

TITLE PAGE

Student Number **96010** - Bachelor of Theology

Theology

Lecturer : Pastor Stephen Fogarty

Southern Cross College

Chester Hill Campus

Due Date: 2 May 1997
Handed In: 23 April 1997

Word Count: 2,048

Essay Question:

How could a good and loving God allow the tragedy at Port Arthur, Tasmania to happen?

INDEX

	Page Number
Abstract	3
Essay	4
Introduction	4
Greater Good	4
Free Will	5
Against Free Will - The Absolute Sovereign God	6
Sovereignty from the perspective of the End	7
The Suffering of Christ.....	8
Conclusion	9
Bibliography	11

Abstract

The tragedy at Port Arthur raises the problem of theodicy. Why doesn't a loving, sovereign God prevent evil, suffering and pain? In this paper we review various responses to this perennial conundrum, from claims that suffering is used by an absolutely sovereign God to produce an ultimate good, to the suggestion that evil is a result of human sin, and thereby outside of the sovereignty of God. We conclude that, although humanity is responsible for evil, God's love and mercy is such that he does not leave humankind alone in the consequences of sin. On the contrary, the cross and the resurrection reveal a God who not only meets us in the midst of suffering, but who has overcome suffering to bring liberty, partially in the present, and completely in the future.

Essay

Introduction

On Sunday 28th April 1996, Martin Bryant shot and killed thirty five people in Australia's worst ever mass murder. The compelling question facing the nation was, "what could have caused such a tragic event?" Since all answers to this question ultimately prove inadequate, we are left with a theological conundrum. How could a good and loving God allow such a seemingly pointless tragedy to occur? It is a question that has troubled theologians throughout the centuries, including biblical writers such as the authors of Job, Ecclesiasties and many of the Psalms. The label "theodicy" has come to be applied to theological attempts to defend God against the charge of injustice, although the types of arguments used vary greatly. In this essay, we shall review some of the more prominent responses, and suggest an answer that is both theological and pastoral in orientation.

The perplexing nature of the theodicy conundrum arises from two seemingly competing assumptions about the nature and character of God. The paradox is described by C.S. Lewis as follows:

If God were good, He would wish to make His creatures perfectly happy, and if God were almighty He would be able to do what he wished. But the creatures are not happy. Therefore God lacks either goodness, or power, or both.¹

In theological terms, we might say that the problem is that a loving and omnipotent God should prevent events such as those that occurred at Port Arthur (or Hiroshima, or the Holocaust, etc.). The fact that he does not prevent such horrendous and incomprehensible evil raises questions, either about God's omnipotence, or goodness or both.

Greater Good

¹C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, Great Britain: Fount Paperbacks, 1977, 21.

An initial response might firstly require a broader definition of “goodness.” In C.S. Lewis’s summation, goodness is equated with human happiness, yet it is now widely recognized that the relentless pursuit of happiness (i.e. hedonism), is a short term and inadequate conception of “the good.” In response to the problem of pain and suffering, we might then be able to argue that God has a wider perspective, and that a loving God has much more than our present good (or happiness) in mind. Rather, as Paul Helm argues, “God’s concern is directed toward the greater good.”² This means that suffering can serve a purpose, developing human character, and working toward goals that are more important than any immediate gratification. As the apostle Paul suggests, our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us (Rom. 8:18).

While this is a line of reason that has merit, and is valuable in certain instances, it provides an inadequate response to the problem of horrendous evil. It is very difficult to suggest that a greater good is served by the tragedy at Port Arthur, or by the events of the Holocaust. Is there an alternate means of understanding evil?

Free Will

The most common theodicy relates to the necessity of human free will, which can be shown to derive from God’s loving nature. To say that “God is love” is to express a relational understanding of God, which is perhaps most clearly evident in His triune nature. Not only is the triune God defined in terms of the perichoretic relations between the Father, Son and Spirit but, as Stanley Grenz asserts, “the triune God enters into relationship with the world He creates.”³ True relationship by necessity involves free will between the parties, which by its very nature entails the possibility of good or evil.⁴ As Gregory Boyd suggests, if a relational God is going to give humanity free will, “He has to allow for the possibility (or probability) of them misusing that freedom, even if it means hurting others.”⁵ Since the fall, the innumerable evils of history are testimony to humanities free choice to sin.⁶ Consequently evil is humanities responsibility, not God’s.

² Paul Helm, *The Providence of God*. London: InterVarsity Press, 1993, 203.

³ Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*. Grand Rapids: Broadman & Holman, 1994, 102.

⁴ i.e. We can have no true love relationship with God if we have cannot choose to disregard that love relationship.

⁵ Gregory Boyd, *Letters from a Skeptic*. Grand Rapids: Victor Books, 1994, 23.

⁶ Even natural evils can generally be attributed to the sin of man. Famine for example could be prevented if wealthy nations shared resources with those in poverty.

Against Free Will - The Absolute Sovereign God

Perhaps surprisingly, free-will theodicy is an argument that is not accepted by all scholars, particularly reformed theologians, who argue that God's sovereignty determines every event of creation. According to Don Carson, Paul Helm, J.I. Packer and others who reject the free will defense, the problem of such an argument is that it denies the Scriptural principle of God's absolute sovereignty, thereby making God contingent upon the free will of humanity. That is, because God is forced to respond to the human free choice, there exists a risk that he will be unable to bring to pass everything that He might wish to do.⁷

Reformed theologians thus reject the free will defense, concluding that the sovereign God is necessarily responsible for all world events. This perspective is rooted in the Protestant reaction against the medieval Church's semi-pelagianism and its "works-based" understanding of the atonement.⁸ The early Protestant reformers returned to the Greek and Augustinian doctrine of the absolute sovereignty of God, from which they developed their understanding of God's salvation as entirely a gift of God's grace, through faith alone. Perhaps the most famous expression of this concept of absolute sovereignty is John Calvin's doctrine of double predestination, in which he argues that "God once established by His eternal and unchangeable plan those whom he long before determined once and for all to receive into salvation, and those whom, on the other hand, he would devote to destruction."⁹ Thus, at the foundation of reformed theology is an assumption that every historical event and every personal decision is predetermined by God. Hence humanity, especially fallen humanity which is in bondage to sin, does not have freedom of choice.

This reformed understanding of the absolute sovereignty of God remains prominent in Evangelical theology today. In what both Carson and Helm describe as the "no-risk" view of God's providence, God has absolute sovereignty or control over the choices and

⁷ See Helm, *Providence*, 54.

⁸ Pelagius, the antagonist of Augustine in the 4th century, denied the doctrine of original sin, arguing that man has within himself the natural ability to become righteous. Thus man has a 'free will' to do both right and wrong. To Augustine, such a concept denied the sinful nature of man, and hence Pelagius was exiled as a heretic. By the Middle Ages however, the church had reverted to a doctrine similar to Pelagius ('Semi-Pelagianism'), which saw a church salvation as being a work of man, achieved through the sacraments.

⁹ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1559 Edition, Edited by McNeill, J.T, London: Westminster Press, 1953, 3.21.7.

actions of his creation, and the creation is incapable of doing anything other than that which is determined by the creator. Humanities free will, they argue, is not indeterministic, (i.e. freedom of choice), but deterministic (i.e. determined by God). We are not held accountable for our actions because we have any real choice in what we do, but are accountable despite the fact that our actions are determined by God, because we freely do what we want to do.¹⁰

It is immediately apparent that such a preconception of God's absolute sovereignty creates a major problem when we consider evil such as was revealed at Port Arthur. Does not such a perspective make of God a monster? Certainly not, argue the absolute sovereigntists, who then are forced to perform "logical gymnastics" to rationalise the dilemma. So, for example, Packer suggests that the absolute sovereignty of God, the goodness of God in the face of evil, and the responsibility of humanity is an "antimony", i.e. "it is not a real contradiction though it looks like one."¹¹ He argues that we simply need to recognise that "here is a mystery which we cannot expect to solve in this world."¹² Carson and Helm attempt to take us a step further, and reconcile the mystery by means of what they describe as "compatibilism." Compatibilism seeks to show the truth of two seemingly contradictory propositions. Firstly, compatibilists argue that "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."¹³ Secondly, they claim that, since God is ultimately responsible for evil, and since God is good, then God must have permitted or ordained evil for a morally good reason, that being the greater good, which is itself a mystery.¹⁴ It is, however, an inadequate, and even contradictory argument, since any good that is served by horrendous evil is, in fact, no good at all! Surely, it is not good enough to take the utilitarian position that "the end justifies the means."

Sovereignty from the perspective of the End

It can be argued that this Reformed position misunderstands the nature of God's sovereignty. The attempt by Carson, Helm, Packer and others to reconcile the concept of an absolutely sovereign God and loving God with the problems of evil and suffering in the world is not only untenable, but unnecessary. The God of Scripture is not absolutely

¹⁰ See Helm, *Providence*, 190-210; Don Carson *How Long O Lord - Reflections on Suffering & Evil*, Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1990, 200-220.

¹¹ J.I. Packer *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, Leicester, InterVarsity Press, 1961, 18.

¹² Packer, *Evangelism and Sovereignty*, 24.

¹³ Carson, *How Long O Lord*, 213.

sovereign. Yes he does harden the Pharaoh's heart (Exo. 11:10 - although perhaps only after his heart had already made its own choice), yes he does control the fate of nations, and yes he does intervene in the lives of people. But he also contends with evil, changes his mind, and relents of a particular course of action (e.g. Exo. 32:14). Not only does God allow people free choice, but he responds to that free choice (e.g. consider prayer).

In what sense, then, is God sovereign? According to Grenz, we must “differentiate between the present and final realities of God's sovereignty.”¹⁵ Firstly, God's absolute sovereignty is eschatological in nature. All Scripture, and indeed all history, points toward God's eschatological rule, where “every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2.11). That is not to say that God is not presently sovereign and, indeed, as creator He is by right sovereign. But presently the whole of creation is in bondage awaiting its liberation (Rom 8:21). As Grenz suggests, “Insofar as we are not what God intends us to be nor do what God intends that we do, God is not now *de facto* sovereign.”¹⁶ Nonetheless, from the perspective of the end, God's sovereignty is evident, in that he will act definitively in the future to bring to pass his will throughout creation, even if evil is presently the result of humanities attempt to reject his sovereign will. We can therefore argue that it is correct to affirm that evil is a consequence of humanities free choice to sin, as discussed above. When viewed from the perspective of the end, this in no way denies the sovereignty of God.

The Suffering of Christ

Implicit in the question “How could a good and loving God allow the tragedy at Port Arthur, Tasmania to happen?” is the belief that if God were real, he would be capable of and desirous of preventing such evil. As we have already suggested, humanities free will, which cannot be overruled by a loving relational God, is the cause of evil. But to say, as outlined above, that God will overcome in the end, is not enough to enable us to cope in the present. If all we have is eschatological hope, then the atheist challenge is still valid.

So, in addition to a free will theodicy, it is important that we note that God does not merely *allow* tragedies such as occurred at Port Arthur. Rather, from the perspective of

¹⁴ Helm, *Providence*, 200.

¹⁵ Grenz, *Theology for Community*, 140.

¹⁶ Grenz, *Theology for Community*, 142.

the cross, God meets humankind in the midst of tragedy. Jürgen Moltmann, influenced first hand by his experience as a prisoner of war, argues that the question asked by those affected by evil is not the theoretical question addressed in the above analysis but, rather, the cry, “My God, My God why have you forsaken me” (Mark 15:34). As Moltmann observes, “at the centre of the Christian faith we find the suffering of a passionate Christ.”¹⁷ In the cross we find not only atonement from guilt, but the “solidarity of God with us in our world of suffering.”¹⁸

What this means is that we are not abandoned by God in tragedy but, rather, are met by a compassionate God who understands our suffering, and more than this, by the Son of God who “actually enters into our situation of godforsakenness.”¹⁹ For Moltmann, there is no contradiction between a loving God and a suffering creation, for “the theology of the divine passion is founded on the biblical tenet, ‘God is love’.”²⁰

Of course, it is not sufficient that the “sufferer know that God is as much a helpless victim of evil as he is himself.”²¹ Jesus was not a helpless victim, but a willing sacrifice, and His story did not end at the cross, but rather with the resurrection. In the resurrection is God's promise of liberation, not only in the future, but at least partially in the present. Even today, when the sick are healed, the demonic freed, and lives transformed by the in-breaking power of God, we experience glimpses of “that glorious future reality” which is a consequence of the resurrection.²²

Conclusion

There is therefore two aspects to the problem of evil, suffering and pain, as experienced in the events of Port Arthur. Firstly, evil is humanities responsibility, and not God's. Secondly, however, God's love and mercy is such that he does not leave humankind alone in the consequences of sin. On the contrary, the cross and the resurrection reveal a God

¹⁷ Jürgen Moltmann., “The Passion of Christ and the Suffering of God,” *Asbury Theological Journal*, Vol. 48/1 (1993): 23-38.

¹⁸ Moltmann, “The Passion of Christ,” 24.

¹⁹ Richard Bauckham, “Only the Suffering God Can Help: Divine Passibility in Modern Theology,” *Themelios*, Vol. 9 (1984): 6–12.

²⁰ Jürgen Moltmann. *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*. London: SCM Press, 1981, 57.

²¹ Richard Bauckham 'Only the suffering God can help: divine passibility in modern theology', *Journal of Theology*, 1984, 12.

²² Grenz, *Theology for Community*, 142.

who not only meets us in the midst of suffering, but who has overcome suffering to bring liberty. The liberty brought about by Christ is experienced in the present by a release from the bondage of sin, and in the eschaton by the establishment of the absolute sovereign rule of God, which will for all time totally destroy evil, suffering and pain.

Bibliography

Bauckham, R., "Only the Suffering God Can Help: Divine Passibility in Modern Theology", *Themelios*, Vol. 9 (1984): 6–12.

Boyd, G., *Letters from a Sceptic*. Grand Rapids: Victor Books, 1994.

Calvin, J., *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1559 Edition, ed. McNeill. England: Westminster Press, 1963.

Carson, D., *How Long O Lord - Reflections on Suffering & Evil*. Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 1990.

Grenz, S., *Theology for the Community of God*. Grand Rapids: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994.

Helm, P., *The Providence of God*, Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 1993.

Lewis, C.S., *The Problem of Pain*. Great Britain: Fount Paperbacks 1977.

Moltmann, J. 'The Passion of Christ and The Suffering of God'. *Asbury Theological Journal*, Vol. 48/1, (1993):23-38.

Moltmann, J., *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*. London: SCM, 1981.

Packer, J.I., *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*. Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 1961.

Stephens, S.T. *Mysticism & Martyrdom in the Theology of Jurgen Moltmann*. Sydney: Southern Cross College (unpublished), 1997.