

THE FALL

by

Cornelius Plantinga, Jr.

Plantinga, Jr., Cornelius. *Engaging God's World: A Christian Vision of Faith, Learning and Living*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. Copyright ©2002.

The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate." . . . The woman said, "The serpent tricked me, and I ate."

Genesis 3:12-13

Fools say in their hearts, "There is not God."

They are corrupt, . . .

. . . they are all alike perverse.

Psalms 14:1, 3

They have turned their backs to me, and not their faces.

Jeremiah 2:27

They became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened.

Romans 1:21

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.

Romans 7:15

The creation was subjected to futility.

Romans 8:20

God's original judgment on creation was that it was "good," even "very good." God made a paradise, and we can still find signs of it. Christians can still sing "This Is My Father's World" and do it with gusto:

This is my Father's world, and to my listening ears

All nature sings, and round me rings the music of the spheres. . . .

This is my Father's world: he shines in all that's fair;

In rustling grass I hear him pass—he speaks to me everywhere.

It's a good hymn, but it gives us only half the picture – only paradise, and not paradise lost. As matters stand, creation still declares the glory of God, but it also declares the tragedy of fallenness, of chaos, of painful carnivorousness. On a bluebird day in May, "all nature sings and round me rings," and you can probably recall a few bluebird days that had some longing and delight in them. But nature also

includes animals that tear each other up and animals that rape each other or kill each other for sport. Some animal parents devour their own offspring. Creation speaks out of both sides of its mouth now. It still sings and rings, but it also groans. As Paul says, "the whole creation has been groaning" for release from its "bondage to decay" (Rom. 8:21-22).

"Formlessness is. . . neither civilized nor natural. It is a peculiarly human evil, without analogue in nature, caused by the failures of civilization: inattention, irresponsibility, carelessness, ignorance of consequence. It is the result of the misuse of power."

Wendell Berry¹

The whole creation includes us. To see human decay, all you have to do is look around town, look around the world. You'll find both hostility and indifference. In fact you'll find hostility packaged as entertainment and indifference treated as normal. (In Scripture it's just as evil, and perhaps more common, to turn one's back on God or neighbor as to attack them.) Every day's news shows us a new assortment of merciless dictators, negligent contractors, remorseless killers. Year after year we see new film footage of old miseries – for example, of refugees forced out of their houses and onto long marches by soldiers who are "simply following orders" in conflicts fueled by long memories and short tempers. As others have noticed, human depravity is the one part of Christian doctrine that can be *proved*.

Human depravity was made all too clear on Tuesday, September 11, 2001, when the whole world looked into the face of evil. The terrorists who flew airliners into New York's World Trade Center and Washington's Pentagon planned the attacks for maximum death and destruction, not only to those who fell under direct assault, but also to the spirit of a watching Western world, forced to see spectacular images of its own vulnerability. Words like "wickedness" seemed suddenly resonant again as the world's acoustics changed in a single day.

Philosophers have long pondered the human condition, and they have noticed that evil is the main human problem. Even when these thinkers reject

¹ Wendell Berry, "The Specialization of Poetry," in *The Poet's Work*, ed. Reginald Gibbons (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), 147.

God, they recognize that the world is out of joint and that human beings, too, are “alienated,” or “divided,” or “repressed.” Human beings live irrationally, as philosophers put it, or “inauthentically.” The philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer described the human condition in a particularly bleak way. “If we want to know what people are worth morally,” said Schopenhauer, “we have only to consider their fate as a whole and in general. This is want, wretchedness, affliction, misery, and death.”²

Human life is not the way it’s supposed to be. And so, as we saw earlier, the world’s great thinkers often diagnose the human predicament and prescribe various remedies for it. They diagnose ignorance and prescribe education. They diagnose oppression and prescribe justice. They diagnose the conformism of “bad faith” and prescribe the freedom of authentic choice. A few look at the world, fall into a depression, and put their prescription pad away.

“If only there were evil people somewhere, insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?”

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn³

Christians think that the usual diagnoses and prescriptions catch part of the truth, but that they do not get to the bottom of it. The human problem isn’t just ignorance; it’s also stubborn pride. It’s not just oppression; it’s also corruption. That’s why newly liberated victims of oppression often end up oppressing others. The human problem isn’t just that we timidly conform to prevailing modes of life; it’s also that nothing human can jolt us out of our slump. Even a move to a pristine backwoods in British Columbia won’t save us because we carry our trouble with us.

The real human predicament, as Scripture reveals, is that inexplicably, irrationally, we all keep living our lives against what’s good for us. In what can only be called the mystery of iniquity, human beings from the time of Adam and Eve (and, before them, a certain number of angelic beings) have so often chosen to live against God, against each other,

² Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea* (London: Everyman, 1995), 216.

³ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, quoted in Fred E. Katz, *Ordinary People and Extraordinary Evil: A Report on the Beguilings of Evil* (New York: New York State University Press, 1993), vii. For this quote, I am indebted to Quentin J. Schultze, *Communicating for Life: Christian Stewardship in Community and Media* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House/BakerAcademic, 2000), 38.

and against God’s world. We live even against ourselves. An addict, for example, partakes of a substance or practice that he knows might kill him. For a time he does so freely. He has a choice. He freely starts a “conversion unto death,” and, for reasons he can’t fully explain, he doesn’t stop until he crashes.⁴ He starts out with a choice. He ends up with a habit. And the habit slowly converts to a kind of slavery that can be broken only by God or, as they say in the twelve-step literature, “a higher power.”

According to Genesis 3 and Romans 5, our whole race “has a habit” where sin is concerned. Near the beginning of our history, we human beings broke the harmony of paradise and began to live against our ultimate good, our *summum bonum*. As Genesis 3 and Genesis 4 reveal, we rebelled against God and then we fled from God. We once had a choice. We now have a near-compulsion — at least, that’s what we have without the grace of God to set us free. Over the centuries we humans have ironed in this near-compulsion, with the result that each new generation enters a world that has long ago lost its Eden, a world that is now half-ruined by the billions of bad choices and millions of old habits congealed into thousands of cultures across all the ages. In this world even saints discover, in exasperation, that whenever they want to do right “evil lies close at hand” (Rom. 7:21). We are “conceived and born in sin,” as Calvinists sometimes put it when they baptize an infant. This is a way of stating the doctrine of original sin, that is, that the corruption and guilt of our first parents have run right down the generations, tainting us all. As the author Garry Wills writes, none of us has a fresh start:

We are hostages to each other in a deadly interrelatedness. There is no “clean slate” of nature unscrambled on by all one’s forebears. . . . At one time a woman of unsavory enough experience was delicately but cruelly referred to as “having a past.” The doctrine of original sin states that humankind, in exactly that sense, “has a past.”⁵

Evil is what’s wrong with the world, and it includes trouble in nature as well as in human nature. It includes disease as well as theft, birth defects as well as character defects. We might define evil as *any spoiling of shalom*, any deviation from the way God wants things to be. Thinking along these lines, we can see that sin is a subset of evil: it’s any evil for which somebody is to blame, whether as an

⁴ Patrick McCormick, *Sin as Addiction* (New York: Paulist, 1989), 152.

⁵ Wills, *Reagan’s America: Innocents at Home* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1987), 384.

individual or as a member of a group. All sin is evil, but not all evil is sin. A killing by a two-year-old who picks up a gun is a terrible evil, but not an actual sin, at least not by the two-year-old. But a premediated killing by a drug dealer of a drug enforcement officer is both evil and sinful. So is willing ignorance and silence about the evils perpetrated by one's own nation. In short, sin is *culpable evil*.

God hates sin not just because it violates law, but also because it violates trust. Sin grieves God, offends God, betrays God, and not because God is touchy. God hates sin against himself, against neighbors, against a good creation, because sin breaks the peace – in the first place between the sinner and God. Sin interferes with the way God wants things to be. That is why God has laws against it. God is for shalom and *therefore* against sin.

Because sin spoils the way things are supposed to be, biblical images for sin suggest that it is deviant behavior. In the Bible, to sin is to miss the target, to wander from the path, to stray from the fold. A sinner has a deaf ear or a stiff neck. To sin is to overstep a line or else to fail to reach it; that is, sin is either transgression or shortcoming. These and other images tell us that, in a biblical view of the world, sin is a familiar, even predictable, part of life, but it is not normal. And the fact that “everybody does it” doesn't *make* it normal.

Given its source in God, goodness is original, normal, constructive. Evil is secondary, abnormal, destructive. In fact, evil needs good in order to be evil. As C. S. Lewis wrote, “a cow cannot be very good or very bad; a dog can be both better and worse; a child better and worse still; an ordinary [person], still more so; a [person] of genius still more so; a superhuman spirit best – or worst – of all.” Why is this so? Because “the better stuff a creature is made of – the cleverer and stronger and freer it is – then the better it will be if it goes right, but also the worse it will be if it goes wrong.”⁶

Here we can see that evil is a kind of parasite on goodness. The intelligence of Nazi commanders came from God. The truth portion of an effective lie (maybe 90 percent of it) makes the lie plausible. The physical power of a guilty assailant comes from the gift of good health. Badness can't be very bad without tapping deeply into goodness. Badness is twisted goodness, polluted goodness, divided goodness. But even after the twisting, polluting, and dividing have happened, the goodness is still there.

According to Genesis 3, sin appeared very early in the history of our race. In this chapter our first

⁶ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 53.

parents try to be “like God, knowing good and evil,” and succeed only in alienating themselves from God and from each other. They choose to believe the tempter rather than their Maker and turn their garden into a bramble patch. The good and fruitful earth becomes their foe (Gen. 3:17-18; cf. 4:12-14), and their own sin then rises in a terrible crescendo. Adam and Eve's pride and disbelief trigger revolt, scapegoating, and flight from God (Gen. 3:4-5, 10, 12-13). Their first child ups the ante: Cain resents and kills his brother Abel, launching the history of envy that leads to murder. Like his parents and the rest of the race, Cain refuses to face his sin (“Am I my brother's keeper?”) and is exiled by God to a place “east of Eden.” In a phrase that suggests the restlessness of all who are alienated from God, Cain becomes “a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth,” a murderer who now fears other murderers and has to be protected from them by a mysterious mark that God places upon him.

Among these strangers (Genesis hasn't the slightest interest in telling us where they came from) Cain starts a family and passes sin down the generation like a gene. At the sixth generation, the Genesis narrator pauses to snap a picture of a homicidal braggart by the name of Lamech.

You wives of Lamech, listen. . . .
I have killed a man for wounding me,
a young man for striking me.
If Cain is avenged sevenfold,
truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold. Gen. 4:23-24)

From there, the history of sin and corruption moves on, down the ages, in a cast of billions. Each new generation, and each new person, reaps what others have sown and then sows what others will reap. This is true not only of goodness (much-loved children can offer a sense of security to their own spouses and children) but also of evil, which each generation not only receives but also ratifies by its own sin. Terrorists, for example, do not think of themselves as others think of them – irrational zealots consumed by some nameless malice that has turned them into enemies of the peace established by decent people. Like Lamech, they think of their violence as retaliation.⁷ And because they have long memories, terrorists may think of themselves as redressing grievances that are decades or even centuries old.

The glory of God's good creation has not been obliterated by the tragedy of the fall, but it has been

⁷ James T. Burtchaell, *The Giving and Taking of Life: Essays Ethical* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1989), 219-20.

deeply shadowed by it. The history of our race is, in large part, the interplay of this light and shadow.

Corruption

Measuring the damage of the fall, the Belgic Confession states that by our original sin we human beings have “separated ourselves from God, who is our true life” and have “corrupted our entire nature” (article 14). The Confession means to tie all of us in with Adam, Eve, Cain, and Lamech as their descendants. The first sin of Adam and Eve has spread and congealed into *original sin* – a tendency of the whole race, for which we bear collective guilt. All of us are now bent toward sin. We have in the world not just sins, but sin; not just wrong acts, but also wrong tendencies, habits, practices, and patterns that break down the integrity of persons, families, and whole cultures.

“O Lord, thou hast set up many candlesticks, and kindled many lamps in me, but I have either blown them out, or carried them to guide me in forbidden ways.”

John Donne⁸

What are the ingredients in corruption? First, a corrupted person turns God’s gifts away from their intended purpose. She *perverts* these gifts. For example, she might use her excellent mind and first-class education not to extend the reach of God’s kingdom, but just to get rich. She wants to get rich not in order to support terrific projects in the world, but just to move up the social ladder. We ordinarily think of a prostitute as someone who rents her body. But a person can also rent her mind for a high hourly rate, and she perverts it if she rents it because she wants to feel superior to the people who bag her groceries and park her car.

Second, a corrupted person joins together what God has put asunder. He *pollutes* his relationships with foreign elements that don’t belong in them. We all know that it’s possible to pollute a river by dumping toxic waste into it. But it’s also possible to pollute our minds with things that debase them. It’s possible to pollute worship by bringing into it unredeemed elements from Vegas lounge shows (the special music is done by a Christian performing artist lying on *top* of the piano). It’s possible to pollute friendships with social ambition and college sports with taunting. Good things have a kind of integrity, a kind of oneness or “this-ness.” A polluted event or relationship is one that has been compromised by introducing into it something that doesn’t belong

⁸ John Donne, from *Essays in Divinity*, in *Ordinary Graces: Christian Teachings on the Interior Life*, ed. Lorraine Kisly with an intro. by Philip Zalieski (New York: Bell Tower, 2000), 75.

there. Now the event or relationship isn’t just “this,” but “this and that.”

“We have plenty of examples in this world of poor things being used for good purposes. God can make any indifferent thing, as well as evil itself, an instrument for good; but I submit that to do this is the business of God and not of any human being.”

Flannery O’Connor⁹

Take the case of idolatry. Like an adulterer, an idolater corrupts a relationship by introducing a third party into it. (In Scripture, idolatry and adultery are often paired up as emblems of each other.) So idolatry isn’t just an act of craving fame, for example, instead of God. Idolatry is also the act of putting fame *alongside* God and trying to serve them both. Your god, said Martin Luther, is “whatever your heart clings to,” and that often means we’ve got more than one god. We are like an adulterous husband who, right through his affair, “still loves his wife.” He loves two women, or so he thinks. Similarly, a Christian who wants to be God’s child, but also wants to be famous and admired in the world, is a person with two loves. God and fame. Fame and God. He loves them both. He “wants it all.”

In Scripture God warns against double-mindedness of this kind, not only because it is disloyal, not only because it is staggeringly ungrateful to our Maker and Savior, but also because it is so foolish. Idols can’t take the weight we put on them; they’re *false* gods. Worldly fame can occasionally be used to gain a hearing for the gospel, but it cannot forgive us. It can’t cure us. Despite rumors, it can’t secure us. And the untamed desire for it can split a person. Divided worship splits worshipers. Divided love splits lovers. The truth is, we have to choose. Like a sailor with one foot on a dock and the other on a departing catamaran, we have to choose.

The Bible’s account of the human predicament is that from the start we’ve been choosing wrong. We’ve kept on perverting and polluting God’s gifts. It’s not just that each of us commits individual sins – telling lies, for example, or wasting time. The situation is much more serious than this. By sinning we not only grieve God and our neighbor; we also wreck our own integrity. We are like people whose abuse of alcohol ruins not only their liver but also their judgment and will, the things that might have kept them from further abuse of alcohol. The same pattern holds for everybody. We now sin because we

⁹ Flannery O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969), 174.

are sinners, because we have a habit, and because the habit has damaged our judgment and will.

I think we understand how this process works. A woman who has gotten into the habit of lying might eventually find it hard to tell the difference between a lie and the truth. Whatever's convenient seems "true" to her. She now lies because she's a liar. And she has no particular desire to change. Similarly, a man who thinks women are "broads" might feel insulted – and angry – when a woman refuses to be treated like a broad. The reason is that he feels entitled to his sexism, and he feels sure that she isn't entitled to object to it. His sexism has corrupted his judgment.

When we sin we corrupt ourselves, but we may corrupt others too. A father who beats up his son breaks some of the bones of self-respect that hold his son's character together. As the novelist Russell Banks shows in *Affliction* (maybe you've seen the masterful film by Paul Schrader that's based on it), an abusive father might break down his son's dignity to such an extent as to wreck his son's chances of making and keeping solid relationships. In fact, abuse fosters abuse, or, as social scientists say, abuse predicts abuse. Victims victimize others, and even themselves. In this way sin gains momentum. Worse, all sinful lives intersect with other sinful lives – in families, businesses, educational and political institutions, churches, social clubs, and so forth – in such a way that the progress of both good and evil looks like wave after wave of intertwined spirals.

Where the waves meet, cultures form. In a racist culture, racism will look normal. In a secular culture, indifference toward God will look normal, as it does in much secular education. Human character forms culture, but culture also forms human character. And the formation runs not only across regions and peoples but also along generations. A boy can "inherit" his father's sexist idea that men ought to dominate women. A daughter can "inherit" her mother's sexist idea that women ought to let men do it.

The result of all this spiraling and inheriting is devastating. Whole matrices of evil appear in which various forms of wrongdoing cross-pollinate and breed. The "gaming" culture, for example, includes a lot more than slot machines and roulette tables: it also partners with the sex, liquor, and pawn shop industries to foster multiple addictions. The culture of war includes not only killing, its main business, but also such side businesses as espionage, counterespionage, treachery, disinformation, profiteering, prostitution, and drug abuse. "War is hell," not only because of its violence and destruction, but also because of the physically and morally nauseating atmosphere it generates. Popular

entertainment culture includes not only songs and dances, but also films that glorify greed or mindless chauvinism and that routinely portray the parents of teenagers as naïve or stupid.

When we are born into the world, we are born into these matrices and atmospheres. Our slate has been scribbled on by others. We are born into a world in which, for centuries, sin has damaged the great interactive network of shalom – snapping or twisting the thousands of bonds that give particular beings integrity and that tie them to others.

Corruption is thus a *dynamic* motif in the Christian understanding of sin: it is not so much a particular sin as the multiplying power of all sin to spoil a good creation and to breach its defenses against invaders. We might describe corruption as spiritual AIDS – a systemic and progressive devastation of our spiritual immune system that eventually breaks it down and opens the way for hordes of opportunistic sins. These make life progressively miserable: conceit, for instance, typically generates envy of rivals, a nasty form of resentment that eats away at the one who envies. "Sin," as Augustine says, "becomes the punishment of sin."¹⁰

All this corruption amounts to a pervasive depravity of human nature, a condition Calvinists have traditionally called "total depravity." This doesn't mean that we are all as nasty as we can be. It doesn't mean that, in a corrupted state, we always choose the worst alternative. Even in a fallen world, ordinary people practice ordinary kindness every day. They build hospitals, organize relief efforts, and manage twelve-step programs for addicts. A warring world that needs peacemakers also has some, and some of the great ones get prizes. The Holy Spirit preserves much of the original goodness of creation and also inspires new forms of goodness – and not only in those people the Spirit has regenerated. Besides such regenerating grace, which actually turns a person's heart back toward God, the Spirit also distributes "common grace," an array of God's gifts that preserves and enhances human life even when not regenerating it. As John Calvin observes, God's Spirit works everywhere in the world to pour out good gifts on the merciful and the unmerciful, on the grateful and the ungrateful, on believers and unbelievers alike. (Rain falls on the fields of unbelievers, too.) Moreover, God checks the spread of corruption by preserving in humanity a sense of

¹⁰ Augustine, *On the Merits and Remission of Sins*, 2.36.22: "What is called 'sin' dwelling in our members is sin in this way: that it becomes the punishment of sin." (I owe this reference and translation to Professor Mark F. Williams.)

divinity and the voice of conscience. To bridle lawlessness, God uses shame, fear of discovery, fear of the law, even a desire for profit among those who believe that honesty is the best policy. Further, God preserves a basic sense of civic justice – a “seed of political order” to go along with the seed of religion – and, for enrichment of life, invests particular talents in jurists, scientists, artists, and poets.¹¹ Still further, the world’s great religions contain civilizing tendencies, greater or smaller, that remind us of God’s will for the kingdom. (Christian peacemakers have learned much from Gandhi.) The same goes for customs and traditions. As I said, culture forms character, and the result may be very bad. But it may also be quite good, as one can tell in traditional Asian cultures with low crime rates and high regard for the elderly. Popular U.S. culture, which sometimes celebrates lust and trivializes faith, can also stir us with a call for humanitarian aid, or with a film such as *Dead Man Walking*, which powerfully portrays redemption through confession and forgiveness of sin. Add these things up, and you’ll have an impressive number of common graces. The Holy Spirit often blows ahead of the progress of the gospel, and to remarkable effect.

Common Grace: The goodness of God shown to all, regardless of faith, consisting in natural blessings, restraint of corruption, seed of religion and political order, and a host of civilizing and humanizing impulses, patterns, and traditions.

According to the doctrine of total depravity, human beings need common grace just to keep life going in relatively civil ways. This is so because evil contaminates everything – minds as well as bodies, churches as well as states, preachers as well as pro wrestlers. People sometimes rebel against grace itself. For example, they might feel insulted to be offered forgiveness, resenting the implication that they need it. Evil runs *through* everything, not around some things.

If you put together the doctrines of common grace and total depravity, you’ll be in a position to explain a remarkable fact: worldly people are often better than we expect, and church people are often worse. Church people are sometimes *much* worse than we expect. In fact, says Geoffrey Bromiley, to see sin “in its full range and possibility” we have to look at religious sin, church sin, the kind of sin that people commit ever so piously.¹² It’s deeply sobering

¹¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:43-45 (1.3.1-2), 1:272-73 (2.2.13-14), 1:292-93 (2.3.3).

¹² Geoffrey W. Bromiley, “Sin,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 4, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 522.

to reflect on the fact that terrorists who run airliners full of doomed passengers into populated buildings do it with joyful hearts: they think they’re serving the

“It’s a sad commentary on our world that ‘integrity’ has slowly been coming to mean self-centeredness. Most people who worry about their integrity are thinking about it in terms of themselves. It’s a great excuse for not doing something you really don’t want to do, or are afraid to do: ‘I can’t do that and keep my integrity.’ Integrity, like humility, is a quality.”
Madeleine L’Engle¹³

God who will soon reward them as martyrs for righteousness. Satan goes to church more than anybody else because he knows that, at a particular time and place, a corrupt church can devastate the cause of the gospel.

“The more excellent things are . . . the more manifold will the counterfeits be. So there are graces no graces that have more counterfeits than love and humility, these being virtues wherein the beauty of a true Christian does especially appear.”
Jonathan Edwards¹⁴

So what we see, if we look around town, is that it isn’t only secularists who “suppress the truth” about God (Rom. 1:18). Believers do it too. How else can we explain that Christians have used their faith to enforce slavery? How else can we explain that Christians have used their faith to suppress honest inquiry into science or history? Or think of this: why does our picture of God so often look like a picture of us? Pondering such questions, Merold Westphal suggests that before we Christians dismiss Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, the three main architects of “the atheism of suspicion” in the modern age, we ought to learn something from them about the corrupt uses of religion, even of true religion.¹⁵ Honest religious practice builds spiritual momentum: “to those who have, more will be given”; but dishonest religious practice can cause shipwreck in the human soul: “from those who have not, even what they have will be taken away” (Mark 4:25). Aware of this terrible possibility, the Jewish thinker Martin Buber once lamented that just as “there is nothing that can so hide the face of our fellow-man

¹³ Madeleine L’Engle, *A Circle of Quiet* (New York: Seabury Press, 1972), 130.

¹⁴ Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections* (1746), ed. John E. Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 146.

¹⁵ Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 13, 16-17.

as morality can,” so also “religion can hide from us, as nothing else can, the face of God.”¹⁶

Who’s to Blame?

But where does all this corruption – including the corruption of religion itself – come from? Could it be that, with some hidden purpose, God causes people to sin? Does the devil make them do it? How about the “powers” that are mentioned, but not really described, in the New Testament (e.g., in Rom. 8:38; Eph. 6:12; Col. 1:16)?

Christians reject these suggestions as classic cases of passing the buck.¹⁷ The first of them (God made me do it) smears the biblical portrait of God: “God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). God is perfectly holy and therefore hates sin. God outlaws sin, judges it, redeems people from it, forgives it, and suffers to do so. So Christians naturally think it blasphemous to say that God causes anyone to sin. If some “hard saying” of Scripture hints that, to the contrary, God’s hands are not wholly clean where sin is concerned – that, for example, in the events preceding the Exodus, God “hardened Pharaoh’s heart” – we have to find some way of interpreting such sayings that preserves the portrait of God’s holiness. In the case of Pharaoh, we have to notice that the book of Exodus does tell us that Pharaoh’s hard heart blocks God’s revelation and, for a time, God’s rescue attempt. But the text doesn’t actually tell us clearly who did the hardening. Did God harden Pharaoh’s heart (Exod. 10:1), or did Pharaoh harden his own heart (9:34), or did Pharaoh’s heart simply harden all by itself (9:7)? Exodus doesn’t answer this question unambiguously. The narrator’s interest lies elsewhere, namely, in how God will rescue people when a hard heart is blocking the road out of Egypt.¹⁸

In the Christian religion God’s holiness is strictly nonnegotiable. Not so for the one the New Testament calls Satan or the devil. This is a figure of such power and wiliness that New Testament writers grudgingly title him “the ruler of the demons” (Matt. 12:24) or even “the god of this world” (2 Cor. 4:4). Nonetheless, Satan is no match for Jesus Christ the exorcist, the destroyer of the destroyer. Nor can Satan wreck those who faithfully cling to Christ. Satan can tempt, but not coerce. Satan can accuse, but not convict. Satan can accost, but not destroy – at any rate, cannot destroy those who “put on the whole

¹⁶ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, quoted in Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, 25.

¹⁷ G. C. Berkouwer, *Sin*, trans. Philip C. Holtrop (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 11-148.

¹⁸ Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 170-75.

armor of God” (Eph. 6:11). A central New Testament conviction is that the evil one seduces only those who are in the market for seduction. Satan deceives only the already self-deceived.

In other words (this is the second problem), Satan does not *compel* people to sin. Nor do “the powers,” whatever these mysterious things are. Whether they are spirits or forces, whether demons or dynamics (e.g., the power of corruption), whether persons or personifications, whether structures of society or their patterns of influence, mention of “the powers” can cause a shiver of recognition. The reason is that, at some point in our reflection on sin, we come to understand that sin is not only personal but also interpersonal and even supra-personal. That is, sin is more than the sum of what sinners do. Sin acquires the form of a spirit – the spirit of darkness, the spirit of an age, the spirit of a company or nation. Sin burrows into the bowels of institutions and makes a home there. When this happens, “special interests” bend the law to favor special people like themselves. Whole companies engage in an orgy of deceit. Whole nations join in lockstep with brutal dictators.

No serious Christian wants to claim that the powers rob us of all freedom and accountability, that they *cause* us to sin. In fact, Christians confess that the powers have already been deeply compromised by the greater power of God. Don’t the victory texts of the New Testament cry out that Jesus Christ has disarmed the powers and principalities, made a spectacle of them, and triumphed over them in such a way that they can never separate believers from the love of God (Col. 2:15; Rom. 8:38-39)?

Still, the powers are aptly named. As the Dutch theologian Hendrikus Berkhof says, mere personal goodness cannot lick them. In fact, their force can seem inevitable.¹⁹

After all, why *did* millions of ordinary German Christians hand over their lives to Hitler and his band of criminals, thrilling themselves with their new status as members of his movement? Why in the Middle East do neighbors keep turning against each other in a nightmare of hostility? Why do military procurement officials and defense contractors bind themselves into mutually corrupting relationships that cheated taxpayers simply cannot break?

The big systemic evils exasperate us. So many of them seem beyond human reach. They partake of the mystery of iniquity. But, then, so do our personal sins. Why *would* we and others live against God, who is our highest good, the source of our very

¹⁹ Berkhof, *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of the Faith*, trans. Sierd Woudstra (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 208-9.

lives? Why *do* we human beings live against each other, fighting over our cultural differences instead of enjoying them, envying each other's gifts instead of celebrating them? Why *would* we human creatures live against the rest of creation, given its majesty and abundance? *Why would we live against the purpose of our own existence?*²⁰

We might say, as Woody Allen did when asked about his affair with his lover's adopted daughter, "the heart wants what it wants." But, of course, that's the problem, not a solution to the problem.

When we come to think about it, the presence of evil in the world poses a number of enduring questions for us. One, as we've just seen, is that people know what's right and still do what's wrong. Another – to return to where we started in this chapter – is the presence of evil in nonhuman creation. According to Genesis 3, God cursed the serpent and the earth after human beings fell into sin. Reading this chapter together with Romans 8 (which describes the creation as longing for redemption), Christians have long pondered the extra-human effects of the fall. We are fallen, but so is everything else.

And so we have old questions without good answers: Is carnivorousness a part of God's original design? Judging by the fossil record and by the incisors of carnivores, it seems so. Judging by the scriptural prophecies of shalom and by our own hearts and minds, it seems not so. In Isaiah's picture of God's peaceable kingdom, for example, we find some of the loveliest of all scriptural prophecies, and in them carnivorousness is only a memory:

The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them. (11.6)

The portrait captures our imagination because we wince at the stark realities of "nature red in tooth and claw." If you watch one of those *National Geographic* specials on television in which young lions chase down a deer, leap at its throat or claw their way onto its back, and then start sinking their incisors into the deer's flesh, it all looks more painful than anything we imagine God to delight in.

Here's a place where Christians who read Scripture, read the fossil record, and consult their own sensitivities may come up with more questions than answers. If carnivorousness is part of God's original design, is God less sensitive to animal pain than we are? If not, why do we have what looks like a design for it? Could a pre-fall in the angelic world have anything to do with an answer? Or is that mere

²⁰ Berkhof, *Christian Faith*, 188.

speculation? If – actually, in the real world – carnivorousness is one day to cease in the coming of God's peaceable kingdom, how will lions keep up their strength?

I should add that it's no disgrace to have more questions than answers here. It's not even surprising. There is much we don't know about the world, and much we don't know about the meaning of Scripture. Following the Belgic Confession in article 2, Christians who read both the "beautiful book" of the universe (general revelation) and the "holy and divine Word of God" (special revelation) will sometimes find themselves perplexed by the apparent conflict between them, or even within them. A faithful Christian will assume that the conflict *is* only apparent – that God doesn't contradict himself in the two books that reveal him. But she will not assume that we'll be able to resolve the conflict any time soon. Honest, patient scholarship refuses to manage conflicts of these kinds of forcing an early resolution. Instead, the patient Christian scholar puts issues of this kind into suspension for a time while she continues to think about them.

The trouble (this is a third problem) is that if the fallenness of creation extends far and wide, then it extends into our thinking processes themselves. For example, we tend to resist unpalatable truth. We resist the idea that we belong to God and not to ourselves. We resist the idea that our lives themselves have come from God and that we therefore owe God our loyalty and gratitude. We resist these ideas by such devices as willed ignorance and self-deception.

The result, says Calvin, is that we claim to be mere products of nature. Or we pretend to have invented our excellences. We "claim for ourselves what has been given us from heaven."²¹ No doubt Calvin means to observe that people often take pride not only in their accomplishments but also in their intelligence, good looks, good breeding, and good coordination, as if they had gifted themselves with these things!

Our thinking has gotten bent, and our learning along with it. Some of Calvin's successors in the Reformed tradition, such as Abraham Kuyper and his interpreters, have thought hard about what it means that our learning has been spoiled by sin. Nicholas Wolterstorff, an eminent Christian philosopher, observes that Kuyper knew a hundred years ago what many know now, namely, that when we try to learn something we bring to the task not only certain "hard-wired capacities for perception, reflection, intellection, and reasoning," but also mental software

²¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:55 (1.5.4).

“Nobody ever says, ‘I think I will lie to myself today.’ This is the double treachery of self-deception: First we deceive ourselves, and then we convince ourselves that we are not deceiving ourselves.”
Lewis Smedes²²

formed outside of school, including a whole range of beliefs, assumptions, and commitments.²³ Nobody pursues purely “objective” learning. Everybody pursues “committed” and “socially located” learning. In fact, everybody’s learning is “faith-based,” and this is so no matter what his scholarly or professional field. The question is never *whether* a person has faith in something or someone, but in *what* or *whom*.

The problem is that we human beings place our faith in nature or in ourselves instead of in God. We identify with our own social group and filter our learning through its membership requirements. So the rich do social science one way and the poor another, and it seems that neither is able to see things from the perspective of the other, and neither even wants to. Or scholars commit to Godlessness, convinced that God would cramp their freedom or intellectual integrity. With remarkable candor, Richard Lewontin, a Harvard biologist, once confessed his faith in materialism:

Our willingness to accept scientific claims that are against common sense is the key to an understanding of the real struggle between science and the supernatural. We take the side of science *in spite* of the patent absurdity of some of its constructs, *in spite* of its failure to fulfill many of its extravagant promises of health and life, *in spite* of the tolerance of the scientific community of unsubstantiated just so stories, because we have a prior commitment, a commitment to materialism. It is not that the methods and institutions of science somehow compel us to accept a material explanation of the phenomenal world, but on the contrary, that we are forced by our a priori adherence to material causes to create an apparatus of investigation and a set of concepts that produce material explanations, no matter how counterintuitive, no matter how mystifying to the uninitiated. Moreover, that materialism is absolute, for we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door.²⁴

It would be hard to find a clearer demonstration of the fact that scholars who believe in God are not the

²² Lewis B. Smedes, *A Pretty Good Person* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 74.

²³ Wolterstorff, “Abraham Kuyper on Christian Learning” (unpublished ms., New Haven, 1997), 15-17.

²⁴ Lewontin, “Billions and Billions of Demons,” *The New York Review of Books*, January &, 1997, 31.

only ones to guide their scholarship by their faith commitment. And atheism at the base of the learning pyramid is only one exhibit of how thinking and learning have gotten bent. People feel estranged from the persons and movements they study, and their estrangement often stems from resentments with a spiritual base. So people form rival schools, with rival systems and worldviews, trying hard not merely to win their way but also to defeat, or even humiliate, somebody from another school. The result is the well-known envy, rivalry, and sheer cussedness of a good deal of the academic enterprise, which is in these ways merely typical of the human enterprise.

Obviously, more education won’t fix what’s wrong with education. Nor will any other merely human corrective. Such fixes are tainted with the same corruption that needs fixing. That’s the bad news. The good news is that God has addressed human corruption from *outside the system*, and it is on this gracious initiative that Christian hope centers.