

**THEODICY
& THE PROBLEM OF EVIL**

by William Brennan

The question of theodicy is not a speculative question; it is a critical one. It is the all-embracing eschatological question. It is not purely theoretical, for it cannot be answered with any new theory about the existing world. It is a practical question which will only be answered through experience of the new world in which 'God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.' It is not really a question at all, in the sense of something we can ask or not ask, like other questions. It is the open wound of life in this world. It is the real task of faith and theology to make it possible for us to survive, to go on living, with this open wound. The person who believes will not rest content with any slickly explanatory answer to the theodicy question. And he will also resist any attempts to soften the question down. The more a person believes, the more deeply he experiences pain over the suffering in the world, and the more passionately he asks about God and the new creation.

*-from Jürgen Moltmann's *Trinity and Kingdom**

Theodicy is a fifty-cent word for the justification of God. One might ask why it should be necessary for anyone to have to justify God. Really what is meant is the justification of God's moral character against the calumnies of unbelievers with respect to *the problem of evil*. It is an apologetic exercise. John Frame has rightly called the problem of evil the greatest difficulty for Christian apologetics. No one could explain this difficulty with better clarity than he can.

In a nutshell, the problem is this: How can there be any evil in the world, if the omnipotent and omnibenevolent God of the Bible exists? Or to put it more formally:

1. If God is omnipotent, he is able to prevent evil.
2. If God is good, he is willing to prevent evil.
3. But evil exists.

Conclusion: either God is not omnipotent, or he is not good.¹

Frame calls this "*the logical problem of evil*" because he recognizes that if valid, it proves the theistic worldview logically inconsistent. However, this really only pertains to adherents of the doctrine of endless torment (and to a lesser degree, advocates of conditional immortality) because they believe in the Manichean concept of the eternal existence of evil. Universalists believe that in the end all evil will cease to exist. Our answer to the problem is simple. Yes, evil exists, but only temporarily and to accomplish a greater good. (More on that a little later when we discuss the Universalist theodicy.) For the time being, let us first examine the doctrine of endless torment and consider various attempts at theodicy that have been employed by its advocates.

The Reformed Resolution

Frame says, "it is hard to imagine *how* God's good purpose justifies the evil in the world."² For him, Christian apologetics is the defense of that

120. John Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God*, (Phillipsburg:P&R, 1994), pp. 149-190, and *The Doctrine of God* .(Phillipaburg: P&R, 2002pp.160-182.

² Ibid, *Doctrine of God*, p. 173.

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version of Christianity which is informed by the doctrine of endless torment, and from that Manichean perspective the justification of God's decisions is truly irreconcilable with the divine character as presented throughout the pages of holy writ. We could exhaust a great deal of space here to demonstrate this but, ironically, no one could do a better job than Frame himself has done.³

Frame correctly insists that the best answer to the problem of evil must be some form of a "greater good" theodicy,⁴ but due to his commitment to endless torment the true solution must remain beyond his grasp.⁵ He identifies his dilemma with laser precision in the following excerpt from his *Apologetics to the Glory of God*:

The problem here is not only that evil raises questions about God's justice or goodness. It is that God's justice and goodness raise questions about each other. That is, God's very nature appears to be self-contradictory. If we could prove his justice, we would thereby disprove his goodness, and vice versa.

Frame finds a partial resolution to the dilemma in the atonement of Christ, but he grants that "this redemptive history does not solve the problem of evil in every sense." He is forced to admit that in his system, the "greater good" is not a "greater good" at all for many. In fact, it is a "greater curse." After declaring that "theo-centricity does not require us to ignore the happiness of human beings," and that "when God seeks a greater good for himself, he seeks at the same time a greater good for the whole creation," he immediately reverses himself.

But we need still more clarification. The above paragraph might suggest Universalism, the doctrine that all human beings will be saved. Scripture does not teach that. Indeed, it teaches that some will endure eternal punishment for their wickedness. For this group history is not working toward a "greater good," but toward a

³ Although Jay Addams claims to find no difficulty in resolving the "so-called" problem of evil. *The Grand Demonstration*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989)

4. Frame, *Doctrine of God*, op. cit., p.173, and *Apologetics to the Glory of God*, op. cit., pp.184-187.

5. *ibid.*

6. Frame, "Apologetics," op. cit., p.184.

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“greater curse.” ... conclude then that God’s glory does bring with it a greater good for the creation in general and for those who love God (Rom. 8:28), but not for every individual person or thing in the universe. So, at points, the glorification of God does conflict with the happiness of some human beings.⁷

So, Frame must admit that after all the sophistry is unmasked, the problem of evil remains a problem for him. Rather than question his Manichean presuppositions respecting eternal evil he concludes that the problem is insoluble for finite man. In this he is really only following his mentor Cornelius Van Til, who believed that the Scriptures are filled with *apparent contradictions*.⁸ How can God both love all mankind and wish their salvation and yet subject much of humanity to abide in a state of corruption that will endure forever. According to Frame’s worldview, God will not save mankind. Thus, he is not truly omni-benevolent. Calvinists, like Frame, Van Til, J.I. Packer and even John Calvin himself, relegate the texts that teach the love of God for all humanity to the ether of antinomy, rather than jettison their Manichean belief in an eternal evil. To their way of thinking, the concession to antinomy is a pious act of humility. They are prostrating their egos before the sovereignty of God and allowing him his rightful place as the final reference point for all truth. Now, this would certainly be commendable were it not connected to an arrogant hubris regarding their own theological acumen. Their concept of antinomy depends entirely upon a *prideful* assumption. It is founded on the conclusion that if *they* cannot come up with a resolution to this difficulty, no one else can either. By their own admission, their Manichean paradigm affords no resolution to this problem. It is logically inconsistent with an omnipotent benevolence. Therefore, say they, since God *is both* good and powerful, and since the eternal existence of evil cannot be questioned, it *must* be an antinomy.

This concession to logical inconsistency undermines all efforts at systematic theology because there is no way to tell the difference between an apparent contradiction and an actual one. It also directly impacts their doctrine of theistic ethics as well. How could a God who allows the unchecked existence of evil be morally defensible? Within the bounds of reformed theology, this problem runs deeper than most realize. If they are

7. *ibid.*

8. Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and The Gospel*, (Phillipsburg: P & R, 1984), p. 67.

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correct regarding predestination and reprobation, then God would certainly be guilty of violating his own moral standard. That is why Wesley made his famous declaration that “predestination makes God out to be worse than the Devil.” This is an unacceptable prospect, especially for those within the Reformed camp who hold that the law of God is an expression of his heavenly moral character. It would mean that the unchanging God was changing his mind and violating his own ethical standard.

Some within the reformed camp, who sense this difficulty take another approach. For them there is no antinomy. No apparent contradiction. They simply deny the benevolence of God altogether.

Divine Culpability

What is typically glossed over is that, despite the language that is suggestive of God’s absence, He was actually present when Adam and Eve sinned. He had to be or else He is not omnipresent. He was absent only from the human perspective. It was with respect to his visible presence, so far as Adam was concerned, that he was not there. But we can be certain, that, when Satan deceived our first progenitors, God was permitting it. It occurred directly in front of him. Therefore, we can only conclude that He wanted it to happen. He did this knowing full well that it would bring doom upon not only Adam but all his posterity after him. He allowed this tragedy to befall his only son. He allowed a sinless naive child to be deceived and finally to corrupt himself through that deception while he stood idly by and in so doing implicitly approved of the catastrophe.

Now if that ruin is irreversible, as our Manichean “orthodoxy” maintains, then God did less for his child Adam than Job did for his children. Job was a righteous man, so he offered sacrifices for his children just in case they might inadvertently sin. In other words, he was looking out for their spiritual well-being to the fullest extent that his limited powers permitted.

He was keeping the law of God with respect to parental obligation before it was codified through Moses on Mt Sinai. Job knew the *Shama* of Deuteronomy chapter six in his heart. The proponents of eternal torment want us to believe that God would do less for his only son than Job and willfully violate his own moral code regarding parental responsibility. They make God out to be a hypocrite who would command us to care for our children’s spiritual wellbeing while he abandoned billions of his own to utter ruin.

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This is logically inconsistent with John's description of God as the embodiment of love. Furthermore, Jesus refutes this idea with an *a fortiori* argument in his Sermon on the Mount which demonstrates God is more loving, not less loving than an earthly father.

What man of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

This verse also addresses another issue by implication. Jesus tells those who are *evil*, that God is their father. By implication then, God is father both to the righteous and the wicked not just to the elect, contrary to the Reformed position, or are we to understand the elect to be the ones whom Christ is referring to by the phrase, "you who are evil?"

Calvin's Theodicy

At the end of Book One of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin devotes a final chapter to the question of evil. CHAPTER 18 is entitled, "*THE INSTRUMENTALITY OF THE WICKED EMPLOYED BY GOD, WHILE HE CONTINUES FREE FROM EVERY TAIN.*"

This last chapter of his First Book consists of three parts:

Having previously stated, "God bends all the wicked and even Satan himself to his will," Calvin notes three common objections to this.

I: First, the common semi-Pelagian answer, namely, that bad things occur, only by the permission, not by the express will, of God.

To this objection, Calvin replies that all angels and men, good and bad, do only what God ordains them to do; and all their actions are directed by God. Now, in thus defending the Biblical doctrine of the sovereignty of God, Calvin leaves himself open to the charge that this makes God the ultimate author of sin. He attempts to answer this (unsuccessfully, as we shall see) under his answer to the third objection.

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II: The second objection Calvin rebuts is the assertion that there are two contrary wills in God, if by a secret counsel he decrees what he openly prohibits by his law. This objection he successfully refutes by showing that the seeming contradiction is removed when precision of language is employed. God decrees what he forbids. That is to say, he orchestrates events and circumstances in such a way that there will be opposition to his law. Although he shows that these things are not contradictory, he fails to give a viable explanation as to why God would ever decree that there should exist in some miserable creatures an endless moral opposition to his law. John Frame is correct when he observes that Calvin's system does not supply a cogent explanation for this action on God's part.

III. The third objection Calvin addresses is the result of the way he deals with the first objection. The semi-Pelagian, says Calvin, will object that God is made the author of all wickedness, when he is said not only to use the agency of the wicked, but also to govern their counsels and affections.

Try as he might, Calvin fails miserably in his efforts to exonerate God here, because his adherence to the Manichean principle of irrevocable endless torment does not allow for a sufficient answer to the charge. While it is true that God is not the *direct* moral agent responsible for man's sinful deeds, He can scarcely be exonerated, since He *is* the one who set everything in motion to ensure that miserable rebel would unerringly act according to a sinful pattern of behavior. He is hardly "free of *every taint*." To exonerate God on the ground that He was not the direct cause of man's sins would be like exonerating the mafia boss because his lackey pulls the trigger in a mob hit. God holds men accountable, not only for their direct actions but for their omissions as well. When a man fails to do all that is in his power to preserve the life of his neighbor, he is guilty of the sin of omission. According to the Westminster Shorter Catechism, sin is not only *direct* transgression of the law of God, but also any lack of conformity to it. How much more would the omniscient and omnipotent one be culpable for such a breach?

I am not the only one to see this truth. John Frame makes the same observation in his *The Doctrine of God*. There Frame writes:

Calvin defended God against the charge of being the author of sin by pointing out that God was not the proximate, but only the remote cause of human sin. Many other Reformed thinkers have followed suit. But I find it unpersuasive to defend God's goodness

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merely by saying his involvement with sin is indirect. In legal contexts, we hold gang leader guilty for the crimes he orders his subordinates to commit, even though the leader does not personally commit them; we may recall the infamous case of Charles Manson in this connection. This principle is scriptural. As we have seen, the owner of a bull is responsible for the damage his bull causes, even though the owner did not do the damage himself (Ex 21:28-36)⁹

The last point he successfully answers; namely that, if God is the ultimate cause of man's sinful behavior, then the wicked are unjustly punished. Even if God predestined man to sin, it was never against man's will. Since man sinned volitionally and not by coercion, he remains guilty, even though God orchestrated the fall by employing the instrumentality of the wicked.

However, the failure of the semi-Pelagian's attempt to exonerate man based on divine sovereignty does not therefore exonerate God. When Calvin prosecutes man's guilt, he merely further implicates God. God could have kept man from sinning and instead abandoned him to calamity. If Calvin's Manichean view of personal eschatology proved true, God would be just as culpable, perhaps even more so, than a human parent, if he were to neglect the spiritual well-being of his child and that child were to fall into ruin as a result.

In cases of parental neglect, human society is justified in its charge against the negligent parent. Such was the failure of Eli with his wicked sons. So too, that of David who neglected Absalom. Job is commended for his diligence in preserving his children's spiritual integrity, how much more so, *a-fortiori*, must the omniscient and omnipotent God be subject to condemnation according to his own unchangeable standards, if the Manichean doctrine of Augustine is truly representative of the situation?

The Annihilationist Theodicy

Adherents of Annihilationism or conditional immortality as it is sometimes referred to, share a belief in the ultimate annihilation of evil with the Universalists. For both Annihilationist and Universalist, evil comes to an end. However, proponents of conditional immortality do not avoid all

⁹ John Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2002) p.155.

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Manichean implications in their eschatology. They too have theodicy issues because although they defend the sovereignty of God over eternal evil, they do not answer the charges that would be leveled against God respecting his own internal conduct. According to their view, God is still responsible for the sin of omission with respect to his abandonment of his parental responsibility in the deception of Satan and the fall of man. Like the advocates of endless torment their paradigm also makes God out to be responsible by implication for shirking his obligation and permitting the doom of his son and his son's posterity.

Although the Annihilationist paradigm is more merciful than that of the advocates of endless torment, it is still a far cry from a characterization of God that is consistent with the testimony of the Bible. For the Annihilationist God can be merciful in bringing the suffering of the wicked to an end, but he is not love. Their doctrine places an irreversible and eternal rift between his love and his justice.

The reason for this is that, in the final analysis, Annihilationism, just as much as Eternal Torment, still rests upon a Manichean God of equally ultimate good and evil. For both systems drink from the same well. Both systems rely on the lie of the devil that evil is as eternal as goodness. For advocates of ET evil exists forever. For Annihilationists it is the ill effects of evil that remain forever. Some of God's creations are eternally lost. Although evil doers are not eternal, their works endure forever!

A Universalist Theodicy

Only on Universalist grounds can there be a way to absolve God of all culpability for Man's dire predicament. Only Universalism allows for a cogent theodicy. For only Universalism predicates the abolition of evil. John Frame is on the right track when he surmises that the resolution to the problem of evil must be some form of "greater good" theodicy.

Only if evil comes to an end can God be vindicated. Only if the fall of Adam ultimately results in Man's advancement, and that of his progeny, can God be justified. Only when we view the Fall as a necessary component in our development as children of God can we see the wisdom in our Heavenly Father's decision to allow the Fall in the first place.

It is true that the reasons why this approach was necessary are unclear, but we can allow God to reveal them all in good time. With Leibniz, we must assume that this is indeed *the best of all possible worlds*, at least for the present. Since there are varying viewpoints among

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Universalists touching the fine points of their doctrine, naturally there will be varied resolutions to the problem of evil as well.

On the basis of a Universalist presupposition, we find all the pieces of the puzzle fitting together harmoniously. Some of them may be cloaked in mystery, but none of them contradict the others. We can account for the fall, sin, and Divine wrath without negating the loving kindness of God one iota. In fact, when Universalism is our starting point, the wrath of God becomes nothing more than a comforting expression of God's infinite love revealed by the negation of all that is opposed to it. God cannot look upon sin precisely because God is love.

In order to make sense of God's plan for mankind it is not only helpful but absolutely essential to study who it is we are worshiping. The subject of theodicy which we have begun to examine in this chapter calls for such an investigation of the character of the divine being. This holds true precisely because man was created in the image of God. The subject of the *imago dei* is intimately connection with this whole question of theodicy particularly as it pertains to the final fate of the lost. Paul explicitly states that man knows the law of God. It is imprinted in our very natures as God's image bearers. Now, it is true that the image was defaced because of the fall, and that this defacement leads to false ideas regarding right and wrong. But when fallen man errs in the way of ethics it's not to behave with greater love and benevolence than God but rather the opposite. Our Lord made this plain in his sermon on the mount when he argued for the superiority of God's benevolence over man's.

⁹Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? ¹⁰Or if he asks a fish, will he give him a serpent?

¹¹If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him? – Matt. 7:9-11

So, as the slogan goes, we should always be asking, "what would Jesus do?" If we think we understand the plan of God on a particular point and our belief paints a picture of God that conflicts with God's moral character as revealed in Scripture, we can be sure our interpretation has gone awry somewhere. Van Til is correct when he notes that man is to be re-creatively reconstructive rather than creatively constructive. We are to think God's thoughts after Him. And because man is fallen, and our hearts are not in the right place all too often, we need to be immersed in the word of God

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constantly. It is there that the clearest expression of the divine character is spelled out for us in minute detail. This brings us to the topic of the comprehensibility of the divine revelation, for if the image of God is corrupt, we need a sure anchor to keep us tethered to the moral code with which we were originally instilled.

Is God Comprehensible?

Although his own theology is not without controversial aspects, Edward Beecher was correct when he took umbrage at the orthodoxy of his day for denying the comprehensibility of God. Today, the situation is, if anything, even worse. We have already noted that such theologians as Frame, Van Til, Packer and Calvin all advocate a form of antinomy in their systems of doctrine. This plea for incomprehensibility is not only unscriptural, it is also dangerous. If followed to its logical resting place it renders systematic theology impossible. As Beecher puts it:

Nothing can be more striking in the history of opinions, both in the pagan and Christian world, that the consistency and intensity with which the powerful spirit of evil has promulgated and maintained the view that the character of the supreme God, as infinite and absolute, is beyond the comprehension of finite minds.¹⁰

The importance of the comprehensibility of divine character cannot be stressed enough. We shall return to this problem of the denial of God's comprehensibility again and again throughout this study as we see the various ways that so-called orthodoxy seeks to undermine this important true and lay waste to all advancement in the area of doctrinal study.

Comprehensibility presupposes objects of comprehension. Specifically, these objects are the attributes of God which man can either comprehend or not comprehend. When speaking of divine attributes, it is traditional to divide them into communicable and incommunicable attributes. It goes without saying, that an attribute that man possesses would be comprehensible, since he too possesses it. So, it seems that those aspects of God which one might consider incomprehensible would also be associated or identified as his incommunicable attributes.

10. Edward Beecher, *Concord of Ages*, (New York: Derby & Jakson, 1866). P.248.

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Among these are freedom, holiness and infinity. Man cannot know what it means to be perfectly free. To never experience any eternal forces that can affect or hinder our purposes. Man cannot know what it means to be perfect and free of any taint of corruption. So, holiness is an alien attribute as well. Infinity, like holiness, implies a mode of being that man can never fully comprehend. Nevertheless, there are limitations to these attributes that can be known from what has been revealed to us in Scripture. We shall examine a few of these briefly.

Divine Freedom

When it comes to divine freedom, there are Biblical principles which serve to hem in some accretions that have been promulgated by well-meaning but sloppy theologians. Unlike the situation with the game of horseshoes or the use of hand grenades, precision counts in theology. When we speak of freedom, we do so in contradistinction to necessity. But to be more accurate, there is more than one type of freedom and more than one type of necessity. Therefore, it is required to distinguish which type of freedom and which type of necessity we are referring to when we investigate the question of divine freedom. Failure to do this causes all sorts of mischief and is responsible for many of the doctrinal errors that are espoused by well-meaning but mistake theologians. One such error is the miss-application of the freedom of God in such a way that it becomes the means of negating the immutability of his moral character.

When we ascribe a libertarian freedom to God, when questions of soteriology are raised, the force of God's perfect benevolence is undercut and subverted. We find a striking example of this in Frame, when he minimizes the love of God to make place for God' freedom. He says,

I know of nothing in God's nature that prevented him from not creation or not redeeming. To put the point positively, there is nothing in God's nature that requires him to create or redeem.¹¹

Now, this is an astonishing statement! Frame is right about creation. There is no moral impetus to create. But once created, man became God's responsibility, just as a child is for any earthly father, only more so. So, there

11. *ibid.*, p.235.

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is clearly a necessity to redeem. This subject, like that of divine comprehensibility will be stressed throughout this study and we return to it again and again.

In his work on Van Til, Frame discusses the difficulty Van Til struggled with the tension between freedom and necessity as it pertains to God.

Van Til similarly sees a limit to human logic in dealing with the problem of necessity and freedom in God. If God's will is directed by his intelligence, then it seems that his free acts, such as Creation and redemption, become necessary: God had to create and redeem us. If, however, God's acts are truly free, then it would seem that they must be unconnected with his intelligence and therefore random.: God just happened to create. Neither alternative is biblical. Scripture requires us to affirm both the intelligence and freedom of God's acts in Creation and redemption.¹²

Frame mentions the obvious resolution to this, not so difficult, "antinomy" in the distinction between types of freedom, but he does not elaborate further, perhaps because he is dealing with Van Til's thought here and as is all too often the case, Van Til had the tendency to set up alleged antinomies and walk away. Van Til delighted in doing this because he believed it was the pious thing to do. He considered attempts to reconcile these theological difficulties as an attempt of the creature to supplant the creator and assert ungodly autonomy in the realm of thought. But God gave us brains so that we would use them. His approach really amounts to an unbiblical form of fideism which denies the *imago dei* in the name of the creator-creature distinction.

When we consider God ontologically, we must recognize that there are aspects of both necessity and freedom. Frame pinpoints one vital aspect of God's being that is absolutely necessary. The aspect of aseity. He puts it this way:

I agree with Aquinas' view that God exists necessarily. He does not merely happen to exist. He must exist. His non-existence is impossible. ...His nonexistence is metaphysically impossible in that nothing or nobody can prevent him from existing or put him

12. John Frame, *Cornelius Van Til, An Analysis of His Thought*, (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1995), p.155.

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out of existence. His necessary existence then follows from his aseity or self-existence...¹³

An additional aspect to the necessity of God's existence is couched in the form of a transcendental argument. Laws of logic, mathematics, ethics and other non-material realities, whose existence are universally affirmed, all presuppose the existence of God. Frame expresses the argument well:

It is also the case that God *must* exist if there is to be any meaning to the world. In a biblical worldview, God is the basis for all reality, and therefore for all rationality, truth, goodness and beauty. Logic itself is based on his nature, and the logical structure of the world and the human mind is based on the fact that God's rationality, his wisdom, is reflected in the creation. Without him, therefore, we could not even speak rationally. Therefore, we must presuppose his existence in all rational thought and action. When we ascribe existence to anything in the world, we must ascribe existence to God. So, we must regard God's existence as more sure, more certain, than the existence of anything else.

That includes even logic; so, in one sense God is *logically* necessary. This is not to say that God's existence can be proved by logical axioms alone, or that God doesn't exist can be shown to be contradictory... The point, rather, is that God's existence is necessary to the very existence of logic, for he is the very source of logical truth...

Notice here how epistemological considerations can lead to metaphysical conclusions. For human knowledge to be possible, certain metaphysical conditions (including the existence of God) must be satisfied. ... On any rational view of the matter, therefore, God exists, and exists necessarily. This is a "transcendental" argument, reasoning from the necessary conditions of human knowledge.¹⁴

From this necessity of God's being Frame derives another important necessity. The necessity I refer to is that of God's defining attributes. The necessary existence of God implies that his defining attributes also exist

13. Frame, *Doctrine of God*, op. cit., p.230-231.

14. *Ibid.*

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necessarily. This raises the question of how to distinguish between defining and non-defining attributes.

Frame sees creation and redemption as non-defining attributes. As far as I can tell, creation may be a non-defining attribute. It is possible that God could abstain from creating and still be true to Himself. Perhaps He must create. Perhaps it is an essential aspect of His being. But what is certain is that once something has been created, He *must* redeem it.

Unfortunately, as we shall see, Frame fails to maintain the force of his own argument at this point. He falters because he fails to discern how non-defining attributes can impact defining ones in certain contexts. For example, he argues that since God did not have to create but was free not to create, he was also free not to redeem. But is this true? No! For, once created, the creature became his charge every bit as much as our children are our charges. We are under no obligation to have children. The scripture says a man may become a eunuch for the Lord, devoting his life entirely to the Lord's work, if he so chooses. But – once a man has a child he is thenceforth obligated to care for that child. In fact, the man who fails to provide for his family is denounced as worse than an unbeliever! So, if this is true for finite and imperfect men, how much more so is it true for the perfect God. How then is God free not to redeem given his necessary attributes of perfect benevolence and righteousness? How is God morally free to be less humane than man?

Frame here confuses the concepts of free grace and election with libertarian freedom. Free and sovereign grace means that God is not under any moral compulsion to save us by virtue of any merit we have earned. We do not deserve redemption. No one does. But that is not the same thing as to say that God is not morally bound to redeem us, by his obligation to care for us as children, even though we are undeserving. Or even worse to argue that God is morally prohibited from redeeming us because of our sins. I have argued for divine culpability elsewhere in this volume because it is an important point. The problem of evil rears its ugly head again and we see that although salvation is by underserved favor and the recipients are all unworthy, there yet remains an obligation on the part of God to rectify the terrible situation he willed into existence by divine decree. So, the truths of free grace and unworthy recipients do not remove the problem of divine culpability. In the final analysis, this reduces to a question of divine righteousness. Is God holy, or isn't he? But we are confident that the judge of the world shall do right. In the end all shall be well.

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In the second place there is the implications for divine benevolence reflected in this question of redemption. Even if we set aside the first point regarding divine culpability it is not enough to say that God is under no obligation to save the lost. For to turn a deaf ear to the cries of the lost is not benevolent. Perhaps if God were a cold but just God, he might be able to do that. But he is not such a God. He is the perfection of benevolence. That is what it means to say God is love.

So, although God may not be constrained by any *external* coercion to redeem, one his children were born, they became his sheep and he became the good shepherd. The *internal* coercion of his own immutable benevolence then dictates with absolute assurance that he will redeem the lost. To deny this is to utterly deny the perfection of God's benevolence. Furthermore, it is to scribe a libertarian freedom in God which separates him from the dictates of his own immutable attributes of love and holiness.

Ironically, Frame himself acknowledges that "in the libertarian sense, God is no freer than man."¹⁵

Holiness

As we pursue this study of the attributes of God, as they pertain to this question of the problem of evil, there is another vitally important one that demands our consideration. That is the attribute of holiness. The benevolence, sovereignty and law of God are all far above anything that a mere mortal can aspire to. That is why God is called holy. The attribute of holiness is really an expression of the way these other attributes of the divine being compare with our station as human beings. Cornelius Van Til liked to refer to this difference as the Creator-creature distinction. Barth said God is "wholly other."

This transcendence of God can also sometimes be distorted in such a way as to result in pushing God away from us, and making him unknowable, as in the case of neoorthodoxy. When this happens, it is an assault on the biblical doctrine of the image of God. The important point we must embrace about God's transcendence is that God's love, sovereignty and law are far more beautiful, far greater and far purer than anything our finite mind can comprehend. That is why he says; my ways are not your ways and my thoughts your thoughts. Etc.

15. Ibid, p.233.

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God's transcendence is his glory. The greater his transcendence the greater his glory. When something gets bigger it doesn't get harder to see. It gets easier to see. The weak of vision do not seek out books with smaller texts but large print editions. So too, contrary to the opinions of Barth and Van Til, the loftiness of God's transcendence shouts his glory to the heavens. It doesn't conceal it.

Infinity

Finally, there is the question about whether God possesses the attribute of infinity. I am not the first to raise this question. Reformed theologian Gordon H. Clark flatly denied the infinite character of God.

It has long been the custom to speak of God as infinite. Strange as it may seem to contemporary theologians, early Christianity did not make this assertion. Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century seems to have been the first person to call God infinite.¹⁶

He follows this assertion with a brief history of the protestant usage of this Thomistic concept and how it finally came to full flower in the reformed churches with the Westminster Confession.

The first Protestant use of the term *infinite*, so far as I can determine, occurs in the French Confession of 1959...The Belgic Confessions (1561, 1619) also have the term *infini*, citing Isaiah 34:6, which contains no mention at all of infinity. The *Scotch Confession* of 1560 has *infini* [sic]. *The Thirty-Nine Articles* and *The Irish Articles of Religion* both have "of infinite power."

The Westminster Confession of Faith and its two catechisms, abandon all restraint. In its second chapter the confession asserts that "There is but one only living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection." *The Larger Catechism* answers Question 7 by declaring that "God is a spirit, in and of himself infinite in being."¹⁷

16. Gordon H. Clark, *The Incarnation*, (Jefferson, MD: Trinity Foundation, 1998, p.56.

17. *Ibid*, p.57.

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Clark examines the proof texts that were used to bolster these strong assertions of God's infinity in the Westminster standards and finds them wanting. They chose verses from Job 11:7-9 as their proof of divine infinity. In these verses, Job's false friend says:

⁷ Canst thou by searching find out God? canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection? ⁸ It is as high as heaven; what canst thou do? deeper than hell; what canst thou know? ⁹ The measure thereof is longer than the earth, and broader than the sea.

– King James Version

In this passage, God's knowledge is proclaimed to be perfect, high as heaven and deeper than hell, but not infinite. With respect to their selection of this passage as a proof of infinity, Clark laments:

It is inexplicable how the men of the Westminster Assembly, devout and learned as they were, could have deliberately chosen these verses in Job to support their Thomistic addition to the Confession. Their action here was as unlearned and deceptive as could be.¹⁸

Clark further notes that there are only three places where the Hebrew and Greek of our Scriptures is translated by the English word infinite.

Ingrained as the doctrine of God's infinitude has now become, its Biblical basis is precarious or worse. The King James Version used the word *infinite* precisely three times; two of these translate one Hebrew word, neither of which means infinite.¹⁹

Of these three references, only one refers to God. That passage is Psalm 147:5 which is rendered, "Great is our LORD...His understanding is infinite." The Hebrew phrase translated "infinite" is *eyn mispar* אֵין מִסְפָּר, which means without number. The most likely meaning of this passage is therefore that the number of things God knows cannot be numbered by man. To say that man is finite is entirely different than saying God is infinite. Clark concludes his discussion of infinity with a bold assertion.

18. Ibid, p.58.

19. Ibid.

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Since then the word does not mean infinite, neither word in fact, God is not infinite, or at least the Bible does not say he is. ...The full conclusion is that the Bible definitely says he is not.²⁰

It should be noted that neither Clark nor the present writer is denying the omniscience or omnipotence of God. We affirm both enthusiastically. It is only the unbiblical Thomistic accretion of infinitude that is questioned. What exactly do we even mean by the term infinity? The colloquial definition is that of limitlessness. In terms of duration, God has limitless existence. He is eternal. In terms of location his presence is also limitless. He is omnipresence or immense. But, Frame observes, “when we speak of infinity in relation to other attributes, the term comes very close to meaning “perfection.””²¹

Does it really make sense to speak of God as infinitely just, or loving? Would it not make more sense to refer to him as *perfectly* just and loving? The reason why it seems inappropriate to affix the term infinite on moral characteristics is that it undermines the perfection of these attributes in God. Is his love truly infinite or is it actually limited to just the right objects and just the right degree? Would it be appropriate for God to love evil? Must we not insist that he hates evil? If so, we are saying that his love is, in fact limited. Conversely, can we say God’s wrath rests upon the righteous? Wouldn’t that be injustice? So, we see his wrath is limited by his benevolence and his justice. It should be obvious at this point that infinity is a non-sequitur when it comes to moral characteristic. Frame is right when he says the term as applied to these attributes is more aptly “perfection” not infinity. If a moral attribute were infinite it would be, by definition, imperfect or incomplete. Infinity has no end, so it never completes. Therefore, if something is infinite it is never finished. No matter how much of that thing we identify, there must always be more. That is what it means to be infinite. Ascribing this quality to a moral attribute makes it impossible to apply it to an object in any way that makes sense. God’s moral attributes are perfect and therefore, by definition, they are finite.

Communicable Attributes

Having considered a few of the incommunicable attributes we turn now to consider some that we hold in common with our Creator. Although

20. Ibid, pp.59-60.

21. Frame, “God” p.544.

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the question of God's final dealings with the human race impinges on most, if not all, of God's attributes, there are three in particular that are directly connected with the question. These are the love of God, or divine benevolence, the sovereignty of God and the law of God.

When it comes to examining these attributes of God, Limitarian theologians are, for the most part, like the blind men who were asked to describe an elephant. The first one, latching onto its trunk, said the elephant is long and sinuous like a snake. The second, feeling his bulky side said, it's like a huge wall. A third grasping its tail said, it's like a whip. Just so is the Limitarian, when asked to describe the nature and character of his God.

They view each attribute as a stand-alone quality rather than as interdependent and interrelated. At least the interdependency is never stressed. The result is that Limitarians are susceptible to developing erroneous doctrines and grave misconceptions because of this short sightedness.

Beginning with the love of God, we shall examine these three important attributes of God that have been so frequently set against each other in the light of their implication for a theodicy for the Christian God in general and universal restoration in particular. In so doing, we will expand on our understanding of what the Bible has to say about them with respect to our pursuit of a cogent theodicy. In the process, we shall place the interdependence of these three attributes on display. So, our chapter on divine benevolence will examine lordship and law in the light of God's lovingkindness. The chapter on lordship will examine God's love and law in terms of his sovereignty. And finally, the chapter on law will examine his love and sovereignty as they impact the law of God.

The reader will also note the close correlation between these three attributes and the three propositions with which we began our discussion of the problem of evil. The love of God relates to the first, the lordship to the second, and God's law to the third. Topics covered under the love of God necessarily spill over into our examination of God's lordship and his law. Some of the material may, for that reason seem to be redundant, but this is unavoidable, as it is the natural result of covering these important topics from three different perspectives. As we proceed, it is my sincere hope that the magnificence of God's holy character will be brought to light and that this light will cast out all the shadows of false and slanderous mischaracterizations of God that our Limitarian brethren have been spreading, in their ignorance, for over two millennia.

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For Further Reading

John M. Patton, *The Death of Death; or, A Study of God's Holiness in Connection with the Existence of Evil, in so far as Intelligent and Responsible Beings are Concerned. By an Orthodox Layman.* (Richmond, J.W. Randolph & English, 1878)

Adolph E. Knoch, *The Problem of Evil and The Judgments of God*

John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, Revised Edition (New York: Harper & Row, 1952)

John A.T. Robinson, *In The End God*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1968)

John Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God*

John Frame, *The Doctrine of God*

A.P. Adams, *The Purpose of Evil*, (New York: Harper & Row, 19xx)

John Essex and James Webb, *The Problem of Evil*, (New York: Harper & Row, 19xx)

Jay Adams, *The Grand Demonstration, a Resolution to the So-Called Problem of Evil*,