

The Question “Why?”

WIDENING THE CONVERSATION Response to a Series of Bible Messages

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A series of messages delivered by a member of the clergy under the heading “The Question ‘Why?’” caused me to reflect afresh on the vexed issue of God’s sovereignty and the presence of evil in the world. Three phrases in particular, central to the speaker’s presentation, gave rise to my critique in form of the questions and comments below. As contemporary issues they are important enough and since they can stand alone without the presentation to which they refer, I trust that by publishing them they will serve others as a stimulus for further reflection.

GENERAL REMARKS

1. Doctrinally the series of addresses belonged to the doctrine of God. In recent decades theological reflection has shown that multiple doctrines of God exist and that even from within the biblical narrative the classical attributes of God (immutability, impassibility, absolute sovereignty etc.) have come under challenge. For instance, the traditional view that all future events are foreordained has been questioned by the proposition (derived from the biblical text) that God is an active participant in the unfolding of the future.
2. The interpretive framework of any such presentation determines its emphasis and the nuances of meaning. There is no “raw data” of Scripture from which an interpreter can, in an unbiased manner, pluck facts about God. Even the way we read Scripture is already loaded with interpretive assumptions and it would have been pedagogically helpful if they had been spelled out.
3. Most of our problems in relating to questions of theodicy seemed to be associated with too narrow a view of God as Creator on the one hand, and with too static a conception of God’s creative work on the other. By contrast, the biblical text offers us a picture of God as Creator of a totally new and original world-story who invites creaturely realms as participants and co-creators (see [5 & 6] below). According to the text, the Creator also set the entire universe on a footing of a *dynamic* stability and sustains it by divine utterance.
4. But there is more. Since God created everything by the ‘word’, God’s relationship to the creation is dialogical (cf. Gen 1 & 2; Job 38ff among others). This means that God does not stand in an I-object relationship to the created order (whereby it would be possible for God to withhold the commitment implicit in dialogue). Rather, God’s relationship is one of “personal promise”. Because God speaks in personal language to the creation, God renders God-self vulnerable: the response of creaturely realms is now subject to the kind of “underspecifiableness” inherent in the structure of personal language and dialogue.
5. When interpreting the doctrine of creation, we traditionally articulate it in terms of causation and control. However this view falls short of the highly dynamic and

interactive model suggested by the biblical text (Gen 1 & 2). When we allow the dynamic character of the text to speak, the responsiveness between Creator and creation comes to the fore. On this view, the creation is not a finished product as God continues to be engaged with his handiwork by observation and evaluation. God confronts the created order with further shaping and blessing. At the same time, God implants creaturely activity (not just human) in the process of creation including their potential for independence (“Let the earth bring forth ...”; “Let man have dominion ...” etc.). God’s “letting be” involves the release of created realms “to become what they might become” through God-endowed implanted creativity.

6. In other words, God’s work, even though brought forth by fiat, is not characterized by ongoing top-down control, but by power-sharing as God invites creaturely realms to be co-creators. In this dynamic model, a much richer matrix of interaction between Creator and creation comes into view than the traditional model of top-down causation allows. As Michael Welker puts it, God brings creaturely realms into interdependent and life-promoting relations. This view, I suggest, affects the way we understand God’s sovereignty and its exercise in, through and over creation.

7. Another important assumption relates to the question of time. What one thinks about God’s relation to time involves much of the rest of one’s theology. We often overlook that there are two ways to view God’s “temporality”. One view posits that all events of history appear before God simultaneously like pearls on a string, while God remains outside time where God exists in self-contained bliss unaffected by what is taking place in history.

8. This static view of time is the view with which conservative evangelicals are most familiar. Yet, it would seem to contradict God’s preferred medium of revelation: a narratable dynamic and dialogical history. That is to say a more dynamic view of time sees events in history in their full temporality; they are completed as they occur and fade away like a TV image. They are no longer held in time and as events they cease to exist even before God.

Now to my questions and comments (the subheadings in bold are the phrases that gave rise to my critique).

QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS

“God created a world without suffering”

The argument of the first message in the series revolved in part around the assertion that “God created a world without suffering” implying that all suffering in the world is the consequence of original sin (presumably based on Genesis 1, possibly 2, and Gen 1:31, where we learn of God’s evaluation of the creation as “very good”). Yet, in the absence of further justification and elaboration, we must ask whether this emphasis, so popular in Christian circles, is indeed warranted.

To my mind, the idea of a creation without suffering too easily relates to a concept of perfection derived from Greek philosophy which held that change means imperfection and weakness. A similar notion undergirds the classical Christian definition of God’s perfection, that is, his immutability, impassibility and so on, implying that God cannot be affected by the creation and that a perfect being cannot suffer. If this were so, God’s perfection would prohibit a Trinitarian understanding of the Cross (see J. Moltmann *The Crucified God*). Also, God’s evaluative comment

cannot necessarily be taken to mean a creation without suffering.

But more to the point, if this statement is to be grounded in Scripture, the question arises how it expresses the meaning of the text. According to Claus Westermann, the Bible does not support the idea that the “state of innocence” was a chronological phase at beginning of human history, because knows no “sinless man”.¹

If so, must we not include *from the beginning* along with the theological dimension also the cosmological, anthropological, psychological, sociological aspects of human existence as we know them? On this point Westermann continues,

[T]he unique and ever relevant message of the narrative of Genesis 2-3 will only become clear when the significance and necessity of scientific research into the beginnings of the human race is fully acknowledged.²

Assuming, as I do, that Westermann has it right, further questions arise. Since the Old Testament knows nothing of a fallen creation,³ how do we account for the suffering occasioned by the food chain? What about the geophysical dimensions of our planet, its fiery iron/nickel core, its magmatic mantle, its tectonic plates whose movements cause tsunamis and volcanic eruptions? Are these effects part of God’s creation or are they consequences of the fall?

If one affirmed the latter, what warrant do we have for stretching the interpretive reach of what has become known as the “curse” in Gen 3:17-19 this far? Is Paul’s reference to creation’s “bondage to decay” (Rom 8: 21) to be understood as its elaboration or simply as an acknowledgement of an underlying ambiguity that this present world is subject to entropy, groaning in hope for release in God’s new creation?

Certainly, the Bible affirms on the one hand that the alien force of sin is now resident in the human creation. On the other it holds out the eschatological hope of a world without suffering. But surely this tension does not warrant a reductionistic approach that flattens the dynamics of the cosmic order (hot gas clouds, black holes, billions of galaxies, interstellar collisions, solar flares and their impact on our weather pattern, meteors, tectonic plates and their movements etc.) seeing them as signs of corruption. Rather, they are structural features of the world as created by God (cf. the anthropic principle); their effects on our planet are not “punishment” but constituent elements of a contingent, yet original creation.

Moreover, the eschatological freedom the Bible anticipates will only emerge from a new act of creation, the results of which will be both continuous as well as discontinuous with the present world in the same way as Jesus’ resurrection body was both continuous and discontinuous with his earthly body. Would it not be more consistent with that pattern if a suffering-free world appeared as God’s eschatological future, rather than as the starting point of his creative activity? Besides, scientific

¹ Claus Westermann, *Creation* (London: SCM Press, 1974), p. 110 citing H. Haag, *Der Urstand nach dem Zeugnis der Bibel*, 1968)

² *Ibid.*, p. 110-111

³ The “fall” has been established in Christian dogmatics through the doctrine of original sin. This term and the meaning behind it did not have its origin in the Christian church but in late Judaism, first mentioned in the second book of Esdras (7.118). According to this tradition, the Adam who sinned is not the representative of mankind as in Genesis 3, but an historical individual, whose fall was passed on to his descendants (genetically?). In other words, the teaching of the fall and of original sin (which reached its climax with Augustine) has no foundation in Genesis 3. Paul too follows late Judaism (Westermann, p. 108).

evidence suggests that we have to do with an expanding (evolving) universe and thus with a creation that is ongoing.

“God is in Control”

This phrase that has gained unwarranted popularity in Christian parlance prompted the next question. The speed and frequency with which this phrase is invoked every time calamities are mentioned indicates that it fulfils a code-like function. Those “in the know” signal to each other their commitment to what they consider orthodox theism, usually followed by much head-nodding acquiescence. At a deeper level, in the crisis of theological ambiguity, this affirmation functions as a shield that protects us from having to come to terms with our fears. That is probably why no-one ever asks, “What do we mean by ‘God is in control’?”

Dictionary definitions of the word “control” or “being in control” are too numerous for inclusion here. To illustrate my concern a few examples must suffice. The plain meaning of ‘control’ is “power to direct or to determine” implying a relation of constraint of one entity (thing, person or group) by another. Exercise of control usually means the use of “authoritative control” or “power to command” other people or resources involving a hierarchical top-down chain of command as in the military. Then there is the “activity of control” when for instance the police controls a mob. By expanding these two latter meanings, we arrive at the idea of “dominance” or the state of affairs when one person or group exercises “oppressive control” or power over another. Also, more subtle forms of control ought to be mentioned in this context: those in control manipulate situations to their advantage and/or according to their (mostly hidden) agendas.

In short, day-to-day language assigns manifold shades of meaning to the notion of control that tend to emphasize a hierarchical arrangement of power designed to constrain the freedom of those who are being “controlled”. The question we must ask is whether “control” fittingly describes the way God exercises sovereignty over his creation.

My concern is this: the more we allow talk of “control” uncritically to shape our understanding of divine sovereignty the more we encourage a semantic shift towards determinism that drags in its wake a raft of other interpretive problems. Let me illustrate by asking a few more questions in the context of our recent bushfires. What are we, as Christians (not to mention unbelievers), supposed to think when someone in the sight of the blaze declared: “God is in control!”? What does “control” mean in that context? Were the bushfires “determined” by God in the sense that God sent them? Are they a physical manifestation of God’s will understood as deliberate, targeted intention? Was the origin of the blaze under God’s control? How about its progression and eventual cessation? Did God direct its path? Did God engineer the precise conditions and then “appointed” a pyromaniac to set it all alight (just as God “appointed” a worm [RSV] to destroy the plant that gave shade to Jonah)? Are fire fighters, in their sacrificial efforts to put out the blaze, fighting against the will of God? What do we mean?

On another line of thought, how is God’s control to be understood when a child is sexually abused, perhaps even by a member of the clergy? What do we mean? How would one expect such a statement about God’s control to bring comfort, hope or resolution to the child’s trauma? Does not the phrase suggest the very opposite, that God “supervised” the evil event but for inscrutable reasons choose not to intervene? Conversely, since the raw notion of “control” can lead to repulsive interpretations of

God's sovereignty, we can ask whether any attempt to qualify the notion of control merely reflects our own desire to remove the moral ambiguity from God.

In my view, we speak at our peril of "God being in control" in the sight of calamity and trauma. As Jesus' life and Passion show, perpetration of evil by human agency is too deep and complex for a one-line answer. I am concerned that if our speech about God's sovereignty has nothing more to offer than the one-liner "God is in control", we need not be surprised when it fosters absurd conclusions about the divine nature. For this reason and more, I am saddened that this unfortunate phrase has become so deeply and uncritically entrenched in contemporary Christian vocabulary. If we but paused for a moment, we would surely become more aware of the deeper issues that are at stake. Let me briefly elaborate on just two – the anthropology of the cross and the call to risk-taking faith.

In human society and culture, all mechanisms of control owe their effectiveness to homicidal violence (the fear of death). Its contagious influence, however, breeds only more of the same. René Girard has shown that humanity's transcendent desires tend to project their own violence unwittingly on the religious screen from where it is read back as a revelation of the true God. God too, we say, uses violence as a mechanism of control and the church has used this reasoning to justify crusades, witch hunts and anti-Semitic pogroms. Yet we fail to compare this view of God with the non-violent revelation of Jesus. On the cross, Jesus, as the second person of the Godhead, absorbed all hostility into his own being, drowning its violence in abyssal love, and thus breached the power of the diabolical cycle of reciprocal violence once for all: human captivity to it has been broken; the prison door is open. Jesus went to the cross to suffer violence not to inflict it and did so for a significant theological reason: there is no violence in the Trinity. This "anthropology of the cross" also belongs to the Gospel and highly relevant for our understanding of how God exercises his sovereignty.

At the congregational level, the phrase "God is in control" points to another trend that is not without dangers. Walter Brueggemann has recently drawn attention to one of the deepest problems a pastor faces in day-to-day ministry. In Brueggemann's words it is "the small-minded certitude of people who want their faith tied up in a safe box that is beyond penetration". He argues that this small-mindedness tends to be simplistic, leads to dumbing down, to uncritical acceptance of clichés, and avoidance of real engagement. This 'little faith' is disconnected from the daily reality of life and from the larger world, is "inward turned in defensive closure" (no energy left for mission), and shows signs of "deep unacknowledged anxiety that precludes discussion, exploration ... [with view to embracing] change".⁴

The danger is that in such an atmosphere of risk-avoidance revealed truth dies. As church history testifies, every time the church sought to live by dogmatic closure, dark ages followed. I am concerned that the church's reductionist leanings have the same effect and unless we return to big-minded, risk-taking faith, the contemporary church too is in danger of killing revealed truth.

"God allows Evil"

For most Christians the possibility that evil in the world might be part of God's plan would be deeply troubling. Even to begin to consider such a proposition would be ruled

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, "Three Ways of Certitude", Lecture at Trinity Lutheran Seminary, Columbus, Ohio, 28 Sept. 2006:1.

out. To ponder that the most horrific acts done by the most depraved individuals might actually be God's will is simply repulsive. In fact, the idea that God might be behind all of the horror we see and experience (cf. the holocaust, Rwanda, Kosovo, cyclone Katrina etc.) may be more terrible than the horror itself. This is, of course, in a nutshell the traditional problem of evil that Christian philosophers, clergy, and even the youngest believer have been wrestling with for ages.

The most-cited Bible passage supporting the idea that God's "permissive will" is behind the human experience of suffering is the Prologue to the Book of Job. Here the sovereignty of God is extended to all things, including the evil Satan inflicts on an innocent sufferer. If we take the exhaustive view of God's sovereignty as portrayed in the Prologue, any effort to blame creaturely agents for their part in the actions (e.g. Satan in Job's case) will not resolve the problem because God's power is so decisive that it is difficult to think of God as good. No matter how we interpret this passage, the underlying view of God's sovereignty casts a shadow over God's character. It makes God inscrutable because he simply does what he pleases and his human creation has to accept what he hands out.

By maintaining an exhaustive view of God's sovereignty (a predetermined plan for the world where every event in history occurs according to the foreordained will of God) we arrive at a point where an unbridgeable rift appears between what we rationally confess about God and our existential Abba-experience of him. Some have even argued that this almost schizophrenic stance is not liveable. Either we deny the one and live the other or vice versa, not to speak of the difficulties involved in inviting outsiders into such a conflicted relationship (for a resolution of this clash we must invoke the eternal state).

On deeper reflection another key question has to be asked: is God's sovereignty really absolute in this world (not suggesting impotence, but self-restraint and humility). Does not even the biblical text suggest such a picture? If God has created a universe where real relationships are possible, then God, instead of absolutely controlling everything, works in, through and with creaturely agents who have been given some degree of influence and autonomy over the way things are and how the future will turn out. It follows that neither God himself nor his sovereignty can remain untouched once he reaches out to relate to his creation in a real and meaningful way.

At the same time, for these relationships to be real, humans must be free to accept or reject God and this choice will impact God one way or another. Since a universe where real relations are possible presupposes creaturely freedom, God cannot remain immutable and impassable. Or as Moltmann puts it, only a suffering God can help.

That rejection or acceptance of God has consequences for human behavior, experience and destiny is undisputed. But if an open universe and an open future are granted as a result of God's relational purpose, then our understanding of God's "permissive will" must be modified. Human suffering can no longer be seen as "targeted test cases of loyalty" as in Job or as the inscrutable acts of a remote and impassable deity.

Suffering rather emerges as the inevitable consequence in a universe of genuine contingency whereby God in Christ suffers with, in and under his creation because, by his own decree, God does not control everything completely. Rather, God chooses despite the misuse of creaturely freedom to work for good in, through and with creaturely realms so that a universe of love becomes a real (eschatological) future. The Christian confession that the resurrected Christ is the first-fruits of the new creation is

certainly relevant here. God's sovereignty is revealed in history in the overcoming of the power of sin and death.

Hence the world as it is becomes battleground where God and mankind are deeply involved in a struggle to rid the universe of evil. In such a universe we should neither be surprised by evil nor squirm before its fierceness. Instead, in line with NT theology, we can look at evil differently. Evil is not a problem but an enemy that needs to be, and can only be overcome in the power of God.

CONCLUSION

Much, much more could be said on this vexed topic of God's sovereignty and the presence of evil in the world. Nonetheless, addressing it by entering into dialogue with each other, by listening to differing theological positions, by responding respectfully to (unfamiliar) ideas, would have been beneficial, at least in my view. Unfortunately, in this instance, the powers that be failed to seize the pastoral and pedagogical opportunity to create a suitable discussion forum for the purpose, thus foregoing potential flow-on effects into congregational life.

Interestingly, respondents to a survey of British church-goers cited two reasons why they believed church attendance was declining: (a) lack of pastoral care and (b) an acute feeling of inadequacy in the face of objections and questions from non-Christian relatives and work colleagues. In other words, apart from pastoral care, these folk were looking for help in dialogical apologetics. They seemed to want tools that would equip them for their daily encounter with a world of rapid cultural change, of social alienation, of consumerist attachment to fads and gadgets, of rising fascination with other religious pathways, and with a scientifically oriented mindset.

In this context, Christians must expect that the age-old questions of life's purpose and the quest for God will pop up in unconventional ways, which means that we must learn to listen for new cues. In an ever-fluid and multi-vocal post-modern culture, Christians are called to an earnest and ongoing grappling with the kind of issues I have sought to highlight—albeit in a somewhat sketchy fashion—through my questions and comments. With this call in mind, I offer them here to a wider audience as a stimulus for further reflection.

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