture a lifeguard on a beach who watches as a boy is taken under by a strong undercurrent. The boy struggles violently (a picture of man's enslavement to sin). The lifeguard has the ability to rescue the boy and he may shout some words of advice, telling the boy to exercise his free will and swim to shore. But the boy drowns as the guard watches from shore. Would the Arminian conclude that the lifeguard has escaped culpability? This illustration shows that permission of evil does not relieve the lifeguard from responsibility. This is even more evident when we consider that the lifeguard (in this case, God) created the beach and the boy. An omnipotent lifeguard could have prevented the boy from entering the beach, or He could have prevented the undertow from occurring, or he could have made the boy a better swimmer, or He could have simply rescued him directly.

Therefore, the idea of permission has no intelligible meaning.

37. Cited in Curt Daniel, *The History and Theology of Calvinism* (Springfield, IL: Good Books, 2003), 207.

38. Paul Helm, "Why? The Nagging Question," *TableTalk*, June 2006.

It is quite within the range of possibility for a lifeguard to permit a man to drown. This permission, however, depends on the fact that the ocean's undertow is beyond the guard's control. If the guard had some giant suction device which he operated so as to engulf the boy, one would call it murder, not permission. The idea of permission is possible only where there is an independent force, either the boy's force or the ocean's force. But this is not the situation in the case of God and the universe. Nothing in the universe can be independent of the omnipotent Creator, for in him we live and move and have our being. Therefore, the idea of permission makes no sense when applied to God.³⁹

Clark's example falters when one considers that the child in his illustration is not innocent and is subject to a fallen world in which undertows exist. After all, God is not merely a (fallen, human) lifeguard watching over (fallen, human) children swimming at a beach! He decreed to allow a world to exist in which there is no general discrimination when it comes to pain and suffering (cf. Matt. 5:45). We trust he has a good reason for doing so and will, nonetheless, work everything into the grand tapestry of his glory.

A Necessary Distinction

God's permission is, therefore, a necessary distinction within his eternal decree. W. G. T.

Shedd explains:

Again, when the permissive decree is denominated the divine will, the term *will* is employed in the narrow sense of volition, not in the wide sense of inclination. The will of God, in this case, is only a particular decision in order to some ulterior end. This particular decision, considered in itself, may be contrary to the abiding inclination and desire of God as founded in his holy nature; as when a man by a volition decides to perform a particular act which in itself is unpleasant in order to attain an ulterior end that is agreeable. Again, in saying that sin is in accordance with the divine will, the term *will* implies "control." As when we say of a physician, "the disease is wholly at his will." This does not mean that the physician takes pleasure in willing the disease, but that he can cure it.⁴⁰

Shedd adds:

It should be observed that in permitting sin, God permits what he forbids. The permissive decree is not indicative of what God approves and is pleasing to him. God decrees what he hates and abhors when he brings sin within the scope of his universal plan.⁴¹

39. Clark, *God and Evil*, 16–17.

40. W. G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2003), 318.

41. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 319. Cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.18.3-4.

We see in Job 1:12 that God allowed Satan, within certain limitations, to put forth his hand upon Job to afflict him. However, later in 1:21 Job declares: “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I shall return there. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD.” Job attributes that which came through the *secondary agency* of Satan to the *primary agency* of God. That the author adds in verse 22, “Through all this Job did not sin nor did he blame God” shows that Job was not in error in either attributing his suffering to God or in declaring that God himself was not the blameworthy cause. Later in chapter two we read that Satan *incited God* “to ruin him without cause.” Eight verses later Job declares to his confused wife, “Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity?” Once again, there is the caveat that “In all this Job did not sin with his lips.”

God may thereby be spoken of as the *final* or *ultimate* cause as it relates to all that occurs within his creation.⁴² When it comes to evil, however, secondary agents serve as the *efficient*, or *blameworthy* cause.⁴³ This is an essential distinction. Again, note the words of Shedd: “By reason of his permissive decree, God has absolute control over moral evil, while yet he is not the author of it and forbids it.”⁴⁴

I add the words of Heinrich Heppe, who also quotes Heidegger:

There is a division of *voluntas decernens* into *voluntas efficiens* and *voluntas permittens*. By the former God executes what in conformity with His absolute holiness He has positively and directly resolved to do. By the latter (*voluntas efficaciter permittens*) God lets the evil happen, which He wills to let happen for the revelation of His glory. The divine *permissio* is thus not to be thought of as indifference but as likewise a positive action of the divine will.—HEIDEGGER (III, 78) "The discerning (sic) or effective will of God is twin; efficient, whereby it wills to allow what it neither effects nor operates or can operate, as sin; and sin as such God can simply neither will nor decree at all. What God wills, He approves, esteems, delights in, He orders, causes and ordains to exist, either as an end or as a means, things which in no way fit sin. Nor whether He is willing or

42. God predestined the crucifixion of His Son, but did not directly perform the act. Men were responsible (Acts 4:27-28).

43. The existence of *gratuitous* or *natural* evil adds an additional problem that is outside the scope of this paper.

44. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 319. The Westminster Confession of Faith adds that God “neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin” (5.4).

refusing is God's permission like man's permission, which admits of an eclipse which he neither wills nor refuses, as the LOMBARD and with him the Scholastics assert. It is effective, mighty, and not separate from God's will at all. Otiose permission of sin separated from God's will is repugnant both to the nature of the First Cause and to the divine and almighty foresight, to His nature and to Scripture."⁴⁵

Other Facets

Deuteronomy 29:29 offers a familiar statement that is classic when it comes to understanding differing aspects to God's will:

The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law.

Clearly, there are aspects of God's willing or being that are not revealed to us. However, the corpus of biblical revelation contains "those things revealed" that we are to heed. John Gill, in his commentary on this verse, writes:

There are many secret things in nature, which cannot be found out and accounted for by men, which the Lord only knows; and there are many things in Providence, which are unsearchable, and past finding out by finite minds, especially the true causes and reasons of them; and there are many things relating to God himself, which remain secret with him; the things of nature and Providence, which are plain and manifest, are for our use and instruction; and especially the word and ordinances of God, which are the revelation of his will, the doctrines and promises contained in the Scriptures, each of the duties of religion, and the commandments of God, such as are of eternal obligation, which may be chiefly designed, because it follows: "that [we] may do all the words of this law:" for the end of this revelation is practice; hearing and reading the word will be of no avail, unless what is heard and read is practiced.⁴⁶

Certainly, when it comes to God's relationship with evil, we ought not go beyond what is revealed to us in sacred scripture.

45. Heinrich Hepppe, *Reformed Dogmatics: Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1978), 89–90.

46. John Gill, "Commentary on Deuteronomy." <https://www.christianity.com/bible/commentary.php?com=gill&b=5&c=29>. Accessed February 14, 2019.

Calamity?

What of passages that directly attribute calamity to God?⁴⁷ It is beyond the scope of this paper to investigate every occurrence of these citations, or even to attempt a satisfactory definition of “calamity.”⁴⁸

An oft-cited verse used by many determinists⁴⁹ is found in Isaiah 45:7, “The One forming light and creating darkness, Causing well-being and creating calamity; I am the LORD who does all these.” Commenting on this verse, Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest write:

Does not the Bible itself say that God can create evil (Isa. 45:7)? Isaiah does not teach the blasphemous idea that the Lord creates sin! What the Lord, the Holy one of Israel (v. 11), initiates is punishment for sin! He created “darkness” or “disaster” (v. 7) in judgement on Egypt when it was dark for three days (Exod. 10:21-23). . . . So Isaiah predicted that a sudden disaster would come upon Babylon (Isa. 47:11). Amos warned Israel that God would punish her for her sins (Amos 3:2). Only in the context of judgment for sin do the prophets write, “When disaster comes to a city, has not the Lord caused it?” (v. 6).⁵⁰

A relevant point is made: God’s use of sin, or even his permission of sin, must be seen in the context of sin! There is no sin in heaven. Sin entered creation with the fall of man, as well as with the sin of the non-elect angelic host. If one argues that God ordained the crucifixion of his Son, the point remains. There would be no need for the sacrificial death of Christ apart from sin!

We again emphasize the fact that God is perfectly holy and just. He is neither the author nor the direct cause of evil. Berkhof’s comments in this regard are apropos:

God's eternal decree certainly rendered the entrance of sin into the world certain, but this may not be interpreted so as to make God the cause of sin in the sense of being its responsible author. . . . In the light of all this it would be blasphemous to speak of God as

47. If I had the space to do so, I would also address 1 Samuel 16:14 (“an evil spirit for the Lord”) and 2 Samuel 24:1 in light of 1 Chronicles 21:1 (God and Satan inciting David to number the people).

48. Certainly, there is a difference between what a wicked army does to a populace, what a tornado does to a town, and what cancer does to a body.

49. While I consider myself a determinist, it is one of the softer variety.

50. Lewis and Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, 1.312.

the author of sin. And for that reason all the deterministic views which represent sin as a necessity inherent in the very nature of things should be rejected.⁵¹

Compare the words of John Calvin, who in his work, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, declares that “the proper and genuine cause of sin is not God’s hidden counsel but the evident will of man,”⁵² What holds true for “sin” must also include “evil.”

Foreknowledge

While the biblical term “foreknowledge” is not mere prescience, God’s attribute of omniscience means that he knows from eternity everything that will come to pass in time. Therefore, future events are rendered certain by God’s foreknowledge. “Foreknowledge implies inevitability” as Clark points out.⁵³ Therefore, if God *knows* that a crime will be committed on such and such a date, that knowledge of a certain event renders that event immutable.

In the following quotes, Francis Turretin conjoins the complementary concepts of permission, decree, and foreknowledge:

But there is no future thing which God has not decreed, either to do if good or to permit if bad; nor can he foreknow unless he has decreed them.⁵⁴

And:

The decree of providence draws this necessarily after it because as whatever takes place in time, God immutably decreed either to effect or to permit, so he ought infallibly to foreknow it all.⁵⁵

Therefore, Turretin concludes that:

The infallible foreknowledge of God does not imply that God is the cause of sins because God foreknows sins as certainly about to be (for example, the selling of Joseph and the betrayal of Christ); not as if they were to be effected by him as sins, but to be permitted and yet regulated by him.⁵⁶

51. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1932), 220.

52. Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, 122.

53. Gordon H. Clark, *Biblical Predestination* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), 45.

54. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology, Vol. 1*, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1992), 210.

Apologetic and Practical Considerations

That God is the final cause of all things must not tempt us to lose sight of the fact that he interacts with his creatures on a personal level. This is especially true for Christians. We need not fall prey to an impersonal fatalism. God enjoins us to worship him—and to pray. He desires our fellowship and is pleased when our joy is made full in him. On the other hand, he is displeased when we neglect our holy calling (Heb. 2:3; 2 Tim. 1:9). We must take the Scripture seriously when it warns us against grieving the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:30). To do so is not to “merely do that which God actively decreed would be done anyway.”

As Edward P. Meadors warns:

Evidence that God was the primary agent of disobedience against himself is totally foreign to these crux passages. Finally, like many, I also cannot understand how . . . God can be holy if he is the primary agent of all that the Bible categorically identifies as unholy.⁵⁷

While the existence of evil and a resultant theodicy may be most problematic for Christian apologetics, we must mutually challenge the skeptic to demonstrate that good and evil truly exist apart from Christian theism. In other words, there can be no ontological absolutes in a world in which God does not exist. The brutal clubbing to death of baby seals for mercenary reasons is not evil if God is not.⁵⁸ Atheism reduces man to the level of a mere animal living in a random, naturalistic universe. There may be pain, there may be disappointment, there may be

55. Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 210

56. Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 211-12.

57. Edward P. Meadors, “‘It Never Entered My Mind’: The Problematic Theodicy Of Theistic Determinism,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 19, no. 2 (2009): 187. Meadors asks whether we should conclude “that God is the primary agent of rape, child abuse, racism, pornography, bestiality, Satan worship, theological heresy, blasphemy, the illegal trafficking of drugs, prostitution, etc.?” (189). I understand Meadors’ *primary agency* to mean “authorship” which is a different sense than I have used the phrase elsewhere as synonymous with *final cause*.

58. For a futile attempt at establishing morality apart from Christianity, see Richard Carrier, “Moral Facts Naturally Exist (And Science Could Find Them)” in *The End of Christianity*, John W. Loftus, ed. (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2011).

anguish, but there can be no absolute moral wrong. “Thus, the Christian may turn the tables on the unbeliever who raises the problem of evil: The non-Christian has a problem of good. Without God, there is neither good nor evil.”⁵⁹

In the words of the late Dr. Francis Schaeffer:

If there is no absolute moral standard, then one cannot say in a final sense that anything is right or wrong. By absolute we mean that which always applies [to all people], that which provides a final or ultimate standard. There must be an absolute if there are to be morals, and there must be an absolute if there are to be real values. If there is no absolute beyond man’s ideas, then there is no final appeal to judge between individuals and groups whose moral judgements conflict. We are merely left with conflicting opinions.⁶⁰

Summary and Conclusion

I have attempted to establish that a biblical and comprehensive *compatibilism* offers the best understanding of the relationship between God and evil. To summarize, we must remember that:

- God is perfectly holy, sovereign, and hates evil.
- While God permits evil for his purposes, he is not the author of it.
- There are aspects of God’s sovereignty as it relates to evil that are beyond our understanding.
- God’s relationship to evil is not simplistic; it is multifaceted.
- We live in a fallen, sinful universe that contains moral and natural evil.
- God has a good reason for creating a universe that contains evil.
- God entreats us to simply trust him.

Gordon J. Spykman cautions us to be mindful that:

Every pursuit of a more original and ultimate “explanation” is bound to come up empty. The origin of evil remains forever that ultimately inexplicable “mystery of ungodliness.” Calvin therefore advocates approaching this issue in the spirit of humble and pious ignorance. Seeking to break the bounds of Scripture is “a kind of madness.”⁶¹

We must keep in mind that God is not required to offer us any explanations. Nowhere in Scripture does he defend his actions, beyond reminding us of the Creator-creature distinction. It

59. Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 292.

60. Cited in Josh McDowell, *The New Tolerance: How a Cultural Movement Threatens to Destroy You, Your Faith, and Your Children* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1998), 55-56.

61. Gordon J. Spykman, *Reformational Theology: A New Paradigm for Doing Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 304.

is his right to be trusted and believed, regardless of the questions and accusations of fallen creatures. To borrow a metaphor used by a well-known apologist, when we sit in judgement on God we are as a child sitting in his father's lap while indignantly slapping him in the face.

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