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**Engaging Theodicy: Human Suffering  
and the Sovereignty of God**

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**Introduction**

What are Christians, with their belief in a perfectly good and omnipotent God, to make of the reality of human suffering? Does the harsh reality of cancer, earthquakes, Tsunamis, war, and genocide invalidate the Christian belief in a sovereign and benevolent God? Though these are not new questions, and though the Christian church has produced no shortage of answers, people still suffer, and the questions continue to be posed with urgency. In this article, though I deal with theodicies, I do not offer one. I do not offer a theodicy because, first of all, they are unnecessary. David Bentley Hart notes that the argument that suffering invalidates belief in a good and sovereign God carries no logical weight.<sup>2</sup> Simply put, God does not

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<sup>2</sup> David Bentley Hart, *The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 13–14. “The entire case is premised upon an inane anthropomorphism--abstracted from [Footnote continued on next page ... ]

need to be justified on this account. The second reason I do not offer a theodicy is that I do not believe there is an adequate one. There is no answer to the problem of human suffering. And the answers offered come at too high a moral cost, as I shall demonstrate below. While I do not believe there is an answer to the problem of human suffering, I do believe there is a response, salvation in Jesus Christ.

In order to argue for this I engage with three positions on the relationship between God and suffering. First, I examine what I call the vulgar Calvinist viewpoint, exemplified by John Piper, the influential pastor emeritus of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota.<sup>3</sup> I engage with this viewpoint largely because of its prominence and because it most self-consciously embodies the perspective that God has purposes in suffering, a position I shall call into question. Other viewpoints will refer to divine purposes, but none with such full sighted awareness of what this entails than the vulgar Calvinists. Next, I explain what I deem a better response, articulated by Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart, who rejects divine purposes in human suffering. This treatment sets the basic parameters for what an adequate response to human suffering must involve, but it is not perfect, as a more sophisticated Calvinist, Michael Horton, helps to demonstrate. In a final, constructive section, I build upon St. Augustine of Hippo's notion of the sacrifice of the whole Christ in order to articulate a response to human suffering that remains within the parameters set by Hart, while also avoiding his shortcomings. I argue for an understanding of human suffering as neither necessary nor meaningless. I close with a brief practical exhortation.

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any living system of belief--that reduces God to a finite ethical agent, a limited psychological personality, whose purposes are measurable upon the same scale as ours, and whose ultimate ends for his creatures do not transcend the cosmos as we perceive it. This is not to say that it is an argument without considerable emotional and even moral force; but of logical force there is none. Unless one can see the beginning and end of all things, unless one possesses a divine, eternal vantage upon all of time, unless one knows the precise nature of the relation between divine and created freedom, unless one can fathom *infinite* wisdom, one can draw no conclusions from finite experience regarding the coincidence in God of omnipotence and perfect goodness. One may still hate God for worldly suffering, if one chooses, or deny him, but one cannot in this way 'disprove' him."

<sup>3</sup> I use "vulgar" in its more classical sense, which refers to the viewpoint of the common people. That it also has connotations of repulsion is not my primary motivation, but neither is it accidental to my choice of words.

### A. John Piper and “Vulgar Calvinism”

John Piper exemplifies what I call the vulgar Calvinist response to human suffering. Piper has drawn criticism for what might be called insensitive remarks in the face of natural disasters. For but one example, consider his characterization of the devastating Japanese earthquake in 2011 as “God's unilateral taking of thousands of lives.”<sup>4</sup> A more sophisticated and biblical theology undergirds such statements.<sup>5</sup> God ordains all things that come to pass whatsoever. This includes things that cause human suffering. However, God always has a good purpose in the suffering he ordains, even if that purpose remains mysterious. God’s sovereign rule extends to the free choices of his creatures, for which these creatures remain morally responsible. The two are compatible.<sup>6</sup> The decisions of God’s creatures may be morally reprehensible, and they may cause untold suffering, but God remains in control of even this. “This includes—as incredible and as unacceptable as it may currently seem—God’s having even brought about the Nazi's brutality at Birkenau and Auschwitz as well as the terrible killings of Dennis Rader and even the sexual abuse of a young child.”<sup>7</sup>

Such statements throw into bold relief the moral stakes involved in considering God’s relation to human suffering. Calvinists maintain that God does have purposes for suffering and that these purposes are good, even if sometimes those purposes are utterly mysterious.<sup>8</sup> Yet it is precisely here, in considering the purposes behind human suffering that the vulgar Calvinist view becomes woefully inadequate. Piper notes several benefits that can come through suffering such as growth

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<sup>4</sup> John Piper, “Japan: After Empathy and Aid, People Want Answers,” March 17, 2011, <http://www.desiringgod.org/blog/posts/japan-after-empathy-and-aid-people-want-answers>.

<sup>5</sup> For a statement of this theology at its most exegetically rigorous see John Piper, *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1-23*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> For expositions of these points see e.g., John Piper, “Suffering and the Sovereignty of God: Ten Aspects of God’s Sovereignty Over Suffering and Satan’s Hand in It,” in *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God*, ed. John Piper and Justin Taylor (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 17–30; Mark R. Talbot, “‘All the Good That Is Ours in Christ’: Seeing God’s Gracious Hand in the Hurts Others Do to Us,” in *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God*, ed. John Piper and Justin Taylor (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 31–77. While not himself Piper, Talbot’s contribution to the book edited by Piper shares a similar perspective with Piper.

<sup>7</sup> Talbot, “‘All the Good That Is Ours in Christ’: Seeing God’s Gracious Hand in the Hurts Others Do to Us,” 42.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 72–77.

in holiness, a preparation for greater glory in the life of the world to come, a motivation for missionary endeavors, and so on.<sup>9</sup> Yet none of these are adequate as *reasons for* suffering. Benefits they may be (but only for Christians, leaving much of the world's population in suffering that does not partake of such benefit), but as explanations they fall short.

Piper makes sense of the relation of God to suffering by way of a logically progressive argument. Because of the absolute goodness of God, “The righteousness of God is most basically his commitment to act unswervingly for his own name's sake and thus display his glory...He must always act out of a full allegiance to the infinite value of his own glorious and sovereign freedom: therein consists his unimpeachable righteousness.”<sup>10</sup> Part of God's glory is seen in his condemnation of evil. If there were no evil for God to condemn, he could not show these aspects of his glory. Therefore, “God is more glorious for having conceived and created and governed a world like this with all its evil.”<sup>11</sup> Piper's ultimate explanation runs thus:

The ultimate purpose of the universe is to display the greatness of the glory of the grace of God. The highest, clearest, surest display of that glory is in the suffering of the best Person in the universe for millions of undeserving sinners... In the life and death of Jesus Christ, suffering finds its ultimate purpose and ultimate explanation... Therefore, the ultimate reason that suffering exists in the universe is so that Christ might display the greatness of the glory of the grace of God by suffering in himself to overcome our suffering and bring about the praise of the glory of the grace of our God.<sup>12</sup>

Much more will be said about this below. For now, though, consider how hollow Piper's statement is: suffering exists so that Christ can display God's grace by his own suffering to overcome our suffering. Yet, if God has ordained the very suffering that Christ overcomes by his own suffering, is this really all that gracious? Is it heroic to set a house on fire so that one may dash into the flames and rescue the

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<sup>9</sup> John Piper, “Why God Appoints Suffering for His Servants,” in *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God*, ed. John Piper and Justin Taylor (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 91–109.

<sup>10</sup> Piper, *Justification of God*, 121–122. Piper pursues this argument with specific reference to predestination and election, which, while certainly not unrelated to the question of theodicy, would take us too far afield to pursue here.

<sup>11</sup> John Piper, “Is God Less Glorious Because He Ordained That Evil Be? Jonathan Edwards on the Divine Decrees,” in *Desiring God*, Revised and Expanded (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah, 2003), 350.

<sup>12</sup> John Piper, “The Suffering of Christ and the Sovereignty of God,” in *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God*, ed. John Piper and Justin Taylor (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 86, 89.

family within, particularly if the overwhelming majority of the family perishes in the flames? Piper is on the right track in seeing Christ as the answer to the problem. However, his theology also demands that Christ be the cause of the problem, which is an unacceptable solution.

### **B. David Bentley Hart and the Refusal of Theodicy**

Writing from an Eastern Orthodox perspective, David Bentley Hart does not mince words when it comes to Calvinism, labeling it “heresy,”<sup>13</sup> “blasphemous,”<sup>14</sup> “foolish,”<sup>15</sup> and as “provid[ing] an excellent moral case for atheism.”<sup>16</sup> Behind this incendiary rhetoric, though, lies an important and compelling critique of theologies like Piper’s. The symbol of this critique is Ivan Karamazov’s speeches to his brother, Alyosha, in Fyodor Dostoyevski’s *The Brothers Karamazov*. Ivan explains why he refuses to believe by first cataloguing a series of instances of horrific human suffering. He has no doubts, he explains, that God is able to bring about a spectacularly good result from all of this. He has no doubts that the salvation to be achieved by these reprehensible means will far outshine their ugliness, that all shall be right and that somehow everyone will be satisfied with the result. However, the cost is too high for him. Better no salvation at all than a salvation achieved by means of cruel suffering. That God would determine to employ such means, even for the purpose of bringing about good, is, for Ivan, inexcusable.<sup>17</sup> His speech on rebellion ends with passion:

I don’t want harmony [i.e., for all the world’s many evils to conspire for some greater good]. From love for humanity I don’t want it. I would rather be left with the unavenged suffering. I would rather remain with my unavenged suffering and unsatisfied indignation *even if I were wrong*. Besides, too high a price is asked for harmony; it’s beyond our means to pay so much to enter on it. And so I hasten to give back my entrance ticket, and if I am an honest man I am bound to give it back as soon as possible. And that I am doing. It’s not God that I don’t accept, Alyosha, only I most respectfully return Him the ticket...Imagine that you are creating a fabric of human destiny with the object of making men [*sic*] happy in the end, giving them peace and rest at last, but that it was essential and

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<sup>13</sup> Hart, *Doors of Sea*, 89.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>17</sup> Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: A.S. Barnes, 1943), 278–291.

inevitable to torture to death only one tiny creature—that baby beating its breast with its fist [one of the stories, culled from the real world by Dostoyevsky and presented by Ivan], for instance—and to found that edifice on its unavenged tears, would you consent to be the architect on those conditions?<sup>18</sup>

This, Hart contends, is “the only challenge to a confidence in divine goodness that should give Christians serious cause for deep and difficult reflection. Those Christian readers who have found it easy to ignore or dispense with the case that Dostoyevsky constructs for Ivan have not, I submit, fully comprehended that case.”<sup>19</sup> For Ivan Karamazov pulls back the curtain of theodicy, showing that it depends upon unacceptable assumptions and yields unconscionable results.

There is, of course, some comfort to be derived from the thought that everything that occurs at the level of secondary causality—in nature or history—is governed not only by a transcendent providence but by a universal teleology that makes every instance of pain and loss an indispensable moment in a grand scheme whose ultimate synthesis will justify all things. But one should consider the price at which such comfort is purchased: it requires us to believe in and love a God whose good ends will be realized not only in spite of—but entirely by way of—every cruelty, every fortuitous misery, every catastrophe, every betrayal, every sin the world has ever known; it requires us to believe in the eternal spiritual necessity of a child dying an agonizing death from diphtheria, of a young mother ravaged by cancer, of tens of thousands of Asians swallowed in an instant by the sea, of millions murdered in death camps and gulags and forced famines (and so on). It is a strange thing indeed to seek peace in a universe rendered morally intelligible at the cost of a God rendered morally loathsome.<sup>20</sup>

What, then, is the alternative? Hart’s alternative is the refusal of theodicy, the refusal to make suffering a meaningful component of a divine architecture. God is entirely good and entirely free. However, unlike Piper’s more voluntarist notion of freedom, Hart’s definition is classical: to be free is to be able to be according to the nature that one is. In this case, because God is good and because God is free, God cannot choose evil because he always acts in perfect accord with his nature.<sup>21</sup>

Hence evil can have no proper role to play in God's determination of himself or purpose for his creatures, even if by economy God can bring good from evil; it

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 291.

<sup>19</sup> Hart, *Doors of Sea*, 42.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 98–99.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 70–73.

can in no way supply any imagined deficiency in God's or creation's goodness; it has no 'contribution' to make. Being infinitely sufficient in himself, God has no need of a passage through sin and death to manifest his glory in his creatures, or to join them perfectly to himself, or to elevate their minds to the highest possible vision of the riches of his nature.<sup>22</sup>

If this is the case, then suffering cannot be “meaningful.” It is instead an absurdity and a parasite upon a good creation. It does not have ontological purchase, but is rather a privation of the good.

Hart is sure to acknowledge that God does indeed govern all things with a providence that so transcends finite causes that there is no competition between them and God. However, given the utter goodness and freedom of God, given the parasitic nature of evil, one cannot say that God wills sin, death, and so on.<sup>23</sup> Sin, evil, and suffering are a corruption of an originally good creation, which God has destined for himself. "God did not will the fall, and yet always wills all things toward himself, the entire history of sin and death is in an ultimate sense a pure contingency, one that is not as such desired by God, but that is nevertheless constrained by providence to serve his transcendent purpose."<sup>24</sup> Sin, death, and suffering come not from the divine will, but from the misused freedom of creatures. God permits the fall, the possibility of which is the price of allowing genuine freedom to his creatures.<sup>25</sup> I shall return to this point below, but for now, let us finish our survey of Hart's viewpoint.

God's intention for finite creation has always been union with himself. For this reason, the Son of God would have become incarnate even if there had been no fall, and the content of his Person would have been the same. Jesus of Nazareth, the fundamental revelation of God, does not depend upon sin, suffering, and death for his identity.<sup>26</sup> This is crucial to affirm if we are to not make God dependent upon sin and suffering for his self-realization. God brings about his purposes for creation through the contingencies of sin and death, but that

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 82–84.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 29–30, 68–69.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 108; David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 158.

purpose by no mean depends upon them. It takes on a distinct shape in the economy because of these evils, but its end point is the same.

This leads Hart to an understanding of the cross that is at once helpful and problematic. First, it is helpful because Hart insists that the cross must not be understood as God somehow endorsing or making peace with suffering and death. It is not a “validation of pain and death, but their overthrow.”<sup>27</sup> Hart recognizes that what the suffering need is not “a companion in pain” but “a savior.”<sup>28</sup> So called “tragic” readings of the cross simply make suffering and tragedy the way things are. They become part of the grain of the universe.<sup>29</sup> This, then, does not really help us make sense of God “in the ‘light’ of Auschwitz,” but rather “describ[es] a God who—it turns out—is actually simply the metaphysical ground of Auschwitz.”<sup>30</sup> This is ultimately the problem that plagues Piper’s theodicy. Making the cross the purpose of suffering means that the cross causes all suffering rather than saving us from it.

Therefore, Hart places nearly all of the weight upon Christ’s resurrection. Easter is not so much a validation of Christ’s suffering as it is of Christ himself.<sup>31</sup> The resurrection, claims Hart, robs death of meaning. This is shown by the fact of “the Father *having* to raise the Son for the sake of his love.”<sup>32</sup> The resurrection shows that “the singularity of suffering is no longer tragic (which is to say, ennobling), but merely horrible, mad, everlastingly unjust; it is the irruption of *thanatos* [Gk: death] into God’s good creation.”<sup>33</sup> While Christ’s self-giving does involve his suffering and death, “God’s infinity embraces death by passing it by as though it is nothing at all and making it henceforth a place of broken limits.”<sup>34</sup>

And yet, this will not quite do. Hart’s evacuating the cross of meaning in favor of resurrection does not do justice to the way Scripture speaks of the cross. In the Johannine tradition, for instance,

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<sup>27</sup> Hart, *Doors of Sea*, 80–81 [80].

<sup>28</sup> Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*, 375.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 387.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 390.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 392.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 393.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 391.

the cross is the moment of Christ's exaltation (e.g., John 8:28; 12:23, 32; 13:31). Paul, while certainly not giving the resurrection short shrift, preaches Christ crucified (1 Corinthians 2:5) and refuses to boast except in the cross (Galatians 6:14). Christian life is pictured as union with Christ in his death (Romans 6:1-14; Colossians 2:11-15), and so on. Hart may indeed be right about the metaphysical principle in question, but Scripture and tradition will not countenance a cross emptied of meaning.

I am persuaded that Hart is absolutely right when he concludes his argument in *The Doors of the Sea* by writing:

As for comfort, when I seek it, I can imagine none greater than the happy knowledge that when I see the death of a child, I do not see the face of God but the face of his enemy...We are saved not through the immanent mechanisms of history and nature, but by grace...God will not unite all of history's many strands in one great synthesis, but will judge much of history false and damnable...he will not simply reveal the sublime logic of fallen nature, but will strike off the fetters in which creation languishes...Rather than showing us how the tears of a small girls suffering in the dark were necessary for the building of the Kingdom, he will instead raise her up and wipe away all tears from her eyes--and there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying, nor any more pain, for the former things will have passed away, and he that sits upon the throne will say, 'Behold, I make all things new.'<sup>35</sup>

But still problems attend his solution. The seeds for a more adequate solution are present in several strands of his argument, but his inadequate treatment of the cross shows that in framing a response, we shall need to move beyond Hart as well. Moreover, his inadequate treatment of the cross might indeed gesture towards a better response. Before that, though, one more voice must be heard.

### **C. Michael Horton's Refined Calvinism**

Michael Horton, writing from a confessional Reformed perspective, offers an articulation of Calvinist thought far more nuanced than the vulgar Calvinism of John Piper, one which avoids many of the criticisms leveled against Reformed theology by David Bentley Hart. Along the way, he also shows significant shortcomings in Hart's argument from freedom. Including his voice in the

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<sup>35</sup> Hart, *Doors of Sea*, 103–104.

conversation will set us up to make a final constructive proposal as regards the problem of divine sovereignty and human suffering.

One of Hart's primary criticisms of Calvinism is that it reduces God to a mere will and envisions him as absolute power. "Were this so, God would be the author of evil and so beyond both good and evil, or at once both and neither, or indeed merely evil (which power without justice always is)." <sup>36</sup> However, as Horton notes, Calvin vigorously opposes any conception of God as absolute power. God's power is always exercised in perfect concert with his goodness, righteousness, and love. <sup>37</sup> Moreover, the Reformed uphold the doctrine of *concursum*, double agency, and secondary causes, which means that the unfolding of history is not due to the mere unfolding of a single divine will, but is a complex interaction between divine and creaturely freedoms. <sup>38</sup> These freedoms, as Hart noted, are not in competition with one another. "It is God who has established the very space in which human freedom can exist. Freedom is not intrinsic to creaturehood but is itself a gift of the creator. Debates about divine and human freedom often fail to begin with that assumption, so that already they are thought of by both sides as antagonistic: either God wins or humans win."<sup>39</sup> Many of Hart's concerns, then, are obviated in this articulation of Calvinism, which allows greater space for creaturely freedom.

In approaching the problem of evil, Horton, like Hart, eschews the theoretical abstractions of theodicy and instead insists that "Christian theology asserts a practical, not a theoretical solution to the problem of evil."<sup>40</sup> This practical solution, again, like Hart, takes on a Christian particularity and is rooted in the fact that Christianity is a religion of salvation. God does not explain our suffering. God saves us from it. Like Hart, the origins of evil lie with "misused freedom," and the contingency of the fall.<sup>41</sup> Horton, indeed, points out how the

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 90–91 [91].

<sup>37</sup> Michael S. Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 78(citing John Calvin, *Dei Aeterna Dei Predestinatione* [CR 8:361]; John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.17.2; 2.2.6).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 87. See also the more detailed discussion in Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 356–362.

<sup>39</sup> Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology*, 81.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

contingency of the fall radically shifts one's consideration of the problem of evil:

If one begins with the biblical drama, in which a broken covenant lies at the very center of a crime scene, the problem takes on deeply personal and historical overtones. According to this plot, God was in no way obligated to rescue the creature, who had rejected a noble role as divine representative and caretaker of creation, in order to seek autonomy...And yet, according to this drama, God not only preserved nature, history, and culture (even after the arrogance and brutality of Cain), but executed a redemptive strategy. But even here, God triumphs over evil in the end, not by canceling out the human agency that was misused, but by renewing and restoring the divine image and finally restoring the entire creation, so that together humankind and the world subjected to sin will be liberated to enjoy the consummation that never arrived in Eden. A broken covenant is at last repaired and its conditions fulfilled by the second Adam, who will make all things new in the likeness of his own resurrection. So when *this* drama is the context for theodicy, the tables are turned. Instead of God being on trial, it is the creature who is arraigned and questioned...And now the problem of evil, though not solved in our minds, is overwhelmed by the problem of good. In other words, given this particular drama, one would expect evil and suffering as consequences of the actions of the leading characters. But one would not expect good and blessing as a response of the play's central figure thus wronged.<sup>42</sup>

This consideration improves upon both Piper and Hart. Piper does not give adequate attention to the fact that suffering results from the contingency of the fall, which means that it is not the world as God intends it. Hart does not give adequate attention to the fact that the fall's contingency does indeed render humanity guilty, shifting again the question's frame.

Horton's response is not without problems. Pointing out that humanity is guilty and that suffering comes as a result of our own sinful rebellion is pastorally inadequate, even if it must form part of the contours of our response. And while the statements about God's lack of obligation do help safeguard the gratuity of grace, they do seem a bit frigid. Better, probably, is Hart's recognition that God's purpose of uniting creation to himself is the plan and that not even the contingencies of sin, suffering, and death can prevent God from bringing this purpose about. Given who God is, and given God's (already gratuitous) decision to create, we can indeed expect blessing

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

and good, even if we cannot deserve or demand it. Still, though, the gains are apparent.

Horton also helps to demonstrate some of the problems attending Hart's argument. It is all well and good to note that suffering and evil are contingencies, that they owe to misused creaturely freedom rather than to God's desire, that God does not need them in order to be the God he is or to accomplish his purposes, that, indeed, when we see the death of a child we see God's enemy and not God's desire. However, does this really resolve the problem? Horton writes, "If God is capable of *any* action in the world (even at the benign level of influence), the problem of evil is just as acute as it is for a full-bodied notion of divine sovereignty."<sup>43</sup> The problem is this: if God creates the universe, knowing full well that sin, evil, suffering, and death will result, are we not left with the same moral problem? Indeed, is this not, at the end of the day, equally horrifying? The creation of a universe in which suffering happens for no reason seems cosmically and inexcusably irresponsible. Hart himself admits:

One is confronted with this bare choice: either one embraces the mystery of created freedom and accepts that the union of free spiritual creatures with the God of love is a thing so wonderful that the power of creation to enslave itself to death must be permitted by God; or one judges that not even such rational freedom is worth the risk of a cosmic fall and the terrible injustice of the consequences that follow from it.<sup>44</sup>

Therefore, while noting that God is the enemy and destroyer of suffering rather than the one who needs it does obviate the moral problem at first blush, it is ultimately only pushed back a step. Making suffering meaningless does not ultimately solve the problem. Indeed, it might compound it. As that is the case, it seems there is no necessity to keep it meaningless so long as it does not become necessary for God and God's purposes. Might there be a way to do this? My final section will attempt such a construction.

### **E. Constructive Proposal: Meaningful, but Unnecessary Suffering**

An adequate response to the problem of suffering requires a few features. First, it must recognize that God does not need suffering

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>44</sup> Hart, *Doors of Sea*, 69.

either to be the God he is or to accomplish his ends. To violate this principle does render God morally reprehensible. Second, God must be understood as God: the same God whether or not he creates, whether or not sin occurs. Following what has been dubbed “Rahner’s rule,” the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity.<sup>45</sup> To violate this rule is to call into question the revelation of God and salvation of humanity given in Jesus Christ.<sup>46</sup> It would mean that the God disclosed in Jesus is somehow not the real God as he is in himself. Third, it will recognize that suffering and evil are contingencies, following from the misuse of creaturely freedom, and parasitic upon God’s creation rather than constitutive of his purposes. Fourth, God must be understood as the saving God, who rescues his fallen and suffering creatures from evil, rather than in any way endorsing their suffering. Finally, the dynamics of New Testament proclamation will remain intact (by which I mean that the cross is seen as meaning-laden).

Remaining within these parameters, the possibility of articulating an alternative account to the others already offered arises. Indeed, many strands of this alternate account have already emerged. I need only synthesize them and add one more strand: St. Augustine’s account of the sacrifice of the *totus Christus* (the whole Christ). The concept of *totus Christus* factors heavily in Augustine’s doctrine of the church. Simply put, for Augustine, the Pauline conception of the church as the body of Christ is no mere metaphor, but rather discloses the depths of the relation between the faithful and Christ, and particularly the way that Jesus redeems humanity: by so identifying with them that they form an inseparable and organic unity. In a very real sense Christ is the whole body: head (the historical Jesus) and members (the church).<sup>47</sup> In book X of *The City of God*, Augustine speaks of the sacrifice of Christ in terms of both the passion on the

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<sup>45</sup> Hart explicitly endorses Rahner’s rule, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*, 155.

<sup>46</sup> See, e.g., the argument in Karl Rahner, “Remarks on the Dogmatic Treatise ‘De Trinitate’,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4, Centenary Electronic (Limerick: Centre for Theology, Culture and Values, 2005), 77–102.

<sup>47</sup> *InPs* 68 (CCSL: 39, 901); *InPs* 55.3 (CCSL: 39, 679); *Serm* 227 (SC: 116, 234, 236); *CivDei* X.iii, vi, xx (BA: 34, 434, 440, 442, 444, 446, 448, 498). See also Tarsicius van Bavel, “The ‘Christus Totus’ Idea: A Forgotten Aspect of Augustine’s Spirituality,” in *Studies in Patristic Christology*, ed. Thomas Finan and Vincent Twomey (Dublin; Portland: Four Courts Press, 1998), 84–94.

cross and in terms of the “whole redeemed city, that is the congregation and society of the saints...offered to God by the great priest.”<sup>48</sup>

It is essential to recognize that for Augustine, these are not two distinct sacrifices, but rather one sacrifice of Christ. The fullness of this sacrifice will be offered at the end of time when all of Christ’s members have been gathered into one body and are presented by their high priest to the Father. It involves the piety and suffering of individual Christians.<sup>49</sup> It bears a special relationship to the Eucharist.<sup>50</sup> But it cannot be seen as fundamentally other than the sacrifice of Calvary. To defend Augustine’s account would take us too far afield. Instead, I assume and appropriate it for the task of a more adequate response to human suffering.

So, then, the offering of Christ involves and is consummated in the eschatological offering of the whole Christ, the whole redeemed city to God. This, from the very beginning, from before there was a very beginning, if we may so speak, was the divine intention. Just as the Father eternally and without passion begets the Son, so the Son eternally and without passion offers himself to the Father. The eschatological offering of the *totus Christus* to the Father is, then, this same offering, only with the gratuitous addition members to Christ. God would have been the same God apart from the contingencies of creation or redemption because this same offering would be offered apart from them. Furthermore, though, granted the contingency of creation, we can affirm that the Son of God would still have become incarnate, would still have gathered his members to himself, and would still have incorporated them into his eternal oblation to the Father even apart from the contingency of sin. Jesus of Nazareth is the

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<sup>48</sup> *CivDei* X.vi (BA: 34, 446).

<sup>49</sup> *CivDei* X.iii (BA: 34, 434).

<sup>50</sup> *CivDei* X.vi, xx (BA: 34, 448, 498); *Serm* 227 (SC: 116, 234, 236); *InIo* 26 (BA: 72); Michael Figura, “The Eucharist as Sacramental Incarnation,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 30, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 39–56; Wilhelm Gessel, *Eucharistische Gemeinschaft Bei Augustinus* (Würzburg: Augustinus-Verlag, 1966); Lawrence F Frankovich, “Augustine’s Theory of Eucharistic Sacrifice” (Ph.D. diss, Marquette University, 1976); Gerald Bonner, “The Doctrine of Sacrifice: Augustine and the Latin Patristic Tradition,” in *Sacrifice and Redemption: Durham Essays in Theology*, ed. Stephen W. Sykes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 101–117; Roland J. Teske, “The Definition of Sacrifice in the De Civitate Dei,” in *Nova Doctrina Vetusque: Essays on Early Christianity in Honor of Freeric W. Schlatter, S.J.*, ed. Douglas Kries and Catherine Brown Tkacz (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 153–167.

fundamental revelation of God and does not depend upon sin and suffering to be the Person that he is.

Christ's sacrifice on the cross, as it actually occurred within the contingent history of human sinfulness, was an offering for sin and involved suffering. The eschatological offering of the whole Christ, though, will not be, as there is no more need for expiation. It would have been so offered even without sin, which would seem to mean even without suffering. Under the conditions of sin, though, this does involve suffering, but suffering is taken up, transformed, and finally overcome by Christ. God is still the same God, Christ is still the same person, and the offering is still the same offering. God does not need suffering in order to be who he is. He does not need suffering to accomplish his purposes. It remains a parasitic contingency. And yet, under the conditions of the fall, suffering is now involved in the plot. The saving action of Christ did indeed involve his entrance into the contingency of suffering, and this is profoundly meaningful.

The meaning Christ injects into history, however, is such that it fundamentally changes history's meaning. According to Henri de Lubac, Christ fulfills the Old Testament not by passively meeting the conditions of bygone predictions, but by actively taking the Old Testament's meaning up into himself and transforming it. This transformation has a retroactive force.<sup>51</sup> I want to suggest that it is the same with the suffering of his members. They are granted meaning, retroactively, by their integration into the Christ event and the final offering of the *totus Christus*. This is worlds apart from them forming a constitutive part of a divine architecture, for their meaning only comes *post factum* and by the operation of Christ. Moreover, it is a transformative meaning, not arising from the vagaries of historical process, not proceeding according to a plan, but instead sacramentally retrojected from the consummation of all things. This, I contend, allows suffering to still be meaningful, even as it is rejected, even as it is overcome. It will be left behind and we will be raised up. But just

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<sup>51</sup> Henri de Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, trans. Luke O'Neill (New York: Crossroad, 2012), 7, 31, 34–35, 85, 90, 105; Susan K. Wood, *Spiritual Exegesis and the Church in the Theology of Henri de Lubac* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 31–39; Joseph Simeon Flipper, "Sacrament and Eschatological Fulfillment in Henri de Lubac's Theology of History" (Ph.D. diss, Marquette University, 2012), 129–134.

like the risen Jesus, we will still bear our scars. Our suffering will still be integrated into the whole.

This account keeps us within all the parameters laid out for an adequate account of suffering. God is not rendered a moral monster by his need to inflict suffering upon his creatures (which infliction is not obviated even if he himself comes to share in those sufferings) to achieve his ends. Sin and suffering remain parasites, contingencies, and enemies. They are not endorsed as necessary means to achieve a (morally suspect) greater good. God's identity as God is rooted in God and not in the contingencies of creation, sin, or even redemption. God's purpose in redemption is to overcome and do away with suffering, not endorse it. And the sufferings of Christ are not evacuated of meaning. Though suffering is contingent it *is* the form that redemption took and it cannot be simply dismissed, even by the miracle of Easter. Because the suffering of Christ is rendered meaningful, there is no reason to exclude his members' suffering from being meaningful. Because they share in Christ, their suffering shares in his, but this sharing does not make their suffering somehow necessary. The cold comfort that their anguish is mysteriously necessary for the world's final happiness cannot be offered. Instead, they receive the hope their suffering is not God's purpose but his enemy and that just as the Christ in whom their suffering participates has left all suffering behind and been raised to eternal blessedness, so shall they.

### **Concluding Practical Postscript**

So then, have we found an answer to the problem of human suffering in the light of a sovereign God? Assuredly not. Instead, we have seen with Ivan Karamazov that answers to this question come at far too high a moral cost. God does not offer answers either. Instead, God offers his Son to be the destruction of suffering and the salvation of the world. This is not an answer to suffering, but rather a response: rejection and rescue. I have tried to supplement David Bentley Hart's compelling statement of this position by constructing a more Augustinian account of Christ's salvation which does not result in a cross evacuated of meaning. Even this more adequate account, though, is severely limited by the fact that the *totus Christus* concept

only applies in those cases where the sufferings of Christians are involved, and the majority of the world's sufferers are not Christian.<sup>52</sup> This is not a fatal flaw, though, because even if some (contingent) meaning is retrieved for the suffering of Christians, I do not offer this retrieval as a validation or explanation. It applies in the limited case of suffering Christians, and even then it does not “answer” anything. In the case of non-Christians the simple statement that suffering is odious, parasitic, and opposed by God is all that can be offered. I commend these sufferers to God's mercy and trust that All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well, even if, like Julian of Norwich, I cannot see how that could possibly be the case.<sup>53</sup> But since I have rejected the option of explaining suffering, instances of it that fall outside the parameters of my proposal do not invalidate that proposal.

I would like to conclude this reflection on a practical note, which is perhaps more appropriate than the foregoing thousands of theoretical words. God's response to human suffering is not theoretical, but practical: rejection and rescue.<sup>54</sup> This too should be the response of Christians who claim allegiance to this God. Whenever possible, Christian people ought to work to alleviate suffering. This does far more good than trying to explain it. This comes closest to the heart of God. This comes closest to the divine response. This comes closest to what a watching, questioning, suffering world needs.

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<sup>52</sup> Hart notes this, *Doors of Sea*, 78–79.

<sup>53</sup> Julian of Norwich, “A Revelation of Love,” in *The Writings of Julian of Norwich*, ed. Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 32.31–40 .

<sup>54</sup> When I say that suffering is to be rejected, I do not mean to imply that people should simply refuse to suffer. Sometimes suffering is unavoidable and cannot be alleviated. In those cases, patiently enduring suffering is indeed the right response. In those cases, there may indeed be benefits brought about through divine grace. However, the baseline response of rejection and rescue should remain intact. God is perfectly capable of benefiting people apart from suffering, so there need be no second-guessing about whether or not its alleviation is a good idea.



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