

Database Theology

Colleagues,

Today's guest contributor is Nathan Schroeder. He's part of the Crossings team. He manages the Crossings listserve. Apparently he also reads the stuff that gets posted. He and his wife Ellen are parents of our three oldest grandchildren. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Database Theology A few months ago, Bethel's adult aducation class [@ Bethel Lutheran Church, St. Louis MO] was doing a series on theories of atonement. When we discussed the idea that Christ had to die because God demands death as a consequence of sin, one person rejected that idea because she couldn't believe in a "vengeful" God that would make such a demand. I worked out another model in which Christ indeed had to die because death is a necessary consequence of sin, but not because of God's vengefulness. This model is based on my professional work; let me share part of it with you.

I am a computer programmer; I design and build data processing systems. As such, I am a creator. In creating a system, I have wide choice: I can build into the system whatever structures and rules I want to include. The system also includes independent agents (programs) that I create; I give them their instructions and start them going. If the agents act as I expect, operating within the rules and structures that I chose, the result will be that the system functions as I desire.

But sometimes the agents don't do what I expect (there are bugs). Acting completely in accord with their natures as I created them, they take actions I did not desire, often impeding other agents or messing up the structures. At that point, my choices are rather constrained (at least in comparison to my freedom when I was creating the system). I always have the option to destroy the entire system and create a new one, but usually there are reasons not to do that. Short of that, any major change to the structures or rules will cause other agents to be unable to function, and almost always will result in problems worse than the ones I'm trying to solve. I usually have to seek some change I can make in the structures or rules, that will be small enough not to impede other agents, but large enough to solve the problem at hand.

You see the analogy, I'm sure. I think that God, in creating our world, could have created it any way God chose; and God chose certain rules and certain structures to incorporate into the creation. One rule that God chose is this: someone will receive good if they do good (and, implicitly, will receive bad if they do bad). This rule of reward and retribution seems to me to be foundational in God's creation; I can see it reflected everywhere, even in the very laws of physics. And God created independent agents (people) in the creation, and gave them instructions. If the agents had acted as God expected, the entire creation would have functioned as God desired.

But the agents did not act as God expected. As a result, in accord with the rule of reward and retribution that God built into the creation, the agents received bad; in fact, death. Now that the agents have shown this tendency, God's choices are limited by the creation God created. God always has the option, of course, to destroy the entire creation and create a new one. That's one choice. God also has the option, of course, to ignore the problem; to let the creation continue to go in the

direction it's headed. That's a second choice. A third choice would be to change the creation to remove the rule of reward and retribution. As I said, I see this rule as fundamental to the creation; if it were removed, physics would change so much that I don't believe humans as biological creatures could continue to survive.

It seems to me that the fact that God didn't choose any of these first three choices shows love for God's created agents. Any of these choices would hurt or destroy us. In love for us, God sought another choice. I think that God found one small change that could be made, that would not change the creation so drastically as to kill all life, but would be sufficient to allow the problem to be fixed. God changed the rule of reward and retribution in this way: the good or bad result no longer needs to happen to the person who did the good or bad action. (Even this change has affected creation significantly; without it, we would never have to ask the question "why do bad things happen to good people?") This allowed God to shift the major consequences of everyone's sin to one person, saving all the other people.

But even this was not loving enough for our God, it seems to me; we have been told that God will not let even one out of a hundred be harmed, but will expend great effort to rescue even the one hundredth. So God found a way to extend God's self into the creation; to be simultaneously both the Creator, outside of creation, and one of the agents within the creation. (Fans of the movie "The Matrix" will recognize this as analogous to what the Machines did in "Agent Smith" – for a very different purpose, of course.) Using the rule change, then, God shifted the major consequences of everyone's sin onto that one person who was God's self acting within the creation.

Thus was Christ's death an unavoidable consequence of (a) the

way God created the world, (b) our sin, and (c) God's incredible love for all of us, that God would enter into the world and take our death upon God's self.

Nathan E. Schroeder