THE PROBLEM WITH THE "PROBLEM OF EVIL": A RESPONSE TO GREGORY BOYD’S OPEN THEIST SOLUTION

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In theology old problems never die, and, unlike old soldiers, they rarely fade away for long. Instead, they return in fresh formulations accompanied by ingenious solutions written by a new-sprung generation of young theologians. The perennial problem of evil—between wars, episodes of genocide, plagues, battles with cancer, and that periodic migraine headache—recedes into the back of our consciousness. But when trouble crashes through the gates, we ask, “Why?” “Why me?” “Why anyone?” Suddenly, the old problem has become my problem, present, vivid, urgent, and anything but faded.

Gregory Boyd, who teaches theology at Bethel College in St. Paul, Minnesota, and preaches at the Woodland Hills Baptist Church, has written a two-volume study of the problem of evil worthy of our attention.1 Boyd is a prominent representative of the controversial new approach to theology known as open theism,2 and he brings the innovative resources of this theology to the task of reformulating and solving that old, recurring problem. Boyd argues that we can deal with the problem of evil only if we give up the idea that God controls all things and has a detailed plan or blueprint for everything that happens. We

1 God at War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1997) and Satan and the Problem of Evil: Constructing a Trinitarian Warfare Theodicy (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2001).

must adopt, rather, a "warfare" view of God's interaction with the world in which God has to take risks, struggles, and sometimes loses in his efforts to get things to turn out right.\(^3\)

In this study I will present the central tenets of Boyd's proposal, highlight some of its weaknesses, and present an alternative I believe better mirrors the perspective of Scripture.

**Boyd's Proposed Solution**

*A Case Study in Evil*

Boyd adopts the principle that "radical evil can be known only when incarnated and experienced concretely,"\(^4\) In keeping with this rule, he describes several instances of horrible suffering, the most wrenching of which is the story of seven-year-old Greta.\(^5\) Greta was abducted from her neighborhood and sexually molested. Hours, days, and then weeks passed without word from her or her abductor. Finally, after months of wondering and hoping, Greta's parents received the devastating news: Greta's decapitated body had been found near a river in a plastic bag. Their precious little Greta was dead—raped and murdered by her abductors.

For Boyd, this monstrous deed illustrates the impossibility of accepting the "blueprint" view of God's providence and shows the necessity of adopting his "warfare" view.\(^6\) The notion that God included Greta's rape and murder in his plan for a mysterious reason or a hidden good is "untenable," understates Boyd, "for this is not the kind of 'good' Jesus promoted."\(^7\) Many well-meaning Christians insult God with their responses to such atrocities, Boyd charges: "It was God's will." "God picks only the most beautiful flowers." No, says Boyd, to these clichés! "If such things are the work of an all-loving and all-good God, what would the work of a hateful devil look like?"\(^8\) Boyd agrees rather with the hard-bitten Ivan in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. Ivan asserts that the

\(^3\) *Satan and the Problem of Evil*, 14–16.

\(^4\) *God at War*, 34.

\(^5\) *Satan and the Problem of Evil*, 214–15. In *God at War*, Boyd tells the story of Zosia, a little Jewish girl tortured and killed by the Nazis in Warsaw in World War II (33–35).

\(^6\) Ibid., 14, 15.

\(^7\) Ibid., 211. Boyd insists that God does not allow a particular evil to happen for a specific purpose. He does believe, however, that once this evil has happened, God sets about to bring good out of it. Boyd distinguishes here between the intended end of an act and the use of an action for other ends. This distinction supports Boyd's case only if (1) God is not an actor in any sense in the event, (2) God does not foreknow the event, and (3) God moves through time in a manner similar to creation. Strong objections can be raised against each of these three presuppositions.

\(^8\) Ibid., 250.
existence of one “tortured child” demonstrates that evil has no hidden divine purpose and can contribute nothing to a “higher harmony.”

According to Boyd, everything about Greta’s fate is evil. God did not will her death at all, even indirectly. God did not cause, approve, or allow it. To the contrary, Boyd asserts, “God absolutely and unequivocally detests the terror and pain” Greta suffered. We can be sure that “God was doing all he could do to stop it.” Boyd speculates at length:

His Spirit was perpetually at work trying to influence the abductor to halt his wicked plan. God’s angels also were undoubtedly battling whatever demonic agents were involved in influencing this person to carry out this hideous deed. But in the end, the will of this man was too hardened to the Spirit and too receptive to demonic influences to be altered. As a result, God’s will to protect Greta was thwarted.

God “wishes this horror could have been prevented.” But it could not. Somehow, Greta got caught in the line of fire between forces loyal to Satan and those faithful to God.

Six Theses on the Nature of Love

According to Gregory Boyd, the answer to the problem of evil “lies in the nature of love.” God created the world for the sake of love, to establish loving relations with his creatures. It is “not logically possible,” asserts Boyd, for God to achieve this end without risking the possibility of great evil. Giving creatures the capacity to love requires giving them the capacity to withhold love as well. Boyd develops these ideas in six theses.

(1) “Love must be chosen.” Boyd argues that love by its very nature must be chosen. To be able to say yes to God, we must also be able to say no. Imagine, Boyd asks, that a man implants a computer chip in his wife’s brain that makes her do the loving thing always. Would her actions arise from genuine love? Certainly not, for her ‘love’ is caused by an external force and is not chosen freely. Being really free, asserts Boyd, requires that we be the “final cause and explanation” of our free actions. Since we are the ultimate causes and final explanations for our free actions, we cannot blame God directly for our evil deeds.

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9 Ibid., 14.
10 Ibid., 214.
11 Ibid., 214, 284.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid., 214.
14 Ibid., 16.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid., 53.
17 Ibid., 55.
18 Ibid., 59.
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(2) "Freedom implies risk." If love implies choice and free agents really are
the final causes of their own actions, God takes risks when he creates such beings.
Risk, Boyd admits, is not something we usually associate with God’s decisions
and actions, for risk implies ignorance. Putting your whole retirement nest egg
into the stock market involves risk because you cannot know whether the market
will rise or fall. Since human beings (and angels) are the “ultimate creators” of
their actions, not even God can know their choices in advance. Hence, Boyd
argues, we cannot charge God with creating the world knowing that evil would
break loose and create horrors.

(3) "Risk entails moral responsibility." When God gives creatures the
capacity to love—and therefore the capacity to help others—he gives them the
power to choose against love and therefore the capacity to harm others.
According to Boyd, God could not protect us from the harm others inflict on us
without robbing them of their freedom and thus of their capacity to love. He
says: “For God to give us a capacity to love one another is for God to put us at
risk with each other and thereby make us morally responsible for each other.”

(4) “Moral responsibility is proportionate to the potential to influence
others.” According to Boyd, the greater a creature’s capacity for good, the
greater its capacity for evil. Lower animals have little capacity for good and
therefore little capacity for evil. Humans have great potential for good and
therefore great capacity for evil. Angels have the greatest capacity for good and
therefore the greatest capacity for evil. This principle, according to Boyd,
explains why God took such great risks. The greater the good God aims to realize
in creation, the greater the evil God risks, should creatures turn against him.
God’s risk-laden venture was justified, Boyd reasons, because the good for which
God aimed was not disproportionate to the evil he risked.

(5) "The power to influence is irrevocable." In his fifth thesis Boyd argues
that God cannot immediately destroy every creature that turns to evil. The power

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19 Ibid., 86.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid., 165.
22 Boyd does say that God may occasionally restrict the freedom of an evil person.
The point holds that God cannot do this without limiting creaturely freedom.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid., 170.
25 Ibid., 172. In the following pages (173–77), Boyd fleshes out his contention that
the risk was worth it, developing an index to measure “the wisdom of a risk” (176). One
must measure the “quality of the prize” against the “probability of acquiring that prize”
(176). According to Boyd, God was 100 percent certain of “acquiring a loving bride” even
if some individuals refuse God’s love, for God “knows . . . that this rejection would never
be universal” (176). As far as I can tell, Boyd provides no satisfactory ground for this
confidence.
26 Ibid, 181.
of a creature to love or hate has no meaning "without some temporal duration."27
"Temporal duration," Boyd concludes, "is thus built into the meaning of love, freedom and moral responsibility."28 We are temporal beings; for us, to exercise freedom means to exercise freedom over time. When God gives the power of choice, therefore, "he has to, within limits, endure its misuse."29

(6) "The power to influence is finite."30 Creatures are by definition finite; thus their possibilities for choice, action, and influence are inherently limited. Each being has a finite reservoir of potential, some of which is actualized in each self-determining decision. In our choices, says Boyd, we determine "the kind of eternal beings we will become."31 Those who continue to choose evil will eventually give up their freedom and, as it were, become evil itself. Once this has happened, God will no longer allow them to influence others.

The Function of Satan

In God at War, Boyd develops his view of spiritual warfare at length.32 Examining the OT and NT in great detail, Boyd concludes that Scripture understands world history as propelled by an ongoing spiritual conflict between God and his angels and Satan and his angels. For Boyd, taking into account this battle in the "world in between" illuminates many texts in Scripture that are otherwise obscure and explains much of the evil we experience in the world.33 Satan, according to Boyd, is the source of what is usually called "natural evil": death, mudslides, diseases, birth defects, mental illness, storms, and earthquakes.34

Blaming Satan for natural evil enables Boyd to encompass all forms of evil in his six-thesis theodicy. Every instance of evil originates in the choice of a creature that was given freedom for the sake of love:

When one possesses a vital awareness that in between God and humanity there exists a vast society of spiritual beings who are quite like humans in possessing intelligence and free will, there is simply no difficulty in reconciling the reality of evil with the goodness of the supreme God.35

God, asserts Boyd, did not create a defective and dangerous creation. He does not will the destruction and terror that comes into our lives through disease

27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., 186.
31 Ibid., 188.
32 God at War.
33 Ibid., 142, 166.
34 Ibid., 206.
35 Ibid., 129.
and 'natural' disasters. Satan invades and disturbs God's good creation and uses it as a weapon to cause harm and spread destruction. Satan aims to destroy God's work simply because it is God's work. Though all of the material creation suffers, Satan takes special delight in recruiting human beings (God's image) into his service.

In Boyd's view, taking the biblical teaching on spiritual warfare seriously has another advantage for developing an adequate theodicy. Satan's enormous power explains why there is so much horrendous evil in the world. The power of Satan prevents God from merely "controlling evil" and makes it necessary for God to war against it. God's foes are "formidable" and put up "genuine" resistance. Consequently, "running the cosmos ... is no easy matter, even for the Creator," explains Boyd. God deals with Satan and his allies, not with "easy manipulation," but with a "sovereignty won in the face of genuine, powerful, opposing forces." Sometimes, these forces deal even God a defeat, as when the god Chemosh "successfully routs Israel" in battle (2 Kgs 3:26–27) or the "prince of Persia" "blocks God's answer to Daniel's prayer (Daniel 10)."

The Problem of Evil Solved

According to Boyd, his six theses show how the presence of evil in the world is consistent with the omnipotence and perfect goodness of God. God is indeed omnipotent, but he has freely created a world containing creatures with self-determining freedom. God thus limited himself to actions that are consistent with his original decision. God is still omnipotent. He could prevent creatures from doing evil, but not without destroying their freedom and hence their capacity to love. "God has no choice in this matter," Boyd bluntly asserts.

Boyd also claims he has preserved God's goodness. God does not will evil, and, strictly speaking, he does not allow it. He permits evil only in a general way.

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36 Ibid., 182, 183.
37 Ibid., 165.
38 Ibid., 291.
39 Ibid., 93.
40 Ibid., 148.
41 Ibid., 98. Boyd peppers God at War with references to Satan's power and God's struggle. The war is "absolutely real for God" (87). God "must battle" (89) against "real opposition" (92). The battles God must fight are "genuine" (98, 162, 283), for Satan is a force that "Yahweh must reckon with" (144).
42 Ibid., 163.
44 Ibid., 342. This hypothetical, or means/ends, logic pervades Boyd's book: 16, 22, 30, 42, 52, 53, 54, 55, 116, 164, 172, 175, 181, 184, 196, and 391.
Because he wishes to create beings that love, he must allow the possibility of evil. In every case, when evil becomes real, it "originates" in the will of a creature. God "always does the most he can do" for us. But even the infinitely intelligent God "cannot always get his own way in a world where other creatures have even finite "say-so." Boyd concludes that once we see free will as the total origin of evil, "there is no difficulty understanding why God's character is not impugned by the evil in the world."

Some Problems in Boyd’s Theodicy

Having attempted to describe faithfully Boyd’s sophisticated and daring theory, I will now investigate its viability. In this section I will point out some weaknesses in Boyd’s work and prepare the field for my alternatives in response to them.

Which Problem? Whose Evil?

As we have seen, Boyd understands the problem of evil to be the apparent contradiction between acknowledging the existence of real evil and believing in the omnipotence and goodness of God. As stated, the problem expects the answer to take the form of a theoretical reconciliation of these beliefs. On the surface, this would seem a real problem for Christians. After all, the fact that Christians believe all three of these theses would seem to obligate them to search for a way to relate them without contradiction.

Rushing to defend the faith, we often fail to notice that this formulation of "the problem" arises from non-belief or doubt and displays a mood of sullenness or cynicism. Christian theologians, however, should be wary of rushing to answer problems formulated by non-believers—or even the non-believer in us. The questions we ask are no more neutral than answers we give. They always restrict in advance the answers we can give. In accepting this "problem of evil," we place God’s power and goodness in question and assume the obligation to show how evil is possible. This starting point guarantees our defeat. If faith arises by believing the word of Christ (Rom 10:10), we will never establish faith by doubting the word. Furthermore, any theory of how evil is “possible” will inevitably end up blaming God for evil because all possible things have God as the ground of their possibility. Otherwise, we fall into metaphysical dualism.

46 Ibid., 46.
48 Ibid., 213.
49 Ibid., 61.
50 The Reformed theologian Heidegger assumes this principle when he asserts, "That is possible, which God can will, order, call, do for His glory; impossible, which God
Boyd gets the problem wrong because he defines evil wrongly. As noted above, he uses the term evil to designate that which human beings fear and dread: pain, loss, grief, and death. Defining evil in terms of disruption to human peace and flourishing enables Boyd to pronounce God’s definitive judgment (“No”) on a concrete event of “evil,” something he must do if his theodicy is to work. He wants to judge of any terrible event, “God did not cause, permit or, strictly speaking, allow this evil. To the contrary, God did every thing he did to stop it.” Boyd’s strategy fails, however; for, to make it work, he must equivocate by using the term “evil” in two senses. He first uses it to mean what we fear and dread, but then he shifts its meaning to indicate that which God rejects. He assumes gratuitously that God never wills what we fear and dread.

Boyd’s epistemic principle that “Radical evil can be known only when incarnated and experienced concretely” substitutes human feelings for divine revelation. Are we really in a position, however, to pronounce God’s judgment so clearly and definitively on a complex event merely because we find it horrifying? Boyd’s approach leads us to focus on our own feelings of pain, loss, and grief and our sense of meaninglessness in the face of tragic events. Should we not focus rather on what God has done on our behalf in Jesus Christ? Boyd begins with the faithless exclamation of Ivan Karamazov. Should we not begin rather with Paul’s statement in Rom 7:24–25: “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!” Boyd defines evil from a human point of view. We should rather define it from the divine point of view.

A Solution . . . But What Cost?

We can employ Boyd’s theodicy only at the expense of placing several Christian doctrines in jeopardy. The first Christian belief to be mortgaged is the doctrine of creation from nothing. Since Boyd defines evil as any disruption to human peace and flourishing and does not distinguish between the total event and the evil in the event, he must deny that God acts in such events. This raises serious problems. Unless Boyd intends to deny the doctrine of creation out of nothing, he cannot avoid the principle that created action requires God’s continual sustenance of the agent, the medium and the patient. Furthermore,
unless one denies that an action exists, participating in being, one must also affirm that actions need God's sustenance. Unless we wish to limit God's action to the original creation and thus fall into deism, we must conceive of God's sustenance of the world as continual divine action.

Everything in Boyd's "evil" event, therefore, needs God's sustenance or concurrence to maintain its existence and ability to act. Yet Boyd's theodicy depends on the proposition that God is not involved in the event at all. Clearly, it cannot be both ways. Boyd could rid his theodicy of this incoherence by making one of three moves: (1) To remove God totally from the "evil" event, he could advocate a deist position whereby God gives to creation the power to exist and act on its own. (2) He could conclude that God is at least partially responsible for the "evil" deed since without God's continual action the agent could not accomplish his evil desires. (3) Boyd could abandon his definition of evil as any disruption to human peace and flourishing and adopt a definition indexed to God's will and based on God's revelation. This last alternative would free him from the need to speak of the whole event as evil and enable him to speak rather of "the evil in the event." Then, of course, his theodicy would be eviscerated.

Boyd, moreover, requires us to give up God's foreknowledge, another huge expense exacted by his theodicy. To absolve God of blame, Boyd denies that God works in evil events to turn them toward his good purposes. Only after the event, Boyd insists, can God begin to bring good out of evil. Sustaining this thesis, however, requires Boyd to deny God's foreknowledge of evil acts. For, if God foreknew an evil action, he could work before, in, and through as well as after the event to bring good out of evil. Admitting this, however, would deny us the ability of rendering an unambiguous verdict on events such as Greta's murder because we could not rule out the presence of God's grace before and in such events.

Boyd's radical free will defense requires him to exclude God not only from free acts of evil but from good acts as well. God cannot foreknow acts of evil because he cannot foreknow any free acts, good or evil; he cannot foreknow them because free acts are self-determining. "We must be able to determine ourselves..."
in relation to God’s invitation,” Boyd explains.56 Before we determine our actions, Boyd insists, they exist only as indeterminate possibilities that none (not even God) can know as actual.57 Boyd faces now the same problem with good freedom as he did with evil freedom. How can any event occur without God’s sustenance and concurrence? Again, he skates close to the edge of deism.58

Excluding God from good freedom, however, creates an additional problem that has disturbing implications for ethics and soteriology. If we are free only to the extent that God is excluded from our free acts, our acts can be good only to the extent that God is excluded from them. Since the created agent is the “ultimate explanation” and the “final cause” of its evil acts, it must also be the “ultimate explanation” and the “final cause” of its good acts.59 Boyd has not yet developed his thought in this direction. But how, on this foundation, could he construct anything but a Pelagian morality and soteriology wherein God can give external help only to aid us in achieving justification and sanctification. God commands, promises, and threatens—all to persuade us to choose for him and not against him. Finally, however, these efforts remain external to our self-determination.

The influence of Satan has much less explanatory power in dealing with the problem of evil than Boyd would lead us to believe. I do not dispute that the activity of a powerful, evil spirit(s) can help explain the sheer occurrence of the massive evils that Boyd describes. Just as the recent arrival of a number of greedy, violent men in a neighborhood can go a long way toward explaining the recent increase in local bank robberies, the existence of Satan might explain the occurrence of many diabolical evils. But the problem of evil is not a matter of scale. If God cannot work before, in, and through Satan’s activity to turn it toward good without violating his free will, God cannot work before, in, and through our activity to bring it to good without violating our free will. This is the disputed point. Traditional theology argued that God works through free human action to accomplish his will. If God can work in and through human free will,

56 Ibid., 57.
57 Ibid., 90–91.
58 I am not charging Boyd with being a deist. He believes in God’s intervention in providence and miracles. But his view implies one deist tenet: that in creation God gave to creatures the power to act on their own. Apparently, Boyd believes in creation from nothing and the consequent necessity of divine sustenance for creation. But these two are inconsistent with the notion that creatures can act alone, for action too requires God’s sustenance and concurrence.
59 Ibid., 19, 39. According to Boyd, the same power or “possibility” that enables us to say “yes” to God enables us to say “no” (ibid., 54). His first thesis states that “love must be chosen” (ibid., 53). According to Boyd, choosing something means exercising one’s power to determine oneself with respect to that thing (ibid., 57). Apparently, Boyd believes that we created agents have the power to love God or not love God and that this power is indifferent to those alternatives; that is, this power is just as true to its nature to choose one as the other.
he can work through Satan’s actions as well. The strength of the creature has
nothing to do with the issue. Boyd’s observations that God’s demonic foes are
“formidable”\(^60\) and “running the cosmos . . . is no easy matter, even for the
Creator”\(^61\) cannot be taken seriously. Quantifying God’s power makes God finite,
and Boyd does not believe in a finite God. I think he would agree with the
tradition in its contention that it would be no harder for God to lift a galaxy that
to lift a butterfly. For God, it is no more difficult to deal with Satan than to deal
with a two-year-old child. Boyd’s argument from scale is beside the point.

Finally, we may examine Boyd’s argument based on the generally accepted
premise that God cannot do the logically impossible.\(^62\) Boyd argues that God
cannot create a being with the capacity to love but without the capacity to
withhold love because this would be a “logical contradiction.”\(^63\) According to
Boyd, the power to love and the power to withhold love are the same power. God
cannot give us that power and not give it at the same time. If we grant Boyd’s
assumption that the power to love and the power to withhold love are the same
power, he is correct that God cannot give one without the other. Boyd mistakenly
concludes, however, that God’s ‘‘inability’’ to do a logical contradiction
‘‘constrains’’ or limits God’s ability to do his will.\(^64\) Boyd then compounds his
error by using this “constraint” to excuse God for not making free beings that
always do right, which would seem to be the morally superior action. He asserts,
“God has no choice in this matter.”\(^65\)

Boyd’s argument contains a serious error. Logical contradictions do not limit
God. When we say “God cannot do a logical contradiction,” we are not placing
limits on God; we are removing them. To say “God cannot lie, die, or be deceived” is to negate limits and emphasize God’s perfect character. In the same
way, to say “God cannot do a logical contradiction” expresses God’s unlimited
nature. If we were to assert that God could do logical contradictions, we would
imply that God could contradict himself and thus become a liar. For God would

\(^{60}\) Ibid., 93.
\(^{61}\) Ibid., 148.
\(^{62}\) Dealing thoroughly with this argument would require extensive discussion. I have
dealt with it in an unpublished manuscript: “Is (the Logic of) Love the Answer to the
Problem of Evil? Evaluating Gregory Boyd’s Theodicy,” 2002. This principle is accepted
by Roman Catholic, Reformed and Lutheran dogmatics in opposition to the nominalist
theory that God can do anything we can say or imagine. For Reformed views, see Heinrich
Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 99–104. See especially the Reformed dogmatician Francis
Lutheran views, see Heindrich Schmid, D.D., *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical
Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1899), 120, 128.
\(^{63}\) *Satan and the Problem of Evil*, 16, 17, 359.
\(^{64}\) Ibid., 359.
\(^{65}\) Ibid., 342.
be making and not making, affirming and denying the same thing at the same time. To say "God cannot do a logical contradiction" is thus the same as saying "God cannot contradict himself." This statement affirms God's complete perfection and unlimited power.

One can illustrate this principle by analyzing the statement "God cannot create a square-circle." This statement does not limit God because the term "square-circle" refers to nothing at all, a "non-entity." The term "square-circle" might as well be gibberish. Since the 'idea' of a square-circle is nonsense, it would be a fatal mistake to conclude that God is "forced" to settle either for circles or squares because he "cannot" make a square-circle. This way of speaking assumes that square-circles are preferable... but unfortunately impossible. It is meaningless, however, to say that nonsense is preferable to anything. We must assume then that God created squares and circles because he wanted squares and circles, not because creating these was as close as he could get to the (preferable) square-circle! Just so, one cannot conclude that God was "forced" to make human beings that can do good and evil because the concept of a human being that can do good but cannot do evil is a contradiction. Nonsense cannot be declared preferable to anything. In the light of this, we must assume that God chose to create human beings as he did—capable of good and evil—for his own good reasons, not because it was the closest he could get to human beings who cannot do evil.

The "Problem of Evil" Reconsidered

The Revealed Answer Reveals the Problem

Christian theologians should allow God's revelation to determine their formulation of the problem of evil. According to the Christian faith, the answer to evil is clear, decisive, and definitive: in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has dealt with evil once and for all. In the incarnation God joined himself to our nature and, though that nature remained vulnerable to evil, he protected it from sin by grace. On his cross our fallen humanity was put to death, and in his resurrection our humanity was made immortal and invulnerable to sin and evil. We live in hope that we will share in Christ's victory, and even now we participate through the Holy Spirit in the power of "the coming age" (Heb 6:5). Nothing in all creation can separate us from Christ's love for us, and our sufferings in the present time are "not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Rom 8:18). We should not consider another answer.

If Jesus Christ is God's solution, what is the problem? God in Christ has treated human beings as vulnerable, enslaved, and completely impotent to save themselves from evil's power. In Christ, God declares us guilty of being evil's willing partners who endeavor to actualize it in open opposition to God's law.

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66 Turretin, 247.
The Son of God did not become incarnate, die, and triumph over death to solve a theoretical dilemma, to explain why bad things happen to good people, or to answer the riddle of the origin of evil. He came to deal with the practical problem of our vulnerability, impotence, complicity, and self-condemnation with respect to evil. He came armed not with ideas about evil but with the power to defeat evil. The problem of evil is the problem of evil’s power over us.

What is evil? A Christocentric definition of evil will look very different from Boyd’s human-centered one. Evil must be defined as that which God rejected and overcame in Christ. Evil has no right to be and no future before God. Evil, in the words of Karl Barth, is that which “God has not willed and does not will and will not will.”67 Evil will not stand. It will not last. It will come to nothing. In a very real sense evil is nothing, or better, it is nothingness. It exists as a void exists, as falsehood, vanity, and deception exist.68

Evil, therefore, is not whatever cuts against the grain of our desires, feelings, hopes, and imaginings. We are in a no better position than our first parents to decide between good and evil on the basis of appearances. Nothing in Scripture would lead us to believe that our fears, hopes, and desires are reliable guides to the will of God. To avoid this human centered tendency, we must define evil according to its relationship to God’s will—not ours, thus closing off the option of pronouncing God’s definitive judgment on the events of our experience, however terrifying and painful they may be.

Contrary to Boyd, a Christocentric definition will conclude that evil has no origin. If evil is that which “God has not willed and does not will and will not will,” it is not a part of God’s creation. This does not mean that evil is an illusion. Nor should we view evil as an eternal reality that exists alongside God, which God must take into account in some way. It ‘exists’ only as those imaginary universes that God has eternally negated and declared impossible. Evil is, so to speak, the leftover ‘possibilities’ that God did not will and does not will and will not will. Evil has no power against God—none at all.

For human beings, however, the story is different. Evil, even as nothingness, has power over us. As creatures called into being by God from nothing, we have no power to resist the nothingness of disintegration and death. We depend every moment absolutely on God’s creative word. In a strange sense, God’s negation of nothingness gives it a sort of existence and power over humanity. Only because God gives us being can we imagine and dread our non-being and look about for other protectors and saviors. In Romans 7, Paul deals with the strange

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68 From the time of the church fathers until today, most theologians have considered evil as a defect, not as an essence. Basil the Great said, “Do not consider God as the cause for the existence of evil, nor imagine evil as having its own existence. . . . For evil is the absence of the good.”
relationship between sin and God's law. What the law forbids it names. What is
named can be imagined, and what is imagined can be imagined as desirable:

I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have
known what it was to covet if the law had not said, "Do not covet." But sin seizing
the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of
covetous desire. For apart from the law, sin is dead. Once I was alive apart from law,
but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. . . . For sin, seizing
the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the
commandment put me to death. (Rom 7:7b–11, NIV)

Human beings do not create evil when they sin. Evil is always present as the
negation of the good will of God. "I find this law at work: [Paul says] When I
want to do good, evil is right there with me" (Rom 7:21, NIV). In our present
state, being reminds us of non-being and good reminds us of evil. Evil enters our
imaginations as the negation of good. But evil does not appear in our
imaginations as itself, as nothingness. It deceives us into viewing it as possible
and good. Evil thus overpowers us. We then set about trying to create one of
those imaginary universes that God has negated and denied. We cannot succeed.
"Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the Lord
watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain" (Ps 127:1).

As concluded earlier, God chose to create us vulnerable to evil for his own
good reasons, not because it was the closest he could get to beings invulnerable
to evil. God created the world from nothing, freely. He had no obligation to call
the world into being, and he has no obligation to sustain its being. He therefore
has no obligation to protect creatures from evil or to perfect them with his grace
or to elevate them into his eternal life. If God chooses to leave us vulnerable to
evil for a time in his good pleasure, we have no basis for a complaint against our
Maker. We have no need to look for excuses for God; God needs none.

What about Those "Concrete Horrifying Experiences"?

How then are we to face those terrible events we fear and dread? How could
Christians think of any model other than the suffering, death, and resurrection of
Jesus? His life fits the pattern of the innocent sufferer of the OT. Peter, quoting
Isa 53:9, affirms of Jesus, "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his
mouth." In John, Jesus applies the words of the Psalms to himself: "They hated
me without reason." In the garden, he agonized at the cup of sorrow and wrath
he knew he must drink. He stood silent in court before unjust judges and false
witnesses. His friends abandoned him, and his enemies humiliated and mocked
him. As the Romans executed him, he expressed his feeling of abandonment in

69 God at War, 35.
70 See also 2 Cor 5:21 and Heb 4:15.
71 See John 15:25, where he quotes Pss 35:19 and 69:4.
the words of the innocent suffer of Ps 22:1: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

It was not as it appeared, however. The truth came to light in the resurrection of Jesus. Paul says Jesus was "through the spirit of holiness declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead" (Rom 1:4). God was hidden in, but not absent from, this horrible event. In the event of the cross, God was reconciling the world to himself (2 Cor 5:19). The cross was God's act of salvation in a far deeper sense than it was a human act of wickedness. Peter proclaimed in his Pentecost sermon, "This man was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross" (Acts 2:23). Yes, it was the act of wicked, desperate, deceived men attempting to actualize the evil they imagined. They are responsible for their deed. They failed, however, to achieve the evil they imagined, whereas God succeeded in realizing the good he intended—the salvation of the world!

The NT points to Jesus as the model of suffering. We are told to face suffering as he faced it and to interpret our suffering as a participation in his suffering. The following texts illustrate a theme that permeates the NT:

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. (Phil 3:10–11, NIV)

Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory, becoming like him in his death. (Rom 8: 17, NIV)

To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. (1 Pet 2:21, NIV)

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. . . . So then, those who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good. (1 Pet 4:12–19, NIV)

Clearly, in these texts Christian suffering is interpreted in analogy to the suffering of Christ. Those who persecute us bear their guilt, but their culpability does not exclude God’s redemptive action from our suffering. Indeed, we are told to identify with Christ in our suffering. Because of him we can believe that, though God be hidden and we feel abandoned, he is not absent in reality. He works before, in, with, and beyond our suffering to bring about healing, redemption, and glory.

In view of this NT theme, I cannot believe with Boyd that we should view our suffering as godforsaken and absurd. We can and we should rather face our suffering and dying as suffering and dying with Christ. We can find meaning in
our suffering...but not by speculating about what God has in mind in allowing it or extrapolating to show how the world might become a better place because of this suffering. We must also not jump too quickly over the suffering to the resurrection. God was at work in the cross itself, in darkness, in death. We can find meaning even in the cold shadow of God's hiddenness by discovering the suffering Jesus there. As we join him on his cross, he joins us in our agony. Somehow, someway, he lets us suffer with him for the life of the world.

What about Greta, though? Given the understanding of evil I have set out so far, what can we say? Let me preface my final comments with a caution. Speaking of the suffering of others in any way other than with horror strikes most of us as cruel and obscene. How dare we find something positive in another's suffering! We do not feel that way about people who find meaning in their own suffering, however. We admire their courage and nobility. That is something to ponder.

What can we say to make sense of this unspeakable event? We should speak with great reserve—with much more hesitancy than does Boyd. Even though he speaks of Greta's suffering only with horror, he claims to know more about this event than we can know. He pronounces it purely evil and totally absurd. He knows that God did not foreknow this event, that he did not will anything about it, that he had nothing to do with it, and that he tried but failed to stop it.

We are rightly horrified and grieved in our hearts, for great evil—incomprehensible evil—was at work in Greta's humiliation, suffering, and death. Can we, dare we say more? Can we believe that Jesus suffered with Greta and she with him? Can we believe that because Greta participated in the sufferings of Christ, her sufferings ultimately were not absurd, godforsaken, and meaningless? Can we believe that, because she suffered with Jesus, Greta somehow, someway suffered for the life of the world—perhaps even for those who raped and murdered her? Can we believe that before, in, with, and beyond Greta's cross the hidden God was working, working in ways we cannot see anymore than the Good-Friday disciples could anticipate the light of resurrection Sunday?

I admit that I cannot see these things with my eyes. I cannot think them with my mind. I will not therefore attempt to write them with my pen. But the mystery of the cross compels me to believe them in my soul. In thickest darkness, in deepest suffering, in bitterest loneliness... beneath Satan's heel, at the very edge of hell—there, even there, the suffering servant, God's own Son, joins us. In our suffering we hold on to him. For where the Son is, there is the Father.
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