

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

Dr. James P. Eckman, President Emeritus
Grace University, Omaha, Nebraska
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Answering Christianity's Critics

The defense of Christianity and its claims has always been important throughout the history of the church. However, today the need to defend genuine, biblical Christianity is more important than ever. The Millennials of Postmodern, Postchristian America value personal autonomy more than anything else and give evidence of a significant lack of trust in all institutions, including the church. Millennials are therefore spiritually vulnerable. Critics of genuine, biblical Christianity are raising penetrating questions, which, if unanswered, will further undermine the appeal of Christianity's truth claims, making Christianity just one of the smorgasbord of choices out there. In this edition of *Issues in Perspective* (and periodically in future *Issues* through the remainder of 2015 and into 2016), I will identify and answer several of these salient questions. In this Postmodern, Postchristian world, we must be able to defend what we believe (1 Peter 3:15). Both our children and grandchildren's future depend on our ability to do so.

Question #1: Why does a good God allow so much suffering/evil?

1. Evil and suffering are not evidences against God's existence.

CLAIM: There is so much unjustifiable, pointless evil in the world that the belief in a powerful and good God is pointless. Some other kind of "god" might exist but not this traditional one. But, just because we cannot see or imagine a good reason why God might permit suffering and evil does not mean that none exists. Further, by observing life and people, we see that suffering and hardship often deepen/develop insight, character and strength.

2. Evil and suffering may actually be evidence for God. Explaining tragedy, suffering and injustice is a problem for every worldview. Just because you abandon a belief in God, does not make the problem of evil easier to handle.

CLAIM: Because of our sense of fair play and justice, we often conclude that people ought not to suffer, be excluded, and die of hunger or oppression. But the evolutionary mechanism of natural selection (the reigning model for biology) depends on death, destruction and violence of the strong against the weak—all perfectly natural aspects of life. So, on what basis does a human judge the world to be wrong, unfair and unjust? The point is that the problem of tragedy, suffering and injustice is a problem for everyone—for the atheist, the Buddhist, the Hindu and the Christian. To abandon a belief in God does not make the problem of evil easier to handle.

3. The suffering of God and the redemption and resurrection that He offers.

Genuine, biblical Christianity teaches that God in Jesus Christ suffered immeasurably and that it was qualitatively different than any other death, for it also involved the cosmic abandonment of the Son by the Father. Christianity alone teaches that God became uniquely and fully human in Jesus Christ and therefore knows firsthand despair, rejection, loneliness, poverty, bereavement, torture, and imprisonment. God is truly *Immanuel*—even in our worst sufferings. Further, the resurrection means that every horrible thing that ever happened will not only be undone and repaired but will in some way make the eventual glory and joy even greater. The incarnation and the cross bring profound consolation in the face of suffering, for God became a victim of evil and suffering to eradicate evil and suffering from this world.

Consider these statements from modern writers:

- C.S. Lewis: *“They say of some temporal suffering, ‘No future bliss can make up for it,’ not knowing that Heaven, once attained, will work backwards and turn even that agony into a glory.”*
- Samwise Gamgee, speaking to Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings*: *“Is everything sad going to come untrue?”*
- Dostoevsky: *“I believe like a child that suffering will be healed and made up for, that all the humiliating absurdity of human contradictions will vanish like a pitiful mirage. . .”*

Question #2: Why does Christianity seek to restrict my personal freedom?

1. In our Postmodern world, freedom is defined as libertinism or absolute autonomy—a freedom with no boundaries and no restrictions.

CLAIM: Christianity is an enemy of true human freedom. True freedom is the freedom to create one’s own meaning and purpose, for we are the captain of our fate; we are the only true sovereign of our lives. But it is rather silly and actually dangerous to define freedom as the absence of confinement and constraint. No parent, no teacher, no boss and no policeman (etc.) would ever agree with that claim.

2. Freedom is not the absence of confinement or constraint. In fact, confinement and constraint may actually be a means to liberation. Freedom is not the absence of restrictions but actually finding the right ones.

For an athlete, a musician or a student, discipline, restriction, constraint are actually freeing; they liberate us to find the purpose and meaning of our lives. There are liberating restrictions.

3. True human freedom is found in loving relationships. We only truly become ourselves when we are in a mutual, unselfish, other-centered relationship.

Both autonomy and control are illusions and children, for example, teach us that truth. A marriage can be the most liberating of relationships, for it cures us of selfishness, self-centeredness and self-indulgence. Freedom is surrendering our autonomy and our rights for the sake of others, which is part of God's design for our lives. It is what He actually modeled for us in Jesus.

4. In genuine biblical Christianity, we find that in a radical manner God actually adjusted to us—in the incarnation and in the atonement on the cross. On the cross, He submitted to our condition—as sinners—and died in our place to forgive us and to free us! [John 8:32, 36.]

True liberation is found in Christ, for we find freedom from the bondage to stifling, destructive sin, and freedom from the terror of death. In Christ, we find that our Creator's boundaries are actually liberating and freeing.

See Tim Keller, *The Reason for God*, pp. 22-51.