

WHERE PSYCHOLOGY AND THEOLOGY MEET

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*I once saw God, as through a window I peered;
He was just as I suspected, just as I feared.
So selfish and cruel He appeared to be;
So very ugly, so unlike me.
Then I looked deeper, still deeper with time;
T'was a mirror all along, and the image was mine.*

The biblical narrative reveals that God bears human guilt in ways for which the penal substitution perspective of Reformed Theology does not account. He bears our misconceptions of His character as we project our own sin and guilt upon Him. To the degree that fallen human beings find it psychologically impossible to bear the revelation of themselves in the light of God's perfect innocence, He allows them to attribute to Him their own ugly characteristics. We evade facing who we really are by refusing to see Him for who He really is.

The dark enterprise is encapsulated in God's penetrating diagnostic question to Job:

"Would you condemn Me that you may be justified?" (Job 40:8).

Here God puts His finger on our most sensitive nerve. We blame Him as a self-justification maneuver. The guilty conscience is possessed of an impulse to fabricate an image of God that resembles ourselves. We do this in order to evade the shame that His perfect goodness would thrust upon us if we were to allow ourselves to be confronted by it in one quantum leap of consciousness. "If God is like me," we subconsciously reason, "then I need not be any different than I am, and I need not feel guilty for the way I am." Our actions and attitudes are justified by attributing them to God.

"These things you have done, and I kept silent; you thought that I was altogether like you; but I will rebuke you, and set them in order before your eyes" (Psalm 50:21).

At one stage of the relational dynamic between God and fallen humans, there is a necessary silence on God's part, lest we be devastated by the truth of our shame. But

His silence is not indefinite. He will “rebuke” us and set things in order before our eyes, but only as we can endure the truth and be healed rather than destroyed by its revelations. God relates to us with one foot on the throttle and one foot on the break, which is to say, He mingles merciful silence with measured disclosure. He refrains from asserting His righteousness—thus submitting Himself to suffer under our distorted perceptions of Him—to the degree that our fragile egos require His silence. And yet, He will gradually set our sins before us and vindicate His innocence. And this, I suggest, is God’s fundamental MO throughout the biblical narrative.

Theology—our systemized doctrinal picture of God’s character—is the primary realm of our quest to evade our guilt. To the degree that we are able to formulate theological constructs that attribute dominance, arbitrariness, and violence to God, we are afforded emotional release and psychological refuge from the shame of our dominance, arbitrariness, and violence. Said another way, there is a subconscious logic of blame and evasion that undergirds all false doctrine. Part of the sin problem is that we formulate pictures of God that justify our cruelty and injustice toward one another.

The three most darkly “ingenious” doctrines that afford us a “refuge of lies” (Isaiah 28:17) from our culpability for evil are (1) determinism, (2) appeasement, and (3) eternal torment.

DETERMINISM

Determinism is the most prominent and pervasive escape mechanism we humans have devised, showing up in nearly every worldview. It allows us to shift responsibility for evil from ourselves to God under the pretext that all events and outcomes are the sovereign will of God. Quite simply, the most dysfunctionally cathartic location to place the responsibility for evil is upon God.

Why?

Because God presents the greatest potential threat to our psycho edifice of evaded shame.

Determinism is a “sophisticated” form of blame-casting that has God as its target while passing for God-honoring theology. It not only allows us to believe that God is the cause of all the evil for which we cannot bear to embrace responsibility, it also allows us to simultaneously feel that God is being honored for His sovereignty over all things,

including all the evil that bludgeons our world. To inflate (or rather *diminish*) God's omnipotence to take on the form of *omnicontrol*, is to be released from all the inherent culpability that necessarily attends freewill. Deterministic theism doesn't overtly blame God for evil. Rather, it is a subconscious form of blame-casting that pass for theological correctness. The dark psychological secret that hides beneath the surface of determinism is that our guilt is so horrific that we cannot bear to believe that God is not responsible for all outcomes, because if He's not responsible, well, then, we are. So in the face of evil, we chant mantras like,

"God is in control."

"Everything happens for a reason."

"God has a plan."

"God knows best."

"God is trying to teach us something."

"God is sovereign."

"God's will reigns supreme."

Each line is a line of defense against the guilt that lurks just beneath the surface of our consciousness.

We *need* to believe that "God is in control."

Why?

Because we sense that if God is not in control, then it is we who are to blame for the horrors that haunt and hurt our world. Attributing to God the tragedies that torment us and our fellow human beings acts as a psychological buffer, hiding from our view the fact that we are responsible, that all the suffering that crushes the human race is the result of our own violations of God's law of love, that all pain is ultimately traceable to our own wrongdoing. Quite simply, determinism is a theological drug used by religious people for the same purpose street drugs are often used by the non-religious—to evade guilt, to suppress shame, to skirt repentance.

APPEASEMENT THEOLOGY

Appeasement theology also acts as a self-protection mechanism. This is the idea that God's mercy or favor or blessings or acceptance can be earned and His justice placated by means of suffering, bloodshed, or prescribed deeds of penance. There are extreme forms of appeasement theology and there are softer versions, but in whatever form it manifests itself the basic concept is the same: God's character is acted upon and altered by human deeds. And in that, there is a misguided but non-the-less real comfort. Sacrifice required by God—ranging in magnitude from an act of penance to human sacrifice—satisfies God's anger and changes His essential posture from wrath to mercy.

In its extreme form, appeasement theology has shown up throughout history in many pagan religions in which the worshippers feel compelled to offer human sacrifice in an effort to avert the wrath of the gods and earn their favor. In its Christianized form, appeasement theology shows up in doctrinal systems that make any given list of prescribed behaviors the moral currency by which we humans purchase God's favor, blessings, or salvation. Whether short-list legalism or long-list legalism, the core idea is the same: God moves positively toward us if and when we first move toward Him. It is immediately evident that this puts the human agent in the position of getting from God what is desired without taking responsibility for the adverse outcomes of life.

In the Christian version, appeasement theology posits a three-party view of the atonement. In this view, there are three parties on display at the cross event:

1. God, the offended party
2. sinful humanity, the offending party
3. Jesus, the third party sacrifice upon whom God's wrath is vented

By infinite contrast, a two-party view of the atonement paints an entirely different picture. At the cross we see:

1. God, the offended party
2. sinful humanity, the offending party

And the one on the cross is none other than God. In this view, God does not require sacrifice, but rather offers the sacrifice of Himself.

The distinction is crucial. If the person hanging on the cross of Calvary is anyone less than God Himself, then there is no qualitative difference between Christianity and all the other pagan appeasement religions of history.

Either “sin” is intrinsically evil and therefore anti-life and inherently destructive in its very makeup, or sin is the violation of extrinsically imposed requirements for which God threatens to arbitrarily inflict suffering. Extending from these two divergent premises, we either see God at the cross inflicting suffering upon Christ as a third party appeasement sacrifice, or we see God at the cross bearing in Himself the horrific reality of our shame-inducing self-loathing and its resulting blame-casting rage.

If “punishment” in God’s system is arbitrary, as appeasement theology suggests, then there is no intrinsic problem with sin itself. We don’t repent of sin because sin is bad and God is good, but because God will hurt us, even torture us, if we don’t comply with His will. Tragically, the motive of love is completely removed from the realm of possibility, in that fear and love cannot occupy the same emotional space (1 John 4:16-19).

ETERNAL TORMENT

Eternal torment—the belief that God will eternally torture the lost—logically extends from appeasement view of God’s character. It portrays God, His law, and the punishment for breaking His law, as arbitrary.

The doctrine of eternal torment serves as a psychological refuge from the darkest features of our own sinfulness. Eternal torment allows us to believe the worst of God while feigning reverence for Him. As long as we conceive of the punishment for sin as God arbitrarily inflicting suffering, we don't need to travel the harrowing psychological ground toward the realization that it is our sin itself, and the guilt that adheres to it, that imposes the “penalty” upon us.

Bottom line: to the degree that we can make ourselves believe that God is arbitrary in character and, therefore, that reality itself is arbitrary in nature, we are subconsciously released from responsibility for evil and the horrific pain it generates.

WE KNOW IN PART

All false theologies constitute some form of blame-casting. Each one is an attempt to evade our shame, each one an effort to construct a survival mechanism that passes for salvific necessity. In this sense, religion is the best place in the world to hide from God and thus hide from ourselves. By logical extension, Scripture, too, is an advantageous place to hide from God if we can interpret it in such a way as to project our guilt onto God. And yet—wonder of wonders—in His infinite love, God has actually provided Scripture for us in a form that allows us to evade Him while approaching Him. God suffers under our theological lies as a necessary aspect of bearing our sin in order to save us.

If God had given us a sacred text that contained no possibility of casting Him in a false light, that text would equate to God forcing upon us the complete truth about ourselves in one quantum leap of consciousness, and the revelation would crush us. Rather, by God's grace, Scripture is formulated in such a manner that the truth of God's innocence, and the realization of our corresponding guilt, may be known by degrees, in developmental phases, as a kind of gradual healing therapy that allows us to face ourselves as fast as we can bear it, while God graciously bears our false beliefs about Him along the way to the degree that we need Him to.

Jesus got at this relational principle when He said, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now" (John 16:12). It is axiomatic to this statement that whatever those things are that we can't bear, His withholding of them necessitates that He bear them for us by allowing us to believe things about Him that are untrue. He suffers under the weight of the falsehoods we hold about Him because He knows that to rip the dagger immediately from our chest would be fatal.

Later, in this same address, Jesus explained to His disciples the revelatory process He is employing in His dealings with humanity, and He defined the ultimate end to which that process is reaching:

"These things I have spoken to you in figurative language; but the time is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figurative language, but I will tell you plainly about the Father. In that day you will ask in My name, and I do not say to you that I shall pray the Father for you; for the Father Himself loves you" (John 16:25-27).

His point is clear: we can only handle the truth in veiled form, in the form of figurative language. So that's how He approaches us. Oddly enough, or not so oddly after all, the ultimate truth to which all the figurative language points, the truth that we cannot immediately bear in full force, is the fact that "the Father Himself loves [us]." Jesus here explains that He is acting in a mediatory role necessitated by our fallen condition. But He would have us understand that the day is coming in which He will have sufficiently enlightened us so that His mediation will be unnecessary. He remains in relationship with us by allowing the false conceptions of God we harbor in our hearts to block our perception of the Father's love. This explains why, throughout Scripture, God is said to do horrific things for which we are actually responsible. The Bible often says that God did things that He merely allowed us to do. We find it easier to frame reality with Him in absolute control rather than trace the threads of evil to our own actions and culpability.

Along these same lines, in 1 Corinthians 13, Paul unpacks the revelatory nature of love's consciousness-inducing effect. After poetically delineating the flawless beauty of love, he states:

"For we know in part and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away. When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known" (1 Corinthians 13:9-12).

Not only do we know in part, viewing things through the dark veil imposed by our guilt, but even our prophesying, our inspired text, the Bible, is partial. But there is a perfection of unveiled perception coming our way that will transcend our partial prophesying, and that perfection of unveiled perception is present in Christ, reaching its zenith clarity at the cross. Prior to the point at which the revelation of God in Christ penetrates us to our depths, we speak and think theologically as children. Putting away childish pictures of God—childish theologies—requires an unveiled encounter with God's perfect love in Christ. It is by embracing the revelation of the Father in Christ that we become mentally and emotionally situated to know ourselves as we really are, without the interposing veil between, without running to our false theological constructs for refuge from our guilt. Within the healing light of His love, we gradually find the courage and honesty to face ourselves.