

## **Happy Meals and Theodicy: The Problem of Evil as an Expression of a Common Relational Issue**

An Apologetic Dialog

By Christopher Caudle

*Three<sup>1</sup> friends and co-workers are driving together across three states. The driver, **Chuck** (henceforth **DC**), is going to attend a family function. He is an inquisitive non-Christian who has offered to let his two friends ride along with him to keep him awake and to share the time. One of these friends is a former seminary student, **Wilson** (henceforth **SW**), who has recently decided he would rather work in the here and visible rather than in the mysterious and invisible. In the backseat is a Christian, **Atticus** (henceforth **CA**), who is riding along to see his fiancée.*

### **Tank One: Lunch Breaks Lots of Things**

DC: Is everyone ready? I'm glad to be sharing this road trip with two friends.

CA: Hey, thanks for letting me ride along with you. Things really worked out in this case. I haven't seen my fiancée in almost a month, so I'm glad to catch the ride. This new job is great, but the transitional challenges are tough since we're not getting married until June. So, this visit is great. We can go over some wedding details and maybe even catch a movie, like an engaged couple, for once.

DC: Yeah, what's that word you always use to describe things that work out like that? "Providential"?

CA: Yeah, "providential."

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<sup>1</sup> There really does seem to be something about the number three. While two people may come to an impasse in conversation or too quickly settle for an uneasy resolution, the third person can help to play the devil's and angel's advocates, reminding each of the other two what the original speaker said that was not commented upon. Though three can often devolve into a pair of two with the "third wheel", or the "third man out" so long as romance or political intrigue are not in view, the number three does work well in dialogues, jokes, and triangles.

SW: Oh, please — no theological terms. I am not interested in spending this trip talking about theology. I've decided to focus on what I can see and put my hands on. Not that abstract stuff. I had enough of that during seminary.

DC: I can understand that, but don't you call yourself a Christian?

SW: Of sorts, but I don't really believe all that stuff I was taught.

DC: I'm not a Christian, but I like some of what I have heard. You know, the goal of high ethical standards, the motivation to help others, the idea that God is looking out for you — providentially. Did I use the word correctly?

SW: Yeah, but there's a lot more to it than that. That word you use — "providential" — it doesn't just refer to the things we like. The church has taught, following the Bible, that *everything* that happens gets described by that term.<sup>2</sup> For example, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* says,

God, the great Creator of all things doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by His most wise and holy providence, according to His infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of His own will, to the praise of the glory of His wisdom, power, justice, goodness and mercy.

It goes on to say,

The almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness of God so far manifest themselves in His providence, that it extendeth itself even to the first Fall, and all other sins of angels and men, and that not by a bare permission, but such as hath joined with it a most wise and powerful bounding and otherwise ordering and governing of them, in a manifold dispensation, to His own holy ends, yet so, as the sinfulness thereof proceedeth only from the creature, and not from God, who, being most Holy and righteous, neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin.

There is a disagreement among Christians today about it, but many Christians believe that providence does describe absolutely everything that happens — even evil.

DC: Wait a minute. First, I thought you didn't want to talk about theology. Second, that is not at all what I would have expected the Bible to say. And third, we need gas and something to eat. So, let's stop and then talk about this after

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<sup>2</sup> *WCF* 5 (Of Providence). For the sake of space, I did not quote the entire article, but I am assuming its contents for the remainder of the dialogue.

we've had something to eat. And talk nicely, because I drive faster when I'm upset and I can't afford a speeding ticket.

SW: Though that, too, would be providential. (Laughs.)

CA: Enough for now! So, where do you two want to eat? I can eat anywhere!

SW: (simultaneously) Burger King!

DC: (simultaneously) McDonald's!

*Both look at each other and laugh.*

CA: This situation will tell you nearly everything you need to know about the complexities of providence and the problem of evil.

SW: You're not serious!

DC: Huh? How can my Happy Meal be related to the problem of evil?

CA: Let's get our food and we can talk about this a little slower, so that our food can digest and so Chuck doesn't get a ticket.

*Back in the car with a full tank of gas and food from McDonald's:*

DC: I want to know three things. One, why don't you Christians agree about this? Aren't you supposed to experience unity in your faith? Number two, where do you get the idea that the Bible teaches such an idea? I thought God was love. And number three, what in the world did you mean when you were talking about my Happy Meal?

SW: Well, the reason Christians disagree is that it is a problem for believers as much as it is for unbelievers. Evil hurts us in many ways the same way it hurts you. We hate to see people murdered. We don't like to see drought and floods or hurricanes destroy people's livelihoods, and we certainly don't like to be hurt by others. But most of all, we wonder how a good God could allow these things. In fact, it may be more of a problem for Christians because we (or they) have a desire to show that belief in God's goodness and righteousness is worthy and right. And different proposals for accomplishing those goals have led to disagreement.

To answer your second question, the church has believed that the Scriptures teach that God is in control of all things, and has determined the outcome of all things according to his own will. Therefore, though God has given us precepts to

govern our actions and will hold individuals responsible for the deeds done in their bodies, behind all this is the eternal determination and declaration of God.<sup>3</sup>

DC: So, in that sense, it doesn't matter if I'm driving to see my family for a wedding or a funeral or a graduation or a criminal sentencing? God is just as responsible for each of them? I think I liked it better when Jesus was the friend of the poor and the Good Shepherd.

CA: We will come back to that, but your last comment is why I think the problem of evil is like the happy meal dispute — because when it comes down to it, though followers of Christ and those who do not follow Christ feel the effects of the problem of evil, only Christians really feel the legitimate pressure of the problem, because we believe in God and accept the revelation of Him given in scripture.

DC: You are going to need to unpack some of that for me to understand. Why do you say this is only a Christian problem? I care about evil too. You know how upset I was when they named the city's new municipal building after the guy who was renowned for exploiting his workers. And you know I volunteer with Amnesty International. I'm not a disciple of Christ in the way you mean that term, but I'm not living in a bubble either. I am aware of evil in the world, and I wish it would be stopped. So, why is evil a Christian problem?

CA: Evil affects everyone, obviously, but it is only the case that Christians have the responsibility, conceptually, to account for it. Non-theistic systems don't assume that there is a personal cause for the things which go on in the universe. And non-personal forces, even if they are absolute, can't imply categories of duty in which labels such as good or evil are meaningful. Only in the Christian system (or a derivative of Christianity) can you have moral judgments, because at the top of all things is a personal God, who is himself absolute: the Personal Absolute who trumps the forces of motion, matter, time and chance. If you don't assume the Christian God, you have no ground for talking about "oughtness."

DC: No way am I buying that. You're saying that if I don't believe in God, I can't know right from wrong? If you and I can agree what to rent from the movie store, then people can agree not to murder.

CA: No, no — I'm saying that of course you can know right from wrong, but only because God exists and you live in a world that he created. I'm saying that you could not have right or wrong in a non-theistic universe. As for your comment on our movie watching, true enough. But what is the choice in the second case based upon? Is it merely the whim of consensus; an accident of the moods of certain people on a certain day? And what if a group of people decided that people who rent the entire Star Wars trilogy plus two in one weekend should lose

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<sup>3</sup> WCF 5.

their right to live? Those movies are not, after all, cinema's greatest achievements.

DC: You're making fun of my point.

CA: No. I'm asking why your point has more weight than mine, if you don't assume that there is an absolute lawgiver. Why is murder worse than poor movie selection? For that matter, what is the definition of evil? How do you know when you have witnessed evil?

SW: I know it when I see it. And I define it based upon my perceptions.

DC: Yeah, but you said that our boss was evil when she asked us to work overtime to finish our project and you missed the series finale of your favorite TV show. Is evil only defined as that which opposes your preferences? There must be more to it than that, because although I don't like onions on my hamburger, it seems that the employees of McDonald's do not care about my preference. Do they have some evil intention against me? Likewise, many people feel perfectly justified in their nation's military killing civilians in other countries, so long as it never happens inside their own country. What makes onions on my hamburger insignificant but genocide a terrible evil?

SW: Consequences. If you murder a whole group of people, it affects a large number. The ripple effects are larger. Bad movie choices and wrong food orders are not that important.

CA: You may be right in terms of the quantity of evil that each act would represent, but does that distinction describe the quality of an evil thing? I'm not so sure I can agree. Here is my rough definition of evil. We only have the category of evil because some things stand in opposition to the revealed will and character of the absolute personal Lawgiver. God says things should be a certain way, and when things go contrary to that, we have evil. Genocide is evil because it is contrary to God's scriptural command not to take innocent human life. And while poor workmanship may reflect a heart attitude that may be evil, if the employee at McDonald's made an honest mistake, evil probably hasn't besmirched your hamburger.

But with the existence of a standard that reflects the character of the Personal Absolute comes the problem of evil. And Christians in particular feel a need to explain and understand why the God that we worship and honor allows ...

SW: ... ordains ...

CA: Yes, and ordains things that are evil in this world. Not only do you get the standard that tells us how to distinguish good from evil, and gives us warrant to protect the lives of those who make bad movie selections, but you face the reality

that the existence of evil is not ultimately traceable back to the forces of motion, matter, time, or chance. The standard and its good news arrive with the problem of evil and its bad news as two sides of the same coin.

DC: You really are in a bad spot. For one thing, you base your whole definition upon God. How much consensus do you think you'll generate with that definition? And how do you reconcile those two sides? I guess a lot of people throw that coin away.

CA: Well, first of all, what alternative do you propose? People who have tried to deal with the problem of evil have usually done it by one of two approaches. They either redefine reality or they reduce their concept of God. That is, we describe natural disasters in terms of chaos theory or we claim that God is limited in his control or in his wisdom. In either case, you move away from God as revealed in the Scriptures and you allow impersonal forces to move toward the seat of ultimacy as the basis of reality. Motion, matter, time and chance are allowed to rule the weather, and free will is given the reign of heaven and earth. But in either of those cases, God's sovereignty has been mitigated by contingency. And we should know from our talk about movies that consensus should not be our highest good.

SW: Time out! That sounds like fast talking to me. I can't assume all that. All Christians don't agree that things are that stark. What if I think evil exists because God gave people free will and that people make bad choices that hurt other people? That's not God's fault.

DC: Yeah, what about that?

CA: I agree in one sense. Evil has expressed itself and left a wake of destruction and pain through the choice of Adam and Eve to disobey God. That door to evil was not only opened by the first family, but it is continuously opened by every one of us. As for free will, though it would seem to be a good solution at first, there are difficulties with that view. First, it is counter to what the Scriptures reveal about God. Second, it only accounts for human choices, but there are more things than people that hurt other people. And third, it doesn't account for how God can be both ultimate, as the Bible describes him, and simultaneously held captive to what the laws of nature dictate or to what individuals decide.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Here is an example of why most single apologetic conversations often extend into a series of conversations. Personally, I have never made it past this point without more discussion. I recognize that so far I have only asserted, not demonstrated, these points. Excellent discussion of these views is included in Frame's *Doctrine of God*. I have found both the positive presentation of compatibilism and the critique of libertarian free will helpful in conversations with Christians and non-Christians alike.

If everything reduces to motion, matter, time and chance, then the problem of evil, if meaningful, would only truly be the problem of circumstances or contingency.

Some philosophers have posited that life, because of its impersonal and material foundation, is utterly contingent. As a result, our job as humans is to do things that reduce the undesirable effects of contingency upon us and others. Those things that do this successfully are labeled “good.” Political philosophers like John Rawls ask us to imagine an original position in which we create a society while we are unaware of what status or role we will have in that society. This is meant to encourage us toward laws that are fair, and that reduce the chance that people will be mistreated. He argues that such a society doesn’t need ultimate consensus by its inhabitants beyond the desire not to be mistreated and a general sense of justice. The local television station has invested lots of money in a new Doppler radar system that will tell me the exact time I will lose my home during the next hurricane. My grandmother told me that the doctor’s ran short of the flu shot and so she had to drive to the health fair at the Ford dealership. But each of these incidents or approaches only deals with the effects of contingency. They try to limit the effects of randomness. But that only leaves us managing things as they are. Is that good enough? The Bible says that through Jesus Christ, there will be a new world where justice is rampant, sickness will be vanquished and there will be a cloudless sky.<sup>5</sup>

SW: But what if contingency is all we get? It sure is what we seem to see. You would say that Jesus loves the little children of the world, but it doesn’t always look that way. Lots of us would like lots of things to be better than they are, but reality imposes itself upon us. Talking about new worlds and health and sunny skies does not get people fed or get laws changed. There sure are lots of things that seem to be better described by the word “contingency” than by the word “purpose.” And it is easier to reconcile evil caused by forces than by people.

CA: I agree that things often do appear to be quite random, but the Scriptures teach, and many churches have affirmed, that behind those very real forces of motion, matter, time, and chance stands the personal God of Scripture and self-revelation. The church has called that truth “providence.” What appears to be random actually lies in the hands and plans of the Lord of both heaven and earth.

SW: But that only raises expectations. If the world is random, I grant that we lose a sense of security. But if all this around us is due to the allowance or plan of God, I have a problem. It is one thing if lightning strikes my house. It is another if my neighbor torches it. And in your system, God is at the bottom of all of it, in an

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<sup>5</sup> On this count, the books listed in the bibliography have been particularly helpful in my understanding of approaches to evil that describe it in terms (explicitly or implicitly) of contingency. Particularly significant in my own thinking has been the conception of social organization presented by Rawls when compared to Scripture’s social vision for the kingdom of God.

ultimate sense. And God's sovereignty doesn't automatically keep people we love from dying or keep other people from marrying people we think are bad news.

CA: That is true, but there is comfort in the ultimate basis for reality being personal. Nothing reduces to blankness or emptiness. We can direct our questions and tears to a person, the God of the Bible.

SW: You keep saying that, but I haven't always experienced that as being the best way to go. I have had many experiences where I was told to go along with something because people told me to, or that I was supposed to trust someone. That hasn't always been so positive in its results. I like a little absoluteness and impersonality in my laws, thank you. The statue of justice is blind for a reason. Why? Because of the issue you raise: personality. People like some people better than others, they share with their friends and they don't share with their enemies. Laws are enforced sporadically. Roads are repaired faster in some neighborhoods than in others. Personality is not always such a good thing in my experience. I think you are interpreting things by your assumptions. In the end, by your assumptions, how am I not just to put on a happy face? It makes me feel like the serfs who smiled until they could rise in revolt. I would like to be honest with God, and not just suppress unhappy thoughts until his back is turned. Your solution seems to tidy everything up, way out of proportion to reality. I want to be honest about life, even though I know you'll tell me that based upon motion, matter, time and chance, that's not so tenable.

CA: Two things you said seem very important. First, the problem of evil is mysterious and I don't have a complete answer at all. I certainly can't tidy it up. I have cried at funerals of friends also. There is much about the morning news that I cannot even imagine a positive outcome for. My only point is that as a Christian I am committed to following the words that God gave me in the Scriptures, and I am trying to submit to them as I would submit to Christ himself. Granted, that's not easy either. But I am not comfortable with any solution that begins by rejecting part of God's revelation to me through the Scriptures. Second, the problem you raise about personality is with the particular people involved. It is not personality *per se*, but the particular personalities involved. But the God of Scripture is not like human judges, who may favor the rich over the poor, or accept a bribe. He is not capricious or unrighteous. He is not ignorant of any fact or intention of the heart. His judgments are true. And he has shown his great love for us in the life and work of Jesus Christ.

DC: Time out. You just went all religious on me. Up until now, we've kept this at a reasonable level of discussion. But you are just assuming that the Bible is true. Lots of people don't agree with that. You'll have to tell me more about that. But, we also have the problem of a flashing gas light. OK, we've crossed the state line and we need fuel. I think gas prices are evil, though I'm not sure at this point if I



am using “evil” correctly, submitting to a consensus view, or if God would agree. In either case, the car needs gas, so let’s stop and stretch. Time for a break!

## **Tank Two: Complicating the Trip: Roads, Maps and Directions**

*Back on the road:*

DC: Fellows, the roads in this state are terrible. I had forgotten how bad they were. I guess God made them this way, huh?

CA: In an ultimate sense, yes. But don’t forget that God has used a variety of means to accomplish his purposes, including human choices and responses to his revealed will in the Scriptures and to the events that occur providentially. Human choice is essential, just not ultimate. And yes, in a mysterious way, God also uses evil to accomplish his purposes.

DC: You keep saying that, but tell me more about your assumption of everything said in the Bible. If the Bible teaches that, which is surprising to me, how can I know the Bible is correct?

CA: This is an important question, certainly. It also leads us into how the problem of evil is expressed in your Happy Meal.

DC: Finally. I’m feeling hungry again anyway.

CA: In a nutshell, I believe the Bible because I believe what it says about itself. I trust its testimony and I trust the God it testifies to. It teaches the things I said earlier about God, and I either see evidence that works to confirm those claims to be true, or I weigh the evidence of Scripture more heavily than evidence I see which would seem to deny its truth.

SW: Whoa — a leap that would make an Olympian proud!

CA: I knew that was coming, and I confess that I am not neutral on this issue. Though, neither is anyone when it comes to their ultimate commitments. But why is it obvious that I should subject God to my conceptions of rational investigation or evidence if he is the God that the Scriptures describe? If he is not that God, then I am left in a world that is occupied by a deity that has not revealed itself, or has revealed itself to be untrustworthy. None of those options appeals to me, and I have no reasonable cause to assume that such is the case.

DC: But, if we are not to subject God to any questions, and if we are to assume that the Bible is right, how do I know this for sure? How do I know at all? First, you have made the problem of Hitler into the problem of everything, and second,

your answer seems to be “open your mouth and close your eyes.” Aren’t there any other choices?

CA: I confess that I am an advocate, and ultimately I don’t think there is an alternative. But I am convinced because this is the God that I know. Ultimately, I find trusting him to be both justifiable (because it is based upon the evidence of God’s activity in the world and in my life) and true (because this God does not lie and he speaks in accord with the reality which he creates).

SW: Here we go — warm hearts. Oh no!

DC: What does he mean by that?

CA: My guess is that he is afraid that I am going to use my personal experience as a shortcut through the challenges posed by the scriptural text or church tradition or other human experiences with evil.

SW: Right.

CA: Hear me out. The Christian faith is not based upon simple affirmations or propositions. We believe that we have been welcomed into fellowship with the Triune God through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That relationship involves our whole person. It is experiential. We shouldn’t be afraid of that. And that also comes to the Happy Meal solution to the problem of evil. Though it is not a solution so much as a way I’ve found helpful to live through the mystery of it.

When the two of you said where you wanted to eat, you disagreed. Thankfully, the two of you are friends. But still, you both encountered the fact that the other person had a mind and will of their own. As long as you are only talking about food choices, you can probably make it through those situations. But what about issues of politics, work schedules, life and death? I’ve talked a lot about God being the absolute personality, but for the most part, I have only pointed out that this should bring us comfort, in that we are not the victims of chance or caprice. But it should also raise our expectation of complexity, because all relationships are complex.

For me, the problem of evil is an example of the problem of relationships, because it is the presence of the personal that should raise our expectations of complexity.

DC: I thought you were getting married soon. And you call relationships the problem of evil?

CA: No, the problem of evil is like an issue common to all relationships: dealing with the fact that the people we are in relationship with are not us. That is, they

have desires, goal, plans, intentions etc. that sometimes contradict our sets of plans, intentions, etc. Likewise, when you are in relationships, there is always an element of the unknowable about the other person, and that requires trust. This creates a sense of mystery, frustration and attraction in varying degrees. Thus, the problem of the Happy Meal is that the two of you wanted two different things at the same time, and you felt impinged upon. Similarly, the idea that God has ordained things that we don't like creates in us a feeling of impingement and unease. But it also requires our decision to trust or not to trust. There is, however, no alternative. To move from that is either to embrace a reality that is ultimately impersonal, and thus not subject to the reasonable possibility of disappointing us, or to reduce the revelation of God until God is something less than the Scriptures describe and more manageable. It also forces us to experience our relatedness to God in non-relational ways.

SW: Yeah, but aren't you reducing God to one of us in your analogy?

DC: That seems to be a fairly big reduction. No offense to my friend here.

CA: There are differences here, to be sure. It is only an analogy. God is certainly unlike us in the sense that he is the Creator, and we are creatures. His unknowability is infinitely more than we can imagine, and he knows us completely. Similarly, the desires of God and the desires of people are distinctly different. Ours are always affected by creaturely limitations and often contaminated by sinfulness, while God's are the very measure of perfection. But I still think the analogy has some descriptive value. In describing God as personal, I mean to say that God is present and near, but that presence still includes both authority and control. Also, God is present in the way that we are present in relationships: in blessing or judgment.

DC: What?

CA: What I mean is that God is at work in his relationships with all his creation to accomplish his purposes and respond to his creatures, just as we interact with people around us and we act in light of their responses to us. In God's case, his actions in history accomplish his eternal purposes. But because these purposes are infinitely more complex than our purposes, and because God is infinitely above our ability to understand or grasp, it is to be expected that in our relationship with God there will be times when we cannot immediately reconcile God's actions within our categories of experience or description.

People more frequently describe God's relationship to Creation in terms of authority or control, but that reduces the opportunity to have any peace about the times we cannot understand God's purposes and God's decisions. I think we have to focus of the personal, or the presence of God, to get a handle on that issue. Those other descriptors are often used to make quick work of the theodicy issue. They either set out defining God as the authority that fashions the very

definitions of right, or else defining God as in control in a way that makes the questions moot. Yet, God as the One who is present is rarely talked about in my circles. It still does not give us a simple solution, because relationships are never simple. It is, however, our responsibility to recognize that we are not exempted from the realities of this issue just because we find them challenging. Just ask any parent, spouse, teacher, pastor, or friend.

DC: Yeah, but what if I'm not in a relationship with God?

CA: In one sense, you are in relationship with God, whether you like it or not. There is no way to get out of the relationship in some aspects, though refusal to submit to God's claims upon your life, and rejection of Christ, does insure that you will only be related to God as an enemy rather than as a friend. But beyond that, I think that it is impossible to find a satisfying answer to the problem of evil without being in a relationship of friendship with God, because coming to a solution does require trust.

SW: So, you have to become a Christian to get the answer that there is not an answer right now?

CA: No, but you probably do have to be a Christian to have grounds to believe that patience and trust are both reasonable and obvious.

DC: What in the world are you saying?

CA: Imagine that the police called me and told me that my fiancée had been arrested for shoplifting at Target. What would I do? Before you answer, also imagine we heard on the radio that a person in another town on the same day was arrested for shoplifting at Wal-Mart. Do you think there is any difference in the way I would hear those two reports? Why?

DC: You know your fiancée, but you don't know the other person.

CA: Right. And I would immediately know that there were more facts needed before I could rightly interpret the police officer's report about my fiancée. I already know many things about my fiancée, and though I don't know everything about her, I feel that I know her well enough to approach an interpretation with caution. My fiancée who did this is also the person who did this, and this, and this, and this, and this... and so on. And I would probably assume that she hadn't done what they accused her of doing. On the other hand, I probably would assume that the other person really did shoplift.

SW: But we have all seen the news enough to hear neighbors who say that "the shooter was such a nice boy who was always very courteous before the day he went on the rampage." New facts can change previous interpretations as easily as old facts can moderate our understanding of new facts.

CA: Granted, new information causes us to rethink our understanding of a person, but most of the time we are able to nuance, rather than totally reject all previous knowledge. Sometimes, it seems that a particular action does shock us and render earlier knowledge useless in the face of it. Ultimately, that really depends upon our assessment of the weight to be given to the evidence. And in the case of God, the weight of the Scriptures as God's revelation to us trumps the evidence that seems to contradict it. The God who uses evil to accomplish his purposes is the God who has saved me from my sins, restored my humanity, is presently at work redeeming the world, and has promised to bring good out of all things.

DC: Isn't that blind faith?

CA: It certainly is faith in the sense that it is a trust that is given before all the evidence is in. But it is not blind because the God described in Scripture is also the God who showed us the depths of his mercy and grace and commitment to save us through the death of Christ. The God who could have dealt with us immediately in judgment chose instead to offer life to all who would call upon his name. And while a resolution to all the issues of faith is difficult, it is only in relationship that solutions will be found.

Jesus faced the problem of evil that he did not create and faced the wrath of his Father personally. In this case, God felt the pain of having absolute personality as the ultimate cause of all things. But God used this to redeem lost people, and to make the promise of a world made new a reality. This trust in Christ as your Savior opens the door to a life of growing trust. Faith is not a single momentary choice, because it is the beginning of a true relationship, similar in many ways to all your other relationships. It is an invitation for the Father and the Son to dwell with you and be with you and make their home with you. It is the invitation to take a road trip of sorts that includes not always getting the Happy Meal because there is another purpose at work.

DC: So, the decision to trust Christ comes before the solution to the problem?

CA: It can, though the problem of evil has been a mystery for the entire history of the church. But there have been many disciples of Jesus who have come to peace about it through their own tears and grief, and their own hope to talk with God about it one day when they come into his kingdom. And their relationship with him through Jesus Christ gives them confidence that they will either have the opportunity to have their questions answered, or to decide that they no longer need an answer.

DC: That makes some sense to me. There are things I accept about my folks that I don't really understand, but I do it because I love them and trust that they mean well. By the way, we're almost there. But I still need to stop and fill up the tank

once more. And I need to check the oil. If I show up at home with less than half a tank of gas, my dad will think I need money. And he will certainly check my oil while I'm not watching. When I was a student, I used to wait until the very last minute to feed the gas tank a dollar at the time. It wouldn't do me any good to have a full tank of gas and an empty stomach. And, I had to call him once when I ran out on the freeway. And you can imagine what happens when the oil isn't changed in a 1975 Nova.

CA: Is that an example of what you don't understand?

DC: No, that is pretty clear to me. I guess that I want to think more about what you've said. Maybe we can talk more on the ride back.

SW: Yeah, but this time, we should eat at Burger King.<sup>6</sup>

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## *Westminster Confession of Faith*

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<sup>6</sup> The goal of this paper has been to explore the existential aspects of the problem of evil as it relates to encouraging people to explore that issue from within the embrace of Christ. As Calvin said, the goal is not to persuade people, but to convert them. That makes the task much more difficult, especially for those who have been impacted by evil in a severe way. But beyond this, it also makes it impossible, for it forces the repentant sinner to confess that they themselves have perpetrated evil towards God and others by their rebellion. Thus, this task is only achieved through the work of the Holy Spirit. Graciously, God has allowed his people to share in that work through the sharing of the Gospel.