

An Essential Kenosis Solution to the Problem of Evil

"If we are faithless, [God] remains faithful -- for he cannot deny himself" (2 Tim. 2:13).

In this essay, I offer a solution to the problem of evil.

Notice I said I would *so/ve* the problem of evil. For many believers, a solution to this age-old challenge is beyond hope. In the face of evil, many Christians settle for a defense to justify their belief in God. They do not seek a genuine solution to why a loving and powerful God fails to prevent genuine evil.

The defense many Christians offer involves an explicit or implicit appeal to mystery. "We don't know why God fails to prevent evil," they say, "but we have other reasons to believe a powerful and loving God exists." Instead of offering a robust solution to the primary reason most unbelievers say they are atheists, defense-playing believers try to show it's appropriate to believe in God despite this crucial problem remaining unsolved.

I think believers should seek solutions and not merely defenses. In offering my solution, of course, I don't claim to know all things. I see as if looking through a dark glass. No creature is omniscient, because we "know in part" (1 Cor. 13). But I believe appeals to mystery like those we see among mere defenses are not helpful. They fail to answer the most important argument against belief in God.

The difficulty of the problem tempts most believers to accept something less than a full solution. In many ways, this is not surprising. A complete solution requires rethinking the views of God handed to us. Yet the work to reconceive, rethink, and reform our views of God in light of Scripture and God's general revelation is the ongoing task of believers.

Reconceiving God is risky business, but it’s necessary.

Clarifying Key Issues

Let’s begin by articulating the problem of evil in a way responsible to the core issues at stake. This articulation might be stated as a question:

Why doesn’t our loving and almighty God prevent genuine evil?

The careful reader will notice the phrase “prevent genuine evil” in this formulation. I use this phrase, because Christians too often answer the problem of evil by saying God doesn’t cause evil, creatures do. But we want to know why a loving and powerful God doesn’t *prevent* evil, not just directly cause it. That’s a more difficult question.

Some say evil is not God’s will, but God allows or permits it. The distinction between God permitting and willing evil, however, is not helpful. I agree with John Calvin that we should make “no distinction between God’s will and God’s permission. Why shall we say ‘permission’ unless it is because God so wills?”¹ In his commentary on Genesis, Calvin puts it bluntly: “What else is the permission of Him who has the power of preventing and in whose hand the whole matter is placed but his will?”²

If the sovereign God can or does control others entirely and yet permits something to occur, God must *want* that occurrence... at least more than the alternatives. A perfectly loving individual would do whatever possible to *prevent* – not just fail to cause or allow – genuine evil.

Let me illustrate: I would not dream of giving my neighbor a “Parent of the Year” award if he allowed his child to drown in the creek behind our house saying, “Although I could have prevented the drowning, I didn’t *will* it; I just permitted it.” A loving parent would do just about

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John T. McNeill, ed., Ford Lewis Battles, trans. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), III.23.8.

² John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, vol. 1 (Christian Classics Ethereal Library, Grand Rapids, Mich.) <http://www.ccel.org> Accessed Nov. 25, 2009.

everything in his ability to prevent the drowning. My neighbor is morally responsible for failing to prevent this evil.

Similarly, a loving God will not just refuse to cause evil. A loving God would prevent genuine evil, if it were possible to do so. The God who could have prevented a genuinely evil event is morally culpable for failing to do so. A steadfastly loving God does not allow preventable genuine evils.

Notice also that I have qualified “evil” with the word “genuine” in much of my discussion thus far. I do so to distinguish between two kinds of events we sometimes call evil. Some events are difficult or painful, but we must endure them to make our lives better. We might call these events “necessary evils.”

For instance, we all know that the couple who wants children will likely experience suffering in both birthing and nurturing. They endure this because they want kids. And they want those kids to live well. The couple endures pain, suffering, and sacrifice -- necessary evil -- for some greater good.

Genuine evils are different in kind from necessary evils. Genuine evils make the world, all things considered, worse than it might have been. Genuine evils are events that, all things considered, do not make the world a better place than it could have been.³ The phrase, “than it could have been,” suggests that better outcomes were possible should choosers have selected or allowed some other option.⁴

³ I am grateful to David Ray Griffin for introducing me to this general understanding of genuine evil. Among his many books, see especially *God, Power, and Evil: A Process Theodicy* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004).

⁴ I develop the notion of genuine evil in my book *Defining Love: A Philosophical, Scientific, and Theological Engagement*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2010), and *The Uncontrolling Love of God: An Open and Relational Account of Providence* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Academic, 2015).

A few believers say genuine evils never occur. They claim that God allows all things -- pleasant and unpleasant, beautiful and ugly, romantic and savage -- because each plays a part in God's good overall plan. Nothing is genuinely evil, they say, from a God's-eye perspective.

But our day-to-day experiences betray the idea that all things are part of God's overall plan. Even though some say genuine evils never occur, they act otherwise. Their moments of regret, guilt, remorse, relief, indignation, etc. suggest they really do think some events are worse than they might have been. In fact, the Christian doctrine of sin implies that we sometimes make choices that are worse than other possible choices. Consequently, we deep down believe genuine evils occur, even if some people deny this verbally.

We who sometimes do evil know something about what goodness entails (Mt. 7:11).

Five Dimensions for Solving the Problem of Evil

The solution to the problem of evil I offer has five dimensions. Each dimension is integral to the overall solution, but I will spend the majority of this essay focusing on one. I call it the sovereignty dimension, and it is likely the most controversial. Before I address it, however, let me touch briefly on the other four. No one of these dimensions, by itself, can carry the weight necessary for a comprehensive solution to the problem of evil. But together they solve the problem of evil.

I label the other four dimensions to my solution the empathetic, didactic, therapeutic, and strategic. The empathetic dimension says that God empathizes with all who suffer. Jürgen Moltmann describes the suffering God well in his monumental work, *The Crucified God*.⁵ In Jesus Christ's life, suffering, death, and resurrection, we find the revelation that God is affected by what affects us. In the Old Testament, we find numerous references to God interacting with creation and whom creatures influence.⁶ Such suffering love denies the ancient doctrine of

⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (London: SCM, 1974).

⁶ A number of Old Testament scholars describe God as both affecting others and being affect, but Terrence Fretheim offers some of the most powerful arguments. See, for instance, *Creation*

impassibility, which says God is unaffected by the joys and sorrows of creation. With most Christian scholars today, I believe God rejoices with those who rejoice and mourns with those who mourn, because creaturely rejoicing and mourning genuinely affects God.

I learned the power of this dimension to my problem of evil solution when I was newly married. As a young husband, I discovered that my wife often wanted me to listen and empathize when she experienced conflict, tension, and pain. Empathy is what she needed most. In fact, we all want to know someone feels at least some of what we feel, because we want to know others understand – at least to some degree – what we experience.

In God, Christians have one who empathizes more fully than any other empathizer possibly could. This is the God whom the Apostle Paul calls “the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation.” This God “consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God” (2 Cor. 1:3-4). God rejoices with those who rejoice and mourns with those who mourn. Although the empathetic dimension plays a significant role in my five-fold solution to the problem of evil, it cannot solve the problem alone.

The didactic dimension in my solution says God can use evil to do good in general and build our characters in particular. This does not mean that God causes or allows genuine evil. But God works in and with whatever happens in the world, good or evil, to call creation toward goodness, shalom, or the kingdom of God. God squeezes whatever good can be squeezed from evil events that God did not want in the first place. We can therefore rejoice “in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope” (Rm. 5:3-4).

The didactic dimension helps us make sense of testimonies about how suffering and pain made believers stronger. We can all look back to times when our lives were difficult and

Untamed: The Bible, God, and Natural Disasters (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2010), *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 2005), and *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

see how God has used those experiences to make us better in some way. It is the didactic dimension to the problem of evil that undergirds the popular saying, "No pain, no gain."

Unfortunately, some believers use the didactic dimension to claim God causes or allows evil as part of some original blueprint or master plan.⁷ If all evil is part of some master plan, those who say rape, genocide, and murder are "God's will" would be correct. The blueprint approach denies that any evil is genuinely evil.⁸ But I find this explanation repugnant! It makes little sense if God loves perfectly and we have some idea of the meaning of good and evil. Consequently, without the other dimensions to my five-fold solution to the problem of evil to complement it, the didactic dimension can undermine the conviction that God loves perfectly.

The therapeutic dimension to my problem of evil solution says God heals, to whatever extent possible, those who experience injury, destruction, and death. God works with every situation and creature to bring healing to whatever degree achievable, given forces, factors, and other circumstances. Some healing occurs in this life; other healing must wait until heaven.

Healing comes in various forms. Most often, those with expertise in medicine, psychology, or other health-care professions are God's primary care providers. But sometimes healing comes miraculously, as God acts specially in unusual ways to do something good.⁹ We who endure pain and injury can trust that God works to bring healing.

Solving the problem of evil includes the hope of salve-ation, the salving healing of our sin-sick and evil-torn lives. Whether this healing occurs in our present reality or in the afterlife,

⁷ The most influential form of this argument in contemporary scholarship comes from John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1966). One of the best scholarly criticisms of this view comes from C. Robert Mesle, *John Hick's Theodicy: A Process Humanist Critique* (London: MacMillan, 1991).

⁸ Gregory Boyd is one of the most eloquent critics of the blueprint model of providence. See his essay, "God Limits His Control" in *Four Views of Divine Providence*, Stanley N Gundry and Dennis W. Jowers, eds. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2011), 183-208.

⁹ I develop a defense of miracles in chapter eight of *The Uncontrolling God*.

we can say with psalmist, "Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all God's benefits -- who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion" (103:3-4).

The fourth dimension I mention points to the role creatures can play in preventing evil. I call it the strategic dimension. God calls us to be co-laborers in the work to overcome evil. God's intentions for the good of the world include a necessary role for creatures, especially humans. God asks us to join in the creation project by living lives of love, which means doing good and avoiding evil. This cooperating includes personal, social, environmental, and even cosmological aspects.

I think the Revised Standard Version translation of Romans 8:28 presents well the cooperative nature of the strategic dimension: "We know that *in* everything God works for good *with* those who love him" (RSV; italics added). The two italicized words point to the idea that God is active in the midst of all situations. And we show our love for God and others as we cooperate with God's purposes and calling. We are, to use the Apostle Paul's metaphor, the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27), and we are called to be God's fellow-laborers in establishing the kingdom (Mt. 6:38).

The strategic dimension to my problem of evil solution is one of the most important, because solving the problem of evil involves responses to God's leading. It is hard to overemphasize the role God invites us to take in establishing the reign of love. But even this dimension on its own cannot solve the problem of evil. After all, those who believe a sovereign God can do anything rightly wonder why God doesn't intervene to help victims when creaturely co-workers fail to cooperate with God's good purposes. Saying, "We are the solution to the problem of evil," isn't enough.

Having looked at four dimensions to my problem of evil solution, I'm ready to address the dimension that will be my primary focus. To explore the sovereignty issue well, let me offer a particular example of genuine evil. I think keeping an example in mind encourages us to take with immense seriousness both the grisly reality of some evil events and the great need to reform our view of God.

Let's consider the case of Amy Monroe. Amy was a nine-year-old girl in Wisconsin. She was kidnapped while walking home from school one day. The kidnapper took her into the nearby woods, raped Amy viciously, and strangled her. A passerby later reported having heard a female voice say, "Please, no! Help me, God!" But the passerby thought the cries were a joke. Searchers found Amy's violated body days later.

It is difficult to hear the story of Amy Monroe and believe that what she endured was not genuine evil. The world surely would have been a better place had she lived and her rapist and murderer not done his horrific actions. This event was not necessary; this is an example of genuine evil.

The question naturally arises for we who believe in God: Why didn't our loving and mighty Creator prevent Amy's kidnapping, rape, and strangulation?

God Can't

The sovereignty dimension of my five-fold solution to the problem of evil relies upon an idea found at the conclusion of the short biblical passage I offered at the outset. The verse says this: "Although we are faithless, [God] remains faithful, for he cannot deny himself." The sovereignty dimension to my solution says that for God to prevent singlehandedly the evil done to Amy, God would have to deny himself. But God *cannot* do this. God's nature is others-empowering love, and this love is necessarily uncontrollable.

Let me explain.

A good number of philosophers and theologians throughout history have admitted there are some things God cannot do. Many have said, for instance, that God cannot do that which is illogical. God cannot make a round square or a man both a bachelor and married

simultaneously. Thomas Aquinas describes this limitation on God this way, "Whatever involves a contradiction is not within the scope of God's omnipotence."¹⁰

Many theologians have also said God cannot change the past. God cannot change history so that World War I never occurred, for instance. God cannot undo the Nazi Holocaust. In the case of Amy Monroe, God cannot change the fact that she was kidnapped, raped, and murdered. After an event occurs, God cannot alter it, because what's done is done.

Thomas Aquinas is again helpful in explaining this inability on God's part: "Some things... at one time were in the nature of possibility... but now fall short of the nature of possibility," Aquinas says. Therefore, "God is not able to do them, because they themselves cannot be done."¹¹ Reverse causation is impossible, even for God.

Other theologians say there are things God cannot do by virtue of what it means to be divine.¹² In fact, biblical writers list some of these limitations on God. For instance, God cannot lie (Hebrews 6:18), cannot be tempted by evil (James 1:12), and cannot become exhausted (Isaiah 40:28). God cannot do these things, because to do them would require God to be something other than deity.

In addition to the limitations mentioned in the Bible, scholars typically say that God cannot decide to be 909 instead of triune. God cannot make another God, cannot decide to stop existing, cannot sin, and cannot make a rock so big that even God cannot lift it. These

¹⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Volume I, ques. 15 art. 3 (New York: McGraw Hill, 1963), 163-64.

¹¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Volume I, ques. 25 art. 4 (New York: Cosmo, 2007), 139. Jonathan Edwards puts it this way: "In explaining the nature of necessity, that in things which are past, their past existence is now necessary" (Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, s.12 [New York: Leavitt & Allen, 1857], 10.). See also Alvin Plantinga, "On Ockham's Way Out," *Faith and Philosophy*, 3.3 (July, 1986): 235-269.

¹² Jacob Arminius offers a long list of things God cannot do in "Twenty-Five Public Disputations," in *The Works of James Arminius*, 135.

limitations derive from God's own nature, not from some outside force or factor. "When we make such assertions as these," says Jacob Arminius, "we do not inflict an injury on the capability of God." We must take care, says Arminius, "that things unworthy of Him not be attributed to his essence, his understanding, and his will."¹³

All of this means the idea of limitless divine sovereignty is preposterous.

These are important limitations to God's power, and each is significant for the sovereignty dimension of my problem of evil solution. But we can admit that God cannot do the things listed above and yet not have a solution to the problem of evil.

To illustrate, let's return to Amy Monroe's kidnapping, rape, and murder. Most believers think God's sovereignty is such that God would not need to break the laws of logic to prevent Amy's suffering. Stopping that suffering would also not have involved a logical contradiction. Preventing Amy's moment-by-moment horror would also not have required God to change the past. Most believers think God has the kind of power needed to prevent genuine evils as they happen. And, by most counts, preventing this genuine evil would not require God to become nine hundred and nine instead of triune, would not have required God to sin, or would not have required God to do a host of things most scholars say God cannot do by virtue of the divine nature.

We need one more claim about God's nature to understand why God did not prevent the atrocities done to Amy. This claim says God's nature of love makes it impossible for God to withdraw, override, or fail to provide the freedom, agency, or basic existence to others. God's giving of existence in love also means God cannot usurp the law-like regularities – what many call "the laws of nature" – we see in the world. Self-giving love is an aspect of God's eternal nature, and God cannot deny this nature. Because of love, God must give.

¹³ Ibid.

God’s loving nature prevents God from singlehandedly preventing Amy’s kidnapping, rape, and murder.

Essential Kenosis

The sovereignty dimension of my problem of evil solution is part of a broader model of providence I call “essential kenosis.”¹⁴ Many Christians are familiar with the word “kenosis,” because the verb form of this Greek word appears about a half dozen times in the New Testament. The most discussed appearance of kenosis comes in the Apostle Paul’s letter to believers in Philippi. Paul writes,

Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself (kenosis), taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death -- even death on a cross (Phil. 2:3-7, NRSV).

Theologians interpret this passage in various ways and apply it to various issues. In earlier eras, theologians turned to it when wondering how Jesus is both human and divine. In recent decades, however, theologians appeal to kenosis primarily to describe how Jesus reveals God’s nature. Jesus’ kenosis tells us who God is and how God acts. Many now read kenosis primarily in light of phrases such as “taking the form of a slave,” “humbled himself,” and “death on a cross.” These passages focus on Jesus’ diminished power and service to others.¹⁵

¹⁴ I explain essential kenosis in greater detail in my book *The Uncontrolling Love of God*. See also *The Nature of Love: A Theology*, chs. 4-5, and *Defining Love: A Scientific, Philosophical, and Theological Engagement* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2010), ch. 6.

¹⁵ See the work of biblical scholars such as James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: An Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation*, 2nd ed., (London: SCM, 1989), 116; Donald Macleod, *The Person of Christ: Contours of Christian Theology* (Leicester: InterVarsity,

The kenosis passage suggests that Jesus reveals God's power to be persuasive and vulnerable, not overpowering and aloof. God's power is qualified, other-oriented, and demonstrates servant love. As the "exact representation of [God's] nature" (Heb. 1:3), Jesus' kenosis helps us understand God's nature in light of incarnate love.

The word "kenosis" sits in the midst of what biblical scholars believe to be a poem or hymn. This genre of literature allows for a wide range of interpretations. Scholars translate kenosis variously as "self-emptying," "self-withdrawing," "self-limiting," or "self-giving."

For a number of reasons, I prefer the translation of kenosis as "self-giving" to the alternatives. I believe it better describes the relational nature of love, both creaturely and divine, described in the context of the passage. And it overcomes problems associated with the other translations of the word.¹⁶

Perhaps the most common contemporary rendering of kenosis says God *voluntarily* self-limits. John Polkinghorne says, for instance, "Divine power is deliberately self-limited." God essentially retains the capacity to control others but willingly self-restricts. Polkinghorne spells out what voluntary self-limitation means for the problem of evil: "God does not will the act of a murderer or the destructive force of an earthquake, but allows both to happen in a world in which divine power is deliberately self-limited to allow causal space for creatures."¹⁷

I have already noted problems that emerge when we think God allows evil. The God who voluntarily chooses not to prevent genuine evil is not steadfastly loving. The God who voluntarily self-limits ought to become un-self-limited, for the sake of love, to prevent genuine evil. Kenosis understood as voluntarily divine self-limitation makes God culpable for failing to prevent genuine evil.

1998), 215; Ralph P. Martin, *Carmen Christi: Philippians 2:5-11 in Recent Interpretation and in the Setting of Early Christian Worship*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1983), 170.

¹⁶ See a full explanation of my reasons in *The Uncontrolling Love of God*, ch. 7.

¹⁷ John Polkinghorne, "Kenotic Creation and Divine Action," in *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, John Polkinghorne, ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001), 102.

Take Amy Monroe's situation again. The God who voluntarily self-limits should have become un-self-limited to prevent Amy's horrors. Allowing Amy's suffering did not promote her good, the perpetrator's good, or the common good. Those who believe God voluntarily self-limits also believe God could have prevented what happened to Amy.

I cannot imagine that Jesus would stand by self-limited as Amy was raped and murdered. I cannot imagine Jesus would say to Amy, "I could stop this. But I think it's best for me to stay out of it." If Jesus truly reveals God's love, as Philippians and other biblical passages suggest, we have a strong Christological reason to doubt the validity of voluntary divine self-limitation.

If I cannot imagine Jesus standing idly by self-restrained while Amy was raped and strangled, it makes little sense to me to say God would remain self-limited and not prevented this evil. After all, I believe Jesus reveals God's kenotic love.

Essential Kenosis and Evil

In light of the problems that kenosis as voluntary self-limitation presents, I turn to explain how the "essential" in essential kenosis overcomes these problems. Essential kenosis considers the self-giving love of God revealed in Jesus Christ to be logically primary and necessary in God's eternal essence. "The steadfast love of the Lord endures forever," as the Psalmist puts it (136:1-28), because God's nature of self-giving love is eternal.

Essential kenosis says limitations to divine power derive from God's nature of love. The Creator does not voluntarily self-limit, nor does creation rule its Maker. Instead, God's self-giving, uncontrolling love is a necessary, eternal, and logically primary aspect of the divine nature. This logical priority qualifies how God works in and with creation. God cannot singlehandedly fix problems or control others.

God relentlessly and essentially expresses love in the quest to promote overall well-being. God could no more stop loving than stop existing.¹⁸ Because God must act like God, God must love: God "cannot deny himself."

The sovereignty dimension of my problem of evil solution draws from the essential kenosis claim that God necessarily gives freedom, agency, and law-like regularities to creation. The result is the bold but helpful claim God *cannot* singlehandedly prevent genuine evil. Combining the Philippians passage about kenosis and the Timothy passage about God's inability to deny himself, we can say the following:

God cannot deny God's own nature, which necessarily expresses self-giving love.

Essential kenosis says that God always gives freedom, agency, self-organization, and law-like regularity to creation, depending on the complexity of the creatures involved. The gifts God gives are, to use the Apostle Paul's language, "irrevocable" (Rm. 11:29). Out of love, God necessarily gifts others in their moment-by-moment existence, and God cannot rescind these endowments.

John Wesley describes this aspect of essential kenosis well. When explaining providence, Wesley says, "Were human liberty taken away, men would be as incapable of virtue as stones. Therefore (with reverence be it spoken) the Almighty himself *cannot* do this thing. He cannot thus contradict himself or undo what he has done."¹⁹

¹⁸ God is not free to choose *whether* to love, because God's nature is love. However, God freely chooses *how* to express love in each moment. God is free in this important sense, because in each moment God freely chooses to love one way instead of another. Love is necessary in God's essence but expressed freely in relations with creatures. I explain this in greater detail in *The Uncontrolling Love of God*.

¹⁹ John Wesley, "On Divine Providence," Sermon 67, *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), paragraph 15. Wesley also says that God does not "take away your

Because God *must* give freedom and cannot override the gift given, we should not blame God when creatures misuse freedom. Creatures using freedom wrongly are blameworthy. Parenting illustrates this. The rapist's parents are causally responsible for bringing him into the world. Their sexual union made his existence possible. But we would not consider them morally culpable when their son freely chooses rape. We blame the rapist, not his parents, although the parents were originally responsible for his existence.²⁰

In Amy's situation, essential kenosis says God necessarily gave freedom to her rapist and murderer. Giving freedom to all creatures complex enough to use it is part of God's necessary, steadfast, self-giving love. God cannot fail to provide, withdraw, or override the freedom a perpetrator of evil expresses. God must give freedom, even to those who use it wrongly. Consequently, God is not culpable for preventing the horror Amy suffered.

God must give and cannot take away free will.

Saying that God must give freedom and cannot take it away does not solve the problem of evil fully. After all, we could imagine scenarios in which Amy's suffering was prevented by changes among small entities or organisms that we doubt possess full-blown freedom. The evil-preventing scenarios we might imagine could involve interruptions of the law-like regularities of nature, or what many call "the laws of nature." Consequently, the sovereignty dimension of my

liberty, your power of choosing good or evil." He argues that "[God] did not *force* you, but being *assisted* by [God's] grace you, like Mary, *chose* the better part." "The General Spread of the Gospel," Sermon 63, *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 281 (italics in original).

²⁰ It is important to distinguish between God partly causing an occurrence when giving freedom and God being morally culpable for failing to prevent evil. Because God providentially gives freedom to creatures complex enough to express it, God gives freedom that creatures can use for good or evil (or morally neutral) activities. God acts as a necessary, though partial, cause for all creaturely activity.

problem of evil solution also includes an explanation of why God does not manipulate and control lesser entities or laws of nature.

Essential kenosis says God cannot control lesser entities or interrupt law-like regularities and thereby prevent genuine evil. In the case of less complex entities, God necessarily gives the gifts of agency and self-organization. Doing so is part of divine love, because God loves *all* creation. This means God cannot withdraw, override, or fail to provide the agency and self-organizing of any simpler organism or entity. The love of God is also uncontrolling among the less complex creatures and entities of our universe.

Realizing that God cannot singlehandedly prevent suffering by manipulating simple entities helps us make sense of what many call "natural evils." This means, for instance, we should not accuse God of causing or allowing birth defects, cancer, infections, disease, hurricanes, earthquakes, tsunamis, or other illnesses and catastrophes. Such calamities do not represent God's will.

In the case of Amy's rape and murder, God could not have singlehandedly caused her rapist to become intensely sick, blind, or immobile. To do so would have required God to withdraw, override, or fail to provide agency and self-organization to his body's basic organisms, entities, and structures. A loving God who necessarily self-gives cannot do this or interrupt other natural processes. To do so would require God to "deny himself," to use the language of the Timothy passage again.

God's love necessarily gives agency and self-organization.

Essential kenosis says God cannot interrupt the law-like regularities of existence. God cannot do so, because these regularities derive from God's persistent and loving activity in creation. God's love is the source of the existence of all that exists, and God's existence-giving love is irrevocable.

The regularities we witness in our world are neither voluntarily inserted by God nor do they transcend God from the outside. God's loving nature is the ultimate source of creation's law-like regularities, and the God who loves necessarily cannot interrupt the love divinely

expressed to all. Rather than being an external watchmaker, God's ongoing, ever-influential love conditions all creation as the One in whom all things live and move and their being (Acts 17:28).

In Amy's case, God could not have singlehandedly prevented her rape and murder by interrupting the law-like regularities we find in nature. Because God necessarily gives existence to all creation and because God's love for creation manifests law-like regularities, God alone could not have averted this tragedy. To prevent Amy's rape and murder by causing a tree to fall on her perpetrator or suspending the laws of gravity momentarily, God would need to forego loving interaction with some portion of creation. Because God loves *all* creation and God "cannot deny himself," God could not have prevented Amy's suffering by failing to express self-giving, other-empowering, and existence-providing love.

Divine love necessarily compels God to act in ways that generate law-like regularity.

Anticipating Questions

When I explain my five-fold solution to the problem of evil and essential kenosis, those who hear it often agree it makes sense. Essential kenosis carries through the logic of God's love and creaturely freedom, agency, and law-like regularity. Of course, believers reluctant to place any limitations on God's power – despite what some biblical passages, our experience, and reason suggests – are usually not open to essential kenosis.

Those open to reconceiving God's power in the way I have suggested, however, often ask two questions in response. I want to answer those questions as I conclude, in part because I imagine my conversation partners in this book may have them.

The first question has to do with God being unable to do what creatures sometimes can do so. In terms of Amy's situation, we might ask the question this way, "We can imagine the passerby who heard Amy's cries walking into the woods and forcibly stopping the rape and murder. Perhaps the rescuer hit the rapist over the head with a log, knocking him unconscious. Or perhaps the rescuer had a gun and threatened to shoot the rapist if he did not let Amy go.

Or perhaps the passerby nonviolently placed her body between the rapist and Amy. If we creatures sometimes thwart evil, why can't a loving God so?"

To answer this question, we need to look at the traditional Christian view that God is an omnipresent spirit. Those who affirm this view often fail to think through its implications. Being an omnipresent spirit affords God both unique abilities and limitations.

To say God is a loving spirit is to say, in part, that God does not have a divine body. God is "incorporeal," to use the traditional language, or as Jesus puts it, "God is spirit" (Jn. 4:24).²¹ Scripture and tradition have also said that God is omnipresent or universal. Rather than being localized in a particular place in the way creatures are, the Creator is present to all creation.

Believers have tried to describe God as the omnipresent Spirit in various ways. There is a venerable tradition within Christian theology, for instance, that says God is like a mind or soul. This description is helpful in part, because we cannot perceive minds or souls with our five senses. And yet we believe minds or souls have causal influence.

Another analogy says God's incorporeal being is like air or wind. This description is helpful in part, because wind has a physical dimension, although we cannot see it. Wind also exerts causal force. Comparing God to a mind, soul, or wind has biblical justification, and these words emphasize the incorporeal aspect of God's being. But they do not do full justice to God's omnipresence.

All analogies between God's being and creaturely being fail in some way, of course. My main point in exploring God as a loving omnipresent spirit is to help us see why God cannot prevent evil in the ways creatures sometimes do. As an omnipresent spirit with no localized

²¹ Those like me who say God is an omnipresent spirit do not also need to claim God has no physicality whatsoever. We can believe a physical dimension exists in the divine presence, although we cannot perceive it with our five senses. I explore this in a number of publications, but especially in *The Uncontrolling Love of God*, ch. 7, and "The Divine Spirit as Causal and Personal," *Zygon* 48:2 (2013): 466-477.

divine body, God cannot exert divine bodily influence as a localized corpus. This means God cannot walk into the woods and use a divine body to stop Amy's perpetrator. God does not have divine hands to grab a log or put a divine body between Amy and her perpetrator.

God cannot prevent evil in the way creatures sometimes can, because God does not have a localized divine body; God is an omnipresent spirit.²²

The careful reader will have noticed that I have said "God alone" cannot stop the evil using a divine body. And I have said God cannot prevent evil "singlehandedly." I include these important qualifiers, because I believe creatures with hands, feet, and bodies can respond well to God's call and use their creaturely bodies to prevent evil. Of course, creatures can also respond poorly to God's call, disobey, or ignore God's leading. When they do so, God's will is not done on earth, as it is heaven.

The second question has less to do with the problem of evil and more to do with how we generally think about God's activities in relation to Christian doctrines. In terms of Amy's situation, we might ask the question this way: "If we say that God's self-giving love cannot stop Amy's murder and rape singlehandedly, does this mean we must reject the vision of God's power we find in the Bible, assumed by many throughout history, and apparent in some Christian doctrines?"

Christians intend for Scripture to inform their views of God's action. For this reason, the issue of biblical interpretation plays a key role in how we answer this second question. In response, let me begin by saying that I have no doubt that many have *interpreted* the Bible as describing a God capable of controlling others. This interpretation, however, unfortunately

²² Depending on one's view of the incarnation, of course, one may think Jesus is an exception to the view that God does not have a localized divine body. That discussion requires a book. But I agree with many theologians who distinguish between God's essential and eternal being and God's temporary incarnation as a localized human, Jesus of Nazareth.

makes God culpable for failing to prevent evil in general and Amy's suffering in particular. And for this reason and others, we ought to look for an alternative interpretative lens.

The challenge as I see it is to interpret the Bible in terms of the overall drift, general tenor, or broad scope of its witness to God and creation. As I and many other Christians read it, the Bible's primary or dominant view is that God's primary attribute is love. This means we can interpret biblical passages pertaining to divine power and might in light of those pertaining to divine love and generosity, especially if, as essential kenosis argues, self-giving love logically comes first in God's nature.

As I read scripture, the uncontrolling love of God arises as the main and overriding theme. Taking what I find as the central theme of scripture provides a hermeneutical lens for interpreting the rest. Additionally, I find no biblical passage that explicitly says God entirely controls others. The closest the Bible comes to saying so may be the passages that speak of God hardening Pharaoh's heart, but those need not be interpreted as saying so.²³

There are definitely passages that say or describe God as almighty. I strongly affirm them. But these biblical passages are plausibly interpreted as describing a God who is *mightier than* all others, is the source of *might for* all others, and exerts *might upon* all others. God can be almighty in these senses without being capable of preventing evil by controlling others. We can consistently interpret the overall tenor of the Bible as promoting the uncontrolling love of God. The God who emerges from this interpretation is magnificent, glorious, awesome, and almighty.

Unfortunately, most of the greatest theologians in the Christian tradition have not taken the uncontrolling love of God as their hermeneutical lens nor their primary theme when

²³ Other verses in the story say Pharaoh hardened his own heart. More importantly, translators have assumed divine coercion when choosing words like "hardened" to describe God's activity in relation to Pharaoh. But other English words are also viable translations, and these do not have the connotations of coercion that "hardening" may have. See Terence Fretheim, *Exodus: Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Westminster/John Knox, 2010)

formulating Christian doctrines. Most have assumed God did, does, and/or someday will entirely control others. Most seem not to have considered the possibility that God's self-giving love comes logically first in God's nature. Few systematic theologians seem to have begun with the conviction that God's nature is love and thought through systematically various Christian doctrines using that orienting conviction.²⁴

I believe a robust Christian systematic theology using God's uncontrolling love as its orienting concern can make better sense of Scripture and the doctrines of the Christian faith. To defend and develop this claim well, however, would require at least another book. But let me touch briefly on a few of the issues:

The uncontrolling love of God provides better grounds for the doctrine of original and ongoing creation. After all, biblical writers say God initially created the universe in relation to something not nothing (Gen. 1:1-3).²⁵ God's uncontrolling love continues to create, and this view of God as Creator is consonant with contemporary scientific theories, such as evolution. The miracles we read of in the Old and New Testaments often describe creaturely cooperation, and sometimes miracles were thwarted because creatures did not cooperate with God's uncontrolling love. God expressed uncontrolling love in the Holy Spirit inception of Jesus, in which Mary cooperates with God's incarnation plans: "be it unto me," she says. Jesus' life powerfully expresses the uncontrolling love of God, as Jesus cooperates with Abba. In his life and death, Jesus reveals God's kenotic nature, which does not control others (Phil. 2:3-7). We can even explain God's resurrecting Jesus from the dead as possible through God's

²⁴ I explore some theological failures of those who fail to take the uncontrolling love of God as their orienting concern for their formal theologies in *The Nature of Love*.

²⁵ Genesis 1 and other biblical creation narratives always describe God's creating in relation to something (chaos, water, deep, etc.). No biblical passage says God creates from literally nothing. I explain this in my essay, "God Always Creates out of Creation in Love: *Creatio ex Creatione a Natura Amoris*," in *Theologies of Creation: Creatio Ex Nihilo and Its New Rivals* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 109-122.

uncontrolling love and the cooperation of Jesus’ body and spirit.²⁶ A participatory view of eschatology emphasizes the view that God’s consummating power is love and not total control.²⁷

Conclusion

I have offered a five-fold solution to the problem of evil. The sovereignty dimension to the solution may be the most controversial. It is based on the essential kenosis notion that God necessarily gives freedom, agency, and regularities to creation, because God’s nature is self-giving love. God cannot withdraw, override, or fail to provide freedom, agency, or law-like regularities. God’s love comes first, and it necessarily gives.

God’s inability to prevent genuine evil is not based upon some exterior force or demi-god. But neither is this inability a voluntary self-limitation. Instead, God’s limitations derive from God’s nature, in which self-giving love – kenosis – is essential to God and logically primary. God cannot deny this nature of love, because God cannot deny himself.

Essential kenosis offers a plausible answer to why God didn’t prevent the atrocity Amy suffered and why God doesn’t prevent countless other genuine evils we witness in our world.

²⁶ I argue for a noncoercive resurrection, as Jesus’ body and spirit cooperate with God’s raising activity, in *The Nature of Love*, ch. 5.

²⁷ I explore this briefly at the conclusion of *The Nature of Love*