

A Letter to a Baptist Minister about: THE ORIGIN OF EVIL

Rev. R.C. Harbach

Dear Frank:

Your question of some time ago, "Where did sin originate?" is admittedly a difficult one. Both pagan and modern thought have wrestled with this age-old problem of evil, but have no adequate solution honoring to God. Reformed theology (the doctrine of Scripture) alone faces the matter squarely, and handles the subject with any degree of success. Philosophy presents evil as something that has always existed, and is as eternal of "God." The problem of evil is also a problem for God, for He never quite overcomes it in His battle for righteousness. But this creates an added problem, that of the unthinkable situation of two infinities, God and sin, existing at the same time. God the one infinite dwells in the infinite environment of sin, which is an ultimate, impersonal power over against God. But the idea of the two ultimate's suggests the thought that one of them simply cannot be ultimate, and the suggestion, according to philosophy, is not in God's favor. Modern thought is encumbered with a finite God, a God who is not God.

The Zoroastrian theory of the origin of evil is that of dualistic pantheism; that is, "God" who is the sum total of all reality is part good and part evil. God's being, then, consists of these two antithetical, or rather contradictory elements, good and evil, which eternally clash, and shall continue to do so without end, not one ever finally overcoming the other, since both are equally absolute. Deism conceives of God as entirely independent of His creation, standing aloof from it as a mere spectator of its unraveling, permitting the course of the world to fall out of itself. Still the optimistic Deists believe that the good in the world will eventually overcome the evil in the world, since the evil has come into being by accident or chance. And, in keeping with Deism, this vanquishing of the evil is without the help of God. Before the world quite unwinds itself, evil will have expired.

The Arminian view of sin's origin is similar, as it is rather deistic. God is only a spectator with regard to sin, being absolutely independent of it, having no contact with it except in occasionally step in to overrule it. God is not the sovereign providential Ruler over evil, which always has it in subjection to His will. Evil was not part of His plan, although He could have made a world without it. It was Satan, the wicked fallen angel, who planned sin by his own "free" will, and God simply permitted it. God foreknew that this catastrophe would occur, but He did not determine sin's entrance. It is man who determines and wills sin, not God. Christian Science makes sin a mere abstraction; an error of mortal mind, Modernism regards it as a subjective sense of guilt which we allow unnecessarily to oppress our minds. But sin has objective reality, yet not independently of God, but under His sovereign control. He governs all sinful acts without becoming the author of sin, or doing violence to the will of the creature. "Him being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain" (Acts 2:23). "Of a truth against Thy holy child Jesus... both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together for to do whatsoever Thy hand and Thy counsel determined before to be done" (4:27f). "The lot is cast into the lap, but the whole disposing thereof is or the Lord" (Proverbs 16:33).

Now sin did not come about by the power of Satan, nor did he create it. No creature has power to create. But sin came about because God ordained its existence. He willed sin, not as sin, but as a means to reveal the glory of His covenant. In Isaiah 45:7 we read, "I for the light,

and create evil. I the Lord do all these things". On this verse, C.I. Scofield says, the "evil" is the "Heb, word translated "sorrow, wretchedness, adversity, afflictions, calamities, but never translated sin. God creates evil only in the sense that He made sorrow, wretchedness, etc. to be the fruits of sin." This makes sin a dualistic power over against God, and the evil in the text only providential evil, not moral evil. As a matter of fact, "ra" is tendered "sorrow" but once (Genesis 44:29), "wretchedness" once (Numbers 11: 15), "adversity" four time, afflictions" six times, and "calamities" once. But the word is also rendered "wicked" 31 times, "wickedness" 58 times, and "evil" (as a noun, adjective or verb) at least 444 times! This reveals that moral evil is certainly in view. But if God is the ordainer of evil, does that make Him the author of sin? Not at all. God who is pure Spirit created a material universe without Himself becoming material. The infinite, unlimited God created a finite, limited world without Himself becoming finite and limited. So He ordained evil, without becoming the author of it, or responsible for it. Jonathan Edwards is worth quoting at this point. "I know the phrase (the author of sin), as it is commonly used, signifies something very ill. If by the author of sin be meant the sinner, the agent, or actor of sin, or the doer of a wicked thing, it would be a reproach and blasphemy to suppose God to be the author of sin. In this sense I utterly deny God to be the author of sin, rejecting such an imputation on the Most High as what is infinitely to be abhorred!, and deny any such to be the consequence of what I have laid down. But if, by the author of sin, is, meant... a disposer of the state of events in such a manner, for wise, holy, and most excellent ends and purposes, that sin ... will most certainly and infallibly follow. I say, if this be all that is meant by being the author of sin, I do not deny that God is the author of sin (though I dislike and reject the phrase as that by use and custom is apt to carry another sense). It is no reproach for the Most High to be thus the author of sin. This is not to be the actor of sin, but, on the contrary, of holiness. What God doth therein is holy..."

God has ordained, and ordered and is the disposer of sin. So God sovereignly hardened Pharaoh's heart (Exodus 4:21). The evil of Joseph's brethren against him was of God: "it was not you that sent me hither, but God" (Genesis 45:8). God raised up adversaries against Israel: "for it was of the Lord to harden their hearts, that they should come against Israel in battle, that He might destroy them utterly, and they might have no favor, but that He might destroy them, as the Lord commanded Moses" (Joshua 11:20). It was the will of God that Christ should be crucified. For this purpose He came into the world. But everything about the crucifixion was ordered in the providence of God according to His eternal purpose. "Truly the Son of Man goeth as it was determined" (Luke 22:22). It is said in Acts 3:17, 18 that what the murderers of Jesus did was what God had ordered and had fulfilled as He had planned.

Listen once more to Edwards. "So the crucifixion of Christ, if we consider only those things which belong to the event as it proceeded from his murderers... as their act, their... views and aims, (then) it was one of the most heinous things that ever was done... the most horrid of all acts. But... as it was willed and ordered of God, in the extent of His designs and views, it was the most admirable and glorious of all events, and God's willing the event was the most holy volition of God that ever was made known to men; and God's act in ordering it was a divine act, which above all others manifests" His moral excellency. ("Freedom of the Will," II, 157-59,161). Revelation 17:17 speaks of the very wicked acts of wicked kings, yet their acts are but the fulfilling of God's will, and that God put it into their hearts to do what they did. Yet God willed with a good will their evil, which they also readily willed, but with an evil will. God in His providential control over all things and all men sustains the evildoer in the performance of his evil deed. "In Him we live, and are moved, and have our being" (Acts 17:28) The sinner devises

his own way, but the Lord directs his steps (Proverbs 16:9). Of Joseph's brethren it is said that "they drew and lifted up Joseph out of the pit, and sold Joseph to the Ishmaelite" (Genesis 37:28). But God controlled their freely chosen way to His own will for the good of all His people. "but as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive" (Genesis 50:20). All things are "predestinated according to the purpose of Him who worketh all things after the counsel of His own will" (Ephesians 1:11) "For of Him and to Him, are all things; to whom be glory forever. Amen." (Romans 11:36). All this weight of evidence shows that "God Uses the Agency of the Impious, and Inclines Their Minds to Execute His Judgments, Yet Without the Least Stain of His Perfect Purity" (Calvin's Institutes I, XVIII).

When it is asked why God ordained evil, we answer, "Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Thy sight" (Matthew 11:26); "it must needs be that offences come, but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!" (18:7): "I hear that there are divisions, (schisms) among you." "For there must be also heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you" (I Corinthians 11:19). In His righteous wrath God ordains the wicked deed of rebellion: "For through the anger of the Lord it came to pass... that Zedekiah rebelled against the king of Babylon" (Jeremiah 52:3). God appointed all the works of Nebuchadnezzar, so particularly that the very people were appointed to be killed by him, and to be taken captive. He was under God's hand acted as His servant, serving His purpose (43:10, 11). So God unchangeably foreordains whatsoever comes to pass, and ordains all evil, some to turn it away from us, the rest to turn it to our profit. So all evil things work together for our good, for them who are the called according to His purpose.

Originally Published in
Vol. 20. No.3 April 1960