

The Problem Of Evil

by Kel Good

The problem of evil is an issue that has plagued theology through the centuries. At the center of all true Biblical theology is the idea that God exists, that God is love, holy in all he does, without evil. The problem to be explained is how such a God for whom absolute moral perfection is claimed could have created a world so plagued with moral evil and every kind of corruption. And if we grant that the God who created this world *is* of impeccable moral character, how is he to remain free of the accusation that he is somehow involved in the guilt that is due for this evil, whether by direct intent or by indirect yet willing participation? The problem stems from the character of God himself. If God is holy then nothing he does can be done except from an intention that holiness be supreme. He could not will to create anything evil, could never desire that evil would come forth. Because God is love, everything he does must flow from the ultimate intention to produce the good in any situation. To choose anything less would be an evil choice.

The difficulty is increased by the fact that since evil is a negation of the good, a real "taking away" from the fullness that good is, and since evil is so damaging to all goodness, it can never be reasoned that evil may be done so that good will result. Paul pronounces the just condemnation of anyone who would reason this way (Romans 3:8). Whenever evil occurs it always takes away from good that could have been as well as doing damage to such good as already exists. This being so, the *best* system would always be the one with the least evil present within it. One cannot reason that accumulated good justifies the certainty of evil. Less good with the presence of no evil would always be better than more good that has come through a compromise to include evil's presence. Such an understanding of the nature of good and evil is fundamental to addressing the issue of evil in a good God's creation.

Was This All Gods Plan?

Here then is the question. Did God intend what we see around us? Is the evil in the present system of reality a part of the original plan of God, intended from the beginning to be that through which his goodness would express itself? There are some who would say it is. Historically the Christian church has been divided theologically into two camps, the Calvinist and the Arminian. Each side has its respective viewpoint on the problem of evil and God's involvement in the question. In Calvinism evil is a part of God's plan to work the greatest good. The purpose of the creation is to show forth God's moral attributes in order to bring glory and praise to himself. Consequently the present system was chosen over a system where evil would be absent, in order to enable God to demonstrate the multifaceted character he is. If sin had not been allowed many aspects of his character such as his wrath and anger, his mercy and grace could not have been made known. But through the presence of evil God has been allowed to show forth the riches of his character. Because of the view of sovereignty which Calvinism holds for God, that he has decreed all events according to his own inscrutable will, one is not able to conclude anything other than that the world is exactly as God ordained that it would be. None resist his will therefore all is as he willed it. Calvinists would divide into two camps over whether God decreed the fall into sin itself or merely allowed it. Whichever view is held, God has decreed all that has happened since that time.

The Arminian camp has always stressed the freedom of God's creation. Men and angels, we are told, have been created with free will and consequently have the power to choose whether they will do good or do evil. When God created them they were not tainted with evil but did possess the ability of choice which made evil a possibility. As time went on, many of the angels and man chose to turn from God and to go their own way. This resulted in the entrance of sin and evil into a creation that prior to this time was completely good. For Arminianism, God has not decreed all events but simply knew that the creatures he created would abuse their abilities and turn from him. God considered this worth allowing because of the good that would result from his being able to redeem men and bring them back to himself.

Problems With Calvinism

Thus we have the two explanations for the nature of the moral universe, which have been the dominant historical Christian positions. They are both problematic. The Calvinist position, which is virtually determinism, has God "causing" all events by his own agency and leaves no reasonable defence that will acquit God of the charge that he is guilty for the evil present in the universe. Usual Calvinist explanations amount to a denial that God himself chooses evil since all evil actions flow through the wills of evil creatures. God simply acts upon creatures which are themselves evil and thus decrees actions which cannot help but be evil because of the material he has to work with. The evil act is the creature's own act and is therefore the creature's responsibility. We are to assume guilt is only to be credited to the final cause of action, not to the true first cause which is God. Even if the argument was granted that the creature's nature is evil, who gave the creature its nature? It does no good to say that it was born sinful for who determined that this nature of sin would be hereditary? The only true recourse for Calvinism is to declare that God is *not* responsible for evil because the Bible says he is not and we must accept what scripture says no matter how much our reason and sense of natural justice recoils at what is being asserted. Thus in the end the Calvinist answer is no answer at all. God is the cause of all events,

even the actions of his creature's wills. Reason would say that he must then be responsible for all the acts resulting from his causation. But here we must stop and must be content that such is not the case. The creatures whose wills God moves are guilty for their actions. God remains free of charge. How? We do not know. Why? Because.

Arminianism has provided a solution that is better in many ways. By denying that God directly dictates and causes all the actions of his creatures a large step has been taken away from God being accountable for the evil acts of his creatures. Since men and angels were created with free will they determine their own moral choices. If a person sins, God had not decreed this and brought it about. It is the person's own act. God certainly knew they would choose to behave in this way but it was not caused by anything other than that God allowed them the power of choice. They could just as well have chosen otherwise, they had no inability to choose. The fact of God's knowing what all men will freely choose to do does not *cause* them to do it. It is not his act at all, he just knows they will choose as they do. They do it. They are responsible for it. Thus God is free of the charge of guilt.

Is Arminianism Really Better?

But is God free of such a charge? At first glance the Arminian explanation appears to alleviate the problem. It seems to put evil back where it belongs, on the shoulders of the individual who chooses to do wrong. This is a large improvement over the Calvinist idea that all actions must ultimately be derived from God's causation. This solution *does* take care of the question of *individual* acts of evil. It still leaves unanswered the ultimate question of evil itself. That this or that act of evil flows from this or that individual's free choice is fine. How could God knowingly create a universe where this or that individual *would* act in this manner? The question is not simply whether God *did* the act, or whether he simply allowed its possibility. Did he *will it* to be done? Responsibility for evil surely must go farther than direct causation. Surely I am equally responsible for evil I could have stopped. If I know someone will murder someone and it is within my power to stop him but I do not stop him is it not my responsibility as well to bear the guilt when the deed is done? What kind of character must I be to have allowed such evil to come forth? Perhaps the person to be killed was a difficult person and I could see many good things that might result from his being removed. Could this justify my allowing this evil to be done?

For years Calvinists have pointed out that the Arminian view that God merely created a world in which he *knew* there would be evil is no more of a solution to the problem of evil than Calvinist determinism with it decrees. They have further pointed out that God's absolute foreknowledge is as deterministic as God's decrees. What difference does it make whether God first chose all that should come about and then since he planned it therefore had a perfect foreknowledge of what would happen, or if he rather had a perfect foreknowledge of what would happen and then chose to create it? Either way, everything is predetermined before the world begins. Either you have a world where the creatures have no genuine free will because God causes everything that happens or you have a world where creatures have free will but all their choices were known before they were created and cannot now help but happen. Thus God again determined their choices because he chose to create a world where *these* choices *would* be made. In either case free will is finally an illusion. God is the only true cause of all events. The unavoidable conclusion in either case is that God chose that evil should come about and could have prevented it. If it is true that evil resulted from the free will of his creatures as in Arminianism he still could have prevented it by not creating the world at all. When he chose to create, he was not creating a world where evil was only a possibility. He created a world where evil *would* happen.

Was It All Worth It?

Often at this point it is interjected that he could not have had love among his creatures without allowing evil. Again we must ask, shall we do evil that good may result? Could a holy God willingly choose evil to come about under any circumstances and remain holy? It is difficult to see how he could. It is sometimes further argued that if greater good could result, it might be consistent with perfect holiness to elect that evil exist. I believe we made it plain in our introduction that to have no evil at all would always be better than any amount of accumulated good in the presence of any evil. Even if we allowed the idea that evil could be acceptable if the greater good had resulted this certainly cannot be the case in the present situation. The indication of scripture and experience is that the vast majority, for whatever reason, are persisting in evil and refusing to come to God. The largest number of mankind appears to be headed for eternal judgement in hell. The greatest good is *not* coming from the present system if it all was planned as it is occurring. Surely it would have been a greater good not to create at all than to have the amount of misery that has resulted for mankind.

In the end, the Arminian solution is also no solution to the problem of evil. Whether God chooses everything including evil through causing it all by direct agency or he chooses everything including evil by creating a world in which he foreknows everything that will happen, in the end God is responsible for evil. This is the inevitable conclusion if we accept the traditional popular Christian answers to the problem. What then are we to decide? Is there no solution? Is the moral universe in danger of a final dualism of good and evil that would ultimately result in evil triumphing? Gladly, we are not forced to make such a conclusion. There is a third position that appears to solve the dilemma. It requires us to rethink many of our fundamental beliefs, but it also results in a satisfying release from the tension left by the traditional arguments. The elements of the solution are to be found through embracing the strong points and squarely facing the

weak points in both the Calvinist and Arminian explanations of the problem of evil.

Keeping The Strong Points And Eliminating The Weak Points

We saw that the most difficult element in the Calvinist explanation was the belief in God's direct causation of all the actions of his creatures through his decrees. It is generally accepted as fact that responsibility for an act must rest upon the true first cause of the act. Getting someone else to do our dirty work does not excuse our guilt. The problem for the Calvinist was that ultimately God did everything. This meant evil acts were God's acts. God was responsible for evil. Arminianism came to the rescue with the explanation that God has endowed his moral creatures with free will and that consequently all their moral actions were their own, free choices of their own sovereign agency within their limited moral sphere of activity. This meant that guilt and responsibility for evil rested completely on the shoulders of the one who committed the act. This observation is important. If we are to have an accurate solution to the problem of evil it must include this element. Evil must be the free act of the moral creature God has made, if it is to be her responsibility and God is to be free of charge for individual acts.

But we saw that there was another flaw in the Arminian answer. This was that God's foreknowledge made evil a necessity in his creation because he knew what these free moral creatures would do once he had created them. Although evil was their free act, his creating them knowing they would sin still brought the ultimate charge for evil on God's head. It also annihilated their true freedom because they had no choice but to be a part of God's creation in which all their "free" choices were already known before they were created or had made any of them. Once the world was created, God's creatures had no choice but to make just these "free choices" which he had foreknown they would make. God again takes the ultimate blame. This problem is alleviated through a denial of the absolute foreknowledge of God. The problem of evil is only a problem if God chose to make a universe in which he *knew* sin *would* happen. If we deny such knowledge to God, the problem is solved. Then God created a universe of free moral beings in which sin was a *possibility* because of their endowment with free will but it was not a *necessity*. They were free to choose, were given every reason to choose rightly, but have chosen wrongly. Since this choice was their own free choice, not caused in any way by God, they are entirely responsible for their own sin. Had they not chosen in this way they would have been free from guilt. Since they have chosen to sin they are condemned. God did not know they would sin, his intention was that all his creatures would love and obey him. Their freedom made the opposite choice possible. The possibility of sin is not evil. It is the only way true virtue can exist. A moral being is only virtuous by choosing to be. But the opposite choice is always a possibility.

We do not have space in this essay to examine the evidence for the denial of God's absolute foreknowledge and the assertion that God is a being of duration, living in an endless stretch of time, travelling along with us through history. This will have to await a future essay. Such a view of the nature of God appears to be the answer to the problem of moral evil and leaves nothing to be explained, satisfactorily placing all responsibility for moral evil and guilt upon those who have freely chosen to violate their creator's good intentions for them.

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