

**How Can God Be All-Powerful and
Totally Loving when He Planned a World
With Sin and Suffering?**

Partial Example

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Introduction

Christianity, a worldwide religion, has been estimated to have anywhere from 1,500 million¹ to 1,759 million followers.² The astronomical numbers reflect a movement of people who believe that this faith best represents the truth for a coherent worldview and way of life. In some instances Christians have even been called followers of the way (Acts 9:2; 19:9),³ signifying the belief that Christianity is the way to real life and eternity with God, something that Jesus Christ stated (John 14:6).

Christianity's most focal doctrine is the Triunity of God. This doctrine that God is Father, Son, and Spirit, "distinguishes the Christian faith from all others" as well it establishes "the basis for all that we hold dear as Christian believers."⁴ Within the Godhead Christianity has historically embraced the idea that this God has at least three attributes that mark the Christian God from false ideas of God. The three characteristics have been historically termed: (1) Omnipotence (all-powerful), (2) Omnipresence (present everywhere), and (3) Omniscience (all knowing). These three attributes of God have been hallmarks of the Christian church.⁵

Below are footnotes. This is the proper way to site sources from your bibliography.

¹ Michael Keene, *Introducing Christianity* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 6.

² David S. Dockery, *Holman Bible Handbook*, Gen Ed. David S. Dockery (Nashville TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 1992), 881.

³ Keith J. Hardman, "Christian," in *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, Gen. Ed. J.D. Douglas (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1978), 220.

⁴ Bruce Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance* (Wheaton ILL: Good News Publishers, 2005), 16.

⁵ Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology: God and Creation*, Vol. 2 (Bloomington MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2003), 158, 180, 210.

To compromise any one of these three points can place one “outside of the orthodox view of God”⁶ as well as creating a “finite God,”⁷ which of course would mean idolatry as one worships a false image of God.

However, many people have wrestled with the questions concerning these three attributes in regard to how these apply to the world in which God created. In light of those three characteristics are other fundamental traits that mark the Christian God from all pagan notions or false gods. For example, God is not only all-powerful, but he is also holy⁸ and perfect as well as omnibenevolent⁹ in love and goodness. But therein rests a major theological and philosophical tension. How can God be holy, sovereign or omnipotent, and loving since there is the stark reality that sin, death, suffering, and pain have entered into his universe? To some this idea of a sovereign, loving, and perfect God with a sinful universe presents an insurmountable problem that is irreconcilable. One of the most outspoken atheists in America, George Smith, has sharply criticized the Christian worldview stating that it is logically impossible for there to be a loving and sovereign God. He has said specifically:

It has often been argued by atheists that the concept of God is self-contradictory—that the existence of evil, for example, is incompatible with a God who is omnibenevolent (and would therefore desire that no evil befall his creatures), omnipotent (and was therefore able to create a world without evil), and omniscient (and would therefore have foreseen the evil aspects of his creation). And if this is so, then the atheist is fully justified in affirming the nonexistence of God by appealing to a self-evident axiom of logic, known as the Law of Non-Contradiction, according to which something cannot be both *A* and

⁶ Ibid, 158.

⁷ Ibid, 210.

⁸ Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology: A Popular Systematic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth* (Colorado Springs CO: Chariot Victor Publishing, 1999), 37.

⁹ Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology: God and Creation*, Vol. 2 (Bloomington MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2003), 367.

non-*A* at the same time and in the same respect. The existence of God, in other words, is logically impossible because the concept of God is self-contradictory.¹⁰

The same argument that Smith has made had been championed by others before him. The famous English philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872-1970), a Nobel prize winner and influential leader in the field of analytic philosophy,¹¹ argued along the same lines of the atheist George Smith. Russell claimed that there is no rationale for believing in a loving God when one sees so much evil and suffering in the world. In his mind the doctrine of God lacks any real support.¹² He attacked the Christian worldview asserting that one cannot reasonably believe God to be both good and omnipotent. He stated:

The world, we are told, was created by a God who is both good and omnipotent. Before He created the world He foresaw all the pain and misery that it would contain; He is therefore responsible for all of it. It is useless to argue that the pain in the world is due to sin. In the first place, this is not true; it is not sin that causes rivers to overflow their banks or volcanoes to erupt. But even if it were true, it would make no difference. If I were going to beget a child knowing that the child was going to be a homicidal maniac, I should be responsible for his crimes. If God knew in advance the sins of which man would be guilty, He was clearly responsible for all the consequences of those sins when He decided to create man. The usual Christian argument is that the suffering in the world is a purification for sin and is therefore a good thing. This argument is, of course, only a rationalization of sadism; but in any case it is a very poor argument. I would invite any Christian to accompany me to the children's ward of a hospital, to watch the suffering that is there being endured, and then to persist in the assertion that those children are so morally abandoned as to deserve what they are suffering. In order to bring himself to say this, a man must destroy in himself all feelings of mercy and compassion. He must, in short, make himself as cruel as the God in whom he believes. No man who believes that all is for the best in this suffering world can keep his ethical values unimpaired, since he is always having to find excises for pain and misery.¹³

¹⁰ George H. Smith, *Why Atheism?* (Amherst NY: Prometheus Books, 2000), 42.

¹¹ Ed Miller, *Questions that Matter: An Invitation to Philosophy* (USA: The McGraw Hill Companies, 1996), 591.

¹² Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian and other essays on religion and related subjects* (New York NY: Simon and Schuster, 1957), 50.

¹³ *Ibid*, 29-30.

Dr. Charles Hodge (1797-1878) realized this was a tension in his own day. The brilliant Princeton theologian correctly asked a similar question and probed such a tension:

How can the existence of evil, physical and moral, be reconciled with the benevolence and holiness of a God infinite in his wisdom and power? This is the question which has exercised the reason and tried the faith of men in all ages of the world. Such is the distance between God and man, such the feebleness of our powers, and such the limited range of our vision, it might seem reasonable to leave this question to be answered by God himself. If a child cannot rationally sit in judgment on the conduct of his parents, nor a peasant comprehend the affairs of an empire, we certainly are not competent to call God to account, or to ask of Him the reason of his ways. We might rest satisfied with the assurance that the Judge of all the earth must do right. These considerations, however, have not availed to prevent speculation on this subject. The existence of evil is constantly brought forward by skeptics as an argument against religion; and it is constantly in the minds of believers as a difficult and doubt. While it is our duty to obey the injunction, "Be still and know that I am God," it is no less our duty to protest against those solutions of this great problem which either destroy the nature of sin or the nature of God.¹⁴

The problem of how God can be both sovereign and loving while the universe struggles with sin and problems certainly strains the mind and faith of Christians. Some, as Dr. Hodge noted, try and answer this tension in such a way that either the holiness of God is destroyed and marred or the reality of sin is lessened, distorted, or extinguished to the point that sin is either an illusion or myth. Neither option, however, can honestly uphold the integrity of Scripture. If a person embraces the evangelical premise that the "supreme authority resides neither in the church nor in the individual, but in Christ and the biblical witness to him,"¹⁵ then the Christian must, if faithful to Peter's admonition to give a defense of the faith (1 Peter 3:15), seek to provide a faithful answer that both honors God and recognizes the reality of sin without doing an injustice to either concept. If, as Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer says, "love is the primary motive in God"¹⁶ then how can sin enter into his universe while God is totally in control of all things in his

¹⁴ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 429-430.

¹⁵ John Stott, *Evangelical Truth: A Personal Plea for Unity, Integrity, and Faithfulness* (Downers Grove Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 35.

¹⁶ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, Vols. 1 & 2 (Grand Rapids MI: Kregel Publications, 1993), 205.

universe without him being the author of sin and thus impure or unloving? Dr. R.K. McGregor Wright summarized the tension in three basis propositions that produce the intellectual struggle: “(1) God is omnipotent. (2) God is completely good. (3) Evil exists. . . . Presumably God is quite capable of preventing evils from coming into existence, or at the very least of eliminating all the evils that do exist. But evils still exist. If God is truly good, he would destroy evil. And if he is omnipotent, he certainly could. It seems that God may be either completely good or omnipotent, but he cannot be both if evil exists.”¹⁷ This is the nature of the problem and it is one of the major objections to the Christian worldview.¹⁸ Dr. Millard J. Erickson, in similar fashion with Dr. Charles Hodge though a more contemporary evangelical theologian, has even pointedly acknowledged how serious of an issue this is within the Christian worldview. He said,

It is important to recognize that this is a very severe problem, perhaps the most severe of all the intellectual problems facing theism. At one evangelical Christian college noted for the high intellectual level of the faculty and student body, a sampling of seniors showed that the problem of evil headed their list of the most vexing intellectual problems facing them in connection with their faith. We are dealing here with a problem that has occupied the attention of some of the greatest minds of the Christian church, intellects of such stature as Augustine and Thomas Aquinas.¹⁹

Of course because it seems to be such a dilemma, some may simply want to ignore this tension. As Dr. Hodge stated, skeptics use this as an argument against the faith itself and against those who embrace the faith. Therefore, this question if left alone could cause Christians to doubt and stumble in light of the skeptics’ criticisms of the supposedly illogical and contradictory nature of the Christian faith. Consequently, Christians would do well to heed the wisdom of Dr. Paige Patterson who once noted that he could not “support, or ultimately leave unchallenged, any

¹⁷ R.K. McGregor Wright, *No Place for Sovereignty: What’s Wrong with Freewill Theism* (Downers Grove Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 178.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 177.

¹⁹ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 1985), 414.

doctrine or approach that engenders doubt rather than faith” because in doing so the “potential cost is simply too great!”²⁰ Likewise, Christians must and should be ready to give a defense of how God can be absolutely sovereign (all powerful and in total control) and at the same time be fully loving and good (omnibenevolent) without being responsible for sin. To leave unexplained such a serious hole in the Christian faith could cause skeptics to miss the faith²¹ and cause Christians to at the minimum doubt or question the faith or at the most shipwreck from the faith (1 Tim. 1:18-20).

Therefore, in this research it remains imperative that the answers provided do not avoid the tough questions nor abdicate any valid biblical doctrine. Too much emphasis or too little emphasis on any clear revealed truth can lead to faulty logic, and thus empower and sustain a skeptic’s criticism, or it can lead to a jettison of some revealed doctrine in Scripture and consequently ruin a Christian’s stability and faith in God. This is seemingly the reason why Dr. John Feinberg has said that when one approaches this subject of God’s sovereignty, love, and sinlessness (Theodicy) that the theologian “must think holistically and synthetically as well as analytically; and he must seek to avoid creating a theological position that contains contradictions.”²² In other words, the Christian, who is a theologian of some kind and to some

²⁰ Paige Patterson, *Anatomy of a Reformation: The Southern Baptist Convention 1978-2004*, 18.

²¹ Reformed theology, the position advocated in this work, does not lessen the responsibility to witness and evangelize since in doing so it is an essential means to bring about the desired ends. For example, Paul said: “I endure all things for the sake of the elect that they may too obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.” (2 Tim. 2:10 ESV). Neither does a Reformed theology of necessity lead one to living in an irresponsible manner. For example, Dr. Paige Patterson has said: “For the most part, I observed that those who embraced Reformed theology tended to live remarkably saintly lives, an interesting reversal of what, according to Arminians, should have been the case. Arminians of various stripes, who believed that you could lose your salvation, seemed never to tire of accusing Calvinists of believing that once you were saved you were always saved and hence you could live like the devil. In fact, the lives of those espousing [Reformed theology] seemed to me, on the whole, to exhibit more of the holiness of God and fewer moral lapses than I found in the lives of their opponents.” Paige Patterson, “*Shoot-Out at the Amen Corral: Being Baptist Through Controversy*” in *Why I am a Baptist*, eds. Tom J. Nettles and Russell Moore (Nashville TN: Broadman and Homan Publishers, 2001), 69.

²² John S. Feinberg, “*Theodicy*,” in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 1984), 1086.

degree,²³ must look at the whole of God's revelation (holistically), not just one truth or one theme in Scripture, then he or she must seek to place all the discovered truths into some type of coherent or logical system (synthetically), the opposite of viewing everything as separate disjointed facts, and then once these steps have been taken the Christian must analyze or consider how all of that relates to one another (analytically). In essence when a Christian embarks upon the relationship between God's sovereignty, holiness, love, and his sinlessness in a sinful universe the *approach* and *answer* must rest within a *comprehensive* and *careful consideration* of all of the facts in Scripture.

²³ Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology: A Popular Systematic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth* (Colorado Springs CO: Chariot Victor Publishing, 1999), 9.

This is an example of an approved bibliography. Undergraduate Students must have a min. of 10 resources. Graduate Students must have a min. of 20 and doctoral students 30.

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