

Book Summary Report: *God and Evil* by Gordon H. Clark (Report Date: March 2019)

In this book Gordon H. Clark addresses the age-old problem of the origin and purpose of evil in light of the existence of God: *How can the existence of the God of the Bible be harmonized with the presence of evil?* The issue at hand was stated in antiquity by Lactantius who asked the question, “If God is good and wants to eliminate sin, but cannot, he is not omnipotent; but if God is omnipotent and can eliminate sin, but does not, he is not good.” Therefore, it is argued, God cannot be both omnipotent and good. But is this syllogism reasonable? Clark does not think so. However, before solving the issue at hand he addresses some of the answers given through out history.

For example, Augustine, under Neoplatonic influence, taught that all existing things are good. Therefore, evil does not exist—it is metaphysically unreal and can have no causation. If this be the case then God cannot be the cause of it. To this Augustine added a variant of free will, which in one form or another has been the most popular theory of the concurrent existence of God and evil from pagan antiquity into modern times. Augustine’s early view, which he later changed, was one of the ability of contrary choice.<sup>1</sup>

For his part, Clark denies all forms of free will theism. Neither does he allow for a separate category within God’s decree of a will of permission. This, he contends, does not solve the problem of evil. He gives as an illustration a lifeguard on a beach who watches as a boy is taken under by a strong undercurrent. The boy struggles violently, an apt portrayal of mankind's enslavement to sin. The lifeguard has the ability to rescue the boy and he may shout some words of advice, telling the boy to exercise his free will and swim to shore. However, the boy drowns as the guard watches from shore. Would the Arminian conclude, Clark asks, that the lifeguard escaped all culpability? Of course not. For Clark this illustration shows that permission of evil does not relieve the lifeguard from responsibility. This is even more evident when we consider that the lifeguard (in this case, God) created the beach and the boy. An omnipotent lifeguard

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<sup>1</sup>This is not to say that Augustine, who modified his view over time, was a free will theologian. He was unquestionably an ardent predestinarian.

could have prevented the boy from entering the beach. He could have at least prevented the undertow from occurring or made the boy a better swimmer. Clark contends that the idea of permission has no intelligible meaning.

To solve the problem of evil Clark turns to determinism. He admits that determinism "instead of alleviating the situation, seems to accentuate the problem of evil by maintaining the inevitability of every event; and not only the inevitability, but also the further and more embarrassing point that it is God himself who determines or decrees every action."<sup>2</sup> Some Calvinists, to be sure, shy away from the term "determinism." However, it is a biblical concept akin to predestination. There is ample biblical evidence that God does foreordain evil (cf. Acts 4:27-28).

As for determinism, Clark gives a helpful historic overview of the writings of Christian leaders, from the early church fathers to the Reformation, in support of the doctrine, taken in part from the excellent tome written by Augustus Toplady, *Historic Proof of the Doctrinal Calvinism of the Church of England*. Clark points out that the Roman Catholic Church officially repudiated the doctrine at the sixteenth century Council of Trent. Clark follows with an overview of Scriptural evidence and gives hearty recommendation to the work of the nineteenth century Baptist John Gill who, in his *Cause of God and Truth*, addressed the so-called "problem passages" often posed by Arminians.

Clark argues that if it can be demonstrated that man's responsibility does not presuppose free will, then theology would be freed from confusion. He further conflates God's will under one rubric: God's will is God's will regardless of whether it involves good or evil. He writes, "I wish very frankly and pointedly to assert that if a man gets drunk and shoots his family, it was the will of God that he should do so."<sup>3</sup> As for God's omniscience, He knew all things that would come to pass before the world was made, and yet He willed it to be so.

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<sup>2</sup>Gordon H. Clark. *God and Evil: The Problem Solved* (Unicoi, TN: The Trinity Foundation, 1996). 18.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid. 27

Clark does, however, tentatively allow for a preceptive will in Scripture (an example being the Ten Commandments). But he thinks that to use the word "will" in this regard is misleading and that, technically, the word "will" should only be used of God's decree, leaving the rest to be described as "precepts," or "commands." There is also a distinction to be made between the secret and revealed will of God. It was God's secret will that Abraham not sacrifice his son, Isaac. But it was his revealed will, his command (for a time), that Abraham do so. This is not a contradiction. The statement "Abraham, sacrifice your son" does not contradict the decree of God, known only to Him, that Abraham would not sacrifice his son. Whatever God does, He decrees, and what He decrees is right by virtue of His decreeing it. To put it another way, God does not act a certain way because it is right. It is right because He acts a certain way. He defines and is above the law, not below and subject to it. We must avoid a Platonic Dualism that makes the law higher than the law-giver. This occurs, for example, when someone attempts to argue that eternal punishment is unjust. Whatever God does is just because He does it and He is the standard for all justice, not vice-versa.

This is not to say that man does not possess a natural liberty. The Westminster Confession states that "God has endued the will of man with that natural liberty that is neither forced, nor, by any absolute necessity of nature, determined to good or evil." The phrase "absolute necessity of nature" means that man is not impelled to act as an impersonal machine. As John Gill observes, glorified saints will act freely to the good and it will be determined that they cannot do otherwise as sin is impossible in heaven. This demonstrates that the word "free" is consistent with immutable determinism.

There is a distinction that must be made between a necessity of compulsion and a necessity of infallible certainty. A helpful example is given of Judas Iscariot who acted in regard to the latter. Judas acted voluntarily in that he chose to betray Christ and did so willingly. That Judas had a will is not in question. What the Calvinist asks, however, is whether that will was free. Could Judas have chosen *other* than to betray Christ? He hypothetically could have done otherwise, had he chosen, but, he could not have chosen otherwise in light of God's

foreordination (Acts 4:28). Fallen men have free agency which is a voluntary agency. But free agency is not the same as free will. Free will means that there is no determining factor operating on the will and that either of two incomparable actions are equally possible (the power of contrary choice). This is incompatible with the depravity of man and the sovereignty of God as revealed in Scripture.

In answering the common charge that determinism reduces men to mere puppets, Clark points out that puppets are inanimate dolls, controlled by strings, that make no choices. Yet, theologically, Calvinists contend that men do make choices that are free. A choice is a mental act that consciously initiates and determines further action. The ability to choose otherwise, contrary choice, has no place in that definition. Therefore, choice and necessity are not incompatible.

Toward the end of the book Clark addresses some concerns under the heading “distortions and cautions.” He points out that God hardly does anything apart from secondary causes. King David took the blame for his great sin with Bathsheba. He didn't blame his sinful nature, or his mother, or fallen Adam, or God—even though these were in the chain of causation leading to his sin. There is a causation that isn't culpable. In that regard it may be said that God is the ultimate cause of sin, but not the author of it. God is, moreover, the ultimate cause of everything. Nothing is independent of Him. Every detail of history was in His plan before creation and he willed that it should all come to pass. God is not the author of sin anymore than He is the author of "War and Peace." Tolstoy was the author and immediate cause of the book; God was the ultimate cause. Causation comes under different kinds. Authorship is one kind of causation, but there are other kinds, as well, such as the ultimate cause. Much as an evil nation using a nuclear weapon to kill millions would be the immediate cause (and author) of that act while The Manhattan Project of the 1940s was the ultimate cause.

To be clear, the answer to the question “is God the author of sin?” is a resounding “No!” To say that God is the author of sin would be tantamount to the assertion that He commits sin. In this regard, Clark observes: "Although the betrayal of Christ was foreordained from eternity as a

means of effecting the atonement, it was Judas, not God, who betrayed Christ. The secondary causes in history are not eliminated by divine causality, but rather are made certain."<sup>4</sup> And:

"God is neither responsible nor sinful, even though he is the only ultimate cause of everything. He is not sinful because in the first place whatever he does is just and right. It is just and right solely in virtue of the fact that he does it. Justice or righteousness is not a standard external to God to which God is obligated to submit. Righteousness is what God does. . . . There is no law superior to God which forbids Him to decree sinful acts. Sin presupposes a law, for sin is lawlessness. Sin is any want of conformity unto or transgression of the law of God. But God is Ex-lex."<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, the Creator-creature distinction must be maintained. Certainly if a man tried to coerce another man to do evil, that would be sin. But the relationship of man to man is different than that of God to man. God is creator; man is creature. And the relationship of man to the law is different than the relationship of God to the law. God has unlimited rights over all creation. The laws that God imposes on man do not apply to Him; they are applicable to human situations and conditions. God cannot steal, not only because whatever he does is right, but also because there is nothing for him to steal; He is owner of all.

It is doubtful that an ardent Arminian would be satisfied with Clark's solution to the problem of evil. However, within the scope of biblical, theological, and philosophical categories, Clark does a masterful job in closing the door to an age-old question.

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid. 39-40.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.