

# **The Staley Distinguished Christian Scholar Lecture**

## *Atonement and the Problem of Evil (1983)*

**Ronald Goetz, Ph.D.**

*The Staley lectures are among Goetz's earliest and most accessible works. While he would later refine some of the ideas found here and abandon others, the lectures nonetheless distill, in almost homiletic form, Goetz's understanding of the gospel: The God who loves in freedom willed from eternity to bestow upon humanity his own divine life. God gave this gift to his human creation with a task: human beings are to be co-creators of their own being in free partnership with God. There is no creativity without pain and sacrifice. Hence, Goetz argues, God created humanity and the world in which human beings would realize their eschatological destiny transitory and vulnerable to sin and evil. This pervasive fragility of creation, and not a primordial fall, is the root cause of human sin; it also gives rise to a more sinister phenomenon extraneous to human sin, a "malignancy" which Goetz calls "systemic evil." Goetz articulates and develops these ideas in conversation with the three historic theories of atonement, arguing, first, that the atoning work of Christ directs itself to human sin as well as to the root causes of human sin – systemic evil, and the structured imperfection of creation. Furthermore, in the cross of Christ, God identifies unreservedly with humanity, makes himself responsible and answerable to an outraged humanity for all the evils that afflict it, and in so doing ransoms God's honor from the implications of the evil God has permitted. The life, death and resurrection of the Son of God manifest, effectuate, and secure God's eternal purpose for humanity and vindicate God's love, justice, and faithfulness.*

### ***Lecture One: Prolegomenon to Recasting Atonement Theory***

Jesus of Nazareth, after a relatively brief career as a teacher and prophet of the Kingdom of God, was arrested, tried, found guilty of blasphemy, and sentenced to death. In the Gospel accounts, Jesus faced his accusers without benefit of council, and the proceedings took on the appearance of a kangaroo court, with Jesus being brutalized, mocked, and passed from jurisdiction to jurisdiction in a prejudicial attempt to get the death sentence carried out. Jesus is ordered executed in a desperate administrative snafu, with Pontius Pilot finally having to come to terms with the limits of his authority. The exasperated bureaucrat washes his hands of responsibility, and Jesus is forced to carry his cross to the place of execution, where he is stripped, nailed hand and foot to the cross, and hanged up. After three hours, he dies. Mark, the earliest of the Gospels, indicates that Jesus' last words were the terrible cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Just as Jesus experienced this sense of divine abandonment, so also he was abandoned by his disciples. Judas betrayed him; Peter denied him; and the rest witnessed these events in

stunned, impotent incomprehension. It is a pathetic tale, this story of the ruin of a strange country preacher, but it lacks the dignity and bearing of great tragic drama.

The cross left Jesus' followers with broken hopes. Could it be that this catastrophe proved that Jesus' enemies were right after all, that he *was* a false messiah? How could the promised successor of King David have such an inconsequential ministry? Perhaps Judas was the only apostle who had accurately sized Jesus up. In any case, the apostles were not going to be fooled and disillusioned again. The women came back from the tomb on Easter morning and reported to them the resurrection. The apostles dismissed it as an idle tale. We all know the Gospel of John's story of Thomas' angry refusal to believe. It was only when they were compelled by their own experience of the living Christ present in their midst that the apostles came to affirm that in this unanticipated and belated way Jesus had been vindicated by God.

The account of the crucifixion was not a very promising basis on which to ground a new religion. Is it any wonder that many people who had not experienced the resurrection as the apostles had could not believe it? The wonder is not that some doubted; the wonder is that *anyone* believed. We're so used to hearing about the cross that it has lost its offense. But imagine how incredible it must have sounded to those who heard it for the first time. How could anyone worship a man who was convicted as a common criminal and who refused to defend himself? How could anyone believe the claims of those gullible enough to believe that a slain criminal was raised from the dead, especially when those apostles had trouble believing it themselves? The problem for the apostles was not just how this looked from the outside, to unbelievers, but also how it looked from the inside to the believers themselves. *What* was going on here? Everything they knew or thought they knew about God's promises was being turned upside down.

As the primitive church tried to make sense out of these disruptive events, one thing seemed logically self-evident. Since the resurrection was God's vindication of Jesus as his very Son, the death of Jesus, the church concluded, could not be seen as a mere accident of history. An event of such catastrophic consequence for his Son could not have occurred unless God willed it. The book of Acts reports that Peter's first sermon on Pentecost contained the quite striking declaration that Jesus was "delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23). However, this insight only underscored the unbearable question, "Why?" Why would God will this brutal killing of his own Son? This question was the stumbling block which to unbelievers seemed to render the Christian faith an unbelievable absurdity.

In the New Testament this question is answered in a curiously indirect way. The New Testament does not spell out what later theology would call a theory of the atonement. That Jesus *must* of divine necessity die is constantly affirmed, but there is no

attempt whatsoever to explain *why* God required Jesus' death. There is rather an impressive array of testimony respecting the effect of this death in the lives of believers. Subjectively, the first Christians experienced in their lives a radical transformation through faith in the saving death of Jesus. They believed in the saving significance of Jesus' death, not because it fit within the framework of some rational explanation—because they didn't have any—but because they experienced its effect. They could not articulate *why* God chose to slay his Son, they only knew, however strange it may seem, that they were *grateful* for that death. In the New Testament, dark reflections upon the frightening implications of so terrible a plan of salvation are swept aside in the subjectively justified assertion: "God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

The New Testament uses any number of powerfully suggestive images in order to express the significance of Christ's death. Christ's death is seen as a ransom, as a sacrificial offering that effects the forgiveness of sin, and as an expiation which justifies us so that now we are saved from the wrath of God. His sacrificial blood purifies and sanctifies us. In his death he becomes a curse for us so that we are no longer under the curse of the law. Certainly his death provides the paradigm for Christian living. His death shows not only perfect love, but it also so perfectly reveals the love of God that we are exhorted by his very example to be reconciled to our neighbor.

In such New Testament images and language, the three great theories of the atonement which developed in Christian theology—the ransom theory, the substitutionary theory, and the exemplar theory—have their basis. In spite of their differences, they all attempt to do what the New Testament never attempts to do, and that is to explain *why* Christ had to die in order to ransom us from sin, death and the devil, or *why* his death was a sacrifice on our behalf, or *why* the willingness of Jesus to die should lead us to love God all the more.

Perhaps if there are disquieting overtones concerning God's willing Jesus' death, we might be better off letting it lie where the New Testament left it. For if the New Testament Christian had to live, paradoxically, by the death of Christ without any fully developed rational theory as to *why* Christ had to die, maybe we should not presume to push the question further.

Of course, there's a certain point to this kind of believing agnosticism—the cross is a mystery, the full meaning of which lies hidden with God. Certainly in the history of Christian thought when the question has been pushed further, Christians cannot agree among themselves, and in centuries of debate each side has exposed the logical weaknesses of the other. No theology of the cross has proved acceptable to Christians as a whole. However, to refuse to probe the mystery of the atonement on the grounds that it

is too great a mystery for our poor, finite comprehension, raises this question: Which New Testament teaching does *not* take us beyond our depth? In this respect the whole New Testament is too deep. Should every Christian utterance begin with the proviso: "Now, I don't expect any of you to understand this, however . . ." Christianity cannot indulge in such timid nonsense. For while it is absolutely true that our knowledge is partial, that our understanding is incomplete, that we see through a mirror dimly, nevertheless Christianity *is* a theological religion.

The prologue to the Gospel of John reads: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us . . ." (John 1:1, 14). John is portraying Jesus Christ as the incarnation of the very thought and wisdom of God. He did not come into the world as an annihilating fire to destroy the inferior thought and wisdom of puny, finite humanity – "God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:17). Christ came to raise us, not to lower us.

Human culture—the arts, the sciences, technology—are magnificent enterprises of human intellect and imagination. Jesus did not come to destroy our work. As beings created in the image of God, we are by our very nature creative beings, so much so that in part, through culture, we tend to create ourselves. If we were abstracted from our creativity and culture, what would be left of us?

Jesus Christ, the one Word of God, himself adds but one word to worldly wisdom. By adding that word he does not destroy the accomplishments of humanity, he impregnates the accomplishments of humanity with the transfiguring light of eternity. That word is love. In spite of our failures and finitude, God looks upon us with the eyes of love, for God is love. Therefore, knowing that we are loved, Christ has demonstrated the eternal value that God places on his world, his human creature, and that creature's works.

The word theology comes from two Greek words—*theos*, meaning God, and *logos*, meaning word or reason. Theology literally means rational discourse about God. Christians must speak rationally about God, for "the true light, which enlightens everyone," has come into the world (John 1:9). How else can we speak? We do not find God in chaos, but in the clear beauty of his living Word, Jesus Christ. What a wonderful thing that Christianity is a theological religion, a religion rich in logic about God! Because we know that the ultimate subject of theology is the pure, perfect light of God, theology need never fear to follow any topic. True, the darkness is threatening, but "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." (John 1:5).

We were lead into this excursus by the question: On what basis can Christian theology be justified in trying to answer questions that the New Testament does not

answer? It might be helpful here to make a formal distinction, the distinction between the New Testament as witness and the New Testament as theology. Only in its function as witness does the New Testament intend to be the final word. As witness, the New Testament is a testament to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As such, its function is the announcement of good tidings based on the objective act of God in Jesus Christ.

But the New Testament is also theology. The New Testament interprets the events of Jesus Christ in the light of the issues that confronted the church in the first century. For example, one burning issue was the relationship between gentile and Jewish Christians. Must gentile Christians keep the law and be circumcised? In the context of this quarrel, a great amount of lasting theological insight was generated, but certainly not every word uttered in this context can be viewed as pure revelation from God, as when the apostle Paul in great anger wrote that he wished the members of the circumcision party would “mutilate themselves” (Galatians 5:12).

Christian theology is not done for the angels. It is done for the church in the historical situation in which it finds itself. Circumcision is not a contemporary problem, and it ceased to be a problem by the close of the New Testament period when, sad to say, Christians and Jews began to part company.

The first Christian converts were generally of low estate—slaves, the poorly educated, etc. But as Christianity spread, and as it attracted people of a more intellectual turn of mind, as well as came to the attention of well-educated opponents, the church was compelled to deal with new issues. The classical Christian doctrines of the Trinity, the two natures of Christ, original sin, and the atonement are not expressly found in Scripture. They are logical extensions of the New Testament witness and theology. They were necessary doctrines if the church was to give account of its faith in the centuries immediately following the New Testament era. In like manner, we today are not faithful to Scripture when we evade the questions that it opens up for our era. We are only faithful when we pursue those questions trusting in the promised help of the Holy Spirit, as far as our wits and imagination can take us.

Augustine of Hippo, when confronting the profound mystery of the Trinity, knew that he was beyond his depth. When in perplexity he said, “We speak so as not to remain silent,” he pointed to a profound dilemma within all theology. On the one hand, to speak is inevitably to err. How can we ever hope to penetrate the sublime truth of God? On the other hand, to be silent is an even greater error. Silence implies that God has shown us nothing and that we know nothing. There is grace in the realization that we are inevitably in error, for in this we see that we don’t *have* to be right. God in his mercy will find whatever value there is in our theology, and hopefully he will forgive us the rest.

Christianity cannot choose the grounds on which it will speak about God. The grounds are always forced upon the church by its historical situation. The gospel is changeless, but the world and the church are always in flux. In one era, the cross might seem incomprehensible because the age is too optimistic about human nature to believe that *any* atonement is necessary. In another era, the cross is seen simply as an inevitable human tragedy that is of no special import because *all* life is tragic and meaningless. Our era, paradoxically, is characterized by a drastic polarization around both contradictory options. Nevertheless, for many the optimism of our Enlightenment origins has been undermined by a profound resignation borne of the sense that evil and death have the final word. The problem of evil haunts every theological effort to speak of meaning in our contemporary context.

The very statement of the problem of evil sounds like an accusation against God, as we are reminded by the skeptic David Hume's version of the dilemma: "Is he [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?" (*Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*) For many, the reality of evil inspires bitterness and outrage against God, as exemplified in Krister Stendahl's oft repeated aphorism: "God's only excuse is that he does not exist."

Though contemporary theology has been radically shaken by the impact of the modern sense of evil, our present situation is somewhat ironic. After the First World War, theologians profoundly criticized the naive optimism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the 1920s, 30s, and 40s it was fashionable to remind the world of the reality of sin and evil. The incredible carnage of modern war had led to a deep sense of humanity's inhumanity, and theology, taking its lead from existentialism, stressed human fallenness. Humanity *needs* redemption because we cannot redeem ourselves. We need a God because we are mired in evil. But after the World War II, Auschwitz, and the hydrogen bomb, etc., many have been moved to suggest that God is not the answer, God is the problem. How could a righteous God permit such evils?

The effort to "sell" the cross, based on an analysis of the sinful situation that made it necessary has backfired. Consider the Holocaust. The annihilation of six million Jews was but the most terrible installment in the burden of anguish that Judaism has suffered since the triumph of Christianity. For centuries Christians justified the persecution of the Jews on the grounds that the Jews had crucified Christ. The cross of Christ was a justification for the crucifixion of the Jews. This drips with irony. Some theologians have even suggested that the only way that Christianity can atone for its crimes against the Jews is to abandon the saving significance of the cross and with it the claim to the

uniqueness of Christ. The evil that the Church perpetrated through its profound misapprehension of the cross now threatens to undercut Christianity at its very foundation.

Some of the most fundamental presuppositions of contemporary theological discourse have already been radically colored by the problem of evil. Two examples will suffice to illustrate this. First, a small but influential number of theologians would solve the problem of evil by arguing that we must abandon the belief in God's omnipotence. This is sometimes called Process Theology. The bottom line is that since God is unable to eliminate evil, God is not culpable for evil. This entails the concept of a limited deity that breaks so radically with the biblical witness to the God of Israel that it is doubtful that such theology is speaking about the biblical God at all. Nevertheless, the proposal of such a drastic alternative indicates how desperate the problem is perceived to be.

Second, and more significantly, is the nearly universal theological affirmation that God suffers. This belief constitutes a 180-degree turn from eighteen centuries of Christian teaching that has denied the possibility of the suffering of God. In spite of the logical inconsistencies entailed, Christian theology has insisted that though Jesus suffers, God does not.

The idea that God is impassible derives not from the Bible, but from the Greco-Roman philosophical and Eastern/Mystical perspectives of the ancient Hellenistic world in which Christianity emerged. In the Bible, God is personal, passionate, involved, and vulnerable. God loves and pays the price that lovers must pay when their love is rejected or their loved ones suffer. Christian theologians are now insisting that in light of the anguish and misery of humanity, in the light of the terrible atrocities that take place, God *had better* suffer.

Until this century, the disillusioning impact of evil would not have given rise to this conclusion. This calls for a radical rethinking of every aspect of Christian theology—creation, the fall, redemption, and more. Indeed, *no* Christian doctrine can remain the same if it is true that God suffers. It should be obvious that the suffering of God would impact *radically* any understanding of the cross of Jesus Christ. There have been books written in this area, notably one rather important book by Jürgen Moltmann entitled, "*The Crucified God*," but still there has yet to be accomplished an understanding of the cross of Christ that parallels and complements the radical shift in Christian theology that must occur secondary to the belief that God suffers.

If God suffers, then he is plunged into this world more totally and more completely than we might find theologically comfortable. One who suffers with us cannot retreat into the transcendent realms of impassibility and static perfection when it comes time to allocate the responsibility for the catastrophe that is so often human existence. It will be the undertaking of the remaining lectures to think these matters out more fully.

## *Lecture Two: Beyond Sin: Systemic Evil*

Why was it, in the words of Luke's Gospel, "necessary that the Christ should suffer" (Luke 24:26)? This is our theme in these lectures. In the history of the church three distinct approaches to this question have developed, which, in their most logically rigorous form, have produced "theories" of the atonement. As we have already observed, they are the ransom theory, the substitutionary theory, and the exemplar theory.

The ransom theory is the earliest of the three. It holds that Christ's death was essential in order to complete a transaction between God and Satan. Since Adam's fall, the human race has been in Satan's grip. Because humanity permitted itself to be ensnared by Satan, Satan came to possess a certain "right" over us. In order to win our freedom, God offered Satan a ransom payment, his own beloved Son. Satan accepted the exchange, and humanity was freed when Christ was executed at Calvary and delivered to Satan. But Satan's machinations were undone, for he was unable to bind the Son of God. Indeed, Christ vanquished Satan and was raised from death. Satan was left with nothing; humanity was liberated; and in the resurrection the victorious Christ triumphed over the power of sin and death.

We will discuss the merits of this theory later. At present we will focus on its limitations in order to understand why, after nearly a thousand years of ascendancy, it was toppled in the twelfth century – and why even recent attempts to revive it have not been entirely successful.

For contemporary people, traditional beliefs about Satan and the demonic are problematic. Even fundamentalist defenders of demonology do not assert the reality of Satan in quite the same unselfconscious and pre-critical categories of our ancestors. Many of us may accommodate a demythologized understanding of the demonic, but we still prefer antibiotics to exorcism when our children are ill. I am not dismissing language about the demonic; but it seems clear that faith in Christ's triumph over the powers of sin and death is more intelligible to many contemporary Christians if such faith does not insist on the existence of a literal, personal devil. Yet unless one affirms that Satan literally exists as a lower, alien deity, the ransom theory loses much of its explanatory power and coherence. Of course, it still can remain mytho-poetically powerful, for it expresses dramatically the Christian experience of liberation from bondage to sin and death. But as a theory explaining Christ's death, its primitive and naïve assumptions render it largely incoherent.

However, when Anselm attacked the ransom theory in the twelfth century, he was not rethinking or rejecting received notions of the demonic. Belief in a literal Satan was a universal medieval presupposition. Anselm found the idea that God must pay Satan in order to liberate humanity unworthy of God. Satan is a usurper and thief who

had unjustly wrested humanity from God. God owes Satan nothing. If the only problem had been Satan's alleged rights, then Christ need never have come; God easily could have overcome Satan.

Why, then, did Christ come? What was the object of his work? Human sin, Anselm taught, is a failure to render God his due; sin thereby violates God's honor. God's honor must be satisfied. Nor could God by mere fiat freely forgive humanity, for to do so would elevate injustice to the very status of God. For just as God is perfectly free and subject to no law, so also would injustice be perfectly free and subject to no law, if it were freely forgiven. This, Anselm insisted, is irrational. God's honor requires that God alone be sovereign. Forgiveness is possible only if humanity pays its debt and gives back to God what is God's due.

The problem is that humanity cannot pay what it owes. Human beings are born in original sin; that is, we share in Adam's guilt. And our further sins compound Adam's debt. We cannot live sinless lives, but even if we could begin to do so, it would merit us nothing. Sinlessness is what we should have attained all along. We are forever a day late and a dollar short.

Since humanity has no resource to make satisfaction, our situation is hopeless unless the Son of God rescues us. In becoming human, he takes our humanity to himself, and as the God-man he volunteers to suffer the punishment due us. This act of innocent suffering by God's own Son merits an infinite reward. However, Christ has no need of this reward. God therefore bestows Christ's merit on those who are united by faith to the God-man.

For the substitutionary theory, a strong offense is the best defense. The cross, far from being a scandal, is the *raison d'être* of Christ's coming. Christ came to die. The resurrection becomes a mere epilogue to the cross. Anselm's substitutionary theory, with relatively minor changes, has become the principal theory of Western Christianity, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, down to the present. But like the ransom theory, it suffers profound shortcomings.

Contemporary critics of Anselm argue that his understanding of the honor of God derives from medieval, feudal notions of honor and power. The idea that God's honor entails a tit-for-tat capacity to extract punishment for every offense comes not from the Bible, but from the unstable and threatened society of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. This historical line of criticism bears affinities to certain theological objections.

Anselm well understood that God's honor is at stake in the work of love that God began in creation. God's honor lies, not in the execution of his annihilating wrath, but in the consummation of his creative love. Why, then, should forgiveness be so difficult? One gains the impression in dealing with Anselm's argument that one is encountering a

theological sleight of hand. We are told that God cannot freely forgive us, for that would violate God's honor. Yet the Son of God *can* freely forgive us—and at terrible cost to himself. Does the atonement achieved between God and humanity expose a radical cleavage between God the Father and God the Son? The Father cannot freely forgive, but the Son can? If the Father's honor is satisfied in an act of free forgiveness by the Son, how can one hold that the Father cannot freely forgive? Anselm replies that there is no *free* forgiveness; on the contrary, the God-man pays for human sin. But surely this argument chases its own tail.

In Anselm's day, there were some few old-line defenders of the ransom theory, but their defense quickly faded into obscurity. The critic who proved most influential was the theological maverick, Abelard. Abelard agreed with Anselm that the ransom theory must be rejected, but he rejected the substitutionary theory as well. Abelard believed it fundamentally unjust that God would require the death of an innocent person as payment for the sin of the guilty.

Abelard ventured another, far more telling, objection. If humanity is potentially doomed because poor, naïve Adam ate a little fruit, why are we not in far worse trouble now that humanity is guilty of deicide? We now have God's own blood on our hands. Anselm had weakly argued that humanity is excused because we didn't realize that Jesus was God's Son. But this simply will not do. To have met Jesus and then to slay him is *sinful* blindness. Why are we not even guiltier after the cross than before? Anselm's substitutionary theory not only fails to answer this question, it precipitates it.

Abelard's alternative is the exemplar theory. Christ is neither a ransom nor a substitutionary victim; rather, he is the one who in obedience to the Father's will carried out his ministry of reconciliation even unto death. He did sacrifice his life—but his was a sacrifice of obedience, not of substitution. "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13).

Atonement occurs when sinners, touched by the self-sacrificing example of God's Son, are moved to repent. In a sense, humans reconcile themselves to God by their grateful repentance. How can anyone continue in alienation from God after witnessing such love?

Abelard's theory has rhetorical power and some scriptural warrant, but it is deeply problematic. First, it makes atonement almost entirely a matter of human effort, as if we, by our good will alone, could vanquish sin. Yet it must be asked, if human beings are so noble, how did we fall prey to sin in the first place? Abelard had little sense of human helplessness and ironically failed to discern just how much God has done for us.

The other great objection to the exemplar theory is that while Scripture does

exhort us to be reconciled to God in light of Christ's death, it also affirms that Christ's death is a ransom and substitutionary sacrifice. This is so even if Scripture does not offer a "theory" for either image. Abelard and his modern defenders never demonstrate how Christ's death shows God's love. Wouldn't greater love have been shown to Christ had God rescued him rather than permitting him to die so terribly? Logically the exemplar theory can never get off the ground.

The exemplar theory only makes sense if it is subsidiary to some other theory. If Christ died to ransom me, if Christ died to bear my sin, it is clear enough why I should repent and seek reconciliation with the gracious God. But if Christ died a martyr to an ideal, however exalted, why should I seek reconciliation with a God who permits so many of his saints to be martyred and so many of his enemies to prosper?

Where does this short critical survey leave us? I hope not in despair of any theological sense being made of the atonement. Nor is it offered in order to illustrate the myopia of the older teachers. They are giants of the faith. Theirs are the shoulders on which we must stand if we are to see farther. We criticize the past only to gain our theological bearings; indeed, we criticize the past as a prerequisite to better understanding and assimilating its insights today.

I believe that any valid alternative theory must incorporate elements from all these theories. Unfortunately in their classic expression all three theories are stated in exclusivist form. In affirming one, you must reject the others. They thus try to account for Christ's death as if it were a one dimensional divine act. In fact, Jesus came to heal the broken relationship between God and humankind in all its multifaceted dimensions. The human predicament, living in alienation from God, is terribly tangled.

Since the theological tradition fails to provide a clear answer, and since Scripture does not even attempt to provide one, we are still left with the perplexing question: Why did God plan and foreordain the death of the Son of God? What would move God to do such a thing? What could have gone wrong that would require so drastic a remedy? How can the death of the only righteous man be a remedy for anything?

It is the Christian faith that the almighty God created the world—and yet things are not right. The world is plagued by both sin and systemic evil. Somehow after all the explanations have been tried, we must confess that it seems incoherent to say, on the one hand, that the almighty God created the world, and yet on the other hand, things are not right. How can God, who lacks neither power nor wisdom nor good will, have a world on his hands that is not right? If the situation before us is *this* radically perplexing, it is perhaps paradoxically comprehensible that God's action to redeem our incoherent situation should be so drastic and terrible. Desperate situations require desperate measures.

There is no way to escape it. We must discuss this desperate situation and address two obnoxious topics: sin and systemic evil.

Sin is an unstable and paradoxical reality. We don't really know that we are sinners—violators of the good will of God—until we know the God against whom we sin. But God cannot truly be known except as the One who loves and forgives. Therefore, to know what sin is—an affront to the God who is love—is to know that it is forgiven even before we can ask. “Christ died for the ungodly” (Romans 5:6). Therefore, for the Christian—who alone recognizes whom it is directed against—sin is a deliberate slap in the face of the God who is love.

Only the godly really know sin, because only the godly know who it is that sin betrays, defames, humiliates, and with the cross of Christ, slays. The atheist, who does not know God, does not know sin in the deepest sense. Only the believer knows clearly what is at stake. We are the ones who bring knowing shame on God.

Paradoxically, sin is also an act of atheism. For who could sin, which is to live as if there is no God, unless deep down he or she had suspected all along that there is no God. We would lose our minds if we sinned in the constant awareness that God is present, that God reads our thoughts and deeds. The knowledge of the presence of the Holy God would annihilate us in our shame. But since God is invisible and hidden except to faith, we who rarely sustain faith put God in cold storage while we set our own agendas. We can't risk wasting our lives in devotion to a god who might not exist. Sin is not only a betrayal of God; it is a denial of God.

What is our sin? It is simply that we do not love God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, and with all our strength—and thus we do not love our neighbors as ourselves. God is not enough for us and our neighbors are too much to bear.

Augustine suggested that Christian ethics are summed up in a single maxim: Love God and do anything you want. It is an extreme statement, but it is essentially correct. If you love God, you will love your neighbor, and if you love your neighbor, justice and mercy will inevitably follow. The Ten Commandments state the same thing in negative form. If you avoid murder, adultery, theft, slander, jealousy, the abuse of one's elders and blaspheming against the honor of God, nothing else is forbidden. The Ten Commandments are not in the least burdensome unless deep down you wish, “If only I could be a murderous, adulterous, thieving, slandering, jealous, ingrate and blasphemer!” Only to the psychopath could God's demands seem unreasonable. No, the Lord's yoke is easy, and his burden is light. Love is a joy; sin is an intolerable mode of being.

But there is a dimension to our situation that is perhaps even more chilling than

our sin. If *only* the fault were solely ours. If *only* we could place all the blame for life's misery on our own puny shoulders and assume the crushing responsibility ourselves, then the sentence of death laid against the human race would be simple justice. However, there is a systemic, a structural brokenness to life and the world that is so pervasive and so overwhelming that some people have been led to conclude that if there is a God, he is a madman and a betrayer; that life "is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

Systemic evil includes such natural catastrophes as earthquakes, tornadoes, drought, flood, together with epidemics, cancer, strokes, heart attacks, and so on. These are problem enough. But as they can merely kill us, maim us, or wipe out our loved ones, they do not, in themselves, call into question the very possibility of our being morally significant beings. They are terrible realities, but they can be fought and often overcome by technology and medicine. They can often bring out the best in survivors. Nevertheless, such catastrophes are in themselves enough to turn a morally sensitive person into an enemy of God

However, there are other manifestations of systemic evil that involve us as moral beings and which, given our finitude, can never be overcome— aspects of existence that simply mock any talk of moral innocence. If sin is a failure of free will, then systemic evil is not sin. I will discuss these aspects under three headings. Systemic evil as psychological and spiritual; systemic evil as social and political; and systemic evil as manifest in the phenomenon of the psychopath.

### *Systemic Evil as Psychological and Spiritual*

Robert Louis Stevenson once observed that we all have thoughts that would shame hell. How often we are overcome by hatred, rage, lust, prejudice, jealousy, envy, violence, and greed! Although we don't always yield to our base impulses, often only fear of reprisal inhibits us. And it is not just that we are willful sinners. We often find ourselves—perhaps most often find ourselves—"in sin" against our wills. Have you ever considered how appallingly direct The Lord's Prayer is concerning this matter? "Lead us not into temptation." Jesus knows that unless a merciful God leads us away from temptation we can no more resist than a snowflake can survive in a furnace.

Of course, we cannot use our helplessness to excuse our personal sin and guilt. However, we are kept from self-righteousness if we can judge the weakness of others with the mercy and compassion our sin and guilt never permit us to show ourselves. I know nothing of the onslaught of temptation in the soul of my brothers and sisters, but I know from my own experience that against the onslaught of darkness no man or woman

can stand apart from the grace of God. Remember Jesus' words to Peter on the night Peter denied him: "Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat" (Luke 22.31).

Even if we do resist temptation we never truly know our motives. Have we looked into our hearts lately? "Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander" (Matthew 15:19). Blaise Pascal once observed that if everyone knew the innermost thoughts of everyone else, there wouldn't be five friends left upon earth. We know deep down that our respectable lives are not born of simple morality. Often it's a trade-off. Outwardly, moral living is simply easier, especially since we haven't got the passion or the energy or the courage to be much more than what most of us usually are: lukewarm human beings. Even if in some of our actions we transcend utter moral ambiguity—and only by the grace of God is this possible—nevertheless it takes grace to be gracious. Grace is all of God. However, why is it that some persons seem to have a greater share of God's empowering grace than others? Even grace itself seems to worsen the dilemma of systemic evil.

Traditional Christian theology has attempted to include the phenomenon of systemic evil in its psychological and spiritual dimensions under the umbrella of original sin. Adam's sin brought such evil into reality. It is the guilty result of humanity's loss of the image of God. However, in spite of certain useful insights of the doctrine of original sin, it rests upon the dubious assumption that there literally was an era of dreaming innocence from which humanity fell, and by this single act brought physical death and moral and spiritual ambiguity into the world—*ex nihilo*, as it were. The doctrine defies, if nothing else, our biological and paleontological understanding of the history of life on earth, which has always been governed by the law of the jungle, or in evolutionary terms, the survival of the fittest.

The Augustinian attempt in the doctrine of original sin to get God "off the hook" and blame humanity alone for the structural, moral, and spiritual brokenness of the world is both scientifically and theologically untenable. What Scripture has called "the wages of sin" (Romans 6:23) in this respect we must frankly acknowledge is a manifestation of the problem of systemic evil. Our sin is not the root cause of systemic evil. Our sin is exacerbated by that systemic evil which is prior to sin.

### *Systemic Evil as Social and Political*

Systemic evil is not just psychological and spiritual, it is also social and political. This is nowhere better illustrated than in the ecology of existence. We can never do just one thing; everything we do reverberates in the world in such a way that we cannot control

the outcome of our simplest acts. A student studies especially hard simply because he or she grows ashamed of having too often just gotten by. The result is that the curve is raised and another student's grade suffers. No ill will was intended. The nature of existence is competitive: for one to succeed is for another to fail. Jesus Christ came into the world to achieve peace and reconciliation, yet Herod viewed his birth as a threat and consequently slaughtered innocent male firstborns. Not even the gracious God can act within the framework of this world without triggering a chain reaction of terror and death.

The great Protestant social thinker Reinhold Niebuhr never tired of reminding us that our socio-economic interests blind us to the demands of objective justice in matters of political conflict. Our sense of justice is colored by our need to justify ourselves. The result is that even the best human will is tainted. Not only do our acts reverberate beyond our original intention and injure others without our willing it, but we cannot even be certain that our most honest efforts are as honest as we suppose.

Life often confronts us with options that are mutually objectionable. Is it better to be dead than Red or Red than dead? Do we allocate limited resources available for medical care in order to perform extremely expensive procedures to prolong the lives of a few individuals? Or do we write off the victims of esoteric or terminal illness and direct our resources to the growing population of poor and elderly who cannot afford medical care? Do we opt for the moral crime of abortion or the moral crime of child deprivation and abuse?

Sin as we have defined it is an act of will, but human wills are not the only source of evil. As we have already observed, we often do evil not as its willing collaborators, but as its enthralled and enslaved victims. The consequence is that even when we do the will of God, "evil lies close at hand. . . . Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:21, 24)

### *Systemic Evil in the Phenomenon of the Psychopath*

We turn now to the third kind of systemic evil -- not the deliberate sin done by the guilty, knowing sinner; not the evil that we are plunged into by psychological, spiritual, social, and political realities of existence itself. There is a third kind of systemic evil, an evil that is done in complete moral insensitivity: the evil of the psychopath.

How can anyone hate enough to butcher six million strangers? How can the serial killer subsist on torture and murder? How can someone rape and brutalize his daughter? How can someone cheat the elderly out of their life savings?

When Christians, for example, wring their hands over sin, they might be referring

to the self-aggrandizing pride that motivated their giving five-hundred dollars to charity. The psychopathic act is an act that transcends considerations of ordinary human morality. There exists in some people a capacity for barbarism, meanness, and cruelty that cannot be reached by moral persuasion. There is nothing more hideous than human intelligence shorn of moral conscience. The origin of the psychopath, whether it is genetic or environmental, need not trouble us. What is a fact is that God's world throws up such aberrations.

The death of Jesus Christ is God's response to a world that is torn by systemic evil. We have dealt with these painful issues because only when we confront the radical brokenness of our situation can we hope to understand why God would have resorted to so drastic a measure.

## *Lecture Three: Systemic Sin: God's Ultimate Burden*

We closed our last lecture with an examination of the broken character of existence as it is characterized by sin and systemic evil. Sin, as we spoke of it, is our deliberate and treacherous denial of the love and being of the gracious God. Systemic evil, unlike sin, does not have its origin with us, though we do as sinners fall in league with it. Systemic evil is that malignancy which is intertwined through the very structure of existence, which assaults us, and by which we become, quite apart from any choices we make, feckless participants in our own tragic ruin.

The New Testament proclamation is that God has decisively grappled with these dread realities in the strange darkness of Golgotha. But how does Christ's death affect the broken character of existence? This is a perennial theological question which, when it is answered with precision, issues in what have been called "theories" of the atonement. Of the three great theories which developed in the history of Christian thought, two of them, the substitutionary theory and the ransom theory, have been called objective theories, for they stress the objective work of Christ on the cross. The radical differences in the two theories reflect the differences in the theological understanding of the predicament that lies behind them. The substitutionary theory primarily focuses on the work of Christ as that work is directed to the reality of sin, as sin is seen as the prime obstacle to atonement. The ransom theory, for its part, is concerned with the reality of systemic evil as the heart of the human predicament. I shall be concerned to expound the concerns expressed in these objective theories in this lecture.

Theology has too often viewed the two objective understandings of the atonement as if they were mutually exclusive. However, neither theory is even remotely adequate by itself and, as I shall continue to argue, each is flawed in its classic expression. Nevertheless, if we are to go beyond them, we can only do so by means of a critical appropriation of their main lines of concern.

The third great theory, the exemplar theory, has been called the subjective theory of the atonement. It views the cross of Christ as a work of God's love which calls forth from us such an answering love so that we inevitably will seek to be reconciled to God. There is great force to this, for if "it is for freedom that Christ has set us free," then of course we must, in freedom return to God (Galatians 5:1). However, our *subjective* response does not really provide a theological explanation for the death of Christ. Rather than being a theoretical explanation, it is more a grateful hymn of praise that follows our reflection on that which Christ has *objectively* accomplished.

Christ died because we are deliberate and willful sinners. It is inconceivable that our sin could be forgiven by a simple wave of the hand. The great strength of the sub-

stitutionary approach to the atonement is that it keeps this sorry reality steadily before us. So serious is our sin that it would seem that once God's love and being have thus been defamed, the only possible outcome for us is annihilating death. When we reflect on what sin finally is, it might appear that not only is totally free forgiveness impossible, but that *all* forgiveness is impossible.

We have to do here with a very slippery matter when we discuss the apparent unforgivableness of our sin, for of course we come to the problem as Christians who know that our sin has been forgiven. Therefore, we are always in danger of going through a mock show of horror, sorrow, and remorse, while all the time secretly believing that sin isn't really all that serious, for after all, it has been forgiven. As W. H. Auden's Herod quipped (in *For the Time Being*), "I like committing crimes. God likes forgiving them. Really the world is admirably arranged." Against such blasphemy the Scripture warns: "Do not be deceived; God is not mocked" (Galatians 6:7).

No Christian can see the miraculous forgiveness of God as diminishing sin's seriousness because to do so is to mock God doubly. First, it takes for granted the cost of Christ's sacrifice and the incredible miracle of grace that was required to achieve forgiveness. And second, such an attempt fails to see what a judgment upon us Christian sinners the forgiveness of God entails. For consider what it means to have to acknowledge that we who know that we are forgiven by God at so high a price continue in sin! Forgiveness itself would make us all the more guilty were it not for the fact that by a miracle we are forgiven. The very forgiveness of sin makes its continual perpetration, humanly speaking, unforgivable.

The forgiveness of our sin doesn't diminish the bitter seriousness of our sin. Nevertheless, its seriousness is no justification for morbidly speaking as if sin were not forgiven. Therefore, since it is forgiven, discussion of the seriousness of sin must always take on a somewhat hypothetical tone, i.e., where would sin lead if it were not forgiven? Were it not for the fact that it is forgiven, sin would seem unforgivable.

To understand the unforgivableness of sin we might simply consider what God has done for us in creation, in which even our limits must be seen as expressions of God's graciousness. Quite obviously we were not created to be rugged individualists, answerable neither to God nor to our neighbor. The life we were given and the maturity toward which we were created to strive certainly have parameters. But these parameters are not arbitrary restrictions; they are expressions of God's mercy, for God did not create a chaos where existence would be disoriented madness. Life, physical as well as spiritual, is only possible in a context of order, for a movement toward disorder can create only disintegration and death.

The order that God wills can be formulated in a variety of ways; however, there is

no formulization better than the Ten Commandments. With magnificent comprehensiveness and brevity, this gracious Decalogue tells us that if we love God and neighbor, we will inevitably come to the goal we were created to attain.

The Ten Commandments, though they take the form of law, basically are a description of what God had in mind when he created us. Only a distorted vision of reality and freedom could give rise to resentment against God's commandments. Only if we fail to understand that we did not create ourselves, that we were created in order to serve God, can we falsely imagine that God's commandments, which mark the only path that leads to both freedom and order, are in any sense restraining.

Only when we have clearly in mind what God expects of us, that his will is pure good will, and that he wishes only good for us and good for our neighbor, are we able to see how absolutely incomprehensible and inexcusable is our sin. Our sin is in the interest of no one. It is not in our personal interest; it is certainly not in our neighbor's interest; and therefore it is not in God's interest. It is absolutely pointless and profitless living. Only when we grasp how completely unmotivated, perverse and unnatural is our sin are we able to appreciate how, humanly speaking, it is unforgivable, and why it can only be forgiven by a miracle. "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26).

Sin is the obstinate determination to be what we are not. It is as if I decided one morning that henceforth I will not be a human being; rather, I will be a parasite. The attempt to live out such lunacy will inevitably lead to the undoing of my neighbor, just as it will certainly entail the disintegration of what I was created to be. I was not created to be a parasite; I was created to be a human being. Sin, the attempt to be what we are not and cannot be, is thus suicidal. God does not will our death, but if we are determined to make war against our own beings, God as creator can only watch in horror as his creature declares that it is his inalienable right to contract cancer.

Not only must God be horrified, but also our perverseness must inspire God's holy and eternal outrage. For we have no grounds on which to reject God's love. All God ever wanted in relationship to us is to love us. The very fact that he creates us for freedom, and that indeed we can abuse our freedom, is a clear indication that God's love is not smother love. We cannot claim that God's love restricts us.

Rather, we are loved with the love of the eternal Trinity. We are loved in the context of the intimate love of the Father for the Son in the perfect unity of the Spirit. We are the very fruit of the triune love of God. This means that, of course, we cannot love as we are loved, but God, who is love, does not require us to love as he loves. All that God asks of us is to bask in that love, to grow in the freedom of that love. And what is our reply? On the whole, we would rather contract cancer.

God's outrage is aroused by our inexpressible stupidity in such a preference. God's anger is also the anger of a betrayed lover, who after pouring out his heart and becoming radically vulnerable to his beloved, is spitefully used, abased, humiliated and violated. We treat God's overtures as if he were the village idiot proposing to the village belle.

God's anger is born of love. God's anger does not contradict God's being as love. It is because God cares so passionately that his outrage is so terrible. If God did not love, God could simply, callously cast aside his creature with the same cool detachment of an assembly-line inspector discarding an imperfect part. The God who is love does not cease to be love, no matter how furious he might become in witnessing the spectacle of humanity in love with its own annihilation. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:6). It is not God's will that any should perish. The annihilation of humankind is not and never can be the determination of God. But can God, who loves in freedom, and who creates humanity for freedom and love, ignore humanity's sinful impulse toward the self-annihilation of its true being?

The substitutionary theory of the atonement assumes that sin creates a true dilemma for God. This sense of dilemma is proper. We were created to be the most glorious of God's creatures, creatures made in the image of God. But we chose to make God's creation blessing our death sentence. For if we are created to be God's people, then we cannot be anything else. For us to try to be anything other than what we were created to be is self-contradictory. For if I should cease to be what I was created to be, I must, in fact, be nothing. The sinner must of necessity die—not because God wills this, but because contrary to the will of God, the sinner cuts out the ground from under his existence.

Yet the dilemma deepens. Now that we are alienated, it would seem that God cannot come to us in an attempt to bring us to ourselves unless he slays us. God can only be his righteousness, yet his righteousness is perpetually denied and despised by us in our sin. Every time he turns toward the sinner, his rights and his love are petulantly and viciously debased. As a result, he is love and anger so mingled as to be a consuming fire.

It is our sin that makes him a consuming fire. Therefore, when in moments of lucidity we discern our madness and we would in shame and guilt repent, we dare not. We cannot walk into a furnace, and we cry out with Peter, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (Luke 5:8). We cannot as sinners bear God's presence. We have sought death; we have become death. In such a state, for us to look to the Holy One set on fire in righteous anger, we must dissolve in shame and helpless futility. We must die

because that perfect light that must penetrate the denseness of our flesh would only expose our debased souls. We could not evade or rationalize, we could only long to die. There is no turning or possibility of healing within us. "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts" (Isaiah 6:5). No man sees God and lives.

Our alienation feeds upon itself. The medicine that alone can heal us will surely kill us. God is our hope and our death. Thus the irony of our dilemma deepens. We have sinned against the good order of creation and cannot approach God, for we have become sin. Therefore, when God in the reckless daring of the incarnation, realizing that we cannot approach him, approaches us in the veiled weakness of Christ's flesh, we strike out at him and crucify the Prince of Glory. We cannot abide even his healing touch. We are like a rabid dog which in the agony of its disease bites its master's hand. In an act of twisted, misguided self-defense we slay our Savior.

It is sometimes imagined that there is a tension between the love of God and the annihilating fury of God. This is simply mistaken. God's fury is born of a love so limitless and gracious that its debasement cannot *but* engender outrage and grief. However, the fact that God's fury is an annihilating fury lies not in God but in us. We are the ones who have chosen the path to annihilation; we are the ones who cannot face God, so that even when confronted by his healing presence we prefer to die rather than to be healed. We are the ones who crucified the Prince of Glory.

The very fact, however, that we still exist even after this act of deicide, in seeming contradiction to the dynamics of our dilemma, demonstrates that the annihilating character of God's wrath lies in us not in God. If our annihilation were the final expression of God's anger humanity would never have survived the first sin. Yet if it is true that God's wrath is born not of hatred but of love, and that our annihilation is contrary to God's will and is not the final end toward which God's wrath is directed, this might at first glance seem to dislocate, if not contradict, any substitutionary theory of the atonement—for doesn't the notion of substitution rest on the assumption of the need to offer a sacrifice that will placate an angry God?

This objection rests on a view of the practice of sacrifice that is based on some sort of *quid pro quo*. God remains angry until some victim or other is made to pay in kind for the offense that has been given. However, such a view of sacrifice is simply not consistent with the biblical understanding and practice of sacrifice.

What distinguishes the Old Testament practice of animal sacrifice from the animal sacrifice of Israel's pagan neighbors is that paganism had an essentially magical view of the ritual. The gods needed and/or delighted in sacrifice and therefore, sacrifice rightly done gave the devotee a certain real bargaining power with the deity.

For Israel it was simply unthinkable that the creator of heaven and earth was dependent on burnt offerings for his pleasure. It is the sinner who needs sacrifice, not God. For Israel, God in his mercy grants this concrete ritual act by which to make atonement for sin, because the sinner needs some vivid way to call upon God for forgiveness. God does not need sacrifice. Sacrifice is merely a symbol for the only true valid sacrifice, the sacrifice of a contrite heart.

We must acknowledge that the classical substitutionary theory has the biblical understanding turned around, so that in some sense it resembles more the pagan rather than the biblical understanding. It was Anselm's view that God was unable to forgive humankind unless satisfaction was made for sin. Satisfaction must be made prior to forgiveness.

Surely this is not in keeping with the Old Testament priority. For Israel sacrifice was but a symbol and a dispensable one at that. Sacrifice has no value in and of itself. Sacrifice would have no efficacious power were not God predisposed to forgive. Sacrifice does not move God to forgive. God's prior willingness to forgive grants sacrifice whatever power it has.

Similarly, the New Testament sees sacrifice as the act that follows forgiveness. It does not precipitate the forgiveness of God. Consider the apostle Paul's laying out of the sequence of things: "Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood" (Romans 3:23–25). For Paul and the rest of the New Testament, the sacrifice of God's Son was a "gift" which God "put forward." Because God determined to forgive, the "expiation" by Christ's blood is offered. The forgiveness of God is not dependent upon Christ's sacrifice; it is expressed in Christ's sacrifice.

But why, if God does not require Christ's death in order to forgive, does he determine to use such terrible means by which to forgive us? Why does our sin necessitate this sacrifice? Now at last we can try to answer this question.

The cross of Jesus Christ confirms what sinners have always dreaded – that God and humanity are co-victims of sin. Even before the cross, the sinner in the wretchedness of sin could intuitively perceive the pain that sin inflicted upon God. Even God's anger could not disguise God's pain. The prophets knew this only too well. As co-victim of sin, God's honor, God's wisdom, God's purpose, and God's love, were all called into question by the first sin. But now this ultimate sin, the crucifixion of God's Son, must leave God decimated – just as surely as it must destroy our last hope.

Then, suddenly, the unexpected occurs. God does not despair of his deicidal creature. Humanity is not destroyed. Instead, God's Messiah is raised up, and thereby,

to our absolute amazement, the all-powerful God turns the other cheek. When the risen Christ appeared to his disciples, there was no recrimination, no talk of vengeance. God's vengeance could only perpetuate the cycle of sin and despair on which sin feeds. An angry God can only drive the creature to despair and to the very misguided self-defensiveness that drove men to crucify Christ. God's anger only prolongs the alienation because God's very fury leaves the sinner unable to conceive of the possibility of forgiveness. It lays on us a burden far greater than we can ever bear. Only if the cycle of vengeance and despair is broken can there be any hope for us. However, this can occur only if God, already victimized by sin, offers himself as the ultimate victim. The only way the cycle of vengeance and despair can be broken is if God, who alone can endure the annihilating burden of sin, bears all its malignancy and returns from death without recrimination.

God's anger is real, but unless God endures that anger himself, the creature will be destroyed by it. As our destruction is never God's will, God determines to bear the consequences of sin. God lets the annihilating consequences of sin roll over his beloved Son. Suddenly we see the divine assertion, "Vengeance is mine," in a strange and exhilarating new light. Vengeance is, indeed, God's entirely. Therefore God has both exacted all vengeance and God has borne all vengeance in the same act, in the cross of God's Son. In the cross, God has made good his claim to *all* vengeance.

Suddenly, the sinner's despair seems quite beside the point. God in Christ has made God's own that which we in our sin believed to be the burden of inevitable, inescapable annihilation. Out of that doom God has fashioned resurrection—a new life with which to begin afresh.

It is not surprising that the apostles should have doubted the first resurrection accounts. The logical outcome of our sin seemed to require divine vengeance for the murder of God's Son. But this, our ultimate sin, became the occasion for God's radical identification with the sinner. The logical outcome of God's love is God's sacrifice.

God's logic is expressed not only in Christ's sacrifice but also in God's solidarity with us. God need not have become human in order to undergo this holy humiliation, although in the cross, the humiliation of our concrete rejection was without measure, for when we first sinned we subjected God to humiliation beyond measure. God need not have become human in order merely to declare that God alone must bear the burden of our sin, for this was implicit in our helplessness from the beginning. It is because God is a lover that God could not refrain from becoming one with us—one of us. God is so irreversibly in love with us that God cannot but, in absolute solidarity with us, bear the consequences of our sin. God is not empathy that is profound sympathy—that though its heart goes out still in fact keeps its distance. God is love; God will not keep his distance.

God cannot let us suffer alone.

This is what the Scripture points to when it asserts, in apparent paradox, that Christ was without sin and yet at the same time became sin on our behalf (2 Corinthians 5:21). The Son of God entered into no deliberate act of rebellion against the Father, but in solidarity with us, he became in the flesh that which God already was in the spirit, a fellow victim of the fall.

Jesus Christ as God and as man is the only completely innocent victim of the fall. He who did not sin willed to be plunged into the sinful order of the world so that as sin's innocent victim he might in fleshly solidarity with sinners be crushed and destroyed by their sin. He dared to risk the sentence of annihilation that sinners pronounced upon themselves. He will not permit us to bear our shame alone. In his love, he is impervious to shame. He gravitated toward the outcasts and his righteous contemporaries saw him as "a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Matthew 11:19). In his solidarity with us, he demonstrates a love that exceeds the bounds of human self-respect and decorum. He has become sin for the sake of his beloved ones.

Not just by his sacrifice, but by his solidarity with us, Jesus Christ has demonstrated that our sin can be taken in hand—that it cannot be the last word. The dilemma that our sin creates, that seems so insoluble from our human point of view, seems to dissolve in the ministry of Jesus Christ. The logical inevitability of our doom, which seemed so inescapable, is revealed for the myth it is. Sin is not the god of this world ruling all things unto annihilation. In our despair we may have conjured up such a specter, but Jesus Christ has demythologized sin.

We have tried to describe the abysmal nature of sin, but when at last we consider God's taking hold of sin in the cross of Christ, we cannot but observe that sin has lost its power to frighten and dishearten us. In the light of Jesus Christ and his sacrifice, we cannot superstitiously speak of sin as if it can threaten us and the good order of God.

We must finally say that in the light of forgiveness, sin becomes, not the ticket to doom, but the most optimistic appraisal of the human situation consistent with realism that is possible. Of course, all is not as it will and must someday be. Of course, the triumph of God is not complete. Nevertheless, the almighty God has spared nothing to achieve reconciliation. Our problem—in light of the fact that "while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8)—is not some metaphysical flaw basic to our being. It is an aberration born of our estrangement from God, and God has made it clear that our rejection will not be accepted. God is a lover who will not take our estranged "no" for an answer. There is no end to the lengths that God will go in order to win us back. Certainly mere sin cannot stand in God's way. With the achievement of Christ's death and resurrection, human sin is the least of God's problems.

God's ultimate burden is not sin; it is systemic evil—the evil in the world for which human beings are not primordially responsible. Sin, in fact, is partially occasioned by systemic evil. Systemic evil causes us to call into question God's love and power. In examining how God confronts systemic evil in the cross of Jesus Christ, we had best start with a consideration of the dynamics of the work of Christ as a work of ransom.

The ransom theory of the atonement finds early articulation in the work of Irenaeus, the second-century bishop of Lyons, France. Irenaeus' theology does not feature a full-blown theoretical explanation of the ransom theme. However, he does speak of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, giving himself as a ransom so that no injustice be done even to Satan when the Word redeems God's original creation from Satan's clutches.

Irenaeus is none too precise in his understanding of the ransoming work of Christ. However, this is not particularly damaging to his overall understanding of Christ's work because the ransom of humanity in Irenaeus' theology is but a single act in the wider drama of creation and redemption. This contrasts with Anselm, who sees the incarnation as singular in purpose, i.e., that the God-man might be sacrificed. For Anselm, the cross is so exclusive an explanation for the incarnation that it might appear that the resurrection need never have occurred for salvation to be achieved.

Irenaeus' understanding of the incarnation is multifaceted and does not focus exclusively on sin. Indeed, a consistent working out of the leading themes of Irenaeus' thought suggests that sin is primarily a by-product of the structural imperfection of the created order. The creation was not made in a perfect state; thus, sin, though certainly not inexcusable, was nevertheless virtually inevitable. While the fact of sin severely complicates the work of the incarnate Word of God, the bulk of Christ's work addresses itself to the root causes of sin: radical evil and the unfinished state of creation. Even had sin never occurred, the creation stood in need of completion.

The substitutionary theory of atonement is the product of Western, Augustinian Christianity. In its drastic emphasis on sin, it reflects an Augustinian preoccupation. Augustine's whole theology is radically colored by his approach to the problem of evil. Augustine, personally obsessed with human frailty and guilt, morbidly delved into the depths of his psyche to find grounds for self-accusation. But this personal probing had a fundamental theological function. It was the means by which Augustine sought to absolve God from all responsibility for the reality of evil.

Humanity, according to Augustine, was created perfect. God gave humankind freedom that they might freely serve God. But humankind made perverted use of its freedom. How humans could have moved from innocence—which did exist—to sin—which heretofore did not exist—Augustine does not explain, nor could he. As has

been observed, Augustine is left with a paradox. By arguing that humankind brought sin and its consequent evils into existence, he is finally left holding the notion that human beings created sin *ex nihilo* in what amounts to an anti-creational miracle of perversity. Augustine could never adequately explain how it is possible that a creature created perfectly good is capable of generating that which God neither created nor willed – sin. Augustine nevertheless insists that it is we who must bear full responsibility for sin and evil.

Whether Augustine's theology on this point is tenable or defensible need not detain us here. The fact remains that deep in the very foundations of the Christian tradition there is precedent for an approach to human fallenness far different than the prevalent Western view. And, of course, a different diagnosis of the human condition entails a different understanding of the remedy necessary to heal it.

It is ironic that by far the oldest systematic analysis of sin and redemption should be revived in our era. It has become a theological cliché that theology should strive to be "relevant" to our modern, post-religious, post-industrial society. It would seem that now that theology is interested in coming to terms with evolutionary thinking, Irenaeus, the first evolutionary thinker since Paul, can at last have his day.

For Irenaeus, God created humanity innocent, but imperfect. That is, human beings did not come into the world the mature reality toward which they were created ultimately to develop. God intended to bestow on human beings a gift so magnificent that they were unable to receive it in their newborn state. As an infant can be offered, but cannot eat, solid food, so newly created humankind could be offered, but could not receive, the fullness of God's intended gift. God intends to grant us immortality, even deification. God intends to make us what God himself is. But we must be mature before we can inherit this foreordained legacy.

Because Irenaeus holds that humans were not made perfect in the first place, he does not regard the fall of so immature a being as Adam to be the shocking paradox that Augustine did. Indeed, for Irenaeus, a creature so vulnerable almost inevitably would have fallen. God uses sin and the evil it generates as a means by which to censure and instruct his delinquent children. Thus even sin can be put to a good end – even sin is not out of control.

The Augustinian insistence on the cataclysmic character of the fall and its finally inexplicable cause and outcome is not to be found in Irenaeus. However, his more naturalistic understanding of sin, almost as if it were a matter of the inevitable growth process of the childlike creature, has its own theological price to pay.

The more one tries to make sense of sin by attributing it to the natural frailties of the imperfect creature, the more God, the creator of such brokenness, must be portrayed

as the ultimate source of sin and evil. The more natural human frailty and weakness are seen as the source of what we call sin and evil, the less room there is for affirming human freedom. If we are merely apes, the moral seriousness of human existence is denied. The more we see ourselves as naturally imperfect, the more incomprehensible is the notion that we can be saved. How can we be saved from our weakness and sin if it is our nature to be weak and sinful? If we are made into some other being, strong and righteous, we cease to be that which by nature we originally were, so that it is no longer we, but some other creature, that is saved.

When I said that sin is an ultimately optimistic appraisal of human brokenness, what I meant is that a doctrine of sin sees sin as a kind of madness that is unnatural to the creature. As such, sin is not a necessary condition of the creature and is thus redeemable. But if sin is an excusable human frailty, because we were created weak, it is endemic to humankind. The more one defines human nature as essentially frail, the more one defines human nature as essentially unredeemable.

Irenaeus thought tries to counter this problem by arguing that sin, though inappropriate behavior, is nevertheless understandable due to our youth. However, ultimately we can be brought to perfection by the ongoing work of Christ. Christ, as the Word of God through whom all things were created, is in the incarnation not only redeeming the world from sin, he is also finishing the work he began the moment he brought all things into being.

Our sin in this context is of only secondary importance in the ultimate cosmic drama. There exists in the world a structured imperfection that exploits and renders essentially inevitable our continued immature behavior. This, for Irenaeus thought, is the real issue. We have called this structural imperfection systemic evil. Irenaeus preferred a more mythological description: Satan. But in either language, the point is that evil has a strange ontological basis that exists prior to its existentially issuing in sin. Evil is not simply reducible to sin.

The ransom theme in Irenaeus is, as we have said, but an aspect of the multifaceted work which the incarnate Christ must undertake. The ransoming work of Christ is the aspect of Irenaeus' cosmic understanding of Christ's work that involves most directly the theme of these lectures – why Christ had to die. Nevertheless, we need to see that death as part of a wider understanding lest Irenaeus' language about a ransom to the Satan be dismissed as excessively mythological.

For Irenaeus, Christ came, first, in order to engage Satan, or in my language, systemic evil, at the place it is most powerful – death. Christ could only engage death by dying, lest the threatening claim on humanity of death and darkness be slighted by God who did not endure its terror and did not experience the enthrallment to darkness that

holds us sinners. Christ's second work is to endure the power of death and triumph over it, to demonstrate by dying and rising that in God's world death is not as powerful as life. As Gustaf Aulen has shown in his classic study, *Christus Victor*, the ransom work of Christ cannot be understood unless it is interfaced with the victory toward which it is directed. In the ransom theory, unlike the substitutionary theory, Christ's death is not an end in itself. Christ died so that he might rise again.

Irenaeus' theology of the incarnation goes beyond even Christ's dying and rising. Christ also came to recapitulate the life of Adam, to live out to sinless maturity the life Adam's sin aborted and profaned. As God's creative word incarnate, it is fitting that he should have embodied the ideal of human life that was in God's thought when God first envisioned the creature. Finally, having achieved perfect humanity in the flesh, the resurrected Christ is the first fruits of the humanity God ultimately envisions. In the resurrection, the humanity of Christ is made immortal, deified, and in him all shall ultimately receive the gifts God always intended to bestow upon the human race.

Irenaeus is not always consistent, but there is a suggestion in his writings that the final work of deification would have required the incarnation even if humans had never sinned. I would argue that, if Irenaeus is consistent, he must hold that the creation would not be complete unless Christ came. Christ came, in Irenaeus' words, "to become what we are, that He might bring us to be what He Himself is" (*Against Heresies*, Book 5, Preface; cf. 3.18.7). Sin did not necessitate the work of deification. Deification is God's great intention for humankind from the beginning. Christ came, above all, to complete the creation.

The revival of certain aspects of Irenaeian thought has been associated with the theodicy of the Unitarian philosopher, John Hick. Hick has argued that evil can be rationalized on the grounds that it is inevitable in a world that was created to be an arena for "soul making." We don't always understand why we must endure suffering, but in the end heaven will more than justify the suffering we must undergo to attain it.

The end, eternal life, will justify the means -- our life in this vale of tears we call the world. Hick argues, in agreement with Irenaeus, that we were created immature and life in this world is necessary for our growth into God's ultimate blessing. Still, there is a certain urbane, sheltered rationalism to his analysis which cannot take into account the bitter outrage which characterizes much modern atheism—for example, Ivan Karamazov, who declines God's offer of heavenly reward, preferring annihilation to peace in a kingdom that was built on the suffering of slaughtered children.

If the creation is evolving to a greater, eternal destiny, why must the world as it presently exists contradict so violently the eternal destiny that will complete it? Why must some people die in shrieking, frustrated, meaningless agony while others can

afford the luxury of the wider view of things, wherein, from their perspective, “all things work together for good to them that love God” (Romans 8:28)? What about those who because of God’s dealings in the here-and- now love God in the by-and-by?

To say the world is in process is to say that God is finally responsible for all the suffering the creature must endure. If to God goes all the praise, so also to God must go the ultimate blame. God’s honor rests on the assumption that God can pull off the work of creation. But this assumes that in the end *all* God’s creatures will agree that what God accomplishes in the end justifies the terrible cost in the present. If God cannot win us to his plan and God must destroy some or endure their perpetual alienation, God will have led some to suffer and die in agony that will never be justified. Thus, to some of God’s creatures God would eternally be what atheists of outrage charge: a cosmic sadist.

God must save all if God’s honor is to remain intact. God must win all to his purpose. Salvation cannot be forced upon us, for if we do not freely accept it, it is not the life unto freedom that God intends for us. God has a great purpose—but it is also an enterprise of dazzling risk. The cross of Christ is God’s answer to suffering. But to understand how it can conceivably be an answer to human suffering both the sacrificial and ransom themes must be deepened and interfaced. To this we shall turn in our final lecture.

## *Lecture Four: Christ the Vindicator*

In our last lecture, we discussed the death of Jesus Christ both as a sacrifice and as a ransom. We saw that Christ's sacrificial death was vital in altering our sinful situation. Christ's work of ransom, on the other hand, was a work in which God through Christ was engaged in a decisive and final coming to terms with the dark reality of what we have labeled systemic evil. In this final lecture I shall be concerned to explore further the work of God in overcoming systemic evil. I shall conclude that Christ's work of ransom in the face of systemic evil is a richly diverse undertaking that must finally be understood as work of simultaneous ransom and sacrifice.

Before we can see the ransoming sacrifice of Jesus Christ in all its richness, however, we must set it in context. We must therefore briefly survey the various theological explanations for evil that have been attempted in the past in order better to understand not only the depth of the problem, but also in order that we might see how, in the light of the failure, or at best the only partial success, of these explanations, nothing short of the death of Jesus Christ can ever support our conviction and hope that evil in all its dimensions can be overcome.

Many theological explanations for evil are already anticipated in the thought of Augustine of Hippo who died in 430 B.C.E. Preoccupied as he was by evil, he developed three basic lines of argument in order to make sense of it. None of these lines is particularly successful, and what is worse, they tend to cancel one another out. Nevertheless, Augustine's explanations for evil have radically influenced Western Christianity. Augustine accounts for evil philosophically; he attributes it to human sin and freedom; and finally, he subsumes it within the predestining purpose of God.

Augustine's philosophic argument is grounded in Neoplatonism, which held that all being emanated from God, or the One. The One is absolute in self-existence and is absolute in simplicity. As light radiates from the sun, so being emanates eternally and necessarily from the One. The farther being radiates from the One, the more rarefied it becomes. The world in which we exist is good insofar as it exists; that is, insofar as it has being. Nevertheless it is far inferior to those higher realms of being which are in greater proximity to the One. Evil has no reality of its own. It is mere nothingness. However, when nothingness stands in contrast to being, it casts its parasitic shadow upon being and gains a certain paradoxical reality. The One is perfect. Being as the immediate product of the One is good. But even the One cannot so fill the universe with being that the density of being would exclude nothingness. Evil is thus an inevitable consequence

of existence. Augustine found Neoplatonism helpful because he believed that it enabled him to account for the actual reality of evil as a kind of absence of good without suggesting that evil is the product of God.

Augustine never expressly rejected his Neoplatonism, but later in his life it tended to wither as he engaged in gradual movement toward more biblical categories. Perhaps this was due in part to a tacit recognition of the high price one must pay in attempting to absolve God from responsibility on a Neoplatonic basis. For one thing, God is compelled by his nature to eternally emanate being, and thus creation cannot be the free act of sovereign love that the Bible declares. Not only is God's love thus precluded, but his power is drastically limited. God cannot create a perfect world. He cannot so fill the universe with being that nothingness is excluded. Since God cannot create a world free from evil, it follows that he cannot redeem his creation. This world is as good as it can be. It is, alas, but the best of all possible worlds.

Modern Process Theology has attempted to revive its own Whiteheadian version of a Neoplatonically limited creator on the curiously naïve grounds that it provides a basis on which to absolve God for responsibility for evil. If God has created the best world he can, given the metaphysical limitations with which he must deal, he cannot be blamed for the evil he cannot prevent.

Perhaps we human creatures can be absolved for acting in an evil manner in a world which is inevitably fallen. It can be argued that we are mere victims of circumstance. God, however, is not thereby absolved. What right has God to make a world that at very best produces the death of all who enter it and at worst produces Auschwitz? God is not absolved by his limited power; God is all the more guilty for creating a world he knew in advance he could never save. Are all the beauties of the world worth the agonized scream of a child beaten to death by a parent? A God who pleads diminished responsibility is a moral coward. If God is not responsible, who could be?

Augustine's second line of argument is the so-called "free will defense." Here the argument implies a rejection of the metaphysical inevitability of evil and holds instead that Adam and Eve were created flawless in the Garden of Eden. As God's splendid creatures, Adam and Eve were given the gift of freedom which they in their pride misused, thereby bringing sin and evil into the world.

Such an argument is laden with difficulties. It entails the paradox of asserting that Adam and Eve somehow brought into being, *ex nihilo*, that which God did not make and did not will; that is, sin and evil. How is it conceivable that a finite creature could bring something out of nothing that was totally contrary to God's love, God's will, God's purpose, and God's order?

The Augustinian explanation is that the gift of freedom requires the possibility of sinning, for in order freely to choose the good, we must have the option to choose the bad. This is absurd from the outset, for it entails the impossible notion that in order to be free, Adam and Eve had to be able to choose between that which manifestly did exist—the gracious will of God, and that which had no reality and was actually inconceivable to the innocent mind; that is, sin and evil.

Beyond this the free-will defense leaves Augustine in a contradiction concerning his definition of freedom. One of his greatest insights was the realization that true freedom is most perfectly expressed in steadfastness. True freedom is not the capacity to act in capricious willfulness. This is slavery to whim. The truly free person is the person who is able gladly to keep his or her commitments and duties. True freedom finds its highest expression in the joy of self-control and self-discipline. Sin is the repudiation of freedom. Freedom does not require the possibility of sinning. Sin is the end of freedom. At the moment Adam sinned, he denied his freedom and lost it.

Further, if true freedom necessitated the possibility of falling, then the final redemption of the world would be impossible. For even if we were restored to our original freedom and innocence, we would presumably of necessity be able to fall again, and the whole cycle of freedom, fall, and redemption would continue *ad infinitum*.

Augustine recognized this trap and argued with far greater consistency that in the Kingdom of Heaven we will be granted the gift of perfect freedom, and our freedom will be like God's freedom. We will be blessed with the "happiness of perseverance, the inability to desert the good." Perfect freedom is the perfect incapacity to sin. However, if perfect freedom is the only basis on which eternal sinlessness is possible, we are compelled to ask: "Why weren't we granted perfect freedom from the very beginning?"

If we were not created with that perfect freedom that would ensure our immunity from sin and evil, how can we be portrayed as the arch villains whose fatal weakness brought a perfect world into chaos? If we were created with the capacity to fall, then the final burden of responsibility for our fall lies not with us, but with our creator. The free-will defense not only fails to absolve God, it ultimately opens up grounds for a radical accusation against God.

Augustine's strongest argument in attempting to account for evil is grounded in his doctrine of predestination. As the redemption of the elect few is hidden in the predestining purpose of God, so also the fall of the damned lies in God's inscrutable will. God alone is responsible for the good or evil done to humanity, and in his secret decrees he decides who will be saved out of their sin so as to reveal his justice. When Luther and Calvin denied human freedom after the fall of Adam, they were simply drawing the

logical conclusion of Augustine's doctrine.

A consistent predestinarianism rejects all attempts to absolve God for responsibility for evil. God has assumed ultimate responsibility for the fact that human destiny must be worked out in the context of evil. While this is a welcome admission in the light of the awkwardness and presumptuousness of all attempts to rationalize God's responsibility for evil, the weakness of the Augustinian predestinarian tradition is manifest. It portrays God whose essence is love as brutalizing humanity in his arbitrary and hidden decrees. The damned are brutalized in their damnation, and the redeemed become culpable in this brutalization when in sheer relief that they are not damned, they make their peace with the God who arbitrarily damned others. To those who protest in the name of justice and mercy that this is divine tyranny, the answer is given that such a protest simply proves that the protester deserves to be damned.

Until the modern period the greatest theologians all affirmed predestination: Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin. They felt compelled to do so by the following dilemma. If salvation were not a work of infused grace, irresistibly granted to the saved, how could one avoid the inevitable alternative that we save ourselves by our own good works? There seemed no middle ground between the admittedly hideous doctrine of predestination and the blasphemously arrogant works righteousness that affirms that by good works alone humanity can resist and overcome sin and evil.

Of course it must be admitted that the belief that we can and must save ourselves or at least lend our feeble wills to the enterprise is not born in all cases of pride. It is sometimes motivated by the hapless desire to absolve God from responsibility for the ultimate evil—the eternal damnation of souls. If it could be shown that it is really our fault, then we sinners shoulder the blame. Rather humanity bear a burden that will inevitably crush it than to live with the terrible thought that it is God who wills and determines all things.

The pride hidden in even this futile gesture to shoulder the blame can of course be torn to shreds by anyone who takes sin and evil seriously. But ironically works righteousness is most effectively beaten down by using sin and evil as a club. Humanity is too sinful to understand God's mercy or his justice. This verges on using sin and evil as a means by which to compel submissiveness to God. If one must tear humanity down in order to build God up, what does this say about the true sovereignty and majesty of God?

This all-too-brief survey is perhaps sufficient to indicate what a mishmash Western Christianity has made of the problem of evil. Recently, therefore, there has been a movement toward an explanation of evil that was first expounded by the se-

cond-century theologian, Irenaeus, whose thought was until this century largely ignored by Western Christianity. Irenaeus, as we saw in the last lecture, argued that while God willed to bestow the gift of immortality, the gift of God's own nature, upon humanity, until we grew to maturity we could not receive so great a gift. Therefore, though we were created innocent, we were not created perfect. Rather, we were created immature. It was thus understandable to Irenaeus that so vulnerable a creature as Adam might sin. It is also understandable that creation was made incomplete. The creation we have been given is not yet complete, as we are not yet complete.

Irenaeus did not leave a complete theology. There are certain gaps in his argument. If one takes one's lead from Irenaeus, however, not claiming to perfectly represent him, but arguing out of the basic spirit of his thought, it appears that he might help lead us out of some of the chaos that Western Christianity has tumbled into over the problem of evil.

There is, however, a basic unanswered problem in Irenaeus that must be addressed. Even if we grant to Irenaeus his major premise, that God in his graciousness wishes to bestow on us a gift so great that we cannot receive it until we grow to maturity, a real puzzle still remains: Why didn't God permit us to come to maturity in a context free from sin and evil? There are clearly examples of living things that come to maturity without the suffering that sin and evil produce. For example, a flower comes to maturity in a hothouse needing only moisture and sunlight to grow to perfection. In fact, it is marred by inclement weather, wind, insects, plant disease, and the like. Or show dogs, similarly, are brought to maturity with meticulous care for their development. No dog at Westminster will be disqualified because he hasn't been beaten, starved, and afflicted, and in this way brought to maturation. In fact, maltreatment tends to stunt the dog's maturation. If plants and animals do better in tranquil environments, why didn't God nurture us in a painless paradise—especially since God is supposed to be love?

However, to advance seriously such an objection implies a fundamental under-estimation of the depth of God's love in creation, and thus it underestimates the daring of God's plan for the final consummation of his creative love.

Christianity proclaims the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. God spoke and that which had no existence came into existence. This doctrine was necessary in order to make clear that all reality ultimately comes into being solely at the behest of God. Only by confessing this can we testify as to how completely we are the product of God's free love. God did not need to create the world—God was self-sufficient—but God willed to do so because he wished to share his self-sufficient plenitude. Since God created the world from nothing and was unlimited in the things he could choose to do, it should be

obvious that this world is the arena in which God chose to bestow his eternal love to us. God created this world and declared it good, which means that God affirmed what he created.

As an act of love, creation demanded God's all. Were God not love, he could have chosen to do less than he did. But because our life in this world is a gift of the love of God, God could not achieve it cheaply. Humanity is given all that God has to grant. We are made in God's image, and it is God's ultimate purpose to draw his beloved creature to himself, so that we will finally unite with him in eternity. We are to become more than his image; we are to become the very fruit of God's very life. We are compelled to assert that God's commitment to the creation is so complete that it cannot but extract from him the painful self-commitment that all true creativity extracts from a creator. Even our limited human creativity exacts a high cost from us.

We are created in God's image, and therefore we are created to be creative beings. When we create, we create what we call culture. Culture includes the entire spectrum of human endeavor: our industry, our tools, our arts, our sciences, our religion, our value systems, our language, our dress, etc. It is curious that since human beings are culture-making, culture-bearing creatures, we cannot exist apart from culture. Culture is that necessary mode of activity in which human beings achieve their creative identity. Therefore, as we human beings exist in culture, we contribute to our own creation. Unlike a flower or a show dog, we are more than our genetic makeup. We are only in part determined by our genes. We are also the product of our culture. In culture, we contribute to the specific content of our beings.

The creation of culture represents humanity's struggle to achieve itself. If we could create culture without the pain of self-sacrifice and self-dedication, culture would be far less than the best we have to give, and therefore we would not be creating as creatures created in the image of God. God creates in love and thus at cost to himself. If we ourselves did not have to undergo the pain of creativity, we would lose the infinite honor of being God's co-creators.

It is for these reasons that there must be structural incompleteness and pain in the present and that the incompleteness and brokenness of the world do not, in themselves, contradict God's love or his power. This leads us into what has been called the Irenaean theodicy. According to Irenaeus, God's ultimate purpose in bringing us to maturity and eternal life is a consummation so glorious that in the end we will gladly affirm that the sufferings of this life were insignificant compared to the glory that has been revealed to us. In heaven, the saints will joyously approve of the arduous struggle we human beings have had to undergo in order to achieve such maturity and such glory. It will all

be worth it in the end!

However, herein the problem of evil rears up again. And it is all the more disquieting because at first we would seem to have banished the problem of evil in these hopeful reflections. Then suddenly, we realize that we haven't touched the problem of evil at all, for while we can understand the need for painful struggle if we are to be creative, this does not account for why and how a finite and incomplete world created by God can possibly contain within it the sort of radical, sinister evil that plagues this world. Systemic evil does not help us come to maturity; in fact, it often destroys the soul of its victims.

Is the world out of control? Can there be some unavoidable flaw in the work of God that allows maturity to degenerate into malignancy? Could it be that there is a hidden darkness in the being of God of which systemic evil is but an ominous expression?

Such thoughts have occurred to the defenders and despisers of God alike. What is a defense of God to some is the basis of God's culpability to others. For example, there are those aforementioned who believe that God's power is limited and thus God is excused for the evil of this world which he cannot prevent. But to others (and I would include myself), the notion of a limited God is an outrage. How dare such an incompetent bungler create a world which he cannot exercise control over? The stakes are too high to permit such irresponsibility. To suggest that the joy and beauty of the world justifies the inevitable suffering that occurs within it—thus better this imperfect world than none at all—strikes some defenders of a limited deity as a compelling argument. But once again, to others, this is tantamount to an immoral ethical tradeoff; that is, the joy and gratitude of some cancels out the misery and despair of others. Is the unrelieved, irredeemable agony of a single person, to say nothing of the billions of people who have gone down to the pit in misery and despair worth the imperfect creation of a finally impotent God? Can I accept the formula that my joy—and I've had a lot of it—justifies the inevitable suffering of countless shattered souls? Systemic evil is so radically disorienting that almost any response that one makes to it makes as much philosophic sense as almost any other. Endless debates fill the theological journals over whether or not God's existence is affected by evil or not. The debate is a perennial standoff.

There are aspects of the problem of evil that can finally never be rationalized. We can make a good deal of sense but we can't make final sense. Christians do not believe in God and trust in God's power to achieve his gracious purpose because they have solved the problem of evil. Our limitedness is such that we can never have this kind of certitude about anything—not just evil. All fundamental human assumptions are unprovable.

Only the naïve believe that they can attain perfect rational coherence about larger questions. Finally, in the words of the philosopher Wittgenstein, “There has to be an end to the giving of reasons.” Finally, one says I believe or I do not believe because I have reason enough *for me*.

I must confess that while I am far from solving the problem of evil and don’t think there is any solution, I do have my reasons for believing that God can—all appearances to the contrary notwithstanding—bring to final consummation the staggering work that God has undertaken in creation. For me, this confidence is grounded in the atoning work of Jesus Christ—his death and his resurrection. The atoning work of Jesus Christ not only tells us a great deal about how God deals with the terrible burden of responsibility that evil places upon him, but Christ’s atoning work at the same time gives us a clue as to how to respond to the atheism and despair of the unbeliever, which is a part of the bitter fruit of evil.

Because the Christian takes his or her stand with God, the Christian is aware that atheism, or dark suggestions that God’s heart is partly evil, or speculative notions about God as a limited power—all these desperate intellectual measures and their variations—are false options. However, rather than seeing such options as threats which must be vigilantly opposed, perhaps we should rather take our lead from the crucified Christ who in his solidarity with sinners made common cause with them. He became our advocate—not of sin, of course, but he became the advocate of sinners.

Rather than feeling compelled to do battle with atheists and those with truncated and twisted doctrines of God, perhaps the Christian should advocate the case of these protestors and mavericks before God himself, just as Jesus Christ advocates our cases before God. Perhaps the Christian, rather than trying to evade the painful jab of unbelief and half-belief should permit these protests to strike home without all kinds of phony intellectual defenses. By sharing in the pain of their uncertainty, we might make our own small sacrificial act of atonement for others.

Perhaps this last suggestion, that we might make our small sacrificial act of atonement, is presumptuous; but it is made against the background of the fact that often in Christian history when the church has used its power, the atheist, the skeptic, the heretic, the Jew were all persecuted in the name of the crucified Messiah. The historic sin of the church compels a better understanding of the task of Christians: the church is not called to be God’s policemen. As God’s faithful ambassadors on earth, it cannot be our task to simply take God’s glorious word to the world; we must also take back the world’s word to God. By standing before God in the shoes of the unbeliever, by pressing his or her case, we will learn sympathy, and we will gain insight. By pressing their cause in

solidarity with them, we press upon God not only their articulated doubts and fears, but if we are honest, our own unspoken doubts and fears. Christians, in silencing the doubter, have expressed not true confidence in the truth of their faith, but a profound sense of insecurity.

In the light of every manifestation of evil, what right have we Christians to go on believing just as if nothing had happened? Christian love demands that we take the case of the unbeliever and press it to God. We alone have access to the divine court! Are we afraid that if we the insiders who know where all the skeletons are hidden were to press the case to God, that God could not answer? Or is it the other way around? Because we have failed to advocate the case of our fellows, have we ourselves failed to hear the reply that God himself gladly wills to give?

If the answer God gives to the problem of evil is not perceived as being an answer – if people continue to hate God or are brought to greater anger by the very answer they receive, what should Christians do? Wash their hands of the whole situation? Turn to the world and say, “God is going to damn you if you don’t believe he loves you?” – thereby intensifying the world’s outrage?

Christians alone know the healing word. Christians alone know the lengths to which God has gone in his effort to make peace between himself and the fallen world. Christians alone, therefore, know the real question that still needs to be pressed upon God. Above all, the Christian knows that God is answerable for the world’s evil because God has made the world and God has made himself answerable.

Because God’s free and sovereign rule is an expression of his nature of love and justice and faithfulness, it follows necessarily that when God created the world he bound himself to the world. He is obliged by his very nature to rule in love and justice and faithfulness. He is thereby inevitably drawn further and further into the purview and assessment of the world which demands to know: Does he, in fact, rule in love, justice and faithfulness? It is no small matter, therefore, when even one of God’s creatures answers no. But what of the countless billions who have concluded as they go down to the grave that the world is not ruled in love, justice and faithfulness?

It is the Christian faith that in spite of the present appearance of things that finally love and justice will be achieved by God who labors in absolute faithfulness to bring about his purpose. This is our faith: It is not the Father’s will that any should perish, but all should have eternal life. But God is engaged in a risky undertaking. How can God bring all things to himself? The God who came to us in the lowliness of Jesus Christ cannot suddenly pull rank on humanity and say, “If you do not love me, you deserve to die. If you do not believe there is justice in my rule you deserve to fry eter-

nally in the flaming hell reserved for those recalcitrants who will not submit.” The theological tradition has often tried to insure God’s risky enterprise against the possibility of failure by speaking of hell. Hell is where the failures go, those loveless and unjust victims of sin and evil.

But hell is not a real answer. Hell is merely a restatement of the problem. If God has created human beings who are good only for eternal punishment, then has not evil triumphed—at least in their case? Hell is the ultimate evil. Evil cannot be resolved by more evil. The doctrine of hell is finally an expression of the possibility that God’s love and justice might fail to achieve their goal. Hell would be a cosmic garbage pit that stains the creation, a morbid reminder that God’s love has been eternally rejected and that God’s justice has been eternally questioned. It is only if all humanity finally comes to recognize the love of God that his daring undertaking will be achieved.

We believe, O Lord! Help our unbelief! Struggling as we do against the dark implications of evil, we cry out to God: Help our unbelief!—knowing that our own faith hangs by the thin thread of grace. How deep must be our sympathy for those who cannot find like solace. If we find in our hearts that given the reality of systemic evil, we truly cannot see the justice in the damnation of the unbeliever, if we are instead in solidarity with the unbeliever, we must honestly confess that we are no more worthy than the unbeliever is. We are then compelled by love and justice to bring before God on behalf of estranged humanity its demand. And that demand is: God, it is long past time that you ransom your honor from the implications of systemic evil and the outrage and despair of humanity.

No sooner, I think, than we stand in solidarity with estranged humanity, and in utter solidarity with the substance of their charge against God, that we find we are not struck down by a totalitarian deity; quite the opposite. We find that God has agreed with the charge and has already in the death of his Son paid the terrible price of ransom.

God had indeed borne the limit of human alienation. In this respect, we are compelled to say that the death of Christ is a sacrifice offered by God to man; and by this sacrifice God seeks to ransom his honor. God acknowledges that evil is so intolerable and unacceptable that unless he bears it in every way—not just spiritually, but in the flesh—God has lost his credibility with us. This is what we begin to see when we stand with alienated humanity in solidarity against the systemic evil that God has permitted. We see his dead and mangled Son in a new light. When we shake our fist at heaven, God comes down to die.

There are stories that in the Middle Ages the priests during the black plague were hanged as involuntary surrogates for God. The crowds were furious with God over

the plague but they couldn't get to him so they hanged the priests instead. But, of course, the priests were actually surrogates for Jesus Christ, who in his cross freely bore humanity's outrage and fury.

All alienation, all hostility, all outrage finally comes to focus in the God-man. He bears human sin—and God's anger. He bears evil's onus—and human anger. In the cross and resurrection, God acknowledges that the situation is far past the stage where the blame can be profitably affixed and punishment allotted, and thus God bears it all: the blame and the anger: God's anger against us; ours against God. He bears it all for he alone can bear it, and as the one ultimately responsible for everything, he must bear it.

We're left finally without an explanation for evil. It is neither God's will, nor is it necessary for our growth to maturity. But what we do have is a reason to believe that God can and will overcome evil—and the reason is finally, simply, and solely the cross of Jesus Christ. For by his determination to suffer with us he reveals the incredible depth of his love. By his concrete acceptance of the final responsibility for sin and evil, he reveals his absolute justice. By the daring he shows in his willing to suffer humiliation, he reveals the security of his sovereignty. His resurrection brings him forth from death and contains within it the promise that he will indeed bring us to eternity.