

He Is Not Lord Over Evil, Is He?: The Dilemma of Providence

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Introduction

The question of God's Lordship over evil came home forcefully to the western world this summer. Father Jacques Hamel was an 85 year-old French priest. On July 26, two French-born, knife-wielding Islamic radicals slit his throat while he celebrated mass at the altar of his church in Normandy.

On one hand, post Vatican II Roman Catholics are in a real bind trying to interpret what happened. Their theology, born out of the bright optimism of the 1960s, says that it is best for religion to "come of age" and to reject exclusivist ideas. They think that the Catholic religion should flourish in community with the other religions of mankind. For them to speak of Father Jacques as being a Catholic martyr might risk slipping back in to what they view as the fruitless religious struggles of the distant past. In fact, no Roman Catholic of the 1960s could have imagined that an old priest could die a martyr's death in the heart of Europe. But for a faithful Roman Catholic, this death must be viewed as a martyrdom.

On the other hand, we conservative Presbyterians, following the Westminster Divines, do not grant that a priest celebrating mass is participating in the true worship of God. But we know that our theological sophistication is entirely lost on the Islamic fanatic who is bent on shedding Christian blood. For the jihadist, it could just as well be a Presbyterian minister standing in his pulpit as it was a priest at his altar who should die a bloody death. Thus, it is legitimate to ask the question assigned whether God is Lord over such evil actions.

Background

This article follows two previous ones which, are titled: "Does God Have Free Will?: The Meaning of Providence" and "How Can God Govern All Things?: The Means of Providence."

Structure

This third article is structured with four main sections and a conclusion. The first section addresses the relationship between God's providence and evil, tracing how the Divines fashioned the fifth chapter of the Confession, "Of Providence".¹ The second section addresses the question of evil- defining and interpreting. The third is concerned with the Westminster Confession of Faith on evil and the fourth on interpreting God and evil.

¹ Chapter 5. Of Providence.

I. The Westminster Confession of Faith on Providence and Evil

A. On Providence.

WCF 5.1 teaches that God directs and disposes his creatures and their actions, from the greatest even to the least, by the immutable counsel of his own will. Therefore, within divine providence, there is no “bare permission”, no “permissive decree.”² Moving from the Confession, the Westminster Larger Catechism question 18 defines God’s works of providence: “God’s works of providence are his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures; ordering them, and all their actions, to his own glory.” The Divines taught that God preserves, governs, and orders all of his creatures and their actions to a very specific end: his own glory. However, WLC 19 uses this phrase: “God by his providence permitted some of the angels, willfully and irrecoverably, to fall into sin and damnation...and all their sins.” The Divines connected their argument to the greater good by adding that these actions were to God’s own glory.

B. On Evil.

The WCF powerfully answers the question of God and evil in WSC 19: “All mankind, by their fall, lost communion with God, are under his wrath and curse, and so made liable to all miseries in this life, to death itself, and to the pains of hell for ever.” Relative to evil, the plain meaning of WLC 18’s answer on providence is that, if any person does an evil action, then somehow that action is ordered to God’s glory.

What these parts of the Westminster documents mean is that it is not that God simply permits something evil like a drunk driver to run over a child. Our God is not like a human king who can simply refrain from stopping one of his nobles from doing an evil deed. No, God the Creator and sustainer is actively involved in all events that transpire on this earth.

At the second part of chapter five the divine’s used scholastic language, implementing the difference between primary and secondary cause, to explain God’s role concerning evil.³ The Confession reads: “God orders things to fall out by necessary, free or contingent second cause.”⁴

² Wayne Spear, *Faith of Our Fathers: A Commentary on the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Pittsburgh: Crown and Covenant, 2006), 34: “In the view of the Bible and of the Confession, providence is the accomplishment in time of the eternal plan of God.” Paul Helm, “Westminster and Protestant Scholasticism” in *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century vol. 2*, ed. J. Ligon Duncan III (Fearn, Scotland: Mentor Press, 2004), 104.

³ Spear (*Faith of Our Fathers*, 35) grants that while the confession is not too “scholastic” (“overly academic and philosophical”), this section is an example of scholasticism. Robert Letham, *The Westminster Assembly* (Phillipsburg, N. J.: P & R Publishing, 2009), 194-95, asserts that the divines “did not argue from logic, but from the Bible.” “Their use of the distinction between primary and secondary causes ...could be said to be scholastic, in the sense that it was a category from Aristotelian philosophy, but if that was so, then virtually everyone in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, including Calvin, could be labeled scholastic.” Helm writes, “Westminster and Protestant Scholasticism”, 103: “So if ‘scholasticism’ means ‘deduction from an axiom asserting the eternal decree of God’ the chapter on providence in the Confession is emphatically not a piece of scholastic theology.” Helm argues that their method is *a posteriori*, seeking, by induction, to formulate their doctrine from the scripture. He adds that this chapter does not depend upon a natural theology, or natural light or probability but is based on scripture. He concludes that: “it is precisely as used in this sense that scholastic is a presentational matter rather than theologically substantive” (107).

⁴ For more on second cause, see John Frame, *History of Philosophy and Theology* (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 2015).

This language is helpful and precise, common in the seventeenth century, but it is foreign to English speakers three hundred fifty years after the Confession. However, we can easily translate their terms: “All events, whether they are instances of laws of nature (‘necessarily’), or of human choices (‘freely’), or of unforeseen happenings (‘contingently’) ...are in God’s direct control.” There are no events that come about because of bare permission.⁵ Humans make real decisions, yet God uses those decisions to carry out his plan.⁶

At WCF 5.4, the Confession affirms that God is almighty, to the extent that his power, wisdom, and goodness, which manifest themselves in providence, extend to Adam’s fall and to human and angelic sins. Then, to make sure that they were clear, the Divines made the difficult situation worse by adding that, because of his power, such sins are not granted by mere permission.⁷

This section screams out a profound theological question. “If God is in control of all events, and he is good, how can there be such evil?”⁸ Any intelligent reader hears the question rumbling in the back of his mind. Knowing that the *WCF*, along with its two catechisms, are meant to be both comprehensive as well as concise, they offer a clear answer to the question. Their answer was two-fold: (1) God does not just permit sin, he also limits sin⁹ and (2) God cannot be the author or approver of sin, because sin occurs for “His own holy ends.”¹⁰ Whether we decide at this point that these answers are intellectually satisfying or not, we need to move ahead to get closer to the heart of the matter. The next step is to define terms. When trying to analyze God’s relationship to evil, we need to differentiate between the concepts of sin and evil. It is from sin that evil has come.

II. The Westminster Confession of Faith on Sin

A. Define Sin

The Westminster Confession defines sin in *WSC* 14 as “any want of conformity unto or transgression of, the law of God.” *WCF* 6:6 tells us about the fruit of sin: “Every sin, both original and actual, being a transgression of the righteous law of God, and contrary thereunto, doth, in its own nature, bring guilt upon the sinner; whereby he is bound over to the wrath of God, and curse of the law, and so made subject to death, with all miseries spiritual, temporal, and eternal.” Therefore, all who are sinners, which means everyone, are bound over to God’s wrath and so are subject to death and to temporal misery. Yes, our God is Lord over what we perceive as evil. Evil comes because of our sin. Having defined sin, the next question is whether we can determine from where it has come.

⁵ Helm, “Westminster and Protestant Scholasticism”, 104.

⁶ Letham, *Assembly*, 196: “God was not a passive spectator watching helplessly as men and angels rebelled.”

⁷ “The almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness of God so far manifest themselves in His providence, that it extendeth itself even to the first fall, and all other sins of angels and men; and that not by a bare permission,” *WCF*.

⁸ Spear, *Faith of our Fathers*, 36.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁰ Murray, “Westminster”, 136-37.

B. Issues with Sin

Concerning sin's origin, sin is something done by creatures and has its origin in the creation, not the Creator. It originated in the angelic world and then travelled down to God's pristine creation.

Also, God is not the source of sin in any sense. This truth is taught in the Old Testament as well as the New Testament. In fact, the Old Testament praises God for his goodness. It is sin that separates humans from God.¹¹ While there are component parts to human sin, knowing those various parts does not explain the origin of sin. There is no room for locating the origin of sin outside of humanity, which is plainly taught by the *WCF*.

Thus, theologians insist that sin cannot be causally determined. If we could find a cause for it, then sin and evil could be explained.¹²

III. The Westminster Confession of Faith on Evil

The Confession distinguishes between natural evil and moral evil.

A. Natural Evil

For this article, natural evil will be divided into two parts.

First, natural evil is a curse that God has placed on the world in response to sin.¹³ The very definition of evil is when the creation tries to usurp the power of the Creator. Thus, the Creator can manipulate creation to remind his creation that he, and he alone, is the Creator. Examples of this natural evil are mosquitoes, earthquakes, floods, tornados, and erupting volcanos. There is thus an intimate connection between evil, defined as God's curse on creation, and God's providence.

A second type of natural evil is death and the dissolution of the body. Death came because of sin.¹⁴ Thus, what we normally classify as evil, things such as debilitating diseases in our bodies, came not because of what God has done, but because of what we have done. Death came into the world because of our sin.

Summarizing natural evil, it is God who brings on earthquakes and tornadoes. Those who are battered and shaken by these natural events are in fact under divine wrath. Such events are only

¹¹ Richard C. Gamble, *The Whole Counsel of God: God's Mighty Acts in the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2009), 192.

¹² *Ibid.*, 193-94: "There is no explanation for sin that is humanly satisfying, save the fact that it exists, and that nothing occurs outside of God's will." 1:194: "At times, theologians have drawn improper conclusions regarding the origin of evil. Some theologians have asserted that if God wills sin, in any sense, then he must be the source of it. They then argue that since he cannot be the source of sin, it must be wrong to say that God wills sin *in any sense*. Yet that conclusion necessitates something happening that is somehow beyond God's will. Granting that there is a tension- God is not the author of sin, yet sin exists- we must not necessarily conclude that he does not will sin in any sense. God is good and holy, and at the same time he is all-powerful and all-controlling."

¹³ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 293.

¹⁴ Richard C. Gamble, *The Whole Counsel of God: God's Mighty Acts in the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2009), 185-186.

the beginnings of their sorrows. As cancer erupts in a person's body, has God brought on this illness? Of course he has, because, on one hand, the reprobate are under his wrath and curse and, on the other hand, even his children must endure death. Thus, to answer the question asked in the title, yes, God is certainly the Lord over Evil.

B. Moral Evil

First, moral evil is that which is contrasted to moral good.¹⁵ To understand moral evil, we turn to the beginning of time. Before the fall, Adam and Eve knew the difference between good and evil. Evil was to do anything that was against God's command.¹⁶ In the Garden, the thrust of the devil's temptation was to convince sinless Adam and Eve, that by committing sin and evil, they would be like God. This claim, touted by the prince of liars, was the opposite of the truth. The nature of the satanic temptation was for Adam and Eve to try to change from being creatures to becoming the all-powerful Creator.¹⁷

Second, the satanic temptation was part of God's divine plan for our first parents. Even if there had been no tempter, there would have been some type of probation or testing in the garden. God wanted Adam and Eve to love him, not for what they could get from him, but simply for who he is. Had they resisted the temptation, they would have moved from the Garden of Eden to a heavenly Garden of Eden. They would have moved to what we will have at the final consummation.

Third, God punishes evil. The *WLC* 28 says: "The punishments of sin in this world, are either inward, as blindness of mind, a reprobate sense, strong delusions, hardness of heart, horror of conscience, and vile affections: or outward, as the curse of God upon the creatures for our sake; and all other evils that befall us in our bodies, names, estates, relations, and employments; together with death itself."

Fourth, what evil is not: evil is neither an illusion nor a privation. A Christian cannot imagine evil as an illusion, but the sect called Christian Science, as well as parts of Hinduism, Buddhism, and contemporary postmoderns, argue that evil is an illusion. For them, the problem of evil simply dissolves. But their claim cannot stand.¹⁸ Moral evil is very real.

Closer to home, a number of Christian scholars argue that evil is what they term a privation. Their argument, they believe, helps to explain evil. While I do not embrace the argument, it is important enough for us to examine the theory. The term "privation" is not one that we use very often. We understand the term private, like a private conversation that is limited to a select number of participants, or private property which has only one owner. If we look up the word "privation", it is defined as "a state in which things that are essential for human well-being, such as food and warmth, are scarce or lacking." Some synonyms are deprivation, impoverishment, or need. In this view, evil is a defect, a lack of good where good should be. Thus, a rock that cannot see is not an evil, but a man who is blind suffers from the privation of vision. The big picture of evil, viewed from this perspective, is that when the world was created, everything was good. Evil is the lack or want or privation, of that good which should be there.

¹⁵ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 292. See his *Apologetics to the Glory of God*, 89-102.

¹⁶ Richard C. Gamble, *The Whole Counsel of God: God's Mighty Acts in the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2009), 175.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 175, 189-91: the fall of the angels and human sin.

¹⁸ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 284-89.

Theologians then use this argument in a philosophical fashion. They contend that God in his being is good. Evil, in contrast, is specifically a lack of being. Thus, when men sin they slip into a lower level of being, they become less perfect than God made them to be. Relative to evil, God is the efficient cause of everything good, but only what they term the “effectually permissive” cause of evil. He merely permits evil, because evil has no true being.¹⁹ We need to reject this notion of evil as privation. In the end, it does not absolve God. Having defined sin and evil, we will turn now to its interpretation.

IV. Interpreting God and Evil

A. Two Preliminary Issues.

1. God’s Common Grace²⁰

When we try to comprehend God and evil, we should begin by remembering God’s common grace. Common grace is God’s unmerited goodness to his creation which falls short of salvation. Our own sin deserves nothing but death and destruction. Yet wicked men and women can enjoy plenty of food instead of only bread and water, warm homes in the wintertime, and aspirin to dull the throb of a headache. There is a common saying among theologians: God is better to the worst of us than the best of us deserve. This goodness to all humanity is God’s common grace. Part of common grace is that God limits evil, which is specifically mentioned in the *WCF*. Men do not get to do all of the evil for which their hearts yearn. Governments, for example, function to control evil and thus are a manifestation of God’s common grace. Despite God’s common grace, we should not make the mistake of believing that God is not angry at evil and sin, which takes us to the second preliminary issue.²¹

2. God’s Reprobation

Although worthy of an article of its own, God in fact hardens hearts. *WCF* 5:6 deals with reprobation.²² First, the objects of reprobation are not innocent, cherub-like children. There are no such people. No, the reprobate are men and women who are wicked and ungodly. They have sinned, and instead of halting their sin, God permits them to roll around in it, becoming more and more deeply entwined in its wicked tentacles. This section (*WCF* 5.6) presents a sobering view of God’s providence in the lives of the wicked.²³ He blinds and hardens them.²⁴

¹⁹ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 287.

²⁰ Richard C. Gamble, *The Whole Counsel of God: God’s Mighty Acts in the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2009), 236.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 292.

²² “As for those wicked and ungodly men whom God, as a righteous Judge, for former sins doth blind and harden, from them He not only withholdeth His grace, whereby they might have been enlightened in their understandings, and wrought upon in their hearts; but sometimes also withdraweth the gifts which they had, and exposeth them to such objects as their corruption makes occasions of sin; and withal, gives them over to their own lusts, the temptations of the world, and the power of Satan: whereby it comes to pass that they harden themselves, even under those means which God useth for the softening of others.”

²³ Spear, *Faith of Our Fathers*, 37.

²⁴ The theological question is how does God act to bring about those sinful results? See Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 293.

Let's summarize so we can approach the big theological question. God gives unmerited favor short of salvation to the reprobate, but will not leave them unpunished.

B. Sin and God's Will

The *WCF* is clear: God is active, in a negative fashion, toward the reprobate. This theology itself asks a question, do the sins of wicked men and women stand against God's will and counsel? If we answer affirmatively, "Yes, their sin is against God's will," then it appears that God must in some sense either be responsible for their sin or be so weak that he cannot control all of the events in his vast universe. Certainly, neither of those two answers can be correct.²⁵ If we say, "No, sin is not against God's will," then it appears that God in some sense wills those sins performed by the reprobate.

I will use a two-fold approach to answer this question. The first angle is the simplest: to remind us that God's perfect will is expressed in his law. When sin is defined as acts that are contrary to God's perfect law, then there is no question that sin is against his will.²⁶

The second angle is the greater good argument for the presence of evil in this world.²⁷ The greater good argument was presented in the first section of *WCF* chapter 5. The divines said: "God upholds and directs all creatures, actions, and things...by his holy providence...and the free and immutable counsel of his own will, to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy."²⁸

To comprehend the greater good argument simply requires us to imagine a situation in which something painful is meant to be positive: the pain of surgery is meant to heal. The presence of evil in the world, when seen from this broader perspective, is somehow meant by God for something good. It is possible to imagine that God has a good purpose in permitting evil, a purpose that outweighs all of the suffering, pain, and evil that men and women experience. The divine purpose would make the world better than it would have been had it existed without evil.²⁹

We have asked the question whether God uses sin against his own will and have learned that God's will is expressed in his holy and perfect law, and sin is violation of that law. But God is free to take sinful human actions committed against his will (defined as his law) and use them for his glory. Even the Evil One will be used for God's glory. The Old Testament teaches that almighty God will use those things that appear sinful for his glory as well. Thus, when seemingly inexplicable things occur, God is still in control.³⁰

²⁵ For more information on the presence of sin and God's holy will, see *Whole Counsel of God*, 196-98.

²⁶ Richard C. Gamble, *The Whole Counsel of God: God's Mighty Acts in the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2009), 194.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 195.

²⁸ A. A. Hodge, *Confession of Faith*, 92: "That the final end of his providence is the manifestation of his own glory."

²⁹ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 289.

³⁰ Richard C. Gamble, *The Whole Counsel of God: God's Mighty Acts in the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2009), 195.

Incorrect Formulations of the Greater Good Argument

A specific argument has been made that evil is necessary for there to be an orderly universe.³¹ Another argument is that the presence of evil is necessary to make the soul strong. However, the most common argument is that evil is necessary for there to be human free will.³² There are problems with each of these arguments, and none of them are necessary.

Similar to the greater good argument, God brings good out of evil. This truth was graphically portrayed in the Old Testament. All we need to do is see God's dealings with Noah or Joseph.³³ God is lord over the devil who is evil, as God taught Job. In the New Testament, we know that, at the end of time, we proclaim God to be just. Through our human history, he has brought forth great blessings worthy of highest praise.³⁴

Drawing Everything Together

The question that was asked is whether the sin of wicked men and women stands against God's will and counsel. The answer to the question is yes. Sin is against his will as it is expressed in his law, which is a true expression of his will. On the other hand, we have learned that God uses sin for the greater good.

C. God and Sin

This article would not be complete without tackling the thorniest question of all: since God permits the sin of the wicked to occur, then, is God the author of sin, the passive permitter of sin, or the cause of sin? Answering this question is a most difficult task.³⁵

First, God Is Not the Author of Sin

We cannot say that God is the author of sin, even if someone presents this argument: "if God controls everything, then he must be the author of sin." The New Testament teaches at James 1:13 that "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God,' for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one." It is essential to maintain that God has decreed all, but is not the author of all that is. Satan and his host are the true "authors" of some sins, although God created them and decreed their sin without himself being the author of them.³⁶ God has a role in bringing about evil and, in doing so, he is still holy and blameless. He brings evil to pass without committing or authoring sin.³⁷

³¹ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 289.

³² *Ibid.*, 290.

³³ Richard C. Gamble, *The Whole Counsel of God: God's Mighty Acts in the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2009), 315, 336, 386.

³⁴ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, "...in the last day, God's justice, mercy, and righteousness will be so plain to all that nobody will accuse him of wrongdoing." "From the evils of history he has brought unquestionable good worthy of the highest praise."

³⁵ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 292.

³⁶ G. I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, (Philadelphia: P&R, 1964), 50.

³⁷ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 294: "So in bringing sin to pass, he does not himself commit sin. ...a Reformed doctrine of the sovereignty of God does not imply that God is the author of sin."

Second, God Permits Sin³⁸

Arminians use the word “permit”, relative to God and evil, and for them the word means that God does not cause sin. Of course, for them, God permits sin because the human actor chooses sin, and God refuses to override that sovereign human autonomy. Since Arminians use the word “permit” in that fashion, Reformed theologians are reluctant to say that God “permits” sin at all. However, we noted that the Westminster documents used it at *WLC* 19. The divines probably used “permit” as a more delicate term than “cause”, in that God hates evil. Reformed theologians may use the word “permit” to apply to God’s ordination of sin.³⁹

Third, God as Cause of Sin

Some Bible believing Christians reject the notion of God as the cause of sin because it is difficult to separate the notion of cause from that of author. If he is the cause of sin, then the question is: How is that different from being the author of sin? Others say that God is not the cause of sin and evil by reverting to define evil as privation, an avenue that should be rejected. The way that Calvin handled the question in the *Institutes* was by differentiating the words “cause” and “ordination”. God is not the cause of sin, Calvin argued, but it is by his ordination.

The Problem

However, having gone through this analysis, having examined all of these possible relationships that God may have to sin, the question remains: “Is even granting divine permission for sin some not form of ordination or causation when it comes to the being of God almighty?”⁴⁰ The problem is that, while no humble believer argues that God is the author of sin, there appears to be no honest escape from the notion that God, in some sense, causes sin, whether by his direct ordination or some type of weaker permission. Simply put, no one is candidly satisfied by the answer, “Well God ordains evil, but he is not the author or cause of it in any sense.” In fact, it is intellectually impossible for us to imagine that God can permit evil without ordaining it.⁴¹

The Solution

However, there is a Biblical solution to the problem. The solution is found at Paul’s teaching in Romans 9:19-21, the only place where the Bible directly addresses the problem of evil.⁴² Paul taught: “You will say to me then, ‘Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?’ But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, ‘Why have you made me like this?’ Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honored use and another for dishonorable use?”

The solution to the problem of God as Lord of evil is in comprehending the difference between the Creator and creature. God is transcendent above creation and in a different moral category than humanity. He is the one to judge moral good and evil on the last day. God is the one who

³⁸ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 296.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 297: “It is right...to use permission to apply to God’s ordination of sin.”

⁴⁰ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 298: “Permission, then, is a form of ordination, a form of causation.”

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 298: “It is not a solution to say that God ordains evil, but doesn’t author or cause it...” “The problem of evil asks how God can ordain evil without authoring it.” “Nor is it a solution to say that God permits, rather than ordains, evil.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 298.

rebukes those human beings, like Job, who question him. Our Lord is not subject to the evaluation of his creatures. He said by the mouth of the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 45:7: “I form the light and create darkness, I make well being and create calamity, I am the LORD, who does all these things.”⁴³ When we turn to the New Testament, we have to ask about the evils that happened to the Sinless One. Acts 4:27-28 records that some humans “...gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.”⁴⁴ The greatest evil ever done, killing the sinless Son of God, came about by God’s absolute cause and determination.

To assert God’s transcendence in the area of morality, as I am arguing, is not the same as saying that God is *ex lex*: that he is not subject to the moral law. Some theologians wrongly argue that, since God is above the moral law, he is not subject to it. But that is a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of God and his law. The law is grounded in his character, and God will never violate his own character.⁴⁵

Thus, it is not theologically incorrect to say that, when God, who is almighty, permits sin and evil, it is for him to ordain those events.⁴⁶ More precisely, “God not only permits sinful acts,” writes A. A. Hodge, “but he directs and controls them to the determination of his own purposes.”⁴⁷ Furthermore, the sinfulness of those evil acts comes from the sinning agent. God does not approve of their acts nor is he the author. In fact, the Scriptures teach that God restrains and controls men in their sins, he forbids sin by positive law, he discourages sin by threatenings and actual punishment, and he restrains sin and at times overrules it for good.⁴⁸

Conclusion

In conclusion, when God brings about evil and suffering, either for the wicked or for the righteous, he has a good purpose. This argument is the greater good argument. Joseph testified that this is so for the righteous in Genesis 50:20, “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.” And Paul testified to the same truth in Romans 8:28: “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” Paul elaborated on the idea a few verses later (8:35-39), when he said that neither tribulation nor distress, neither persecution nor famine, not even the sword, can separate us from Christ’s love. God’s promises and love make us conquerors even over death, for nothing can separate believers from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

The Confession as both a clear and practical document, actually addressed these evils in the believer’s life. At *WCF* 5.5, the Divines dealt with the question of spiritual desertion.⁴⁹ They address what appears to us to be an evil: when God “oftentimes leaves for a season his own

⁴³ Translated in some versions as “I make peace and create evil.”

⁴⁴ Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, 49-50.

⁴⁵ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 299.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 296: “...it is not wrong to say that God causes evil and sin.”

⁴⁷ Hodge, *Confession of Faith*, 100.

⁴⁸ Hodge, *Confession of Faith*, 100.

⁴⁹ Letham, *Assembly*, 197.

children to manifold temptations...” The Divines rightly say that the reason is “to chastise them for their former sin, or to discover unto them the hidden strength of corruption...that they may be humbled; and, to raise them to a more close and constant dependence for their support upon Himself...and for sundry other just and holy ends.” The apparent evils from God’s hand are for good ends.

This teaching parallels the following section that we already examined concerning reprobation. Believers commit sin, and God chastises them for that sin. For the reprobate, given the same situation, people sin, but in their case, God blinds and hardens. So the bitter chastisements that come to us in this life, while they appear evil to us, are meant to humble us (which is a good thing) and to raise us up to a closer dependence upon God (also a good thing).

At *WCF* 17:3, we learn that, when we fall into grievous sins (because of our own fault), we incur God’s displeasure and can be deprived of grace and divine comfort and can also bring temporal judgment upon ourselves. At *WCF* 18:4, we learn that we can be brought to the door of utter despair. The reasons for such actions on God’s part are our negligence in preserving in salvation by falling into a special sin after a sudden temptation, and God’s then withdrawing the light of his countenance from upon us.

The greater good argument underscores that the greatest good in the universe is God’s glory. Even the damnation of the wicked brings glory to God. God is glorified when sinners are judged, and God has promised that what brings glory to him will eventually bring benefits to believers.⁵⁰ Yes, the Lord brings suffering into our lives, but that does not give us the right to make accusations against him, and in bringing evil, he never does evil himself.⁵¹ God faithfully preserves his people through persecution and “honors our suffering by uniting it to Christ’s sufferings.”⁵²

Furthermore, the full goodness of God’s plan will only be manifest at the end of redemptive history. There is a promise in the Book of Revelation that, in the last day, we will confess God’s righteousness.⁵³

Finally, the Westminster Divines, with their great depth of analysis, do not attempt to explain the nature of those divine actions which are concerned in the origin of sin, nor do they attempt to explain God’s control of the sinful actions of his creatures in the execution of his purposes.⁵⁴ Their reticence about doing so is good because, brothers and sisters, we do not have to justify God’s ways.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 291.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 291.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 178.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 292.

⁵⁴ Hodge, *Confession of Faith*, 99.

⁵⁵ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 292.