

Tackling Tough Questions **Winter 2006 – GTW 1: Week Three – The Problem of Evil**

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Paul Tillich, the 20th Century Roman Catholic theologian once said that theologians and preachers are very good at answering questions that no one is asking. He could have said that we are also very poor at answering the ones that dwell most deeply in the heart of Christians and non-Christians. The first two weeks we have talked about the issues of God's being three and yet one and of the interrelationship between divine sovereignty and human free will. These are of course important issues – they ground our worship, our communication and understanding of God, and our human responsibility to “be holy even as I am holy.” But no problem acts more as the “elephant in the living room no one wants to mention” than the problem of evil. If God is good, why is the world so horrid?

As a theologians and preachers, both Quinn and I prefer subjects like the victorious life in Christ, or the joy of the Kingdom, about the goodness and wonder of God. Let's face it; we all prefer good news to bad, and historically, most of the highly rated television shows have been comedies, not dramas. But, we live our lives in the midst of, as Dante termed, *The Divine Comedy*, (what he meant by “comedy” is different from the TV situation comedy) which included the inferno along with paradise. We all have known the reality of someone we love getting a medical report with the dreaded “C word” in it, or someone being killed in a car accident, or while serving our country in the military. And then there are the natural disasters, and 2005 with the tsunami (in the waning days of 2004), the hurricanes, and the earthquake in Pakistan killing or leaving homeless hundreds of thousands. The problem of evil, along with our own natural stubbornness, is the single largest impediment to trusting God, and this is true whether or not we are Christians.

While we don't like to dwell on the issue, it is not true that our faith and the theology that has developed around the Scriptures and the Incarnation leave us with nothing to say on the subject, so let's dive in.

Where Did Evil Come From?

Rooted in this lies the question, “Is God the author of evil?” We know that all things come from God, and indeed, Paul in Colossians says that all things are created in, and held together by, Jesus Christ. The general line of thinking is, “God is good. God is all-powerful. God created the world. Evil exists. Therefore....” First of all, I think we must agree that evil is real and true. This is the Christian affirmation. Were we Buddhists, we would say that ideas such as good and evil are illusory, and that the path of salvation is to realize that there is no good or evil, and in so doing, we can achieve the plane where we ourselves no longer exist. As Christians, who affirm that God created us and that the world is real and it was indeed good as creation, this is not an acceptable option.

The Christian answer is not easy to come by. We cannot say that God created evil, since he by nature is good. Therefore, everything he creates must be good and cannot be evil. Therefore, evil is actually either a form of good (which Karl Barth seems to say in his writings), or evil must come from outside (a creation/fall of Satan for example). There are some concepts of evil having positive side-effects (for example, God made King Nebuchadnezzar crazy for a period of time in order to see him repent). Here we see God “using” or “allowing” evil to occur, usually as

a punishment to bring repentance or as the outcome of rebellion. The prophet Jonah even says that God is the one who will bring “evil” (Hebrew *ra’ah*) upon the city (Jonah 4:2). We will get to this later. As for Satan “creating” evil, it assumes a) that Satan can create, which is never implied by the Scriptures and that b) evil is a “thing” in and of itself. This is not supported by the Scriptures either.

Instead, Christian theology sees evil not as a thing itself, but as a shadow or the absence of the good. It is a twisting of things created good and turned away from God and towards something else. This is the image that J.R.R. Tolkien picked up in his *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, as he describes the Orcs, the foul creatures who serve Sauron, as creatures who were once elves, but were captured, tortured, and twisted so that they become everything that the elves are not – ugly, murderous, opposed to nature, and serving only darkness. The account of his fall (seen in Luke 10:18 and in the Old Testament in Ezekiel 28:11-16 along with the other angels in Jude 6), show a being who is not on par with God and yet rebels and seeks to affirm his own status. He twists the good of being a servant of God into the evil of being a servant of his own desires.

This of course leads us back into last week’s discussion of free will, by both angelic beings and humans. Free will is never the freedom to pick between A and B, as if the two are of equal weight. A is the freedom of life; B is the path of slavery and self-focus (what we mean when we use the term concupiscence). So the fall of humanity in the Garden was neither a necessary outcome of freewill nor something that God created, but rather the abuse of freedom and the running from goodness towards its opposite. While Satan’s fall seems to pre-date the creation narrative, the entry of evil into creation happens with the decision for slavery by Adam and Eve in Genesis 3, with the curses upon human beings and upon creation as the result.

Could God have stopped evil from taking hold? Here we get into the question of what the world could have been. Had God stopped them from rebelling and instead forced obedience, would that not then be a crime against the good reality of freewill? Would that not itself be evil? Did God not give clear instructions and the power within both Adam and Eve to say no, and to live in freedom and light? Sin and evil are neither necessary nor natural outcomes from freedom, but rather the abuse and rejection of freedom. It is, to use the concept from Karl Barth, an incomprehensible decision. In this way it is true that evil is unimaginable, but it is still very real.

So evil is neither a creation of God nor unreal. It is a real but shadowy rebellion against the real that is the result of slavery rather than the created reality of free obedience. And we continue to live in that created condition today.

What about Natural Disasters?

The above discussion seems to help us make sense of evil wrought by human beings. People choose slavery and act upon it; they choose darkness and kill, rape, steal, lie, commit genocide and every other act of evil about which we read in the newspapers and history books. But what about the tsunami or the hurricane in the Gulf States? In the aftermath of the Southeast Asian tsunami some Imams (Muslim clergy) in Aceh, the hardest hit region, said, “This is the will and act of God because we have not been good Muslims.” Likewise in just the past week Mayor Ray Nagin of New Orleans said that “Surely God is mad at America. He sent us hurricane after

hurricane after hurricane, and it's destroyed and put stress on this country...Surely he doesn't approve of us being in Iraq. But surely he is upset at black America also. We're not taking care of ourselves.”

Let's be clear about both of these statements. For the Muslim, Allah is all-powerful and everything is because Allah wants it that way. There is no “problem of evil” in Islam precisely because all things are the will of Allah. This is not the same as saying Allah allows it, because then Allah would not be the actor in history that Muslims see him to be. As for Ray Nagin (and we can add Pat Robertson here as well), while the prophet Jonah does speak of God bringing *ra'ah* to Ninevah, God sends prophets before judgment. It also sees God as not a loving being, but as one whose primary disposition to creation and people is anger, not love.

Can God stop natural disasters? Of course, because he is all powerful. However, he allows them. Why? First of all, they are the fruit of rebellion against God. Creation itself, not just human beings, fell in Genesis 3. Paul suggests this when says that all creation is groaning (Romans 8:19-22). Creation does not work as it was supposed to in the original creative order. This is not “the best of all possible worlds” as the writer Voltaire says through the religious Dr. Pangloss in his satire *Candide* (poking fun at the way Gottfried Leibniz dealt with the problem of evil in his 18th century theodicy). It didn't have to be this way, but we “choose” it to be this way by embracing slavery and pulling the world down with us.

Must then God allow all natural disasters that take place to take place? Here we deal with the limitations of knowledge. How many earthquakes, hurricanes, volcanoes and the like have not caused disaster because of God's decision to hold them back? We do not and cannot know. God acts all the time without giving us the information on it. While we wish he had acted on December 26, 2004 to stop the earthquake and tsunami, he didn't. Why? Here we must admit that we do not know, and will never know. Pointing to all the “good” that has come out of it does not change the horrible evil that came about because of it. In fact, to do so has the sense of “covering for God.”

Paul's ideas in both Romans 1 and 8 point to us that we should not be surprised that we reap the whirlwind of evil that comes from our sin. The point of praise for Paul is that God does act when it in his wisdom. For this reason Paul says in Romans 9:19-24:

One of you will say to me: “Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?” But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? “Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, ‘Why did you make me like this?’” Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory— even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?

Here we must live by faith, in the goodness of God and in his ultimate purposes. This same thing holds true for us as we see or read of someone else healed of a horrible disease while our loved one passes from this life with the same ailment. I was most touched by an interview with Francis Schaeffer (one of my personal heroes) the year before he died of cancer. He said, “If God should heal me, and I pray every day expecting him to do so, then I will praise him. But if

does not, I know that his purposes are greater, and that my death at this time will not upset the ultimate purposes of God. I am sinner, and I deserve death, but I pray expecting my body to be healed and my life to continue.” He died within the year, holding firm to God’s goodness and to the ultimate victory of the God made known in Jesus Christ.

Does God Sometimes Do “Bad” Things?

With all that has been said, we must also admit that the Bible is clear that “evil” and God are sometimes associated. Three instances come to mind readily: 1) the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, 2) the hardening of Pharaoh’s and Saul’s hearts, and 3) the captivity of Israel (I won’t touch on the Father allowing the Son to go to the cross here (come to Winter Session Two of GTW for that class). As I said above, the Bible even places God as the author of *ra’ah* (evil). If we look at these and other instances though, we see that God sometimes acts in what is perceived by those who experience it as evil in order to head off greater evil. At other times God withdraws from a situation and allows the consequences of people’s actions to reach fruition. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is an example of this. These are such wicked cities that it is God himself who destroys them. Notice though this occurs after God bargains with Abraham to spare the cities if just a handful of righteous people (those who have not added to the evil of the cities) can be found. None can be aside from Lot. As an outside observer, we would say that God has done *ra’ah* to these cities, even if they “deserved” it. God is merciful, but God remains holy, and when great wickedness arises, we do see God acting (though, it should be noted this is mostly reserved for those who are his people).

The second way in which God acts that could be conceived of as evil is “hardening of hearts.” At first blush this seems as if God is overriding human freedom, which I have already said would be an evil action. What we miss is that God is already at work in people’s heart and in their lives, he holds the universe together and it is his Spirit that woos us at all times. The instances of Pharaoh and Saul are indications of God withdrawing his Spirit from the presence of these men. Basically, after they have set their direction and resisted the calling of God, God allows them the freedom to live out their decisions without any more interference from him. Their hearts are hardened because of their own actions and because God, who alone softens hearts, has left their presence.

There is always a tension in this life, between God’s attempts to woo us back, the natural outcome of the sowing and reaping of sin in our lives, and the simple reality that we live in a fallen world where people who are otherwise without guilt in their particular circumstance suffer great evil (think of John 9 and the blind man). In all situations we know that God is at work, bringing about his larger plan and seeking, without destroying human freedom but working with it, to work “for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28)

The Ultimate Victory over Evil

German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg says that “doubt is the shadow of faith.” We live always with part of our hearts in faith and part in doubt. This is the challenge, and I would add, the honor, in living this life following God. But our faith is not merely in the character of God, but in the action and actions of God. The problem of evil has been and will be dealt with. How?

In the 20th Century we witnessed (and continue to witness) a battle royal between two opposing visions over how victory will be defeated. On the one side is the myth of progress. According to this view, which began with the Enlightenment (18th century) in the West, human beings are progressing towards an ultimately good end. Utopia is upon us. In the 19th century this manifested itself in the civil society concept, and in the 20th century religious philosophers like Pierre Teilhard de Chardin saw evil as merely challenging us to more good, and thus itself served as a good. This, combined with the technological focus of the end of the 20th century, placed an option before humanity. But, as we saw in the 20th century, and continue to see today, human beings and creation are not evolving towards some utopian end, but are always bending the world back on themselves (Luther’s famous “*incurvatus in se*,” from which C.S. Lewis gets his notion in the science fiction trilogy of “the bent ones”). Technology which can heal is used to destroy. Pain is covered over. As Bishop Tom Wright says,

“The myth of progress cannot address evil. It cannot explain it and it cannot eradicate it. We are staring at a cosmos where the future is either entropy or a collapse back to nothingness. The myth of modern progress has no answer for the moral problem of evil in the past or in present sufferings.”

Bishop Wright sees that the myth of progress must simply end up glossing over all the stuff that doesn’t fit. This is like the legendary Oxford professor, Jan Morris, who whenever his piles got too large, would simply place newspapers over them and start making new piles. After his death they unearthed layer after layer of still unfinished problems, like archeologists digging on a city site in Israel.

Christianity is the other response to the problem of evil. Here we see a consistent God, always working to bring the creation and those created in his image back to true goodness. The way evil is dealt with is not by ignoring it or by hoping it will get better on its own, but by God head-on challenging it in the Incarnation (the first true human being of true goodness since Adam), and in the cross (which defeated the powers of evil by letting them try and conquer Jesus in his death), and most importantly in the resurrection (where life, light and freedom gained the victory over all the powers of darkness). As St. Paul says in Colossians 2:13-15:

When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

This is the victory we see in the new creation, a creation that doesn’t simply “evolve” to its status, but which comes about by discontinuity and trauma (think Romans 8 again). But this

trauma, which has been manifested first and foremost in the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus, brings the true and final victory over evil. This victory will come fully at the end of time, but is experienced through Christ in the now. Again, not in fullness, but in hope. Evil is still winning individual plays in the game (or, if you like, skirmishes in the battle), but it doesn't realize the final outcome yet (evil loses).

Here we find the reason to read and meditate on the book of Revelation. Not so we can get caught up in charts or speculative predictions, but so we can hear of fulfillment of Jesus' victory over those powers Paul refers to in Colossians (and elsewhere). The victory sees evil and its dwelling destroyed, as the angel says in Revelation 18:1-2:

After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven. He had great authority, and the earth was illuminated by his splendor. With a mighty voice he shouted:

“Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great!
She has become a home for demons
and a haunt for every evil spirit,
a haunt for every unclean and detestable bird.

But the true answer to the problem of evil doesn't merely lie in the defeat of evil, but in the coming of life and freedom, which Revelation 21-22 speak about and which begins:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

All this doesn't mean that “we have the answer” enabling us to glibly state these things to those who are experiencing evil in their lives. But it does mean we can hope and live in faith and bring the good news of the “already, but not yet” healing of Jesus into people's lives. For those who know God's character, God's actions, and God's future, can act in grace and peace towards the world of evil so that, like Job, the world can say “now my eyes have seen you (Lord).”

The problem of evil is rooted in the world we have made out of God's good creation, and this means that often evil befalls those who are “innocent” of any of the crimes for which they are being punished. Evil leaves no innocents, only in the end victims. Against this comes the character, action and future of God – and while Christianity readily admits the presence of evil is a challenge to faith, it also offers an answer to evil that is rooted in the faithful and good God who calls all people to himself.