

# Don't Doubt God!

## *A Biblical Response to the Theodicy of Christian Educational Services*

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The problem of evil is the most difficult and profound problem known to man. If there is a God, and if God is good, then why do evil, sin and suffering exist? Why does a good God allow bad things to happen? Answers to these questions are called “theodicies,” that is, explanations which seek to vindicate the righteousness or justice of God.<sup>1</sup>

A ministry known as Christian Educational Services has recently proposed its own theodicy in the book *Don't Blame God!*<sup>2</sup> Though the greatest theological and philosophical minds have found this problem to be profound and difficult, Christian Educational Services believes “that too often Christian theologians have been guilty of intellectual laziness, and thus have not arrived at rational convictions rooted in reason and faith.”<sup>3</sup>

In this article, I intend to show briefly that they are the ones who have not thought through the issues adequately. Their theodicy betrays profound confusion and self-contradiction. Furthermore, the ramifications of their erroneous theodicy are *very* serious, as they ultimately undermine the awesome power of our God. CES proposes that God does not *permit* evil and suffering to exist. They propose rather that He is *unable* to prevent it.

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<sup>1</sup> The term “theodicy” comes from two Greek words, *theos* (“God”) and *dike* (“right” or “justice”).

<sup>2</sup> Mark H. Graeser, John A. Lynn, and John W. Shoenheit, *Don't Blame God!: A Biblical Answer to the Problem of Evil, Sin and Suffering*, Indianapolis: Christian Educational Services, 1993.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

## I. OMNIPOTENCE OR IMPOTENCE?

In their heart of hearts, the men of CES know the truth about God. They share a deep conviction that God is in control and that our victory over the forces of evil is assured. “Those who confess Him [Jesus] as Lord and believe in His resurrection are saved,” they write, “*guaranteed of ultimate and everlasting victory over sin and death.*”<sup>4</sup> In fact, it is *Satan* whose attacks “are designed to create doubt in people as to the goodness and power of God.”<sup>5</sup> “We can turn to Him [God] in times of trouble and ask for help, knowing that He is both *able and willing* to give it.”<sup>6</sup> In fact, “with God, *nothing is impossible.*”<sup>7</sup>

These statements are scriptural and true.<sup>8</sup> However, these statements are also diametrically opposed to their own theology and are inconsistent with what they assert in the remainder of their book. When this truth does occasionally crop up, they are frequently quick to qualify it and attempt to reconcile it with their own teaching. The result is no small amount of confusion.

This is apparent in what may be considered the thesis statement of the book:

Here we have arrived at what is perhaps the crux of the whole issue dealt with in this book: *God does not lack the power or desire to help people, but He cannot violate His purely righteous nature by overstepping the legal bounds He Himself has determined.*<sup>9</sup>

In “layman’s” terms, this means that God has the power and the desire to overcome evil, but He does not have the power or desire to do so. The first part of the statement obviously contradicts the second part. If squelching evil entails violating His nature and self-imposed legal limitations — and if He cannot violate His nature or those limitations — then He *does* lack the power to help people. Furthermore, the “legal bounds” He set for Himself have apparently become something of a

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 47, emphasis mine.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 90, emphasis mine.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 173, emphasis mine.

<sup>8</sup> Cp. Gabriel’s statement that “nothing is impossible with God” (Luke 1:37) and Jesus’ teaching that “all things are possible with God” (Mark 10:27). Unless otherwise noted, Scripture references are taken from the New International Version.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 36, emphasis mine.

stumbling block for God, a fundamental weakness. This is tantamount to saying that God “created a rock too heavy for Him to lift.”

Their attempt to reconcile God’s ability with His supposed inability is obviously a failure. They seem to be saying that God is all-powerful, but that He has made Himself not all-powerful. Throughout the history of mankind, therefore, “God has been making the best of a bad situation.”<sup>10</sup> Some of us would call this “a bad mistake” on God’s part.

## II. THE PLOT

The salvation history proposed by CES goes something like this: God created the angels, among whom was Lucifer, who rebelled against Him. God could have destroyed him at that moment, but did not, because, as Ellen G. White taught, the other angels would have served God out of fear, rather than out of love. Furthermore, Lucifer’s rebellious influence would not have been fully destroyed. It was necessary that Lucifer (Satan) should:

more fully develop his principles, that his charges against the divine government might be seen in their true light by all created beings, that the justice and mercy of God and the immutability of His law might forever be placed beyond all question.<sup>11</sup>

To overstep Satan’s freedom of will was “illegal” for God:

Why does God “allow” Satan’s evil activities? Because He cannot act in opposition to His own nature. God is righteous, which means, among other things, that His actions, totally consistent with His internal nature, are ruled by law and not by whim.<sup>12</sup>

Next, God created man and gave him authority over the earth. “But Adam, by disobeying God, relinquished his authority over to Satan.”<sup>13</sup> “Scripture makes plain,” they write, “that the Devil received his authority

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> E.G. White, *Final War*, Phoenix, AZ: Inspiration Books, reprinted 1979, 2, quoted in *Don’t Blame God!*, 28.

<sup>12</sup> *Don’t Blame God!*, 35.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

over the world from Adam, and that God, who can only act legally and righteously, cannot simply step in and take it away.”<sup>14</sup>

When Satan gained dominion over the earth, he immediately began to corrupt it. He used genetic engineering to alter creation<sup>15</sup> and proceeded to exploit all mankind.

However, God so loved the world that He devised a plan — another “Adam” — whereby, legally and righteously, He could regain dominion over creation and save all people who believe in this “last Adam” (Jesus Christ).<sup>16</sup>

Although they do not explicitly state it, they imply that God offered Jesus as a ransom to the devil to purchase us in a legal transaction:

If you have been born again of God’s spirit (Romans 10:9), you are no longer the legal property of Satan. He has no legal dominion or authority over you. You have been bought with a price, the blood of Jesus Christ, and you belong to Him.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, “although we must live within the Devil’s domain, he no longer has any legal authority over us.”<sup>18</sup> However:

We must *know and exercise* our rights as citizens of “the kingdom of the Son.” If we do not, Satan, who has always broken every law he thought he could get away with breaking, will disregard his lack of legal authority over us and treat us just like he treats those others who are under his dominion.<sup>19</sup>

So God’s victory over the devil at Calvary was not complete; He still cannot overstep the legal exercise of free will. We must authorize Him to intervene in this world: “our prayers and faith ‘authorize’ God and His Son to intervene into Satan’s worldly domain and help us.”<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, our disobedience limits God’s ability to protect us:

The more precisely we as believers obey God, the more difficult it is for the Devil to succeed in ruining our lives. . . . Sin in the life of a Christian is a primary cause of his vulnerability to spiritual

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

defeat. If Satan can get a believer to act contrary to the will of God, it appears that this gives him an opportunity to step in and afflict him. . . . It is very difficult for God to help those of His people who do not adhere to His guidance and direction.<sup>21</sup>

However, those who suffer are not necessarily guilty of committing some sort of sin:

The Devil has a vested interest in keeping everyone as ignorant about his *modus operandi* as he possibly can. One way he does this is by afflicting both good people and bad people in such a manner that it is impossible to determine whether a person is good or evil simply by what is happening in his life. . . . Suffering, in and of itself, is not a valid barometer of one's sinfulness nor his godliness, nor is it an indicator of God's judgment on one's life (Luke 13:1-5). Often Satan will arrange the circumstances so a person doing evil suffers no apparent consequences (Psalm 37:7; Job 21). In other cases, he sees to it that one doing the right thing suffers for it (II Corinthians 11:3-28).<sup>22</sup>

Thus, it is not a matter of being "good enough" to escape the death and suffering the devil brings; it is a matter of being "good enough" *and* invoking the legal authority we have in Christ. Without these essential ingredients, God finds it "very difficult" to intervene and help us.

In a nutshell, then, their theodicy or vindication of God hinges on the proposition that God is not all-powerful: "The basic biblical pattern is plain: *whenever and wherever God and Jesus Christ can help people, they do, and whenever and wherever they don't, they can't.*"<sup>23</sup> For all the pitfalls of this scheme, it is internally consistent. Since it provides the essential framework for their interpretation of evil, we will dismantle it before criticizing their less coherent arguments.

### III. A LEGAL ISSUE?

I would first like to question CES' confident assertion that the Bible plainly teaches that Satan gained legal dominion over the earth when

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 109, 198.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 80, 81.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

Adam fell.<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, the only verses they can marshal in support of this radical statement are Luke 4:6 and 2 Corinthians 4:4.<sup>25</sup>

In 2 Corinthians 4:4, Satan is called “the god of this age.” Clearly the devil exercises some sort of authority, but this does not at all imply that it is a *legal* authority. “Satan is only a god,” writes Steve Jones, “insofar as wicked people pay him homage and carry out his schemes” as if he were their God. “The devil has no real authority over this planet.”<sup>26</sup>

Luke 4:6 is clearly their strongest evidence. In Luke 4:5, we read that the devil took Jesus to a high place and showed him a vision of “all the kingdoms of the world.” In verse 6 Satan said to him, “I will give you all their authority and splendor, for *it has been given to me*, and I can give it to anyone I want to” (emphasis theirs). Who had given the devil that authority? “The one who originally had it — Adam,” write the authors of *Don't Blame God!* “God had given Adam and Eve dominion over the world, and they had relinquished that dominion to the Devil.”<sup>27</sup>

Putting aside for a moment the fact that no verse of the Bible actually *says* that Adam gave the devil any legal authority, we would like to point out that “the father of lies”<sup>28</sup> himself is hardly the best place to get our theology. Shouldn't we be a little concerned that their strongest proof-text is the personal testimony of Satan?<sup>29</sup>

The biblical fact is that *Satan has no legitimate authority over the earth*. He *exercises* authority, it is true; but he has no *legal* right to it. God is not bound by a contract with the devil. Satan has no title deed to the earth and the people on it. On the contrary, the Bible very clearly teaches that *God owns the earth*.

King David praised God by saying that “everything in heaven and earth” is His (1 Chron. 29:11). In the book of Psalms, God declared that “the world is *mine*, and *all that is in it*” (50:12; cf. also 89:11). The New Testament teaches this truth as well; Stephen quoted Isaiah 66:1, in which God said: “Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool” (Acts 7:49). Not only does the Bible *not teach* that the devil gained legal authority over the earth; it flatly *contradicts* that teaching at every turn.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>26</sup> *Southlawn Church of God Newsletter*, January 25, 1994, Vol. 37, No. 14.

<sup>27</sup> *Don't Blame God!*, 33.

<sup>28</sup> John 8:44.

<sup>29</sup> CES should know better. They themselves have written that “the reader of Scripture must be aware that when the Bible quotes people, what they say reflects their perspective and belief, whether accurate or inaccurate” (*Ibid.*, 70, fn. 72).

What about God's "legal limitations" which prevent Him from interfering with free will? Although I believe that God generally *chooses* not to interfere with the free will of His creatures (human and angelic), I believe that He certainly *can* do so if He desires. For example, even CES teaches that God sometimes inflicts pain, suffering, and death (but only on unbelievers).<sup>30</sup>

This admission alone calls their entire thesis into question. Did God "interfere" with Herod's free will when He struck him down (Acts 12:23)? Of course He did. I seriously doubt that Herod wanted to be killed. Not only did God (illegally?) overstep Herod's free will, He apparently disregarded Satan's "jurisdiction" as well. Didn't Herod belong to Satan, since he wasn't bought with Jesus' blood? Notice also that no Christian seems to have "authorized" God to intervene. CES' contention that God is bound by all sorts of legal limitations (self-imposed or otherwise) is clearly at odds with the teaching of the Bible, which indicates that God "does whatever pleases him" (Psa. 115:3).

Lastly, I would like to question Ellen G. White's highly speculative account of why God chose not to destroy Satan at the very beginning. This is a critical issue, because White's (and CES') theodicy ultimately hinges on that speculation. Since God regained "legal authority" at the crucifixion of Christ, the devil's legal "jurisdiction" over the earth can no longer be considered the fundamental reason that God has not already put an end to evil.<sup>31</sup> Since God's ability (or lack thereof) to interfere with His creatures' free wills appears to be a constant (i.e., there is no reason that God's "overstepping" the free wills of evil persons should be any more "legal" at the Second Coming than it is now), their explanation of why God has allowed evil to develop and spread has become the crucial determinant in their theodicy.

White and CES explain that God did not destroy the devil at the beginning because it would have compromised His justice, particularly since evil had not yet matured. In order to be fully vindicated in His

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 101ff, 106 (fn. 100). In all fairness, we should note CES' important distinction between a "reason" and a "cause." God is sometimes the *cause* of a tragedy in that He is the one who inflicts it, but that does not mean He is the *reason* for it. The *reason* is sin. This is clearly true in the cases of the Flood and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. God *caused* the destruction, but the *reason* He did so was the sin of the people which demanded a response. Cf. 5, 102.

<sup>31</sup> "The last Adam [Jesus] will exercise His earned dominion to crush Satan's head and rescue us from the present evil age" (*Ibid.*, 49).

destruction of evil, God must allow the consequences of evil to become fully manifest.<sup>32</sup> Their lack of scriptural references at this critical juncture is noteworthy.

Even considering the fact that this is all speculation (a dangerous hanger on which to hang one's theological coat), the Bible's description of God and His actions seems to fly in the face of it. Why would God's justice be called into question for destroying a single rebellious angel, but not for wiping out an entire planet in a universal Flood? Furthermore, haven't the ghastly consequences of evil already become painfully obvious? Hasn't the point already been made? What is God waiting for?

CES has other answers to this question, but they are less consistent with their thesis.

#### IV. SHOOTING IN THE DARK

At points the authors of *Don't Blame God!* are clearly taking blind potshots at the problem of evil. For example, they quote verses such as 2 Peter 3:9 and 1 Timothy 2:3, 4 to make the point that "until that glorious day when sin and its consequences are forever eradicated, He [God] is *willing to take the long way around* to a righteous conclusion so that as many people as possible can come to repentance."<sup>33</sup> Of course this is entirely true; it is in fact a scriptural argument. However, it implies that God *could* take the "short way" around. The argument that God is delaying the Second Coming (and thus putting off destroying evil) so more people may be saved is inconsistent with their assertion that God does *not* in fact allow evil for the cause of a divine plan:

Does the God who teaches us that the end does not justify the means then deal with us as if it did? We think not. If God is somehow responsible for mankind's misery, if He could stop it but doesn't, if He has "reasons" because somehow this is all part of some unseen "plan" that will work to His glory, then He does not practice what He preaches.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 28, 42, 119.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 49, emphasis mine. It is noteworthy that they are quick to qualify this with the statement that "His loving nature *prohibits* any other course of action" (emphasis mine). Again the tension between God's ability and inability is evident. Is God "unwilling" to pursue another course of action, or "prohibited" from doing so? There is a big difference.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.



CES offers another “potshot” at the problem of evil by arguing that God cannot be held responsible for the evil that men do:

Still another cause of suffering in the world today is people who live contrary to God’s Word. We suffer mentally and physically from con men, thieves, robbers, rapists, murderers by the score. God has made it very clear in His Word that men are responsible for governing themselves. Our societies are run by men, not by God or by angels. Our judges, our lawyers, our juries, our police are all human beings. If we, God’s created beings, do not see to it that God’s laws for running a just society are enforced [!], then we suffer when the ungodly behavior of ungodly men manifests itself. . . . If society ignores God’s laws concerning murder, rape, robbery, perjury, etc., and criminal activity abounds, then surely we cannot blame God when we are victims.<sup>35</sup>

That, however, is not the point. Of course it is true that we are not to blame God for someone else’s evil. But the question is, does He *allow* it? They have argued that He doesn’t:

Suppose you are sitting in a restaurant visiting with two friends, Bill and Joe. Bill sees a guy with a lead pipe in his hand sneaking up behind you. He turns to Joe and asks, “How’s your family?” When you wake up, don’t you think you will blame Bill almost as much as you blame the guy who hit you with the pipe? Who can truly love a God who causes suffering, or one who could stop it, but just decides to “allow” it to happen?<sup>36</sup>

Let’s adapt this illustration to their argument about societal evil. Does the point change significantly if Bill refrains from telling you about the guy with the pipe because it was the responsibility of the restaurant’s security guard to tell you? Certainly not. The above argument is simply not relevant and serves only to cloud the issue in a barrage of poorly calculated potshots at the problem of evil.

#### V. EXPLAINING AWAY GOD’S PUNISHMENT

The authors of *Don’t Blame God!* have much explaining to do and they know it. They have confidently asserted that not only would God never

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 107, 108.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

do anything to harm His people, He would not even *allow* any harm to come to His people if He could stop it. Of course many Scriptures teach otherwise. Most of them are in the Old Testament. This is convenient for CES, because they can invoke the principle of progressive revelation to pit the New Testament against the Old: “*any argument that uses Old Testament Scriptures to prove that God causes or allows suffering must be examined in light of the New Testament teaching.*”<sup>37</sup>

Their reasoning is very simple. For example, the New Testament teaches that Satan is “the god of this age,” i.e., the legal owner of the earth. This implies that he does not need to:

ask God’s permission before doing evil. If he did, the so-called “war” raging between the forces of good and evil would be a sham. *That is why the dialogue between God and Satan* [in Job 1, 2, where God gives Satan permission to inflict suffering on Job] *must be an allegory*, set forth in Scripture as it is because of the limited understanding of the Old Testament believers.<sup>38</sup>

Notice that a theological principle (supposedly derived from the New Testament) is invoked to dismiss critical Old Testament material, banishing it to the ethereal realm of a figure of speech.

Similarly, when God is depicted as inflicting punishment on His people Israel, a figure of speech is involved. Again, the New Testament is invoked as a witness against the Old (when in fact a much more satisfactory harmonization is possible):

The Old Testament seems to make God the cause of disease, destruction, and death. The New Testament attributes these things to the Devil. The Old Testament portrays God as the ruler of the world, in charge of both good and evil, and that is what the Hebrew people believed. Job said, “Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?” (Job 2:10). The New Testament, however, paints a different picture: the Devil is “the god of this age” (II Corinthians 4:4). It is he who controls much of what is going on in the world, it is he who offered all the world’s power and glory to Jesus (Matthew 4:8, Luke 4:5, 6). In the Old Testament, God is portrayed as the cause of good *and* bad. In the New Testament, the Devil causes evil (John 10:10a), but God sends “every good and perfect gift” (James 1:17).<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 80, emphasis mine.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

When the Old Testament depicts God as punishing the Israelites, it is using the figure of speech known as *metonymy*, they argue.

The figure of speech *Metonymy* involves the exchange of nouns or verbs, where one noun or verb is put for another related noun or verb. . . . *Metonymy* is a common figure of speech with a wide variety of usages. “The White House said today . . .” is one contemporary example in which the President of the United States and his staff are represented by the building they occupy. When we say, “Give me a hand,” it is by the figure *Metonymy* that “hand” is put for the many useful ways the hand can help.<sup>40</sup>

In applying this principle to God’s Old Testament activity, they explain:

*Metonymy* is integrally involved in understanding many of the verses that seem to make God the direct and active cause of negative circumstances. . . . In the Old Testament, God often revealed Himself as the author of both good and evil. Thus “God” is often put by *Metonymy* as the cause of events that were actually engineered by the Devil.<sup>41</sup>

Was it not actually dishonest of God to conceal the truth from Old Testament Israel? Why did God tell His people that He would punish them for disobedience, when in fact it was the devil who was doing it?

Today we can look back into the Old Testament, see *Metonymy of the Subject* and understand why God had to use this figure of speech. It seems clear that without the power to fight the devil, people were better off not knowing about him. In His abounding love, God “took the rap” for good and evil, telling His people that if they believed and obeyed Him, they would be blessed, but if they disobeyed Him, He would afflict them. God’s use of *Metonymy of the Subject* emphasized His efforts to communicate to His people both the consequences of their sin and the fact that, if they disobeyed Him, He would have to give them up to their disobedience and let them learn the hard way.<sup>42</sup>

The authors explain that God’s punishment is not *always* a figure of speech, however:

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 64, 65.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

Not every Old Testament instance where God is said to be the agent of affliction and death is an example of the figure of speech *Metonymy of the Subject*. There are occasions when God acts at the expense of evil people to protect His own righteous interests.<sup>43</sup>

The guiding principle for discerning this figure of speech seems to be this: Whenever God is said to punish His own people, it is a figure of speech; He is not really the one doing it. Whenever God is said to punish other people, it is not a figure of speech; He is really the one doing it.

This principle of interpretation is so obviously arbitrary that it hardly needs to be refuted. Clearly CES' theology, not the biblical text, is guiding their interpretation.

What about God's punishment in the New Testament? What about Ananias and Sapphira? They were members of the early New Testament church, yet God punished them. The authors of *Don't Blame God!* explain the passage (Acts 5:1-11) as follows:

In Acts 5, both Ananias and Sapphira died when confronted by Peter. However, the Bible does not say that God killed them. It is reasonable to believe that when confronted with their sin, they died of something like shock or a heart attack, and that by revelation Peter knew ahead of time that it would happen. . . . Ananias and Sapphira . . . were apparently overcome with terror and dropped dead. In any case, the Bible does not say that God killed them, because He did not.<sup>44</sup>

With all due respect to my brothers, mental gymnastics such as these are hardly credible. I have confronted people with their lies before, but none of them have ever dropped dead with terror. The text obviously implies that God smote Ananias and Sapphira. Peter pronounced the judgment and it happened. We may compare Acts 13:9-12, where Paul pronounced judgment on a wicked sorcerer who subsequently lost his sight.

## VI. NEW TESTAMENT GYMNASTICS

Several New Testament verses must also be addressed. The first is Romans 8:28, which reads in the King James Version: "And we know that

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 105 (fn. 100), 161.

all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to His purpose.” Of course this would destroy CES’ proposition in a single blow, for they do *not* teach that *all things* “work together for good to them that love God.” They attempt to escape this dilemma by appealing to other Bible translations, such as the NIV, which proposes the reading “*in* all things God works for the good of those who love him.” Their point is that not everything is good or of God, but God can work with any bad circumstance to bring good out of it.<sup>45</sup>

Strictly speaking, they are correct about the translation of Romans 8:28. Textual variants lie at the heart of the issue; in many good Greek manuscripts the term “God” is the subject of the verb “works with.” This calls the KJV reading into question.<sup>46</sup>

They are also correct in asserting that God is not the source of evil. However, I am not so sure they can consistently state that God works “in all things.” They seem to teach rather that God *can* work in all things, provided He is legally authorized to do so. We may also note that the difference between the two readings of Romans 8:28 is not great; if God works “in” all things, then it follows that “all things work together for good to them that love God.” This verse provides a formidable challenge to their theodicy, regardless of the Bible translation they use.

Second Corinthians 12:8-10 provides another challenge. There Paul asked the Lord to remove his “thorn in the flesh” three times, only to receive the answer that “My grace is sufficient for you” (v. 9). They interpret Jesus to mean “Paul, I *cannot* totally remove this persecution, but even amidst these circumstances, I will, by my power, accomplish my purposes within you.”<sup>47</sup>

This interpretation is not suggested by the text, however; an entirely different reason is given. According to Jesus, the real reason Paul’s affliction was not removed was because “*my power is made perfect in weakness*” (v. 9). “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses,” Paul writes, “so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (v. 9b, 10). Jesus’ purpose for allowing Paul to experience crippling

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 173-180.

<sup>46</sup> See John Knox, “The Epistle to the Romans,” in George Arthur Buttrick, ed., *The Interpreter’s Bible*, New York: Abingdon Press, Vol. 9, 524, 525.

<sup>47</sup> *Don’t Blame God!*, 197, emphasis mine.

problems was *clearly* that his grace could turn Paul's weakness into strength. This is part of the paradox of evil which CES refuses to recognize.

CES must also wrestle with John 9:1ff, the account of the man born blind. When the disciples asked Jesus whose sin was responsible for the man's blindness, Jesus answered: "It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was in order that the works of God might be displayed in him" (v. 3, NASV). To get around Jesus' clear teaching that God allowed this man to be born blind so He could display His power in the man's healing, CES rearranges the punctuation marks. They would much rather hear Jesus say that "Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents. But that the works of God should be made manifest in him, I must work the works of him that sent me. . . ." <sup>48</sup>

This does not do justice to the text, however. If we place the period after the word "parents," the entire passage becomes somewhat awkward: "It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents. But in order that the works of God might be displayed in him, we must work the works of him who sent me as long as it is day; night is coming, when no man can work." Notice that this would place the emphasis entirely on the *timing* of the healing, not on the healing itself. It would make Jesus say that if God's works were not displayed in the blind man in this age, they could not be displayed in him at all. That could hardly be Jesus' meaning, for God's works will be displayed in *all* His people when they are resurrected (cf. Rom. 8:18ff).

Furthermore, periods and commas aside, the presence of the word "but" argues against their interpretation. Whether the word "but" begins a sentence or not, it clearly denotes a contrast with the preceding phrase.<sup>49</sup> For this reason I am confident in asserting that all the Bible translations are right on this point and CES is wrong.

## VII. A WEAK GOD

CES is clearly driven to defend God's goodness at the expense of His immeasurable power. Throughout their book, they repeatedly express their concern that believing God even *allows* suffering (when He could

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>49</sup> Arndt and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, University of Chicago Press, fourth edition, 1952, 37.

stop it) jeopardizes people's faith. For example, Charles Darwin gave up his belief in God because "apparently, whatever he was taught [when studying for the ministry] laid the blame for human suffering on God."<sup>50</sup> Thus, in a sense, the entire theory of evolution may have been caused by more traditional theodicies. "Only God knows how many millions of others have turned away from Him for this same reason."<sup>51</sup>

It is true that some Christians lose their faith in God when a tragedy strikes, embittered that God would allow them to experience that kind of pain. However, CES' easy answer is no answer at all. Someone who loses faith because God *did* not prevent a tragedy is just as likely to lose faith because God *could* not prevent a tragedy. I would ascribe such loss of faith to things other than people's views of God's goodness or power; I would ascribe it to shallow faith. Those who lose faith in God are like the shallow soil of Jesus' parable of the sower; they "are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away" (Luke 8:13).

I fear that CES' solution is worse than the problem. Undermining the power of God can serve only to cast salvation history into doubt. Inconsistently, they do exude great confidence in God's eventual victory; but this by no means follows from their thesis, which could throw believers into a chaotic, fearful state, uncertain of their ability to overcome the devil, even with God's help.

The authors write, for example, that "God *is* the most powerful and most wise one in the fight, and that means that human history as a whole will be resolved according to His will."<sup>52</sup> This seems to be their strongest argument for God's certain victory, but it is not a good one. We know from experience that "the race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong . . . but time and chance happen to them all" (Eccl. 9:11). "The most powerful one" does *not* always win the fight. Considering the state of our world today, one might even surmise that God is losing the battle. The authors assure us that God and Jesus "are fighting tooth and nail" for us;<sup>53</sup> but those who are *losing* battles fight "tooth and nail."

Interestingly, the authors of *Don't Blame God!* tell us that there are *only* four alternatives to the problem of evil — nontheistic evolutionism, the New Age movement, determinism, and their view:

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<sup>50</sup> *Don't Blame God!*, 19

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

(a) There is no God, your great-grandfather was a lizard and life is a “crapshoot.” Good luck!

(b) *You* are God. Good luck!

(c) There is a God who determines everything that happens. He is able and willing to both help you and hurt you, and there are no guarantees which He will do, or when He will do it. Good luck!<sup>54</sup>

(d) There is a God who once made a Paradise for man and who has guaranteed for those who believe His Word that it will one day again be so. In the meantime, He and His Son are far more powerful than their (and your) enemy and they are doing their absolute best for you each day. You have God’s Word on it. You don’t need “luck.”<sup>55</sup>

I would like to reword proposition (d) to capture better the spirit of their theodicy, and then offer a fifth proposition:

(d) There is a God who loves you and wants to help you, but His nature and legal limitations may prevent Him from doing so, even if you give Him legal authorization to intervene in your life. Good luck!

(e) God is all-good *and* all-powerful. We cannot fully understand how both these statements could be true in the face of unrelenting evil and suffering, but they are sufficient to fuel our faith in what we cannot see, namely, that in *everything* God is working for our good. “Luck” has *absolutely nothing* to do with it.

This proposition will not be palatable to the authors of *Don’t Blame God!*, for whom any element of mystery is unwelcome. Human reasoning is fully sufficient to tackle the problem of evil, they say. Since evil exists, God can be *either* all-good *or* all-powerful, but not both.<sup>56</sup> Of course this is a popular argument, and it is thousands of years old. Epicurus asked, “Is he [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then is he impotent. Is

<sup>54</sup> This appears to be a crude caricature of Calvinism, which of course does not teach this.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 84ff.



he able, but not willing? Then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?"<sup>57</sup>

#### VIII. ASSERTING GOD'S POWER<sup>58</sup>

God is not only all-good; He is also all-powerful. This point is easy to prove from the Scriptures. God asked Moses, "Is the LORD's power limited?" (Num. 11:23, NASV). This rhetorical question certainly demands a negative answer. The angel Gabriel told Mary that "nothing is impossible with God" (Luke 1:37). The Lord God is "Almighty" (Rev. 21:22); His power is not limited in any way.

I might also state that I am not a Calvinist. I believe that God has purposely chosen to create free-will beings who may make their *own* decisions about whether to do good or to do evil. I believe, with Jack Cottrell, that "God cannot overrule every evil choice of man and every evil consequence therefrom without contradicting his own purposes in creating beings with free will. This is part of the price we pay for freedom, and which God himself pays for creating us thus."<sup>59</sup> Yet our friends from CES must understand the vast difference between saying that God cannot overrule each of His creatures' free choices *without contradicting His own purposes*, on the one hand, and that God cannot overrule each of His creatures' free choices *because He is unable* on the other.

The Bible clearly teaches that God is not the author of moral evil and cannot be blamed for it.<sup>60</sup> "When tempted," James writes, "no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone" (Jas. 1:13). The Bible clearly teaches that there is a degree to which the principle of evil is independent of (if ultimately subject to) God. To the degree that God *permits* evil, He is not directly responsible for it and cannot be blamed.

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<sup>57</sup> Quoted in Jack Cottrell, *What the Bible Says about God the Ruler*, Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing Company, second printing 1989, 382.

<sup>58</sup> Portions of this section have been adapted from my article "Satan and the Problem of Evil," *Wisdom & Power*, September/October 1993, Vol. 7, No. 3, 6-8, 17.

<sup>59</sup> Cottrell, 407.

<sup>60</sup> We should also note the phenomenon of natural evil (catastrophes of nature, sickness, death, etc.). This evil is generally the result of the so-called "Fall," not of sins individually nor of God's desire.

However, CES rightly points out that if God even *permits* evil, then to a degree He is ultimately responsible for it. The argument of free will is not particularly helpful at this point, since we would not consider a human judge good (for example) who “respects” the freedom of criminals to perpetrate their crimes. Furthermore, even though God is not the author of evil, now that it has arrived God chooses to work through it to accomplish His purposes. How can this be?

The authors of *Don't Blame God!* frequently ask this question.<sup>61</sup> “If everything that happens were God’s will,” they write, “then *nothing* would be sin or disobedience. What a travesty of logic!”<sup>62</sup> They cannot see how God can manipulate evil without being evil, without “making” free-will creatures do what is bad.

Ironically, one illustration they use to demonstrate how God does not manipulate evil actually elucidates the view that He does:

In regard to God’s eventual victory, consider the analogy of a chess match between current World Chess Champion Bobby Fischer and the president of a high school chess club. Although the latter might capture a few of his opponent’s pieces and perhaps, to an untrained eye, even appear to gain the upper hand at some point, the outcome is never in doubt. No matter what the lesser player may do by the freedom of his will, the master player always has a superior strategy that will result in ultimate victory. *Likewise, God need not stoop to manipulating His opponent in order to achieve His goals.*<sup>63</sup>

It should immediately become apparent that the analogy does not support their conclusion, nor does it capture the spirit of their theodicy. On the other hand, it illustrates *my* theodicy very well. In the analogy, is Bobby Fischer reaching across the chessboard, grabbing his opponent’s hand and actually *forcing* him or her to move certain pieces? Of course not. Every move the teenager makes is one of his or her own choice. Is Fischer *manipulating* his opponent? You bet he is!

Fischer is not desperately fighting “tooth and nail” to win the game; he sees the bigger picture and knows how to win. He knows how to entice or frighten his opponent into making certain moves which will ensure his victory. In this sense, Fischer is *using* his opponent. This is exactly how the Bible pictures God “using” the devil or accomplishing His purposes

<sup>61</sup> *Don't Blame God!*, 54, 55 (fn. 61), 56ff, 80, 87, 116.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 121, emphasis mine.

through evil; there really is a spiritual conflict in which free-will beings assert their own wills against God's, but ironically they seem to end up playing into God's hands, somehow accomplishing His purposes. Corrado Balducci writes:

God could surely prevent the rebellious angels from doing any harm, but in His infinite wisdom and goodness He has permitted them to pursue their evil intentions. Then later, much against their will, their evil intentions can be transformed by man into a stimulus and a means for moral perfection. In that way, says St. John Chrysostom, the devil, in spite of himself, becomes, as it were, an instrument and coefficient of holiness. This fits well into the divine economy which, in governing the world, is able to use everything — even the worst things — for a good end. Moreover, the dependence of the devil on the permissive will of God is part of God's universal government of the world. . . . To add to their vexation and confusion, the relatively little that they [the demons] can do is always directed by God to some good end.<sup>64</sup>

The most dramatic example of this principle is the crucifixion of Christ. As the authors of *Don't Blame God!* point out, Satan worked "behind the scenes" to crucify Christ (cf. Luke 22:3; John 13:2, 27; 1 Cor. 2:8).<sup>65</sup> However, God had *predetermined* that Christ would die on the cross, and that it would be the crux of salvation history (Acts 2:23; Rev. 13:8). Using the chess analogy, we might say that God intentionally sacrificed His queen in order to place the devil in checkmate. CES suggests that God did not manipulate Satan and wicked men in that maneuver. But if God had *intended* it all along, how else could He have accomplished it?

This is the point of Job 1 and 2, and is why Job's trials are variously said to have come from Satan (1:12; 2:6, 7) and from God (1:11, 16, 21; 2:3, 5, 10). Both statements are true. It was the devil who brought these problems upon Job, but it was God who granted him permission to do so (1:12; 2:6). Thus, the devil was directly responsible, and God indirectly responsible, for Job's trials. Notice, however, that they led to a good end (42:7-16), certainly to the devil's great frustration.

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<sup>64</sup> Corrado Balducci, *The Devil*, trans. by Jordan Amman, New York: Alba House, 1990, 97, 98.

<sup>65</sup> *Don't Blame God!*, 178.

## IX. A THEODICY OF FAITH

Apart from affirming that God is in control, there is much about the problem of evil that must remain veiled from our understanding. Though CES is not satisfied with God's answer to Job (38:1-41:34),<sup>66</sup> we must be. "'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,' declares the LORD. 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts'" (Isa. 55:8, 9).

When tragedies happen in our lives, we struggle. We become angry and we question why God allowed them to happen. That is all right; it is healthy. This anguish is a necessary part of the healing process. But *knowing* that God is working in the situation to bring about good can and will bring comfort. We do not need to be good enough Christians or understand how to "authorize" God to intervene; God works for our good *anyway*.

Can we be any more specific about interpreting the tragedies of life? Not much. While we are experiencing a tragedy, we can almost never see the bigger picture; we must exercise our faith, knowing that there *is* a bigger picture. Only with hindsight can we sometimes understand how God manipulated the circumstances to bring good out of the tragedy.

Did God Himself instigate the tragedy? Before we can even consider answering this question we must first consider the type of tragedy. Regarding natural disasters, we may recall that:

God caused certain natural evils in Bible times. But does He still do so today? Perhaps so; but without special revelation to interpret providence for us, there is no way to be sure. When certain natural disasters strike, we may wonder and we may speculate. We may offer our tentative opinions as to the meaning of a particular event such as a tornado or flood, and we may draw some lessons from them in the way of correction. But there is no basis for dogmatism regarding the meaning of a particular calamity. Thus a believer who is experiencing disaster or suffering must not torture himself with such questions as "What have I done to deserve this?" or "Why is God punishing me?" He must take comfort in Romans 8:28. If God's hand is in it, it has a good purpose, and we must trust Him to bring that good purpose to pass.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>66</sup> "Somehow God's 'answer' to Job is not satisfactory to us" (88).

<sup>67</sup> Cottrell, 406.

Regarding moral evil, we may affirm with CES that we cannot blame God for the moral sins committed by free-will beings, be they human or angelic (cf. Job 1:22). At the same time, however, it is true that God *allowed* the sin to be committed. Can we justify God's *allowing* such atrocities? We may if we recognize, first, that the potential for moral sin is the high price of freedom; and second, that although we cannot yet understand how, "in all things God works for the good of those who love him."

This second point will no doubt invite the criticism that I am affirming God's omnipotence and acknowledging the essential reality of evil at the inexcusable cost of depicting His goodness in such a way as to empty it of all appreciable meaning. The criticism is a valid one and has often been leveled at traditional theodicies which are content to vindicate the character of God and stop there. For this reason we must be quick to add that there is another dimension to this answer, namely that "God rejects evil and desires us to fight it."<sup>68</sup> In Christian theology, God is vindicated from the charge of cruelty not only by virtue of His unsearchable ways, but also because He willingly subjected His only Son whom He loves to all the horrors of the cross for our sakes. As someone has aptly paraphrased John 3:16, "For God so loved the world *that He got involved.*"

Thus, as Jeffrey Burton Russell writes, we must recognize two equally important levels to the understanding of God and evil. On the first level, although God is both all-powerful and all-good, we cannot yet fully understand God's goodness and how it is being accomplished in the tumultuous events we perceive around us. On the second level, God hates evil and wants us to fight it, and He has paved the way for us in His Son whose example we are to follow. Russell writes:

The relationship between the "goodness" of God on the first level and the "goodness" of the second level is the location of the mystery, the eternally ungraspable by the human intellect. Yet human goodness is analogous to that of God, and the two are not divorced. Further, both levels should be understood. Failure to understand the first level leads to atheism; failure to understand the second leads to indifference to suffering.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Satan: The Early Christian Tradition*, London: Cornell University Press, 1981, 229.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

Leaving room for the mystery inherent in this perception of God's goodness is the key to affirming His omnipotence and His goodness even while recognizing the reality of evil, sin, and suffering.

#### X. CONCLUSION

I have not attempted to address all of the issues surrounding the problem of evil; this is strictly a response article, and it should be read in that light. I have tried to the best of my ability to be fair and objective in my criticism. Of course this is an issue I feel strongly about, and I have not attempted to hide my feelings. I do believe this is an important issue and I fear that this teaching may have an unhealthy impact on some believers, offering some comfort on the surface but leading to grave doubts during those times when trust in God is needed most.

As we have seen, we certainly are not to blame God for the evils rampant in the world today. However, I would add that we must not doubt His power either. My reply to Christian Educational Services is, "*Don't doubt God!*"