# I N  A N T I T H E S I S

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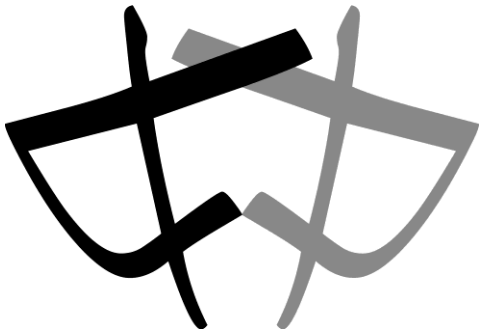

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# INTRODUCTION

## ARTICLES

### The New Atheism, Fast Company, and the Integrity of Doubt

*Stephen Rodgers*

Stephen Rodgers is first and foremost a slave of Jesus Christ. He holds degrees from both UCSD and SDSU. He is an amateur apologist and theologian who serves both his church and family to his utmost ability, including teaching on apologetics in general and Van Til in particular. He strives daily to keep the words of Paul ever in mind: "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost." (1 Timothy 1:15)

*Abstract*

No doubt this journal will have a few articles penned by great minds wishing to push the boundaries of presuppositional theory. Some will be philosophical in character; some might even employ logical notation.

This is not one of those articles.

In the apologetics classroom, a question is often raised that has been asked in many other classes and many other contexts. The question is variously phrased, but the general form goes something like this: *this is all well and good, but when will we ever use this in life?*

A few months ago, an incident occurred that struck me as illustrating a number of Van Til's teachings, particularly the lack of epistemological self-consciousness in non-Christian thought. As Van Til famously observed, the unbeliever can *count*. He simply cannot *account* for why he can *count*. And obvious pun notwithstanding, I hope that this *account* will drive that point home, and provide some grist for the mental mills that we are commanded to steward in this world (2 Corinthians 10:5).

The incident in question centered around the appropriation of an infographic originally conceived by a Lutheran minister and a graduate student, which visually represented 63,779 cross-references within the Bible. The derivative version attempted to use the same visual methodology to represent alleged Biblical *contradictions*.

Almost immediately, hilarity ensues.

This article will explore this incident, set against the backdrop of the recent publications of the so-called "Four Horseman" of the New Atheism. Together, we will see how presuppositional apologetics matches up against atheist dogma and practice, and how even in the creation of something as small as a *picture*, atheism must ultimately presuppose theism, just as Van Til said it would.

## *God's Problem*: Review and Solution

*Alan Rhology and Matthew C. Martellus*

Rhology blogs primarily at www.rhoblogy.blogspot.com.

Martellus blogs at www.vox-veritatis.com

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*Abstract*

In this paper, we provide a review and critique of Bart Ehrman's God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question – Why We Suffer. Contrary to Ehrman's titular assertion, the Bible does indeed provide a coherent answer as to why suffering exists, which we also present and discuss in brief.

## Hollywood, Geneva, and Athens: A Reformed Philosophy of Film

*Nathaniel Claiborne, B.S., Th.M.*

Nate Claiborne holds a certificate from Word of Life Bible Institute, a B.S. in Psychology from Liberty University, and a Th.M. in Philosophy and Systematic Theology from Dallas Theological Seminary. He teaches Anatomy and Biology, records music professionally, and blogs at www.nathanielclaiborne.com. This issue features the first part of a series of articles from Claiborne.

*Abstract*

While there are numerous Christian views on film, few are from a distinctly Reformed perspective, and many consider Calvin's theological aesthetics to be inadequate for constructing

a philosophy of film. The burden of this paper is to demonstrate that Calvin's exegesis of Scripture can provide a solid theological foundation for a philosophy of film from a Reformed Christian perspective. In starting with Calvin, it will be shown the knowledge of God and the knowledge of self are interdependent. Additionally, the knowledge of self and the knowledge of the world exhibit a similar interdependence. John Frame's triperspectivalism synthesizes the insights into an epistemological tool that will then be used to analyze film in a general sense. This type of analysis makes it possible to synthesize divergent Christian views of film, such as ones that emphasize that film reveals God and is a vital part of general revelation, and others that find no place for God in the movie theater and instead point to what film reveals about the surrounding culture and the nature of fallen man. The epistemological framework provided by Frame's triperspectivalism makes it possible to incorporate the insights of both of these philosophies of film and go beyond them to argue that there is more to be seen of both God and man in the movie theater. In the end, it will be shown that not only does Calvin's theological foundation provide a better starting point for a philosophy of film, but it has more power to unlock the nature of film beyond the surface level of mere visual imagery.

## BOOK REVIEWS

### *A Reason for the Hope: Essays in Apologetics* by Massimo Lorenzini

*C.L. Bolt, B.A., M.Div.*

# THE NEW ATHEISM, FAST COMPANY, AND THE INTEGRITY OF DOUBT

*Stephen Rodgers*

**Author's Note:** The events described in this article took place in November 2010, and the original article was written at that time as well. Please read it with that understanding in mind. All Scripture references are taken from the ESV.

## Introduction

Some time after I was saved but before Abraham Kuyper's "all of Christ for all of life" was more than a slogan for me, a dear friend and pastor deposited a number of books by Cornelius Van Til in my lap with the instruction that I should read and comprehend. I'm not sure if this was done out of a loving desire to see to my spiritual welfare, a selfish desire to spare himself from my incessant questions (at least for a while), or both. It was probably both; after all, shepherds of the flock conform themselves to the image of the great Shepherd, and often wind up working in mysterious ways, just as He does.

That being said, the work of Dr. Van Til and his students caused nothing less than a revolution in my mind. And like most revolutions that last (and unlike those where one simply renames the monuments and bridges and life goes on), it has come at considerable cost and grief along the way. This is a good thing; as the old adage goes, *the more you sweat in training, the less you bleed in combat*. And as one who has chosen to spend their precious time reading an apologetics journal, I trust you understand the utter appropriateness of the warfare metaphor.

Since that time I have become a teacher of apologetics at my church, which is not so much an honorific as it is a divine judgment, and further proof that while GK Chesterton was right about a great many things concerning God, he was wrong to assert that we don't see evidence for His sense of humor.[1] To my dismay, I find that I have less time to bother people with my *asking* questions, because the demands of the role dictate that I spend time *answering* theirs. Sometimes I find my own curiosity satisfied in the process; other times it is simply piqued all the more. But in the apologetics classroom, a question is often raised that has been asked in many other classes and many other contexts. The question is variously phrased, but the general form goes something like this: *this is all well and good, but when will we ever use this in life?*

[1] From GK Chesterton's *Orthodoxy*

[2] *We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ,*

[3] *Now I watched when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures say with a voice like thunder, "Come!" And I looked, and behold, a white horse! And its rider had a bow, and a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering, and to conquer.*

 *When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, "Come!" And out came*

A while ago, an incident occurred that struck me as illustrating a number of Van Til's teachings, particularly the lack of epistemological self-consciousness in non-Christian thought. As Van Til famously observed, the unbeliever can *count*. He simply cannot *account* for why he can *count*. And obvious pun notwithstanding, I hope that this *account* will drive that point home, and provide some grist for the mental mills that we are commanded to steward in this world (2 Corinthians 10:5).[2]

## The New Atheism

Today I want to bring your attention to the so-called "New Atheism" that we've all no doubt heard of. Numerous books have been written *by* this group, in support *of* this group, in opposition *to* this group, and *about* this group. The whole movement has become something of a cultural lightning rod in certain circles, which is why I think that it will pretty much burn out in five to ten years. As a whole, Western thought in the 21st century seems to have been afflicted with a rather serious case of ADHD, and the shirt that begins a rational thought and concludes with "…oh look, a chicken!" seems rather prophetic. It's been a fun diversion, but we're starting to lose interest and it's time to move on to the next all-the-rage-ideology in our marketplace of ideas.

That's not what I wanted to talk about however. And all my predictions notwithstanding, I am neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet. However, for those who missed it the first time around, let me give you a rather brief recap of the New Atheism, its notable representatives, and its latest contribution to the discussion among worldviews.

## The Four Horsemen

The so-called "New Atheism" movement is really nothing that new, *per se*. A few years ago, there was a flurry of books published pro-atheism/contra-Christianity, and from this body of literature four voices emerged as the primary spokesmen. Those voices were Richard Dawkins (a biologist), Daniel Dennett (a philosopher), Christopher Hitchens (a writer), and Sam Harris (at the time, a graduate student in neuroscience who has since completed his studies). And ever since they got together for a roundtable discussion of sorts in 2007, they've referred to themselves (and been referred to by the media) as the "Four Horsemen of Atheism." As an amateur apologist of the Van Tillian variety, I can't help but facepalm in noting that even their very name is "borrowed" from the Christian scriptures (Revelation 6:1-8).[3] Truly, as the Preacher said, there is nothing new under the sun (Ecclesiastes 1:9-11).[4]

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[2] *We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ,*

[3] *Now I watched when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures say with a voice like thunder, "Come!" And I looked, and behold, a white horse! And its rider had a bow, and a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering, and to conquer.*

*When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, "Come!" And out came*

I'm not particularly fond of the "Four Horsemen" label. For one, I don't like loaning out Christian books to people who return them with the pages smudged and the corners dog-eared, not to mention the nasty notes written in the margins. Also, with the relatively recent revelation that Christopher Hitchens is in the final stages of esophageal cancer, drawing parallels between him and *Pestilence* seemed rather tasteless.[5] It is the sort of shocking reference that I would actually expect Mister Hitchens to embrace rather than shrink from, but mine would be a most uncomfortable laughter.

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*another horse, bright red. Its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that people should slay one another, and he was given a great sword.*

*When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come!" And I looked, and behold, a black horse! And its rider had a pair of scales in his hand. 6 And I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures, saying, "A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius, and do not harm the oil and wine!"*

*When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come!" 8 And I looked, and behold, a pale horse! And its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him. And they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth.*

[4] *What has been is what will be,*
*and what has been done is what will be done,*
*and there is nothing new under the sun.*
*Is there a thing of which it is said,*
*"See, this is new"?*
*It has been already*
*in the ages before us.*
*There is no remembrance of former things,*
*nor will there be any remembrance*
*of later things yet to be*
*among those who come after.*

[5] At the time this article was initially composed, Mr. Hitchens was ill but had not yet passed away. Since then, he has gone to meet the Maker he denied and the Judge he reviled. While Scripture is quite clear that it is not given to me to know the disposition of his soul, I will gladly admit that I hold out hope that in his final moments he saw the error of his ways and the inconsistency of his position. You see, I always thought there was something charmingly *Van Tillian* in many of Mr. Hitchens' arguments; perhaps most clearly seen in his denial that humanism provides the necessary preconditions for pro-choice ideology…a position that alienated him from many would-be supporters. In much the same way, Van Til argued that on a larger scale, non-Christian worldviews cannot provide the necessary preconditions for logic, morality, and science.

With such a contradiction hanging over his head in a Damoclean fashion, it seemed to me that Mr. Hitchens was ever at risk of being waylaid by the grace he rejected. For while we know from the Apostle John that Heaven rejoices in the just punishment of the guilty, we also know from the Lord Jesus Christ that it rejoices in the salvation of the lost. And while we often associate God's patience with a forestalling of *judgment*, it occurs to me that salvation could also be framed (at least poetically), as a divine unwillingness to forestall *grace*. And as I note elsewhere in this essay, one takeaway from the book of Job is that any attempt to dictate terms to God falls into a category that theologians have historically referred to as "really stupid ideas."

I'm afraid this footnote has become embarrassingly long, so I will endeavor to wrap this up. Given what human wisdom I have at my disposal, I would not say it is *probable* that Mr. Hitchens repented prior to his passing. However, given what divine revelation I have at my disposal, I would say that such an outcome is absolutely *possible*. After all, we have the parable of the Generous Employer and the penitent thief do we not? But as Thomas Brooks once wrote in regards to that thief (not JC Ryle, as many misattribute for some reason): "…That one was saved to teach sinners not to despair, so another was damned to teach them not to presume."

In my experience, between the twin errors of Despair and Presumption we have a valid option left to us: Worship. It is enough.

To my mind, the "Four Horsemen" were more reminiscent of the modern boy band than the Biblical Apocalypse. Richard Dawkins is the front man; he is the catalyst, the rallying point, and the central pillar of the group. Daniel Dennett is the deep one, the writer, the (for lack of a better word), the soulful one (and he sports an epic beard to prove it, of which I am duly jealous). Christopher Hitchens is the bad boy; in a different world I can envision him sporting sleeveless undershirts in combination with a beanie, muscled arms covered in cryptic tattoos, and adorning the posters on teenage girls' walls. And Sam Harris…well…not to be too insulting or dismissive but Sam Harris is *that other guy*. Every band has one, and those of you who play in one know exactly what I mean.

But more on Mister Harris later.

## The Integrity of Doubt in General

The literature of the New Atheism is often said to be bracing in its assertions. The authors do not shy away from making their claims, rather they proclaim them boldly, assert them aggressively, and even take a rather perverse joy in blasphemously sticking their finger in the eye of religion in general and Christianity in particular. And once the initial shock wears off, there is something almost endearing about this; after all, at least they are honest about it right? These are not knives in the dark; this is a gunfight at high noon.

But when one reads further, something is not quite right about their assertions. They muster seemingly-impressive arguments to justify their disbelief. Their objections seem almost righteous in their fury, and their claims that they are simply following the evidence wherever it might lead seem almost noble…but one can't help but feel a bit uneasy. To paraphrase the Bard, something is fishy in Denmark, and while it isn't immediately apparent, it's there…just beneath the surface.

It took me a while to put my finger on it, but I think I've finally sorted it out. While it's easy to get carried away by their claims, there is an undercurrent of disingenuity to the whole affair. And in that understanding I was finally able to understand while after nearly five years of dealing with the fallout that this movement has produced, I can honestly say that while I have been *exhausted*, I have not been *enriched*. In other words, there is a good reason that the whole affair has made me *tired*, but not *smarter*.

You see, the whole movement, when the veneer of glamour, rage, and panache is stripped away, is empty inside. It's a parody of the Trojan Horse: hollow yes, but the soldiers overslept and the arborous equine was delivered without its martial payload.

## The Integrity of Doubt in Dawkins

Take Richard Dawkins for example. He quotes early and often the atheist argument (technically categorized under "multiple-attribute disproof") that if God did exist, He could not *possibly* be both omniscient and omnipotent. After all, a God who knows the future in absolute terms is actually powerless to change it, is He not? For if He knows something about the future, and He knows it in the past, then when He eventually arrives at the time of the event in question, He's stuck. If He *knows* the event, He can't *change* it (and is thus not omnipotent). If He *changes* the event, then He didn't really *know* it (and is thus not omniscient). And so Mister Dawkins crosses his arms, leans back in his chair and feels that in 30 seconds he has dismissed the very question of the existence of God.

Now don't get me wrong; this might be a great argument to use against *me* if I ever were to claim that I was God, with all the divine *properties* and human *limitations* therein. But who EVER suggested that the *Christian* God is like me? Who said that He *knows* things as I do, subject to the vicissitudes of space and time? The God of Christian theism is not subject to the universe He created, caught up in His own creation and along for the ride whether He likes it or not. Rather He stands over and outside it; this is precisely what we mean when we describe God as *transcendent*, when we speak of the *Creator/creature distinction*, and is even hinted at when we invoke His attribute of *Holiness*.

And this is no cheap equivocation on the part of the Christian; we aren't making this up as we go along. In several of my conversations with modern atheists they have been unable to grasp the irony of mocking my "bronze age holy book" with one breath, and then faceplanting into the most basic descriptions of deity it espouses with the next.[6] "That argument," they will sputter, "was advanced by *Plantinga*, and has yet to be *proven*!" No friends. That argument was advanced by *Isaiah* (and I detect echoes of *Moses* in there as well) and has yet to be *refuted*. I realize that being fashionably belligerent is all the rage these days, but please, a modicum of respect for history. We have gone over this ground before: the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 46:8-10),[7] the apostle Paul (Acts 17:24-28;[8] Romans 11:36;[9] Colossians 1:16[10]), the church father

[6] One debate in particular comes to mind, where an unbeliever (who claimed to be an expert in matters of Christian doctrine) commented that I should find it suspicious that the Christian God seems to be described in such anthropomorphic terms. I responded that from the Christian worldview, such comparisons are inevitable, since the Bible declares that it is not God who is *anthropomorphic*, but rather mankind who is inherently *theomorphic*. And when I was accused of blindly asserting that, we wound up back in Genesis 1:26…which, at least in my Bible, is on page 1. Apparently, despite their vaunted study of the Bible, they never made it *that* far. You see my point?

[7] *"Remember this and stand firm,*
*recall it to mind, you transgressors,*
*remember the former things of old;*
*for I am God, and there is no other;*
*I am God, and there is none like me,*
*declaring the end from the beginning*
*and from ancient times things not yet done,*
*saying, 'My counsel shall stand,*
*and I will accomplish all my purpose,'*

[8] *The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made*

Augustine[11] (in his declaration the prior to God creating it, *time was not*) …and these men have been on record for *thousands* of years. There comes a point in debate when your opponent refuses to abandon a pointless line of argument, and we all channel our inner James White[12] and finally resort to praying for patience as we repeat our mantra of "asked and answered" through gritted teeth.

And so, as a Christian theist and amateur philosopher, I am forced to admit that perhaps Mister Dawkins has done some damage to the god of *deism*. If these arguments were assembled, put in good order, and aimed well then we might conclude that they strike the god of *Spinoza*. But the God of *Abraham*, *Isaac*, and *Jacob* watches the missiles sail harmlessly by, and were He *not* omniscient, would no doubt be wondering what the *heck* the archer thought he was aiming at.

## The Integrity of Doubt in Hitchens

This is getting long, so I must move along, and so I skip past Dennett for reasons of *space* rather than *fear* to arrive at Hitchens.[13] Now to be fair to Mister Hitchens, he is rather fun to listen to. Of all the exemplars of the New Atheism he is the cleverest, the most humorous, and far-and-away the most entertaining. But nestled among his *bon mots* and his scorching sentences is a rather alarming vapidity of scholarship. His book *God Is Not Great* betrays a rather obvious dearth of philosophical argumentation, historical accuracy, and logical reasoning. And his written exchange with Douglas Wilson in *Is God Good for the World?* shows either an inability to apprehend the hard questions asked of him (if one is inclined to be charitable), or a refusal to engage subject matter that is uncomfortable given his inability to ground his own beliefs in it (if one is being accusatory).[14]

David B. Hart goes into far greater detail on the matter, and is more fun to read as well, so I would simply recommend to you his essay on the subject.[15] (And in the interest of giving

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*by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for*

> *"'In him we live and move and have our being';*
> *as even some of your own poets have said,*
> *"'For we are indeed his offspring.'*

[9] *For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen*

[10] *For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him*

[11] *Confessions*, Book XI, Chapters XII to XXVIII in general, and Chapter XIII in particular

[12] http://www.aomin.org/aoblog/index.php?itemid=4240&catid=7

[13] If Dennett simply *must* be addressed, then I would suggest that the backlash against attempts to apply Darwinian philosophy to non-biological fields of study presents serious problems for his lines of reasoning. Even secular, anti-Christian academia has largely rejected notions of Darwinian psychology, Darwinian physics, Darwinian astronomy, et. all.

[14] http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/mayweb-only/119-12.0.html

[15] http://www.firstthings.com/article/2010/04/believe-it-or-not

credit where credit is due, was a source of inspiration for this essay as well). But at the end of the day, to my mind at least, Hitchens' objections to Christianity fail to even *find* Christianity in the first place, and then fail to even rise to the level of *argumentation* in any event. So we have arguments that *aren't* against a target that *isn't*…which is politely known as "nonsensical" to those in academia. Others may employ harsher language, but this is, after all, a Christian publication.

## The Integrity of Doubt in Harris and Fast Company

Now you've been quite patient to come this far with me. I would beg your indulgence to go a little further, with the encouraging comment that, (as Henry VIII perhaps said to one of his wives), "I shan't keep you long."

You see, this brings us to Sam Harris and his most recent foray into the fray, armed with nothing less than an *infographic*. For those of you who haven't been blessed or cursed so as to have relatives who forward a veritable bounty of these to you daily (in my family the less scholarly inclined seem fond of GraphJam.com, whereas the more educated have a preference for FlowingData.com), and infographic is simply a visual representation of some data set. If that's still confusing, think of it simply as a "graph on steroids" and that should be a sufficient basis for moving on.

You see, all that to say that late last week Mister Harris emerged onto the scene with a graphic showing the alleged contradictions within the Bible. One writer has even crowed her triumph by crowning her endorsement of the graphic with the proclamation "So to anyone who thinks the Bible's the last word on anything, remember this: It isn't even the last word on itself."[16]

Alright…got it. Flag on the play. A claim against Biblical inerrancy has been lodged, and the ball, as they say, is in our court. But is this really a case of novel argumentation, or once again do we find ourselves *well-lit* and in the presence of something rather *old*?

## Integrity MIA: "Info-"

First there is the question of where these objections came from. Apparently they came from someone named Steve Wells…and apparently Mister Wells has been able to put his copy/paste skills to good use in appropriating (that is the correct term, we do not say "stealing" when it comes to works of literature and art!), the very same questions raised by the Skeptic's Annotated Bible.[17,18] For those unfamiliar with the work, it is pretty much exactly what you would expect given its name: a series of objections and questions to the Bible, often relying on

[16] http://www.fastcompany.com/1701846/infographic-of-the-day-what-the-bible-got-wrong
[17] http://images.fastcompany.com/upload/bibleContra_text_excerpt.jpg
[18] http://www.skepticsannotatedbible.com/contra/by_name.html

either an overly-literal hermeneutic of some kind, a lack of context, or both…in annotated form. And just to muddy the waters further, it typically uses the KJV, but that's another issue for another day.[19]

Now please understand, my point here is not to fault Mister Wells in using a readily available set of data. And to be fair, it doesn't seem to be an exact match since the graphic in question cites 439 alleged contradictions and the latest version of the SAB cites 457. My point is simply to show these are not new objections; they have been *asked* before, they have been *answered* before, and this whole exercise is one in retracing our steps rather than boldly going where no man has gone before. And more to the point, the SAB at least has the intellectual honesty to link to a fair number of Christian explanations and refutations regarding these alleged contradictions. (And I do emphasize "alleged" since a large number of them can be resolved simply by restoring one or both verses to their context, and then reading them there). In fact, the SAB is sometimes used in seminaries to underscore the importance of *hermeneutics*; it's not considered a strong argument raised against *inerrancy* (at least, properly understood).[20]

(I'll skip quickly past the observation that said chart, which vociferously decries textual errors, actually *contains* typographical mistakes of its own and accidentally repeats multiple objections. This is, after all, a rather small ironic fish in a sea of much larger ironic brethren).[21]

Alright, so at the very least this presentation is predicated on specious argumentation and a lack of intellectual charity. After all, as the late Dr. Greg Bahnsen observed, when your opponent presents an argument that can be understood in either a *weak* or *strong* sense, it is incumbent on any scholar wishing to preserve their integrity to deal with the strongest possible form of the argument. Otherwise at *best* you are a coward, and at *worst* you've committed the logical fallacy of arguing against a straw man. Or perhaps that should be the other way around?

But does it end there?

## Integrity MIA: "-graphic"

You see, as I observed earlier in my essay (we're being charitable remember, so let's call it an essay), that I am both a Van Tillian in my apologetic orientation, and an artist/statistician by training who is often besieged by emails from well-meaning family members containing just such infographics. And while those might seem unrelated, they converge precisely at the point of Mister Harris' *allegedly*-novel presentation (alternatively described as "stunning" and "provocative") of *alleged* Bible contradictions. And since my theological betters have already

[19] In the interest of keeping the hate-mail to a minimum, my intention here is not to fault anyone who uses the KJV as their translation of choice. I merely point out the obvious that sometimes it is used by unbelievers precisely *because* it employs language that has fallen out of common parlance over the years.

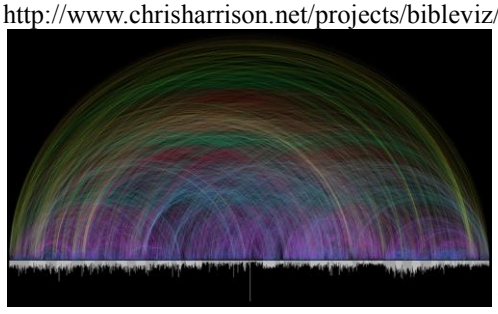
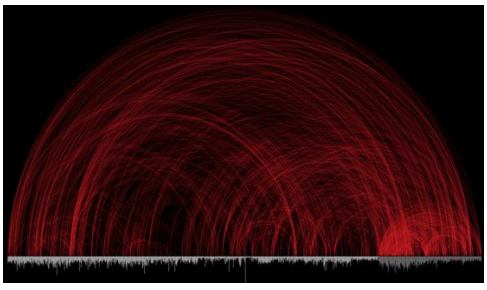
[20] http://www.spurgeon.org/~phil/creeds/chicago.htm

[21] For those who want specifics, #7 and #9 are copies of one another, as are #263 and #264. There may be others, but those are the two that immediately presented themselves.

addressed the issue of the contradictions well enough (see contributions from Justin Holcomb,[22] Douglas Wilson,[23] and Matt Perman[24]…which interestingly enough pretty much covers a decent range of my theological library as well), there's not much left to say on that subject. That leaves very little for me to deal with, except the "graphic" part of the infographic. But I have a BA in Visual Arts…sort of[25]…and so with sketchbook in hand and beret perched at a *rakish* angle, into the fray I go.

Now, the design of the graphic itself is attributed to Andy Marlow. But it seems rather familiar to me…probably since I wrote about one suspiciously similar back in January in my church newsletter. You see, this has been done *before*. It has been done *better*, and ironically enough, it has been done by *Christians*.[26] (And ironically enough, the original artwork was intended to show *continuity* within the Bible; seriously, I could not make up this much irony if I *tried*). And so, interestingly enough, we have a very real example of atheism once again propping itself up on *borrowed* capital. However, lest I mistake charity for lying, it is worth noting in passing that when the capital is borrowed without the original artist's knowledge, we call that "stealing," and when the capital is abstract and epistemic or artistic in nature we call that "plagiarism."

Now to be fair, do I have any real evidence that Mister Marlow simply stole Mister Harrison's work, made a few minor changes, and is now passing it off as his own? Well, again in good presuppositional fashion, that is going to depend entirely on what sort of propositions you accept as "evidence" in the first place. If you are asking if I have video evidence of Mister Marlow talking aloud to himself about how the inspiration of his work came from elsewhere…then no. If you are wondering if perhaps certain emails have come into my possession wherein he admits to having prior knowledge of the original piece, and elects to use an almost-identical style without attribution…then no. However, I do have two perfectly good eyes, and when point out that this is Mister Harrison's work from at least ten months ago, and this is Mister Marlow's work from last week…well, decide for yourself.[27] To my "trained" eye,

[22] http://theresurgence.com/2010/11/12/why-fast-company-sam-harris-need-to-do-their-homework
[23] http://www.dougwils.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=8173:a-little-something-called-context&catid=93:letter-to-mr-harris
[24] http://www.whatsbestnext.com/2010/11/a-few-thoughts-on-the-fast-company-article-what-the-bible-got-wrong/
[25] Technically a BA in "Interdisciplinary Computing and the Arts" for those who care about such things. There's an MBA in there somewhere as well, but not surprisingly, there weren't a lot of art history classes in that program of study.
[26] http://www.chrisharrison.net/projects/bibleviz/index.html
[27]  vs. 

the appropriation seems completely obvious. And I suspect that even if you spent your college years on the science side of campus rather than the humanities side, you'll agree.

## Integrity and Lack Thereof

Part of the oft-referenced title of this piece is "the integrity of doubt." I originally latched onto that idea in confronting the claims of the New Atheists that their doubt and disbelief stemmed honestly from their examination of the evidence available to them. Some of you might realize that as a Van Tillian I already reject that notion on Biblical grounds, while conceding the possibility that perhaps, in their self-deception, they believe it to be true. As I showed several times, this "doubt" is not really doubt at all; after all, what they *disbelieve* is not what the Christian *believes*. They have not refuted Christian theism so much as they have simply failed to understand it.

In his letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul writes "*Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?*" (1 Corinthians 1:20) Simply put, it is an open challenge: if you want to go head to head with God, then show up and do so. Step into the ring. And like Job, (I'm paraphrasing here), you will find that in the end, *your arms are simply too short to box with God*.

The New Atheists act like prizefighters. They strut around, chests puffed out, flexing impressively. Oh sure, they talk a good game. Initially they sound dangerous. On paper, their record seems good. And we start to wonder if when they finally get into the ring, if perhaps God might be in a bit of trouble after all.

But they never get in the ring. They run *around* the ring. They shout insults *into* the ring. Occasionally they may even climb into some *other* ring and administer a beatdown to some lesser conception of deity. But they never actually fight the Christian God; He is *evaded*, He is *made fun of*, but He is never actually *engaged*.

But this comes to a head of sorts in this latest offering from Harris. All manner of problems are both inherited and invented here. You see, it is one thing to exhibit shoddy scholarship in selecting your data set. And into that general realm of intellectual feebleness I would include things like broadly construing words like "contradiction," and ignoring elements of the case that undermine your argument like *context*, *metaphor*, and *genre*.[28] But it is something else entirely to blatantly rip off another's work without even passing attribution. As someone instilled with a particular form of academic ethos, I am outraged; in respectable scholarly company, this is simply not done. And as an artist, I can't help but notice that it is also utterly unnecessary. After all, atheism in general and the New Atheists in particular have a history of using traditionally Christian forms of argument in a satirical and subversive way. I

[28] I have a minor in Literature as well, but I suspect that statement is just as obvious to those who don't.

may not always enjoy or appreciate their doing so, but when done so honestly, it is a valid form of expression. However, this is not really *satire*; this is *lying*.

Or if you prefer, taking the late Dr. Greg Bahnsen's work on self-deception into account, and quoting from his debate with Gordon Stein, it "is not only over-simplified and misleading, it is simply mistaken."

And all this brought to us by the so-called "Horseman" whose most notable academic work is in the area of attempting to establish a scientific basis for grounding *morality* and *ethics*.[29] I trust the irony is not lost on you.

It certainly wouldn't have been lost on Van Til.

**Update:** The Fast Company page now contains a line stating "Inspiration: Chris Harrison."[30] It's about the bare minimum that could be done in terms of attribution, but at the very least, they have now done that.[31]

[29] And who recently was profoundly drubbed for trying to do so in a debate with William Lane Craig. While Dr. Craig is no presuppositionalist, he clearly exposed the difficulty (if not impossibility) of Sam Harris' position.

[30] http://www.project-reason.org/gallery3/image/105/

[31] And just to avoid any unnecessary controversy, the attribution has remained there for the past several months, since the original formulation of this article was penned some time ago. My ultimate point is not to *tsk-tsk* at what could be considered uncredited or insufficiently credited attribution, but rather to illustrate how the futility of non-Christian thought is exposed throughout the entire incident…just as Van Til taught it is evident throughout all of life.

# *GOD'S PROBLEM*: REVIEW AND SOLUTION

*Alan Rhology and Matthew C. Martellus*

## Review

"Where is God now?" inquires Dr. Bart Ehrman in his 2008 book, *God's Problem*.[1] The subtitle of the book is what really commands attention, as it continues: "*How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question - Why We Suffer*". The further one delves into the book, however, the more one will discover that this is substantially inaccurate. A title that would more accurately reflect the book's content and thought would be: "*My Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Why We Suffer to My Personal Satisfaction*". Indeed, the very chapter layout belies the thesis of the book, where Chapter 2 is entitled, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God: The Classical View of Suffering," Ch. 4, "The Consequences of Sin," Ch. 5, "The Mystery of the Greater Good: Redemptive Suffering," Ch. 6, "Does Suffering Make Sense? The Books of Job and Ecclesiastes," and finally Chapters 7-8, where Ehrman discusses apocalyptic views. So in reality, Ehrman has conceded the imprecision and untruth of his thesis statement before he has begun. As a result, his book ends up primarily as an exercise in egotistic complaints against the biblical view of God, unsupported claims to the moral high ground and a capacity to judge set up by poor exegesis, and false dilemmas set up against the God of the Bible.

Ehrman begins by describing how, despite a thorough theological education, including a degree from Moody Bible Institute, graduate work under the great Bible scholar Dr. Bruce Metzger, and a stint as a pastor in a Baptist church, the question of theodicy became one of the two principal pressures that drove him to apostasy - that is, a rejection of the Christian faith he had once professed. In laying out his initial case, he anticipates the aforementioned irony - that the Bible does indeed provide various answers to the problem of evil and suffering, but opines that they are mutually exclusive and contradictory. This is a grave claim, and one would expect to find a great deal of serious biblical exegesis to substantiate it, especially given Ehrman's tremendous qualifications as a Biblical scholar. Unfortunately, the book contains a good deal more bad exegesis than good. An example of this comes in the chapter treating the biblical book of Job. Ehrman says:

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> The narrator then moves to a heavenly scene in which the 'heavenly beings' (literally; the sons of God) appear before the Lord, 'the Satan' among them. It is important to recognize that the *[sic]* Satan here is not the fallen angel who

[1]Bart D. Ehrman, *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question - Why We Suffer* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2008).

> has been booted from heaven, the cosmic enemy of God. Here he is portrayed as one of God's divine council members...But he is not an adversary to God: he is one of the heavenly beings who report to God.[2]

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Admittedly, Ehrman's formation and degrees are in **New** Testament, but it is strange to see someone ignore the status of Satan in the rest of the Old Testament, as accuser (Zech 3), deceiver (Gen 3), and enemy of the covenant people of God (1 Chron 21). For that matter, Ehrman seems to overlook the fact that Satan in Job 1 and 2 in effect asks permission, twice, to destroy Job's life and thus entice him to curse God, a terrible sin. Then again, Ehrman does little better in New Testament concepts, such as: "But the view that Jesus was himself God is not a view shared by...the Gospels of Matthew, Mark or Luke."[3] Ehrman has apparently forgotten about Luke 18:19, Mark 2:7, or Matthew 28:20, among numerous other examples.[4]

One must credit Ehrman with his correct identification of numerous of the biblical themes and responses to the problem of evil and suffering. The disagreement arises when he asserts that these explanations are mutually contradictory, but unfortunately, the book barely even attempts to prove this allegation. Apparently, they just are, and that is that. But the reader must pose a very important question, and the following illustration will make use of one of Ehrman's favorite examples of "gratuitous suffering" - that of a large-scale natural disaster, such as the tsunami of December 2004. Let us take the biblical explanations in order of their appearance in Ehrman's table of contents, and ask whether each explanation could be **part** of a greater, coherent whole?

- **People suffer because God is punishing sin.** Because Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, everyone who has since lived is under the condemnation that leads to death, born as a sinner and a rebel enemy of God (cf Romans 5:7-8 and James 4:4). As the Judge of sinners (John 3:17-18), God claims this: "I am He, And there is no god besides Me; it is I who put to death and give life. I have wounded and it is I who heal, And there is no one who can deliver from My hand" (Deut. 32:39). The book of Revelation is clear that one day God will judge all evil with finality and redeem the repentant and indeed the entire Earth by recreating it (such that there will no longer be destructive natural disasters - Rev. 21:1,4, cf. Is. 65:17), but that time is not yet come. In the meantime, God claims for Himself as the holy lawgiver and judge. Finally, let us consider that the law and evil exist to

[2]Ibid., 165.
[3]Ibid., 273.
[4]For an in-depth treatment of the deity of Christ, including His self-testimony to His own deity, see Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 212-312; for Jesus' self-testimony in the synoptics (as well as in the Gospel of John) specifically, see pp. 214-237. A more accessible, though weaker treatment is given by Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Chicago: IL, Moody Press, 1999), 284-286.

drive one to guilt over his sin and press him toward the Savior, especially when one sees the punishment meted out more obviously against someone else.

- **People suffer as a result of sin done against them by others.** Adam and Eve were expelled from paradise, and in bringing forth children, bring them forth in sin with a sinful nature (cf. Rom. 5:12), and eventually suffer physical death. Though each human ratifies Adam's choice with his or her own, it all started with Adam, and that includes natural disasters.

- **The greater good and redemptive suffering.** Obvious examples of heroic self-sacrifice and self-endangerment to rescue others stricken by a disaster would not be possible without the presence, first, of the disaster. Charitable outpourings of aid and workers further illustrate the redemptive power that God exercises in the world.

- **Mystery, as in Job and Ecclesiastes.** Who can doubt that many answers to the problem of evil are mysterious? God does not always show His hand, and a poorly-argued book from a 21st-century religious studies professor does not trump God's authority. And of course, if God's reasons for allowing a natural disaster are mysterious and unknown, how could Ehrman know that they contradict the others?

Are any of these reasons mutually contradictory? Let the reader judge whether this contention, which is the main thrust of Ehrman's book, holds any merit.

The unsupported assertions and judgment calls that Ehrman makes would more nearly approach credibility if he had at least made an effort to argue for an objective standard by which a human can know right from wrong and good from evil. As it stands, however, the pattern for most of the chapters is to give his take on the biblical teachings in question and then to say "are we really to think this way about God?" or "this is surely not the answer." As an example, let us continue with Ehrman's treatment of Job:

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> But I refuse to believe that God murdered (or allowed the *[sic]* Satan to murder) Job's ten children in order to see whether Job would curse him. If someone killed *your* ten children, wouldn't you have the right to curse him?

> And to think that God could make it up to Job by giving him an additional ten children is obscene.[5]

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In response to this kind of argument, the biblical Christian might simply pose a series of simple questions:

1. Quoting God: "Will a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? Let him who reproves God answer it... Now gird up your loins like a man; I will ask you, and you instruct Me. Will you really annul My judgment? Will you condemn Me that you may be justified? " (Job 40:2, 7-8). Why would anyone take seriously the attempt by a mere man to accuse God of wrongdoing? Will a creature that cannot even exist on its own argue with the One who gives it existence (Job 40:14)?

2. On what basis do you assert that God's putting a sinful person to death is "murder"?

3. Who is claiming that God's blessing Job with a further ten children is meant to "make it up to him"?

4. What, if any, is the nature of the distinction between Creator and creature?

5. If God does not exist, how does one define or identify "the right to do" anything?

6. Just how do you know what is obscene, that is, morally reprehensible, and what is not?

Questions 1 and 4-6 in particular are fundamental; none of these are meant to dismiss the critic of the God of the Bible, but rather to actually begin the conversation and discuss issues of real substance. Unfortunately, Ehrman never ventures past this type of surface-level, emotional (one might even say, visceral) critique. He does not like it; ergo, it is wrong.

Perhaps it is best that the final chapter of the book fits consistently (that is, it is consistent in its downward spiral into near irrelevancy) with what preceded it, as Ehrman prepares to grapple with the question of "*Why We Suffer*" and give his readers the answer that has eluded them, despite the Bible's best attempts to answer the question. This answer has no doubt satisfied Ehrman after his rejection of the Bible, which was caused in large part by his dissatisfaction with the Bible's own answers to this question. Given that he "...can't believe in (the biblical) God anymore, because from what I now see around the world, he doesn't intervene,"[6] what is this

[5]*God's Problem*, 275. Emphasis original.
[6]Ibid., 16.

overarching, satisfying answer to the problem of suffering? Live better. It is almost insultingly childish in its naïveté:

> To live life to the fullest means, among other things, doing more. There does not have to be world poverty. The wealth could be redistributed...[7]
>
> People do not *have* to be bigots, or racists...I think we should work hard to make the world - the one we live in - the most pleasing place it can be for *ourselves*.[8]

Unfortunately for the reader, significant biblical explanations of suffering are left waiting until this final chapter. Among such explanations are the idea that God chastens those He loves,[9] and that God has indeed entered our sorrow by taking on human flesh and dying on the Cross. These explanations only receive blurbs the length of a few sentences. While the biblical Christian can look suffering people in the eye, tell them that their suffering has real, eternal meaning, and tell them of a loving Savior Who left Heaven behind to die a horrible death to save wretched, suffering enemies of God and adopt them as His own, what possible fulfillment does Ehrman's alternative offer?

## A Biblical Solution to the Problem of Suffering

As detailed in the previous section, Ehrman surveys a number of Biblical explanations for suffering. He finds them all wanting, and vacuously claims that they are mutually contradictory. Despite Ehrman's disapprobation, the Biblical explanations he studies do in fact explain the existence of various kinds of suffering in various contexts. However, there is a higher-level explanation that accounts for all suffering, and provides a solution to the "problem of suffering" that Ehrman presents in the first chapter. Ehrman claims[10] that the following three propositions are logically incompatible:

- God is all-powerful.
- God is all-loving.
- There is suffering.

[7]Ibid., 276.
[8]Ibid., 277. Emphasis original.
[9]Though it is mentioned, the purpose of this fatherly discipline is left unstated. Scripture teaches that God chastens us for our good (Heb. 12:5-6,10), and that the ultimate good for which all of God's fatherly discipline has been designed is our holiness in conformity to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:28-29, Heb. 12:10).
[10]Ibid., 8.

It is often claimed that the solution to the seeming incompatibility of these propositions is found in asserting the libertarian free will of man. Ehrman critiques this commonly-used defense,[11] and rightly so.[12] However, there is an explanation for how these propositions are not incompatible that Ehrman does not address. Such an explanation begins by asserting the absolute sovereignty of God, and the doctrine of the two wills of God.[13]

## *The Two Wills of God*

The doctrine of the two wills of God states that God has a will of precept, and a will of decree. The will of precept concerns God's approval or disapproval of certain things, including what He enjoins as moral duties and prohibitions - things that men ought and ought not to do. This follows from Scriptures that state that certain individuals do not do God's will.[14] On the other hand, the will of decree pertains to those things that God has decided from eternity past to bring about.[15] Thus, while the will of precept can be violated, the will of decree cannot.

The solution to the problem of suffering detailed here follows from a simple principle: that there is a difference between a whole and its parts. The God of Scripture is not schizophrenic or fickle – He is the unchangeable I AM, and is not subject to the vicissitudes of the fallen human mind.[16] However, what God wills concerning a complex entity need not be what He wills concerning its components. To assert otherwise is to commit the fallacy of division,[17] since what is true of the whole is not necessarily true of the parts. It is consistent with Scripture, as well as historic theology, to assert that God's decree is a unified whole.[18] That is, that in eternity past, God conceived of the whole of creation and its temporal history (together a *world*[19]) as one complex entity. That is to say that God did not proceed through a series of steps in deciding what to decree, but that His decree is an eternally complete whole to Him. Thus, what God wills concerning the content of His decree, as a whole, is not necessarily what He wills concerning the individual things and events that are a part of that whole.

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[11]Ibid., 12-13.

[12]Traditional Evangelical approaches to theodicy attempt to solve the problem by asserting the libertarian free will of man. Such approaches are logically inconsistent and Biblically inadequate, as demonstrated by Gordon H. Clark, *God and Evil: The Problem Solved* (Unicoi, TN: The Trinity Foundation, 2004).

[13]An accessible Scriptural defense of this doctrine is given by John Piper, *The Pleasures of God* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Books, 2000), 313-340. A more technical treatment is given by Francis Turretin, *The Institutes of Eclectic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, James T. Denison, Jr., ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1992), 220-231.

[14]Matt. 7:21, 12:48-50, 1 Jn. 2:7.

[15]Is. 53:10, Ac. 2:22-23, 4:27-28.

[16]1 Sam. 15:29, Mal. 3:6, Heb. 1:12, 13:8.

[17]Irving M. Copi and Carl Cohen, *Introduction to Logic* (10th Ed.), (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1998), 197.

[18]Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1958), 102

[19]The term *world*, in this context, denotes the entirety of what God created (or could have created), extended in time. An appropriate neologism for this concept is a *cosmos-history*.

These concepts can be stated more precisely. The two senses of God's will (decree and precept) can be stated as follows for the purposes of this analysis:

- **WD** (Will of Decree): That sense in which God decides to bring something to pass.

- **WP** (Will of Precept): That sense in which God approves of, or disapproves of, or feels a certain way towards a thing.

Scripturally, God **WD**-wills that of which He sufficiently **WP**-approves.[20] Since God's decree is a unified whole, God **WP**-wills this world in such a sufficiently-approbatory manner that He decided to bring it to pass. However, just because God approves of this world as a whole, does not mean that He approves of the individual things and events that comprise it. For instance, God hates sin,[21] yet He decrees that sins be committed.[22] How is this possible? The solution is that God **WP**-disapproves of the sins themselves, and the acts in which they are committed, yet when the entirety of this world is taken into account, He **WP**-approves of the whole.[23] And since He sufficiently **WP**-approves of the whole, God **WD**-wills it to come to pass. Thus, if one takes the two wills of God into account, a solution to the problem of suffering arises.

## *Suffering is Not a (Logical) Problem*

Ehrman's three supposedly-incompatible propositions can be restructured into an argument that explains how suffering is not a problem for a theology that accepts the above formulation of the two wills doctrine. The argument is as follows:

1. God is all-powerful.

2. Thus, God brings to pass all that He **WD**-wills.

3. God is all-loving.

4. Thus, God **WP**-wills that acts and instances of suffering, considered in and of themselves, do not occur.[24]

5. God's glory is uppermost in His own affections.[25]

[20]Ps. 115:3. Also, Ps. 135:6, and Dan. 4:35.
[21]E.g., Pr. 6:16-19.
[22]Since He decrees all that comes to pass (cf. 1689 LBCF, III.1).
[23]For a similar line of thought, see John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 1996), 39-40.
[24]God's omnibenevolence is seen in that He only **WP**-wills good to occur, in and of itself. For God to be malevolent, He would have to **WP**-will for suffering to occur, in and of itself. But God only wills for suffering to occur as a result of sin. Thus, God is not malevolent, since He does not **WP**-will suffering, in and of itself.
[25]That is, God regards His glory as of first importance above all other things. For a logical and Scriptural exposition

6. God determines that this world, as a whole, glorifies Himself to such a degree that He **WP**-wills that it occur, to such a degree that He **WD**-wills that it occur.

7. Thus, this world is actual (from (2) and (6)).

8. This world, as decreed, contains suffering.

9. Thus, suffering exists.

The above argument demonstrates how the existence of suffering is not only consistent with the existence of the God of the Bible, who is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent, but that the existence of suffering follows from His existence and attributes.

### *How then is God Glorified?*

One might ask, however, why God is more glorified in creating a world in which there is suffering than in creating a world in which there is not. The first answer to such a question is that God is not obligated to explain Himself. While God does reveal some things to us for our benefit and edification, He has seen fit to not reveal a number of things that we would like to know.[26] As God's dialog with Job[27] testifies, we cannot justifiably put God in the dock, and presume that He is in the wrong until He explains Himself to us. Even if God had not explained how He is glorified by suffering, such a state of affairs would provide no justification for questioning His goodness. Nevertheless, He has chosen to reveal some principles that explain why He has chosen to decree a world in which suffering exists.[28]

God is glorified through the expression of His attributes.[29] He is also glorified through the joy that His people receive by beholding His attributes expressed.[30] Moreover, the measure of God's commitment to the joy of His people is arguably the measure of His commitment to His glory.[31] It is easily conceivable that God is glorified in creating a wholly-good world,[32] in healing the sick,[33] and in redeeming the lost.[34] Such things display God's genius, His design, His compassion, His mercy, His grace, and His goodness, and it is easy to take joy in such things. But what about cursing the world and its inhabitants to decay and suffering because of sin? [35]

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of this vital doctrine, see John Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1998).
[26]Dt. 29:29.
[27]chs. 38-42.
[28]That God has in fact decreed such a world is seen in Is. 45:7, Am. 3:6, Lam. 3:37-38, and Ex. 4:11.
[29]Christopher Morgan and Robert Peterson, eds. *The Glory of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 153-187.
[30]Piper, *Desiring God*, 45-50.
[31]Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory*, 33-34.
[32]Gen. 1:31, 1 Tim. 4:4.
[33]Examples in Scripture abound, such as Matt. 8:14-17, Jn. 4:43-54, etc.
[34]Matt. 1:21, Mk. 10:45, 1 Ti 1:15, etc.
[35]Gen. 3:17-19, Rom. 8:20-21.

What about the eternal condemnation of unrepentant sinners? [36] How is God glorified in a world that contains such things?

It should first be noted that if God is indeed glorified in the expression of His attributes and His people's recognition of them, then He is glorified by that which expresses His attributes all the more clearly. Sin and suffering are a stark picture of what ought not to be, and as such, they provide a contrast that makes it clearer what ought to be. The existence of things at variance with God's attributes makes the recognition of His attributes all the more clear. Thus, sin and suffering help us to see God's holiness and goodness more clearly, by providing a contrast, much the same way that a white object is more clearly seen when contrasted against a dark background.

Furthermore, God is in the business of overcoming evil with good.[37] The whole history of redemption testifies to the fact that God is working to bring good out of the evil and suffering that mankind has brought upon itself. The end result of this process is a New Heaven and New Earth in which goodness and righteousness will reign, and in which sin and suffering will never again be found.[38] Thus, God is glorified in this world, with its sin and suffering, because He will overcome that sin and suffering, to His glory. If there were no sin and suffering, then God's goodness in healing and redemption would never be displayed. But the existence of sin and suffering serve a good purpose in providing a context in which God can be glorified through the expression of His attributes.

But what about unrepentant sinners? Why not ensure that they are saved, and avoid an eternity of conscious torment in Hell? Wouldn't this glorify God more than their condemnation? While it easy to think this way, the Bible provides a different answer - specifically, that God is glorified in displaying His wrath and power against those sinners who refuse to repent, and that in so doing He shows the riches of His mercy and grace to those who are objects of His mercy.[39] The display of God's wrath provides a backdrop from which God's mercy can be properly appreciated by its recipients.[40] This can be further seen in the fact that God's wrath and justice are not poured out upon His vessels of mercy, and thus they can never have any personal experience of such attributes being expressed. The backdrop of such attributes being eternally expressed against a subset of deserving humanity[41] provides a background for the recipients of

[36]Lk. 13:3, Jn. 3:18,36, Rev. 20:15, 21:8.

[37]Jn. 9 is a good example of this (see v. 3). Also cf. Rom. 12:21 - given that God is about this work Himself, it is no surprise that He commands us to be about it as well.

[38]Is. 25:6-8, Rev. 21:1-5.

[39]Rom. 9:22-23. These verses imply that God desired to show His wrath to the unrepentant, for the purpose of making His glory known to His vessels of mercy. For a rigorous exposition of this passage, see John Piper, *The Justification of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1993), 204-216.

[40]Piper, *The Justification of God*, 214-216.

[41]The idea is that it is not enough merely for Christ to suffer for all men, but that some deserving, unrepentant sinners should suffer for their own sins. See Oliver Crisp, "Is universalism a problem for particularists? " *Scottish Journal of Theology* 63 (2010): 1-23.

God's mercy, whereby they can more clearly see God's attributes expressed, and thus more fully glorify God in beholding such an expression. Thus, the unrepentant sinner also serves to glorify God in this world containing sin and suffering.

### *So what is the Christian to Do?*

Given that an explanation for the existence of suffering can indeed be provided, how should the Christian then respond to personal suffering? How should the Christian respond when tragedy strikes home? Every person is unique and each situation different, so, it is hard, if not impossible, to put forth a set of hard-and-fast rules for how to cope in various trials and hardships. Nonetheless, some general principles applicable to all trials and hardships can be inferred from Scripture.

First, we should remember that nothing happens outside of God's sovereign decree. If hardship befalls us, it is because it was God's will (of decree) for it to do so. However, we should also remember that God is working all things to our ultimate good, in conforming us to Christ's image.[42] In doing so, God is glorifying Himself in us, and making us holy. This is a blessing that we should not be quick to discount. We should also remember that conformation to Christ's image requires God's fatherly discipline and correction. We are corrupted by sin to the core, and it often takes painful circumstances to bring us to see our sin for what it is and motivate us to put it to death.[43] Such discipline is painful at present,[44] but its end result is further conformity to the image of Christ.

Lastly, though, we should remember that our joy in God is found in His glory, and that the more we glorify Him, even through suffering, the greater our cup of joy in Him will be. Deuteronomy 29:29 states that "the secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law." Even if we can't see how everything works together in the details (the hidden things), we can praise God in faith, knowing that He is working all things, even our own personal pains and calamities, to His glory (for this much has been revealed), and if it is to His glory, then it will be to our greater joy in all eternity. For inasmuch as God's glory is the source of our joy, then anything that reveals His glory to a greater degree will bring us a proportionally greater degree of joy due to seeing His glory revealed in it. Thus, if our blessings glorify God, we should praise Him for His blessings. And if our sufferings are given to glorify God, then we should be faithful and praise Him for what He has brought, even though it be painful. We can praise Him, because we know that we will see His glory all the brighter on the other side of this life, for bringing His people through seasons of both blessing and hardship. Thus, because we know that God's glory is the source of our eternal joy, and that God is glorified in our suffering, we can wholeheartedly

[42]Rom. 8:28-29. God works all things to the good of His people, but as v. 29 suggests, that ultimate good is their conformation to the image of Christ.
[43]We are commanded to mortify sin (cf. Rom. 8:13, Col. 3:5), but mortification is a painful process.
[44]Heb. 12:5-11.

say with Job: "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord...Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil? " (Job. 1:21, 2:10).

# HOLLYWOOD, GENEVA, AND ATHENS - A REFORMED PHILOSOPHY OF FILM

*Nathaniel Claiborne*

## Introduction: Eyes to See

Since the inception of the film industry over a century ago, thoughtful Christians have wrestled with how to think about Hollywood. In the beginning, it was churches who were concerned about the social impact as well as the pedagogical function that film provided.[1] In response, film criticism was conceived.[2] In the many intervening years since the advent of film criticism, there have been many approaches advanced by Christians and non-Christians alike.[3] Given the prominence that film has in the contemporary culture, being conversant with it is a necessary skill for the Christian theologian. According to Craig Detweiler, "The next generation of pastors, teachers, and therapists must not only learn the language of film but also develop the art of interpretation – seeing and hearing what's happening on big (and small) screens."[4] In order to do this effectively, one must be provided with a matrix for thinking theologically about film. A matrix created by the work of a capable theologian will allow pastors, teachers, and therapists to put film to use in their ministry contexts.

### *Framing the Shot*

Thinking theologically about film clarifies what film in general actually looks like from a distinctively Christian perspective. This entails articulating a philosophy of film. As David Clark explains, "A 'philosophy of' analyzes the concepts, goals, and methods of that activity in hopes of achieving more coherent and effective practice."[5] The purpose of this paper is to articulate a philosophy of film from three interdependent perspectives. First, film can be studied from the perspective of what is reveals about God. Second, film can be studied from the perspective of what it reveals about the culture it inhabits. Third, film can be studied from the perspective of what it reveals about man himself. In this way, film is seen as a conduit of revelation that the theologian needs to account for in assimilating knowledge of God, culture, and man. The focus

[1] Robert K Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*, ed. William Dyrness and Robert K Johnston, 2nd ed., Engaging Culture (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 186.

[2] On churches inventing film criticism, see Richard A. Blake, *Screening America: Reflections on Five Classic Films* (New York: Paulist, 1991, 4 quoted in Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*. See his survey of Hollywood and the church Ibid., 41-53.

[3] A standard approach is James Monaco, *How To Read A Film: Movies, Media, and Beyond*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). For a survey of various Christian approaches, see the categories in Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*, 55-85.

[4] Craig Detweiler, *Into the Dark: Seeing the Sacred in the Top Films of the 21st Century* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 29.

[5] David K. Clark, *To Know and Love God: Method for Theology*, Foundation of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003), 298.

of this paper is primarily on epistemology, but in answering epistemological questions, metaphysical ones must be touched on as well (what is film?). Since the argument of this paper entails a certain way that one *ought* to think about film, it has an inherent ethical thrust as well.

For this paper, I will be looking at film from the vantage point articulated in the Reformed stream of Christian theology, specifically the thoughts flowing from John Calvin and some of his recent predecessors. In his book *Reel Spirituality,* Robert Johnston notes that while Calvin's own theology may have allowed for appreciating the visual arts, the Reformed theologians coming soon after him "used his rhetoric to distance themselves from the image."[6] This is echoed by Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor who lament, "religious practices and theological content rooted in the Protestant Reformation often fail to embrace the artistic and the colorful," and, "As a result, Reformation theology as is cannot deal with the arts in a way that incorporates the visual and the material into the spiritual."[7] Once an idea like this has taken hold in the mind, it is almost impossible to eradicate, but a purpose of this thesis is to redeem the use of Calvin and Reformed theology *as is* for the purpose of thinking theologically about film. So while the goal is to construct a philosophy of film, the approach taken here is highly theological, and is done from the perspective of Reformed theology. This will be accomplished using foundational ideas from Calvin, as well as epistemological tools provided by conceptual architects that follow his thought closely.

In his recent work on the language of thought, Steven Pinker claims that "the nature of reality does not dictate the way that reality is represented in people's minds. The language of thought allows us to frame a situation in different and incompatible ways."[8] When dealing with a subject like film, there are then even among Christians, multiple ways of framing the topic.[9] Robert Johnston outlines a continuum of five different approaches that Christians have typically taken with film.[10] They range from total avoidance all the way to viewing film as a place for divine encounter. In the middle are the postures of caution, dialogue, and appropriation.[11] These approaches are primarily for actual film criticism rather than philosophies of film, but in each case, there is some underlying philosophy of film that drives the particular train of criticism. As far as these underlying philosophies go, they can generally be split into two divisions.

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[6] Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*, 304n51. Original discussion 102-3.

[7] Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor, *A Matrix of Meanings: Finding God in Pop Culture*, ed. William Dyrness and Robert K Johnston, Engaging Culture (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 294.

[8] Steven Pinker, *The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007), 4.

[9] Pinker would point out "different ways of framing a situation may be equally consistent with the facts being described in that very sentence, but they make different commitments about *other* facts which are *not* being described." Ibid. 260.

[10] Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*, 55-85.

[11] These five categories roughly correspond to the views of culture in general outlined in H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951).

The first is exemplified by Grant Horner's work *Meaning at the Movies*.[12] A big thrust of his book is developing discernment in the Christian viewer.[13] He is writing to offer "an extended meditation on why we have movies at all, why they are so powerful, and why Christians need to think deeply and theologically about film art – indeed, about all human cultural production."[14] His approach is mainly focused on discerning the worldviews within a film. On the question of how to engage culture in general and film in particular, to Horner the answer is clear: "I believe there is only one biblically valid model, and that is to critique culture theologically, bringing Scripture to bear as an object of critical inquiry that dismantles error while also pointing out truth in human cultural production."[15] The underlying philosophy is one of mainly seeing film as a purely human product and therefore tainted by sin. This position is characterized by Johnston's paradigms of "caution," with hints of "dialogue."

The second major division of Christian approaches to film is exemplified by Johnston and Detweiler, both of whom are more sensitive to traditional currents of mainstream film studies, yet they still work within a Christian perspective.[16] In *Reel Spirituality*, Johnston's goal is to bring theology and film into dialogue. Though a Protestant, his approach is deeply influenced by Catholic sacramentality and so in regards to the paradigms above, he leans more toward appropriation and divine encounter.[17] A similar position is articulated by Detweiler's *Into the Dark*, which focuses on seeing the most popular films in our culture as means of divine revelation.[18] Both of these approaches have much to offer to the construction of a Christian philosophy of film, but as noted above, both also demur the use of Calvin in film studies and criticism, seeing greater appeal in other theologians.[19]

In general, the landscape of Christian film studies seems to split along these two lines. Either the philosophy of film lends itself toward a film critical approach of caution and occasional dialogue, or it leans more toward an approach of appropriation and divine encounter.

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[12] Grant Horner, *Meaning at the Movies: Becoming a Discerning Viewer* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).

[13] "Discernment is judgment. Scripture in the hands of the wise Christian should open up an effective, sophisticated, and edifying mode of interpretation of the culture surrounding us, and ultimately, enable us to reach individuals with God's truth while minimizing the negative impact of fallen culture on us." Ibid., 26.

[14] Ibid., 11.

[15] Ibid., 28. A more nuanced approach to film that is less critical, but still focused on discernment is Brian Godawa, *Hollywood Worldviews: Watching Films With Wisdom and Discernment*, 2nd ed. (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009).

[16] Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*, and Craig Detweiler, *Into the Dark.* See also Detweiler and Taylor, *A Matrix of Meanings*, 155-183. A useful resource is Robert K. Johnston, ed., *Reframing Theology and Film: New Focus for an Emerging Discipline* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

[17] Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*. See also Robert K. Johnston and Catherine M. Barsotti, *Finding God in the Movies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004).

[18] "The best movies are revelatory in nature, not just talking about God and ultimate questions but becoming an occasion for the hidden God to communicate through the big screen. Cinema is a *locus theologicus*, a place for divine revelation." Detweiler, *Into the Dark*, 42.

[19] Detweiler specifically says that "Hans Urs von Balthasar's imaginative and Christo-centric theology informs much of my methodology." Ibid., 295n.25. He refers specifically to Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, 7 vols. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982).

The former division is usually found in distinctively evangelical approaches focused on worldview and sometimes story, working within a broader *modus operandi* of negatively critiquing culture.[20] In both cases, assumptions about the nature of film and the nature of God's revelation determine the understanding that results. In constructing the Reformed philosophy of film outlined above, part of the goal is to integrate these two divergent divisions in Christian philosophies of film. It will be demonstrated that the epistemology drawn from Scripture by Calvin and expanded on by his heirs is capable of integrating the strengths of both while avoiding their respective weaknesses.

## *Focusing the Lens*

In contrast to Detweiler and Johnston's opinions of Calvin, a careful study of his writings would reveal not only that his thought is not opposed to using the visual, but that he actually anticipates the general contours of Balthasar's theological aesthetics.[21] This is a conclusion of the argument in Randall Zachman's *Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin*, which is built on the idea that an interdependence between the verbal and visual is "not present in a few isolated topics in Calvin's theology, but is central to the way he thinks theologically."[22] Detweiler praises Balthasar, saying that for him "there is no hierarchy within truth, goodness, and beauty. Like the Holy Trinity, they are equal partners, utterly independent," and that, "He begs for a recovery of revelation as a God-initiated action that emanates from the Spirit. Balthasar places Christ at the center of that revelation, as simultaneously fact and form, the ultimate beauty."[23] But in a more careful study of Calvin, one would find many of those same ideas, while remaining in the stream of Reformed theology. A careful study of Calvin's writings yields a theological aesthetics that is just as suited for use in a philosophy of film as Balthasar's is.[24]

One way of drawing this out briefly is to examine Calvin's depth of visual metaphors that he used "to describe the ways in which the invisible God makes Godself somewhat visible in the universe."[25] Familiar to most may be his passage of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* that

[20] As exemplified by Horner. Godawa's view is less negative in its critical approach.

[21] Calvin "holds together the revelation of God in the truth of the Word with the manifestation of the goodness of God in the beauty of God's works, in a way that anticipates Hans Urs von Balthasar's attempt to do the same in our own day." Randall C. Zachman, *Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 437. Like Detweiler in *Into the Dark*, Zachman refers specifically to Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*. Space does not allow making these connections explicit, but it would make for interesting further research.

[22] Zachman, *Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin*, 7. Also of great use in redeeming Calvin's appreciation of the visual and tracing the historical development is William A. Dyrness, *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture: The Protestant Imagination from Calvin to Edwards* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 49-89.

[23] Detweiler, *Into the Dark*, 39.

[24] While no doubt Balthasar is a useful source in this regard, he will not be consulted in this particular paper since the aims here are to demonstrate the value of Calvin instead.

[25] Zachman, *Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin*, 39. For a historical tracing of Calvin's development of

speaks of old, bleary-eyed men with weak vision, unable to recognize the beauty of a text and put even two words together coherently without the aid of glasses.[26] For Calvin, the Scriptures are the spectacles we need to see the world rightly.[27] The Word "clarifies our weakened vision so that we can see more clearly the powers of God set forth in the works of God."[28] Looking through these lenses we see "that this world is like a theatre, in which the Lord presents to us a clear manifestation of his glory,"[29] and that "this world is a mirror, or the representation of invisible things."[30] This, to Calvin, means that the universe is a living image of God: "For God—by other means invisible—(as we have already said) clothes himself, so to speak, with the image of the world, in which he would present himself to our contemplation."[31] Calvin sees the universe filled with "infinite images of God's power, wisdom, and goodness."[32] This triad is a recurrent theme in Calvin's commentaries when he discusses what can be known of God in studying the world around us. For Calvin, knowing God is interdependent with knowing the world.[33]

In the opening of Calvin's *Institutes* he states that all wisdom consists of two parts: knowledge of God and knowledge of self.[34] On the one hand, our very being subsists in God, so without the knowledge of self there is no knowledge of God, yet on the other hand he says that, "man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God's face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize himself."[35] While Calvin may not be able to say "which one precedes and brings forth the other," it is this latter knowledge of God

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visual metaphors see 25-54. The pivotal text of Scripture for Calvin in this regard was Hebrews 11:3, but he drew heavily on Romans 1, Acts 14, Acts 17, and Psalm 19 as well.

[26] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1.6.1.

[27] "For by the Scripture as our guide and teacher, he not only makes those things plain which would otherwise escape our notice, but almost compels us to behold them; as if he had assisted our dull sight with spectacles." John Calvin, *Commentary on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, ed. John King, vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos, 2010), 62.

[28] Zachman, *Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin*. Referencing *Institutes* I. vi. 3

[29] John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Corinthians*, ed. John Pringle (Bellingham, WA: Logos, 2010), 85. Compare also his comment on Genesis: "After the world had been created, man was placed in it as in a theatre, that he, beholding above him and beneath the wonderful works of God, might reverently adore their Author." Calvin, *Commentary on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 1:64.

[30] John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, ed. John Owen (Bellingham, WA: Logos, 2010), 70. He makes the comment in reference to Hebrews 11:3.

[31] Calvin, *Commentary on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 1:60. Earlier, drawing on Hebrews 11:3, Calvin said "We know God, who is himself invisible, only through his works."

[32] John Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, ed. Henry Beveridge (Bellingham, WA: Logos, 2010), 2:166. Similarly in commenting on Hebrews 11:3 Calvin says, "God has given us, throughout the whole frame-work of this world, clear evidences of his eternal wisdom, goodness, and power; and though he is in himself invisible, he in a manner becomes visible to us in his works." John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews*, ed. John Owen (Bellingham, WA: Logos, 2010), 266. Calvin, it also seems, was very clear on who wrote Hebrews.

[33] More can be known about God than what can be known through the world, but one cannot know about the world without also knowing about God, even in suppressed form.

[34] Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.1.1.

[35] Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.1.2.

that he makes foundational for his thinking in the *Institutes*. Calvin, following the structure of Paul's epistle to the Romans, begins his *Institutes* stating that everyone knows God.[36] The knowledge of God in Calvin's thought is a "concept by means of which he intended to bring all of his other concepts into focus, a concept by which he sought to make all his other concepts understood."[37] Since one cannot come to know God without coming to know God's relations to the world and man, a good theistic epistemology will imply a general epistemology applicable to everything.[38] Just as it was shown through Calvin's commentaries that knowing God and knowing the world are interdependent; when one turns to his *Institutes*, one sees that so are knowing God and knowing the self.[39]

John Frame merely organizes the triad in what he refers to as "generic Calvinism."[40] Commonly known as "triperspectivalism," what Frame has developed is an epistemological tool that is capable of being used to analyze any object of study.[41] Perspectivalism, as a general concept is merely an admission of human limitations and a desire to dialogue with other limited perspectives. Often, the approaches from various perspectives will result in an interlinking of the perspectives, which is how the term "triperspectivalism" was coined. For Frame, this system finds roots in the Trinity as well as in the lordship attributes of control, authority, and power.[42]

Every epistemological endeavor looks at an object of study, norms of evaluation, and a person doing the study. Looking at an object while focusing on the norms of knowledge, particularly the norm of Scripture, is what Frame refers to as the "normative perspective." It is focused on emphasizing an object's character as divine revelation.[43] The objects one encounters to study in the world can be classified under what Frame calls the "situational perspective." This perspective focuses on a particular subject, "emphasizing its character as a fact of nature, history,

[36] Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.3.1. "There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity." This is the same point Paul makes in Romans 1:19. On Calvin following Romans see K. Scott Oliphant, "A Primal and Simple Knowledge (1.1-5)," in *A Theological Guide to Calvin's Institutes: Essays and Analysis*, Calvin 500 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 16-43.

[37] John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, A Theology of Lordship (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1987), 1.

[38] Ibid., 10.

[39] Consider Frame's comments: "The best way to look at the matter is that neither knowledge of God nor knowledge of self is possible without knowledge of the other, and growth in one area is always accompanied by growth in the other." Ibid., 65.

[40] Ibid., 90.

[41] Because of the recently published Festschrift for Frame, there is a definitive collection of his ideas and triads in Appendix A and B of John J. Hughes, ed., *Speaking the Truth in Love: The Theology of John M. Frame* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009). For Frame's own account of the development of his thought, see John Frame and John J. Hughes, "Backgrounds to My Thought," in *Speaking the Truth in Love: The Theology of John M. Frame* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009).

[42] On those, see John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, A Theology of Lordship (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 36-102, and more concisely, Frame, *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 15-18.

[43] Or on the methods of knowing. See John M. Frame, "Glossary," in *Speaking the Truth in Love: The Theology of John M. Frame*, ed. John J. Hughes (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009), 1002-28. For extended discussion and development see Frame, *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*. 62-75, John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, A Theology of Lordship (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 33-37; 131-238

or both."[44] Lastly, the existential perspective emphasizes the object's character as part of human experience and an aspect of human subjectivity.[45] For this study, the next chapter will focus on the revelatory nature of film and how God is both present active through it. That itself will be done with three perspectives.[46] Chapter three will focus on film as an object of culture and how it functions in that context. Chapter four will then turn the focus to film and humanity, examining what we see of ourselves in film.

## Film and God's Revelation

In the introduction to *Into the Dark*, Craig Detweiler laments that "Too many film critics and scholars have underestimated (or even missed) the transcendent, revelatory possibilities of film."[47] This lament is exemplified by Grant Horner in the preface to *Meaning at the Movies*, where he states, without argumentation, that there is not a chance of finding God in the movie theater.[48] Detweiler attributes this mentality to an under-appreciation of general revelation on the part of evangelical theologians.[49] While there may be some truth to this, it certainly is not an issue within the Reformed stream of theology where "nature as revelation is taken most seriously."[50] This is particularly clear in the work of Cornelius Van Til, who made general revelation a major emphasis in his writings.[51] "Van Til's view of revelation is essentially that of Calvin and the Reformed tradition, especially including Kuyper, Bavinck, and Warfield."[52] Van Til clearly echoed Calvin's affirmation of the universe as the theater of God's glory.[53] Like Calvin, Van Til affirmed, "All knowledge is interrelated. The created world is expressive of the nature of God. If one knows 'nature' truly, one also knows nature's God truly."[54] Far from

[44] Or also the aspects of an object that change in different situations. See Frame, "Glossary."
[45] It can also focus on the person doing the knowing. See Ibid.
[46] An opening section clarifying how we are going to proceed (existential), demonstrating a norm (normative), and evaluating how that changes the context of watching movies (situational). The structure from here on will be one of perspectives within perspectives within perspectives.
[47] Craig Detweiler, *Into the Dark: Seeing the Sacred in the Top Films of the 21st Century* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 30.
[48] "Are you going to find God at the movies? No. Not a chance." Grant Horner, *Meaning at the Movies: Becoming a Discerning Viewer* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 17. Presumably this is a jibe at Robert K. Johnston and Catherine M. Barsotti, *Finding God in the Movies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004), and perhaps also Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor, *A Matrix of Meanings: Finding God in Pop Culture*, ed. William Dyrness and Robert K Johnston, Engaging Culture (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003).
[49] "General revelation is an underappreciated theological category, an underexplored catalyst for revitalizing our faith and practices." Detweiler, *Into the Dark*. 31.
[50] John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, A Theology of Lordship (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1987), 90.
[51] John M. Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Anlysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1995). 116. In Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Revelation, Scripture, and God*, ed. William Edgar (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007),117-89; 190-222.
[52] Frame, *Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought*, 115.
[53] "Scripture constantly speaks of the whole universe as a revelation of the glory of God." Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 120.
[54] Ibid., 64. He explains further "all knowledge that any finite creature of God would ever have, whether of things that pertain directly to God or of things that pertain to objects in the created universe itself, would, in the last analysis, have to rest upon the revelation of God, and so "Christians think of the whole of the created universe as

underestimating or even missing the revelatory possibilities of nature, Van Til, along with Calvin before him, saw "the knowledge that we have of the simplest objects of the physical universe is still based upon the revelational [*Sic*] activity of God."[55]

Turning from revelation in nature to revelation in human culture, if creation is inherently revelatory, it would follow that human cultural creations are also inherently revelatory to some extent. As John Frame states, "Creation is what God makes by himself, and culture is what he makes through us."[56] Man creating culture imitates and images God who created everything. Man is part of God's original revelatory creation, and so his cultural creations are derivatively revelatory. For Christian film studies, the movie theater is a theater within a theater. With the eyes of faith and the spectacles of Scripture to correct our vision, we can see pictures of God in the world of film. In what follows, the analysis is looking at film from the normative perspective, looking to see what films can reveal about God's attributes and actions.

## *God in the World of Film*

Some authors are possessed of the radical notion that Calvin and Reformation theology are inadequate for appreciating visual imagery theologically. Taking cues from Catholic writer Andrew Greeley, Robert Johnston observes that "where the Protestant tradition assumes God to be largely absent from creation and human creativity, the Catholic tradition assumes God to be largely present."[57] While I would agree with Johnston that "God can be experienced through film's stories and images in myriad ways,"[58] his book offers little insight into what attributes of God can actually be seen on the silver screen. It is one thing to argue that finding God in the movies is achievable, but a vague affirmation of God's presence in the movie theater could be deduced simply from the attribute of his omnipresence.[59] Craig Detweiler's approach in *Into the Dark* is more rigorous in explaining how film can be revelatory as he focuses on "the experience

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a revelation of God." Ibid., 119. For this reason, the designation "natural revelation" can be misleading since it is revelation found in nature, but it has a supernatural origin. On this point, see Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Prolegomena*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003). 307-312.

[55] Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*. 123.

[56] John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, A Theology of Lordship (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 854.

[57] [57] Robert K Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*, ed. William Dyrness and Robert K Johnston, 2nd ed., Engaging Culture (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 104. On Greeley's thought, see Andrew M. Greeley, *God in Popular Culture* (Chicago: The Thomas More Press, 1988), and Andrew M. Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). It is a misunderstanding on the part of both Greeley and Johnston to place a dichotomy between Protestant and Catholic approaches. What they affirm in Catholic approaches is present in a true Calvinist approach as well. By true Calvinist approach I mean not necessarily approaches advanced by people who categorize themselves as Calvinists but an approach that takes cues from Calvin himself and is consistent with his thought and theologians that have followed him closely.

[58] Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*, 115.

[59] In Johnston and Barsotti, *Finding God in the Movies*. Johnston and his wife are on the right track, and I think the contribution they make there is helpful. However, the focus is more on Christian spiritual themes and imagery in film rather than attributes of God *per se*.

of God available to all people" through the movie theater.[60] Yet he still falls short in actually laying down in advance what can be specifically revealed about God in the movies.

While Calvin did not comment directly on film, he did go to great lengths to biblically describe and delimit the aspects of God's character present in general revelation.[61] Calvin may not have been comfortable with the use of film images in the church worship service, but as already noted, he was not against images per se.[62] As Randall Zachman points out, "Calvin consistently and increasing exhorted the godly – those whose vision had been clarified by the Word and faith – to contemplate the powers of God set forth in the works of God in creation."[63] For Calvin, what could be known of God in creation was what he referred to as the "powers of God," specifically God's wisdom, goodness, and power.[64] If these attributes of God were knowable through creation, it would follow that they are to some extent knowable and displayed through the creation within creation. Image bearers of God cannot escape creating images of God in their own creations, even creations that are distorted and dimmed by the effects of sin. In studying film equipped with eyes of faith and the lens of Scripture, one is looking at a derivative world within our world and should see glimpses of God clearly there.

Helpful in unpacking Calvin's power trio is the ordering of the attributes in John Frame's *Doctrine of God*. While there is no explicit statement that he is following Calvin, Frame's major divisions are attributes of goodness, knowledge, and power. He subdivides under each heading according the lordship attributes: control, authority, and presence. Control emphasizes dynamic attributes that are most readily seen in God's actions in history.[65] Authority emphasizes static attributes that "denote constancies in God's nature, a structure that defines the limits of his possible actions."[66] Presence emphasizes involvement attributes that constitute the character of

[60] Detweiler, *Into the Dark*, 33.

[61] It is here assumed that Calvin's thoughts on literature, when consistently assimilated with his thoughts on general revelation, give an approximation of how he would think about film were he around to comment today. For Calvin on literature, see Leland Ryken, "Calvinism and Literature," in *Calvin and Culture: Exploring a Worldview*, ed. David W. Hall and Marvin Padgett (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010), 95-113.

[62] As William Edgar reminds us "it must never be forgotten that never did the magisterial Reformers issue blanket condemnation of visual imagery or forbid the proper enjoyment of the arts." See William Edgar, "Calvin's Impact on the Arts," in *Tributes to John Calvin: A Celebration of His Quincentenary*, ed. David W. Hall, Calvin 500 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010), 464-86. 477. See also the extremely similar essay William Edgar, "The Arts and the Reformed Tradition," in *Calvin and Culture: Exploring a Worldview*, ed. David W. Hall and Marvin Padgett (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010), 40-68.

[63] Randall C. Zachman, *Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 42 commenting on Calvin's discussion of Genesis 2:3 and the purpose of the Sabbath. See John Calvin, *Commentary on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, ed. John King, vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos, 2010), 1:107-8.

[64] He associated wisdom with God the Son, goodness with God the Father, and power with God the Holy Spirit. Zachman, *Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin*, 27. Calvin is no doubt drawing on Romans 1 and expanding what God's eternal power and divine nature would mean in a general revelatory context.

[65] John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, A Theology of Lordship (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 398. Full discussion and exegetical justification of this lordship attribute 36-79.

[66] Ibid. 398-99. Full discussion 80-93

God and are present in his creaturely dealings.[67] In Frame's understanding, each of God's attributes display his covenant lordship with a perspectival emphasis on control, authority, or presence, but "some are more conveniently described as powers, others as forms of knowledge, and others as forms of goodness."[68] It is interesting that the broad categories of Frame's divisions are anticipated by Calvin who saw them as the basic attributes available to all through general revelation. The teaching of Scripture would then deepen one's understanding of the power triad, and when used to view a film, enable one to see a depth of imagery of the divine that others miss. Exploring each of these categories in turn will demonstrate what it means to look at film through the lenses of Scripture with the eyes of faith.

## Goodness

To see God's goodness displayed in the world of film, one must consider the framework of related attributes. The dynamic control attributes to consider include: goodness, love, grace, mercy, patience, compassion, jealousy and wrath.[69] Static attributes of authority in this scheme are justice and righteousness, while attributes of presence and involvement are joy, blessedness, beauty, perfection, and holiness. Of the power of trio of God's attributes that can be discerned in the film world, these attributes are the most readily visible since they fall into the more traditional category of God's communicable attributes. From a normative perspective, many film plots center on the theme of justice and good triumphing over evil in the end.[70] A film that does this is using an attribute of God's goodness as a norm for story development. Additionally, these attributes are often the targets that characters in the film world aim to develop on an individual basis. Characters that develop and display these attributes are, from an existential perspective, revealing God through their achieved virtue. Films display the genuine goodness of God through characters that love one another, show each other grace and mercy, exercise patience and compassion, and protect their loved ones in righteous jealousy and wrath. From a situational perspective, films with beautifully orchestrated cinematography, as well as overall excellence in production are cinematic demonstrations of God's goodness by incarnating beauty and in some cases glimpses of near perfection. In one way, the mere presence of films that promote these attributes of character is a revelation of God's goodness toward us. As Zachman points out, "According to Calvin, the good things of this life are symbols and pledges of God's love and goodness towards us, as well as steps and ladders by which we might ascend from this life to

[67] While the difference between control and authority may be seen as analogous to the distinction between content and form, presence is a kind of synthesis of dynamic and static, content and form. Ibid., 399. Full discussion of presence see Ibid., 94-102.

[68] Ibid., 397. His rationale for ordering along these lines rather than other traditional routes is explained on 394-99.

[69] These, and the attributes listed in the following discussion are all charted in Ibid., 399. Wrath may seem an odd inclusion here. Frame pairs it in his discussion with righteousness and see it is an implication of that attribute. See discussion on Ibid., 446-468.

[70] I could provide examples, but I am treating this statement as self-evident. A film is unusual only if it reverses this trend.

God, the Author and source of every good thing."[71] But in examining the actual world of film, we are able to see God's goodness on display within his goodness.

**Power**

In looking for God's power on display in the world of film, a consultation of the framework is again in order. The power attributes related to dynamic control are eternity, immensity, incorporeality, will, power, and existence. The attributes of static authority are aseity, simplicity, and essence, and the attributes of presence and involvement are glory, spirituality, and omnipresence.[72] Since this cluster of attributes overlaps with the more traditional category of incommunicable attributes, it may seem that these would be hard to see these readily displayed in the world of film. However, consider the phenomena of comic book superhero films. Like the gods of Greece and Rome our modern superheroes are "amplified humanity," representing modern culture's attempt to envision beings who have these attributes in some form.[73] From a normative perspective, the attributes of God dealing with power must in some ways inform what powers a superhero might have. Looking from an existential perspective, many films present characters who embody attributes of power that dimly reflect the power of God. From a situational perspective, "a very popular device in film narrative is the idea of playing with timelessness, eternity, time travel, and time loops."[74] This shows up not just in the setting of many superhero films, but in many other films as well and turns the viewer's attention to the immensity of the universe beyond planet Earth.[75]

In general, Calvin strongly commended the study of heavens that "declare the glory of God" (Ps. 19:1), seeing the powers of God most clearly displayed there.[76] He felt similarly about meteorological phenomena, particularly "dramatic changes produced by the weather which were especially useful in compelling the ungodly to consider the power of God, which they otherwise ignored."[77] While films may present an imaginary world, they nonetheless present events, that

[71]Zachman, *Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin*, 55.

[72] For discussion of the attributes of power see Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 513-616.

[73] On the gods of ancient Rome and Greece being amplified humanity, rather than divinity, see Francis Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1982), 85. Quoted in discussion in Brian Godawa, *Hollywood Worldviews: Watching Films With Wisdom and Discernment*, 2nd ed. (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009), 62-67.

[74] Horner, *Meaning at the Movies*. 36.

[75] One could say as well that time travel turns our attention to our relative insignificance in the scope of eternity.

[76] Zachman, *Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin*, 43. Consider Calvin's comments on this verse: "When we behold the heavens, we cannot but be elevated, by the contemplation of them, to Him who is their great Creator; and the beautiful arrangement and wonderful variety which distinguish the courses and station of the heavenly bodies, together with the beauty and splendour which are manifest in them, cannot but furnish us with an evident proof of his providence." John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, ed. James Anderson, vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos, 2010), 1:309.

[77] Zachman, *Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin*, 45. In Calvin's words "when the atmosphere is troubled, we feel a depression of the animal spirits which constrains us to look sad, as if we saw God coming against us with a threatening aspect. At the same time, we are taught that no change takes place either in the atmosphere or in the earth, but what is a witness to us of the presence of God." Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 1:271.

were they to actually happen in our own world, should cause us to recognize the power of God and his related attributes. The film making enterprise itself is a visual display of man's derivative power to create. This makes the presentation of phenomenal events and phenomenal characters, displays of power within power: man using his own power to creatively image God's power.

**Knowledge**

In looking through the framework of attributes to help see God's knowledge on display in the world of film, the attributes of dynamic control are speech and incomprehensibility; the attribute of static authority is truth; the attributes of presence and involvement are knowledge, wisdom, mind, and knowability.[78] From a normative perspective, many films exhibit a commendation of virtue and warning against vice that could resonate strongly with similar ideas in the Bible's wisdom literature.[79] The lived wisdom presented in the world of film draws on the law of God inscribed on man's heart. From an existential perspective, often there will be a character in most films that is sage-like in their assistance to the main character.[80] Additionally, many main characters are faced with a psychological choice in the plot of the film that requires them to exercise wisdom.[81] In doing so, the movie usually ends positively. Failing to exercise wisdom many times leads to tragedy. From a situational perspective, truth and wisdom are demonstrated through the dialogue of the characters of the film. As most Christians are comfortable saying, "All truth is God's truth," or better put by Calvin, "All truth is from God; and consequently, if wicked men have said anything that is true and just, we ought not to reject it, for it has come from God."[82] In this case, there can be much truth presented through the characters of a particular film, whether through what they say, what they do, or what they aspire to be.

## *Redemption in the Stories of Film*

Turning from attributes of God in film to actions of God seen through the window of film, there is still much more to see. The window through which God's action is seen is the story of the film. As a leading screenwriter in Hollywood puts it, "The art of story is the dominant

[78] Some of these may strike the reader as odd inclusions in a listing on the attributes (like speech and knowability). See full discussion in Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 469-512

[79] On this point, see Stanley D. Williams, *The Moral Premise: Harnessing Virtue & Vice For Box Office Success* (Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 2006). Williams is working as a Christian, but is writing to screenwriters from a semi-objective vantage point. Through his doctoral dissertation, he validated this idea by demonstrating that *every* successful film has an underlying moral premise that when dissected, looks just like a proverb we might find in Scripture.

[80] This is detailed in Christopher Vogler, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure For Writers*, 3rd ed. (Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 2007), 39-48. The specific character archetype is called "mentor."

[81] This is detailed in both Ibid., 135-74 and Williams, *The Moral Premise*, 66-80.

[82] John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, ed. William Pringle (Bellingham, WA: Logos, 2010), 300-301. This means of course that the wicked men who make films in Hollywood will at times say, through characters in their films, true and wise things, or will communicate truth about the nature of how the world really is through their storytelling.

culture force in the world, and the art of film is the dominant medium of this grand enterprise."[83] Robert Johnston concurs stating, "the nature of film is story," and "we go to the movies to see stories."[84] Stories however, are rarely *just* stories, but rather, "Storytelling from its inception was expected to be more than entertainment. Through their craft, the first storytellers were expected to teach the culture how to live and behave in their world."[85] Interestingly, this quite often takes the form of a character going on a quest to achieve some kind of redemption. As Craig Detweiler observes, "The most timely, relevant, and haunting films resonate with the shaping story of Scripture: from the beauty of creation, through the tragedy of self-destruction, to the wonder of restoration."[86] One could easily say that "The essence of storytelling in movies is about redemption,"[87] and, "Movies are finally, centrally, crucially, primarily *only* about story. And those stories are finally, centrally, crucially, primarily *mostly* about redemption."[88] In addition to seeing the attributes of God displayed in the world of film, one can also see through the stories of film, images of God's action in accomplishing redemption.

From a normative perspective, stories are "universally perceived as the best way of talking about the way the world actually is."[89] This in turn implies something about reality itself: "Storytelling is meaningless gibberish unless reality itself is narratable. And reality is unnarratable in a universe without a transcendent narrator."[90] In other words, the prevalence of storytelling across cultures is an apologetic for the existence of God. Without a being who fits the description of the biblical God, there is no unity that makes sense of the diversity of storytellers, nor is there a unity of world history itself. Assuming a grand narrator, it would make sense that there is also a grand narrative of which all the individual narratives told by human storytellers are analogical reflections.[91] Joseph Campbell, who formulated the idea of the Monomyth underlying all mythologies, was certainly on to something, but in the absence of a Christian perspective, he failed to notice that "Christianity is itself the true incarnation of the

[83] Robert McKee, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 15.
[84] Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*.
[85] Godawa, *Hollywood Worldviews*, 76. If one takes biblical history seriously, then this observation makes sense of the purpose the first story would have had. In Genesis 2-3 one is presented with what would have been the first story ever told, and it would have presumably been passed on from family to family as a means of explaining how to live in the world they all found themselves inhabiting.
[86] Detweiler, *Into the Dark*, 257.
[87] Godawa, *Hollywood Worldviews*, 86.
[88] Ibid., 89. Emphasis original. Humanity has an innate longing for redemption from the conflicts we find ourselves embedded in, and movies, as the stories of our day, are one way of expressing that longing. Cultures may differ on the nature of the conflict or what the fall (either the literal one or a metaphorical one) produced within man, but all cultures tell stories of redemption to satisfy a seemingly innate longing all humanity shares.
[89] N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and The People of God*, Christian Origins and The Question of God 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 40.
[90] Godawa, *Hollywood Worldviews*, 70.
[91] Were Van Til available for comment, he would characterize this distinction by saying that the story of redemption history is archetypal, while human stories of redemption are ectypal. "God is the archetype, while we are the ectypes. God's knowledge is archetypal, and ours ectypal." Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 324.

Monomyth in history, and other mythologies reflect and distort it like dirty or broken mirrors."[92] This being the case, the story of redemption as exemplified in the Christian gospel is the ultimate story of redemption that the redemptive storylines in the movies analogically reflect.

This is in fact how the stories of film would be viewed from a situational perspective. The individual redemptive stories that are displayed in the movies follow the same trajectory as the grand narrative of redemption told in Scripture. They are situational reflections of the divine norm of how redemption really works. As the blueprint for all other redemptive storylines, "The Bible narrates the story of God's journey on that long road of redemption. It is a unified and progressively unfolding of God's action in history for the salvation of the whole world."[93] This is not to suggest that film-makers are consciously modeling their stories after God's story of redemption. It is simply to observe that the prevalence of redemptive stories found in movies indicates not only that this type of story is the most satisfying, but that there is an innate human desire for redemption that leads to the creation of "gospel stories" that mimic *the* Gospel.[94]

To see this clearly, consider the stages of Christopher Vogler's adaption of Campbell's Monomyth that is used by numerous screenwriters.[95] In the first act, called Separation, the stages are: (1) Ordinary World, (2) Call to Adventure, (3) Refusal of the Call, (4) Meeting with the Mentor, (5) Crossing the Threshold, (6) Tests, Allies, Enemies, (7) Approach. In the second act, which can be split into two parts itself, Descent and Initiation, there is the single stage: (8) Central Ordeal. In the last act, called Return, the stages are: (9) Reward, (10) The Road Back, (11) Resurrection, (12) Return with Elixir.[96] In his analysis of story, Vern Poythress breaks the story of redemption accomplish by Christ into three acts as well.[97] In the initial act (Challenge), Christ is in heaven (his Ordinary World) and is sent by the Father to redeem the world (a Call to Adventure that lacks a Refusal of the Call).[98] At the outset of Christ's public ministry there is a Crossing of the Threshold.[99] From there Christ makes Allies (the disciples) and Enemies (Satan, the Pharisees) and amidst the many Tests (challenges from Pharisees and demons) he breaks away often to meet with his Mentor (God the Father). All the while, Christ has set his face to

[92] Godawa, *Hollywood Worldviews*, 70. On the Monomyth in Campbell, see Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, Bollingen Series XVII (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2008).

[93] Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 12.

[94] On this point, see Frame, *Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 902.

[95] This is particularly amplified in Vogler, *The Writer's Journey*. And illustrated in numerous films by Stuart Voytilla, *Myth and the Movies : Discovering the Mythic Structure of 50 Unforgettable Films* (Studio City CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 1999).

[96] "The reason for walking through these elements of the craft of storytelling used in movies is to illustrate how the essence of storytelling in movies is about redemption." Godawa, *Hollywood Worldviews*, 86.

[97] I am synthesizing Poythress' analysis with Vogler's. For the original, see Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language - A God Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 206-208. Poythress does not use Vogler, but rather Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, ed. Louis A. Wagner, trans. Laurence Scott, 2nd ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968).

[98] Gal. 4:4-5; 1 John 4:14

[99] The wilderness temptation, Matt. 4:1-11

Approach Jerusalem.[100] In the second act, it is not a stretch at all to see Jesus' crucifixion and death as the Central Ordeal of the gospel story.[101] In his death though, Jesus was vindicated and received the Reward, completed the Road Back and was Resurrected from the dead. He then returned to his Ordinary World (heaven) having accomplished redemption and made the Elixir available to all who would believe.[102] From a Christian perspective, even though it happened in the middle of history, the Gospel is the archetype for all stories with a redemptive trajectory. Film is no exception.

From an existential perspective, "All human communities live out of some story that provides a context for understanding the meaning of history and gives shape and direction to their lives."[103] Stories in the movies are no different and tend to contribute to the shaping of many people's lives. As Grant Horner observes, "You can learn a lot about a person by 'talking movies' with them."[104] It is also worth noting that in general, "A Christian testimony of redemption follows the same structure that a movie does."[105] In this way, the life of the believer embodies a kind of redemption within redemption, and watching movies involving redemption storylines involves participating in another level of redemption.[106]

By actively entering into the redemptive storyline found in most films, a Christian may come to better understand their own story as well as find an opening for dialoguing with others about true redemption. Seeing the redemption in movies is recognizable because it is a picture, an imitation, of how God has acted in the world. Man as an image of God will inevitably imitate God's actions at some level.[107] As God acts on the stage of world history to accomplish his purposes, so man acts on the stage of his own personal history to accomplish his purposes. Stories in their basic form are accounts of a main character's purpose, action, and the result. In this basic sense, all stories are accounts of a man imaging God, who as Scripture teaches has purposes, acts in history, and brings about his intended results.[108] In a more specific sense though, God does not just act randomly in history, but as stated before, acts to accomplish redemption. This redemption "is at the heart of God's purposes for the world, it is *the* one central

[100] Most clearly brought out in the Gospel of Luke.
[101] Matt. 26-27
[102] 1 Tim. 3:16; Phil. 2:8-11; Rom. 4:24-25
[103] Bartholomew and Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture*, 12 They add "To be human means to embrace some such basic story through which we understand our world and chart our course through it. This does not mean that individuals are necessarily conscious of the story they are living out of or the molding effect that such a story has had on their thought and actions." Ibid, 20.
[104] Horner, *Meaning at the Movies*, 157.
[105] Godawa, *Hollywood Worldviews*, 86.
[106] In a way, Christ's life itself is a redemption within redemption since his personal life involved being "redeemed" by his own resurrection which then provided the basis of the redemption of anyone else in the scope of redemption history. This redemption within redemption is brought out by Poythress, *Language - A God Centered Approach*, 209-18.
[107] Gen. 1:26-28, and Ibid., 200.
[108] Eph. 1:10-11, 1 Cor. 15:28, Rev. 21:1, 22-27

story."[109] If this is true, then "in the end, all the other stories about working out human purposes derive their meaning from being related to this central story."[110] If man in general derives meaning as a human from imaging God, at the particular level of stories told by man, meaning there would be derived from imaging The Story. All stories then image the Christian story of redemption, which is another way of saying all stories are in reflections of the gospel.

[109] Poythress, *Language - A God Centered Approach*, 206.
[110] Ibid.

# BOOK REVIEW - *A REASON FOR THE HOPE: ESSAYS IN APOLOGETICS* BY MASSIMO LORENZINI

*C.L. Bolt*

Lorenzini, Massimo. *A Reason for the Hope: Essays in Apologetics*. Lexington, KY: CreateSpace, 2011. 224 pp. $15.99.

## About the Author

Massimo Lorenzini is the author of *A Reason for the Hope: Essays in Apologetics*. Lorenzini has always struck me as a being a very serious person. But he is serious about all of the right things. Perhaps his background has something to do with it. Long before receiving a B.A. in Pastoral Ministries from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and the M.Div. from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Lorenzini arrived in the U.S. from Italy as a part of his parents' divorce (i). Lorenzini's meager access to religious truth was solely the result of his nominal Catholic upbringing, and he was quickly ensnared by sins involving alcohol, drugs, partying and girls (i). He was also deeply fascinated by rock music and a pervasive desire to be in a band (i). Devoid of an understanding of the Gospel, Lorenzini held to an extremely pessimistic view of the world, believing humanity was a plague upon the earth that would inevitably destroy the environment and anticipated an economic and political crisis ending in anarchy (i). Lorenzini explains his eventual dissatisfaction with the aforementioned lifestyle.

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> As I grew out of my teen years I became more lonely and depressed. I had nothing to live for. Sin wasn't even fun anymore. I even began to welcome death. I was not suicidal, just tired of living. Inside I hungered for truth and meaning. (i)

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At the age of twenty Lorenzini went to see the documentary *Hell's Bells*, a presentation put together by Christians which contrasts the message of rock music with that of Scripture, realized he was guilty of sinning against God, and repented of his sin, trusting in Christ Jesus as his Savior and Lord (i-ii). In the Preface to his book, Lorenzini briefly describes his subsequent growth in the knowledge of Scripture, in prayer, service, and worship as well as the Christian duty of evangelism which led to his deep interest in apologetics (ii). That desire to offer apologetics in accordance with evangelism has brought about Frontline Ministries, a website dedicated to teaching and defending the essentials of the Christian faith as well as a number of other books by Lorenzini available at www.frontlinemin.org/bookstore.asp (iii). (I credit Lorenzini's website for getting that presuppositional light bulb in my head to finally come on after more than a month of studying the method through other means.) If anything is clear from

the description of Lorenzini's background provided above it is that he is well-qualified to write the work discussed in this short book review. He explains, "I fully believe apologetics serves evangelism and every Christian ought to be interested in learning about and doing evangelism and apologetics simply because lost people matter – to God and to us as well" (ii). Lorenzini's firm devotion to sound apologetics and evangelism as well as his love for the lost come from an unswerving commitment to Scripture, a commitment I have seen evidenced in various other tidbits of wisdom from Lorenzini during the years I have known him, and for which I am grateful. It did not surprise me to find that *A Reason for the Hope* is an invaluable apologetic work rich in biblical fidelity, critical thinking, and passion for evangelism.

## Summary

In the first chapter of his book Lorenzini defines apologetics as, "the reasoned defense and vindication of the Christian worldview" and makes a distinction between *positive* and *negative* apologetics, relying upon the classic text found in 1 Peter 3.15 and providing his outline of apologetics in light of the church's need for them (1). Lorenzini describes *four central tasks* of apologetics and *four different approaches* to apologetics before arguing that the church's need for apologetics stems from the fact that, "apologetics is the handmaiden of evangelism" (1-5). Lorenzini finishes out the chapter by providing a series of helpful suggestions for incorporating apologetics into the ministry of the church (5-10).

The second chapter contrasts postmodern and biblical conceptions of truth by tracing the history of the rise and influence of postmodern thought followed by a textually driven look at the biblical concept of truth working through the Old and New Testaments (11-20). Included with this chapter is a section on the proper Christian response to postmodern tolerance (20-24).

The third chapter is the core of the book as the method of apologetics utilized by Lorenzini throughout the remainder of the book is explicitly and clearly described in its most basic form. Here Lorenzini groups three of his earlier approaches to apologetics under the one category of "evidentialism" before briefly discussing where evidentialism falls short as a biblically effective approach to apologetics (27-29). According to Lorenzini, "The main problem with evidentialism is that it grants the unbeliever too much."

> The evidentialist grants the unbeliever the right to think autonomously (or, independently, lit. "self-law" or "self-governing") while at the same time asking him to give up his autonomy through conversion. This is theologically impossible. (29)

The method of apologetics Lorenzini subscribes to and recommends in lieu of the problematic evidentialist method is *presuppositionalism*, "the method that places the Christian worldview and its starting point over against the non-Christian worldview and its starting point" (29). A lengthy explanation of presuppositional apologetics with proof texts, illustrations, and examples follows (29-39). Presuppositional apologetics is shown to rely heavily upon a *transcendental argument*, and, "A transcendental argument is one that transcends normal patterns of arguing from premises to conclusions allowing the unbeliever to weigh the plausibility of arguments and, instead, speaks to the possibility of intelligible thought or rationality" (37). Lorenzini also calls this approach to argumentation "worldview apologetics" or an argument from "the impossibility of the contrary," explains why, and seeks to support this form of argument by citing various passages of Scripture (37-39). Finally, an extremely practical outline for a presuppositional apologetic is adapted from a similar outline in Richard L. Pratt Jr.'s *Every Thought Captive* and provided for the reader to put all the theory learned in the chapter into actual use (39-45).

The fourth chapter of the book is dedicated to answering the question of how we can know that the Bible is the Word of God. Lorenzini begins the chapter by discussing the biblical doctrine of inspiration (49-52). He then states that there are seven areas of argument that can be offered as to how we can know that the Bible is God's Word (52). Following some arguments from Greg Koukl of *Stand to Reason* and the use of the hand as a mnemonic device for remembering them Lorenzini matches the pinkie to prophecy, the ring finger to unity, the big finger to big questions, the index finger to historical accuracy, the thumbs up to changed lives, the fist to survival, and the raised hand to the self-attestation of Scripture (52-64). Next, three of the four main categories of biblical theology (creation, fall, redemption) are applied to the apologetic task as it pertains to the matter of the Bible as the Word of God (64-76). The chapter ends with an explanation of how the Bible is defended using the presuppositional method, a response to the charge of circular reasoning, and an outline of how to test truth claims by virtue of coherence, correspondence, explanatory power, practical value, logical consequences, and authority (76-87). The fifth chapter delves into the topics of divine revelation including general and special revelation, the inspiration of Scripture, canon, translation and transmission (89-108).

The sixth chapter of Lorenzini's work takes on the infamous problem of evil in the form of the question, "Why Does God Allow Death and Suffering?" (109-133). Lorenzini emphasizes the reality of this problem while addressing its logical force without succumbing to the temptation to handle the difficulty purely in the abstract (109-111). Before resolving the problem of evil through a theological explanation derived from the text of Scripture as to why God permits it and a description of the role of presuppositions, Lorenzini turns the problem back on the objector by pointing out that an unbeliever has no basis upon which to call anything good or evil (111-133). In the seventh chapter he addresses objections to the exclusivity of Christ as the only way to God from the unbelieving view of tolerance and from Islam (135-158).

As the book draws to a close, Lorenzini explains the six ways of testing truth claims in great detail in the eighth chapter (159-176). In the ninth, he shifts to contrasting biblical meditation with Taoist meditation in a presuppositional fashion (177-186). The tenth chapter brings out the presuppositional conflicts of culture with Christianity and applies the presuppositional method to Satanism (187-198). Finally, the eleventh chapter provides a detailed account of wisdom and the hope that is available in the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ alone (199-214).

## Strengths

One cannot read *A Reason for the Hope* without facing the reality of God and what it means for one's life, for the book is saturated from cover to cover with Scripture. The case for the method Lorenzini utilizes as well as the practice of the apologetic itself are made up of the direct application of Scripture to the problems of the world that come about as a result of sinful thought and action. Lorenzini unabashedly empowers his evangelistic and apologetic endeavors with a consistent reliance upon the Word of God. However, he does not forsake solid critical reasoning in doing so, contrary to the claims of those who are inclined to stereotype a dogmatic presuppositional approach to apologetics. Lorenzini does an excellent job of staving off objections and categorizing massive amounts of information into points, acronyms, and mnemonic devices that are easily memorized and used in real apologetic encounters. Humorous and helpful illustrations appear in several chapters. From his testimony at the beginning of the book to the final chapter titled, "Why the Cross Changes Everything," Lorenzini proves through his Gospel-centered, missions-motivated words that he will never stop calling attention to the crucial lesson that apologetics do not constitute a merely abstract intellectual exercise, but rather are a matter of *eternal life and death*. There are many, many more strengths than there are weaknesses in this book. The layout of the book, its more classical or evidential feel in terms of the presentation of arguments, clarity in that presentation, the positive use of evidences and arguments in defense of divine revelation, and the practical examples provided throughout in addition to the explicitly Scriptural character of the book mentioned earlier make this work the best basic introduction to presuppositional apologetics currently available.

## Weaknesses

Still, there are some difficulties in the book. There are a few places where Lorenzini uses unhelpful theological language. For example he writes, "Evidentialism (also called Classical apologetics) is the method of Catholics, Arminians, and many inconsistent Calvinists" (28). Whether one agrees with this assertion or not (Lorenzini does offer argumentation to support it), introducing these terms in the middle of a basic work in apologetics could be rather confusing to those within evangelicalism who either have not ever heard of Calvinism and Arminianism or are

inclined to immediately reject one or both of them. Given the strength of Lorenzini's book as an introduction to apologetics and presuppositionalism in particular it is important to highlight this concern about the use of such labels in contexts outside of the Reformed camp. People in those contexts would certainly benefit from a book like this one, and it would be a shame for them to be turned off to the book by such a seemingly insignificant thing. Elsewhere Lorenzini writes about, "The Risk of Freedom" and claims that God, "understood the risks" while offering the analogy that, "Raising children is risky" and finally stating, "It's a risk we take because we desire love and joy and the alternatives are unthinkable and cruel" (112-113). Lorenzini also claims that, "in allowing for human freedom God allowed for the possibility of evil" (113). But why is Lorenzini talking about "risk" with God at all? And how will human freedom and the possibility of evil be reconciled with our glorified state in heaven? Lorenzini is not ashamed to number himself with the Calvinists, and he goes on to provide an excellent response to the problem of evil that is informed by solid Reformed theology, but his initial comments about risk and freedom seem rather out of place if not wholly mistaken. It would not hurt to remove them from the book along with the labels of Calvinism and Arminianism.

## Recommendation

One more item worth mentioning that is not so much a weakness as it is a way the book could be strengthened is that while there are occasionally bold (but biblical) claims concerning the foolishness of unbelief (presumably pertaining even to logic, science, morality, and the like), the demonstration of these claims by way of philosophical argumentation is lacking. However, what is lacking in deconstructive argumentation is easily made up for by the strong biblical presentation of the Christian worldview using Scripture, evidence, and reason within a presuppositionalist framework. I highly recommend Massimo Lorenzini's A Reason for the Hope to anyone who wants a well-written, biblically informed introduction to apologetics and suggest that it be read prior to other works on the same topic.