

God: the Architect of Evil? (Part 1 of 2)

By W.L. Bredenhof

As of late the subject of apologetics is receiving more attention in our circles and for this we may be glad. It's been a long time coming. Apologetics is basically the defence of the Christian faith. Apologetics deals with important issues we encounter when we speak with non-Christians. In this two-part series, I want to consider one of those important issues, namely the problem of evil. I should note at the outset that is not going to be an exhaustive treatment of this important subject. There's **a lot** that could be written about it, but these articles will only be introductory in nature.

The problem of evil is addressed by apologetics. As a discipline, apologetics has its roots in what the Bible says in 1 Peter 3:15, "But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect..." This is a command that comes to all believers, young and old alike. We are to be prepared to give an answer, literally it says, "be prepared to do apologetics." In other words, be prepared to give a careful, reasoned defence for what you believe.

If you speak regularly with unbelievers, you start to see patterns emerge. There are certain key objections that come up regularly. These objections have always been there and they've often left believers speechless, not knowing what to say. That's why apologetics is important – it equips us to have an answer. Now maybe it won't be an answer that unbelievers appreciate or find convincing, but we should still be able to give them a well-thought out answer to any objections that they might have to the Christian faith.

The Resurgence of Atheism

Over the last couple of years, there have been a number of popular books by atheists. For instance, Richard Dawkins wrote *the God Delusion*. Dawkins is a biologist and he argues that belief in God closes people's minds to science, oppresses women and children, and stands in the way of the evolution of the human race. Christopher Hitchens wrote, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. Hitchens argues that atrocities performed in the name of religion throughout history make a solid case against God. However, there was another book that also came out and it too received a lot of publicity. It's by a former atheist, Antony Flew. His book is entitled, *There is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind*. Now Flew hasn't become a Christian, at least not yet. However, he did make the move from denying God's existence to believing in God's existence and in this book he explains how.

First he explains how he became an atheist as a teenager. There was one particular issue that drove him to this position. Antony Flew's father was a minister, a Christian preacher. Actually, he was a man of some importance in his church and this led him to do a lot of travelling throughout Europe. And he was able to take his wife and son on those travels. Antony Flew was in Europe in the time right before World War II. In Germany, he observed the Nazi

preparations for the holocaust, the anti-Jewish signs and regulations. He says, “Such experiences sketched the background of my youthful life and for me, as for many others, presented an inescapable challenge to the existence of an all-powerful God of love.” The seeds of atheism were planted and they started to bear fruit in high school where he says, “I was regularly arguing with other twelfth graders that the idea of a God who is both omnipotent [all-powerful] and perfectly good is incompatible with the manifest evils and imperfections of the world.” It was partly this problem, what we call the problem of evil, that led Antony Flew to become an atheist.

Taking the Problem Seriously

We have to take the problem of evil seriously. This is the most serious objection that an unbeliever can bring against the truth of the Christian faith. Suffering and evil seem to cry out against the existence of God, at least a God who is both all-good and all-powerful. Look around you and you’ll see man’s cruelty, stories of oppression and hatred, poverty and racism. Even in the natural world, we see suffering and pain: birth defects, parasites, cancer, starvation, hurricanes, tornadoes, wildfires, earthquakes, and we could go on.

We need to take all of this seriously. We must insist upon the reality and the serious nature of evil. Evil is real and it is ugly. Suffering is real and we can’t just pretend that it doesn’t exist.

The problem of evil has been wrestled with not only by theologians and philosophers and people who study apologetics, but also by novelists. One of the most famous examples is from Fyodor Dostoevsky. I think Dostoevsky captures the essence of the problem very accurately in a well-known passage from his novel *the Brothers Karamazov*. It’s a bit of a long passage, and I should warn you that it is graphic, but I think that by the end of it, you’ll understand full well what the problem of evil is and how serious it is. This is Ivan speaking with his brother Alyosha:

“People talk sometimes of bestial cruelty, but that’s a great injustice and insult to the beasts; a beast can never be so cruel as a man, so artistically cruel...

I’ve collected a great, great deal about Russian children, Alyosha. There was a little girl of five who was hated by her father and mother...You see, I must repeat again, it is a peculiar characteristic of many people, this love of torturing children, and children only...It’s just their defenselessness that tempts the tormentor, just the angelic confidence of the child who has no refuge and no appeal that sets his vile blood on fire...

This poor child of five was subjected to every possible torture by those cultivated parents. They beat her, thrashed her, kicked her for no reason till her body was one bruise. Then they went to greater refinements of cruelty – shut her up all night in the cold and frost in an outhouse, and because she didn’t ask to be taken up at night they smeared her face and filled her mouth with excrement, and it was her mother, her mother did this! And that mother could sleep, hearing the poor child’s groans! Can you understand why a little creature, who can’t even understand what’s done to her, should

beat her little aching heart with her tiny fist in the dark and cold, and weep her meek unresentful tears to dear, kind God to protect her? Do you understand why this infamy must be and is permitted? Why, the whole world of knowledge is not worth that child's prayer to 'dear, kind God'!

Imagine that you are creating a fabric of human destiny with the object of making men happy in the end, giving them peace and rest at last, but that it was essential and inevitable to torture to death only one tiny creature – that baby beating its breast with its fist, for instance – and to found that edifice on its unavenged tears, would you consent to be the architect on those conditions? Tell me, and tell me the truth."

"No, I wouldn't consent," said Alyosha softly.

You may think that's just a fictional novel, but there was a recent news story about the discovery of an abused feral child somewhere in the United States that's very similar. This child never received any human love or interaction and grew up to be feral, basically a wild child who didn't know to speak or relate to other human beings. Those sorts of stories make us angry and indignant. How can people do this? Moreover, they evoke this reaction not only with us, but also with unbelievers. Unbelievers also get upset about the evil and suffering that exist in the world. However, for them, it is an argument against God. The problem of evil keeps them from joining with us in our faith.

In the second instalment, we will consider one way to address the problem.

God: the Architect of Evil? (Part 2 of 2)

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In the first instalment, we noted that the problem of evil is real and it must be taken seriously. It is one of the foremost objections brought to the Christian faith and one which we will also encounter regularly in our conversations with unbelievers. Apologetics is the discipline that looks at the Bible for guidance in how to address these sorts of problems.

Basically, the problem of evil boils down to this: if God is all-powerful, then he must be able to prevent or remove evil if he wants to. If God is all-good, then certainly he wants to prevent or remove evil. Yet no one can deny that evil exists. Thus, unbelievers will say that there is a problem in our worldview, our way of looking at the world, including the place, character and existence of God. They'll say that there is a logical defect in the Christian faith.

Addressing the Problem: Defining Good and Evil

How do we address this? As noted last time, we should first openly acknowledge that evil is indeed a serious problem. We must never be glib about it or minimize it. But then where do we go from there? We have to recognize something about the unbeliever. The fact is, he or she acknowledges the existence of evil, and on the flip side, the existence of good. So, we need

to ask the question: what does the unbeliever mean by “good”? By what standard does the unbeliever determine what is good or what is evil? What are the presuppositions, or most fundamental and unquestioned beliefs of the unbeliever, that allow him or her to make any moral judgments at all?

Perhaps you’ll meet unbelievers who say that “good” is whatever most people think is good. But just because a large number of people think that something is good, that doesn’t automatically make it good, and even unbelievers can see that. The best example is the one from Antony Flew’s youth. The majority in Nazi Germany believed it was “good” to exterminate the Jews. So, is it good? The vast majority of unbelievers you’ll meet will agree that the Nazi holocaust was patently and absolutely evil.

On the other hand, perhaps you’ll meet unbelievers who say that “good” is whatever you think is good. If that’s the case, I can punch you in the nose and that’s good because I think it’s good. You might not think it’s good, but it doesn’t really matter. I think it’s good, therefore it’s good. Or we could think of abusing children again. The parents of that poor Russian child in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* thought it was good to abuse her, to rape her and to torture her. If they think it’s good, who are we to impose our standards of morality on them? You see, when pressed most unbelievers will be forced to admit that good and evil are not determined by our opinions, but by some objective standard outside of ourselves.

The problem of evil is a problem for the unbeliever. It’s a problem because he or she cannot account for the existence of objective good and evil in the world. Unbelievers can talk glibly about good and evil being relative, but when they’re faced with atrocities like war, rape, and torture, they’ll usually back down. They’ll begin agreeing that morality, that good and evil, are in fact, absolute and objective realities. However, the problem is that they cannot account for these things within their way of looking at the world, their worldview. With the unbeliever’s worldview, there is no valid reason for saying that anything is evil in itself, instead it all becomes a matter of personal feelings, or perhaps the agreements of a society to live a certain way.

We can be thankful, then, when unbelievers get upset about evil and about suffering. In order to get upset, they have to presuppose or assume the reality, the truth of the Christian worldview. They have to assume that there is in fact an absolute standard of good and evil, even if they can’t identify it as being God’s law. With their arguments they reveal the truth of what we read in Romans 1 and 2, namely that unbelievers know in their hearts that God exists and that he will judge in righteousness, but they suppress this truth. They live in self-denial. On the one hand, they speak as if some things are inherently evil (for instance, child abuse), but on the other hand they’ll talk as if good and evil are a matter of your own personal choices. We have to call unbelievers on this inconsistency. In order to argue against the Christian faith, they have to secretly borrow certain truths from the Christian faith. To put it in Greg Bahnsen’s words, “Antitheism presupposes theism to make its case.”

And so the problem of evil is a problem for the unbeliever rather than the believer. As Christians we can make perfect sense out of our disgust and hatred for things like child abuse. The non-Christian cannot. Our moral outrage fits with our worldview, our way of looking at the world, it fits with the Christian faith. The unbeliever's worldview simply cannot account for the existence of evil.

Defending the Christian Worldview

But that still leaves us with this supposed problem in the Christian worldview. To remind you, the problem looks like this:

God is all-powerful.
 God is all-good.
 Evil and suffering exist.

The unbeliever has a problem with the third premise or statement. However, from the unbeliever's perspective we have a problem holding to all three of these truths together. There appears to be inconsistency and incoherence in the Christian worldview.

However, if we presuppose or assume that God is perfectly and absolutely good, as the Bible obviously teaches us, then we have to evaluate everything in the light of that presupposition. So, when the believer sees evil events or things or suffering in the world, and thinks about it, he has to be consistent with that presupposition or assumption of God's goodness. In other words, we infer that God must have a morally good reason for the evil and suffering that exist. If we hold to all four of these truths or premises, then there is no logical contradiction or inconsistency in the Christian worldview. It is part of our growth in the Christian faith, part of our sanctification, that we come to see that whatever evil and suffering exist, exists for a good and just reason, even if we can't know what that reason is.

Two Biblical Illustrations

To illustrate this, we can point to two examples from the Bible. Think of the great injustice and evil done against Joseph by his brothers: throwing him into a well and then selling him to slave-traders. Imagine doing that to your own flesh and blood, your own brother! Joseph ends up in Egypt and then, again through no fault of his own, he ends up in prison. Again, there's injustice and evil done against an innocent man. But in Genesis 45, when Joseph reveals himself to his brothers, he tells them that it was God who was behind all of this. God sent Joseph on ahead and allowed him to suffer all this injustice and evil so as to preserve life. Then in Genesis 50, after Jacob dies, Joseph reassures his brothers. His brothers think that since Jacob their father is dead, now Joseph is going to try and get his revenge. But note what Joseph says to them, "But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive."

That's a good example, but it's not the best one. The best one is the greatest crime in all history. I said that Joseph was an innocent man, but that's not completely true, is it? He was still a sinner in God's eyes. However, there was a man who was completely and totally innocent, also innocent in God's eyes. Our Lord Jesus suffered and died, though he was, of himself, totally righteous. The greatest evil ever perpetrated happened two thousand years ago on Golgotha. Lawless and wicked men put a truly innocent man to death and made him suffer in horrific ways. Yet, what does Peter say in Acts 2:23? He says that our Lord Jesus was handed over "by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God." He says that God ordained this and he brought it about for a good purpose: the salvation of all who believe in Christ.

You see, the problem of evil is not actually a problem for the Christian. It's only an *apparent* problem. When considered in the light of all that the Bible teaches, we can make some sense of evil and suffering in the world. No, we won't understand why every instance occurs and we may struggle with that. We may struggle with the suffering and evil that we've experienced in our lives. But in the end we can trust our heavenly Father that he always does what is best. He always does what fits with his righteous and good character. As Abraham says in Genesis 18:25, "Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

The problem of evil boils down to whether or not we will trust God and his Word, or whether we place faith in our human thinking, abilities and values. It's a question of faith. It's a question of ultimate authority. That takes us back to the Garden of Eden and the question that the serpent asked Eve, "Did God really say...? Come on Eve, you can judge for yourself, you don't need the Word of God." Should we take God and his Word in faith or should we judge God on our own grounds and on our own terms? In the words of C.S. Lewis, do we dare to put "God in the dock"?

This is what we need to gently and lovingly drive home to our unbelieving friends, co-workers, and fellow students. We need to demonstrate that the Christian worldview makes sense of the world. We need to tear down the non-Christian worldview and bring unbelievers to see that without Christ, and without his Word, nothing makes sense. Moreover, we need to be able to winsomely and persuasively share the good news of our Saviour with them.

I gratefully acknowledge Greg Bahnsen's treatment of this subject in *Always Ready: Directions for Defending the Faith* (Texarkana: Covenant Media Press, 1996). There are other ways of approaching the problem of evil. For one alternative approach, see my article "Conversation on a River," *Outreach* 10 (April 2001), 6-7. This article is available on-line at www.reformedevangelism.com – look under the "Library" tab.