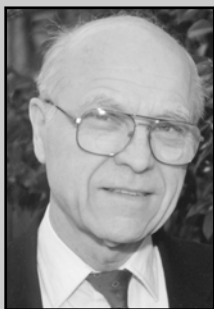


# Editorial Comment

Ralph D. Winter



Few Christian thinkers today write with the penetration and boldness of Philip Yancey. His experience contemplating a beautiful young bride suddenly devastated by a fatal illness is where this editorial begins.

It does not end there.

Our mission in this world is not yet so perfectly obvious that we can consign it to a marginal place in our daily lives, our wallets, our awareness.

Claudia, a beautiful young bride only a year into a glorious marriage, is now suddenly confined to a hospital bed, her beauty rapidly fading, her body sinking into unexpected and yet certain death from Hodgkin's disease.

This we hear from Philip Yancey. But his (true) story only begins there.

Now six kinds of visitors show up.

One is a deacon. He solemnly and earnestly "reminds" Claudia that our God would not "do such a thing to her" unless He had some good reason, unless there was some sin, some lesson for her to learn. Search for that in faith, he said. But, in her weakness she could not think of anything she had done wrong. And, anyway, why such a violent punishment?

Another visitor is an ebullient, cheerful woman. She arrives with flowers and flowery words to cheer. She insists on changing the subject every time Claudia refers to her illness. She overflows with exciting stories. She does not come back. She has done her duty.

Another woman arrives with great confidence in the power of faith.

When she learns about the first visitor, she reacts instantly with, "Sickness is never God's will! Haven't you read the Bible? The devil stalks like a roaring lion, but God will deliver you if you can muster up enough faith to believe you will be healed ... Simply name your promise, in faith, and then claim the victory." Claudia was exhausted and confused.

A fourth visitor "brought along some books about praising God for everything that happens." This very

spiritual woman told Claudia, "You need to come to the place where you can say, 'God, I love you for making me suffer like this.'" This repulsed Claudia. Is God really like that? What kind of glory of God is that?

On and on. You must get Yancey's book—*Where Is God When It Hurts* (Zondervan, 1990).

This is not just an intellectual problem. It has a great deal to do with Who and how we worship.

What is the connection between worship and a day by day deeper awareness of the true glory of God? If worship hinges on our sense of His "worth-ship" we can't go on singing again and again "Majesty, Worship His Majesty" and expect the mere repetition of those words alone to deepen our awareness of His Glory. Jack Hayford did not write that magnificent song so much to gain or procure a sense of God's majesty as to express his awareness of it—and to allow us to do so along with him.

But the power of his marvelous song hinges on the degree of whatever true sense we have, what true aware-

ness we have, of God's majesty. Otherwise those words can become no more than a Hindu mantra.

Thus, if our awareness of God's glory is confused or distorted by the puzzling issues of Claudia's visitors, our worship is going to be limited to our actual experience of that glory.

Yet we commonly hear people wondering out loud why would God have "done" this or that dastardly deed, as though there is no other power working to tear down His Glory.

I would not give you a dime for the idea that God's sovereignty is limited by His "inability" to know what choices His created beings will make in the future, or the reverse extreme that nothing really happens that is dead wrong or truly evil. Apparently a handful of "openness" theologians are being accused of the first extreme. And *Christianity Today* (April 23, p. 103) gives a whole page to let us hear them stoutly deny this.

But I would give you far more than a dime to know more about that "other" person in this world whose sole occupation is incessantly to pervert and despoil God's goodness and creation, and to twist our understanding of what in this world God does or doesn't do.

Yancey is right to bring this puzzle before us. Why are our usual hospital "visitors" so confused about the virtually omnipresent pain, suffering, premature death, and the myriad examples in our world of the distortion of God's intent—in a word, evil? Or, why are we so illiterate—so seldom discussing—what precisely are "the works of the devil" which "the Son of God appeared to destroy" (1 Jn. 3:8)?

As a matter of fact, how in this world of universal pain and violence, can anyone for a moment question the existence of a Satanic campaign to reduce and distort the true glory of God? How can we be content if we do not learn more of the details and how to fight back?

Frontier mission is that activity which focuses on precisely the confused edge of our active awareness of

***How, in this world of universal pain and violence, can anyone for a moment question the existence of a Satanic campaign to reduce and distort the true glory of God?***

Satan's domain of global destruction.

This bulletin is focused on mission frontiers, not on what is already clear and widely accepted. Like Yancey, our thinking is intended to probe the borders, the frontiers of our understanding of God's Mandate.

Many interpret the Great Commission to be merely the global extension of knowledge, the "all things I (Jesus) have taught you." Look again. The text clearly says something far more than that. It has Jesus requiring us to make certain that that knowledge is "obeyed," that is, acted on. A colossal difference. Merely 1) to know Jesus healed people, and 2) to both know and "obey" that knowledge, is the difference between, say, 1) a casual intellectual reflection on the existence of disease germs and parasites and 2) an active sense of duty to eliminate them in the Name of Christ.

This is why mission is more (although not less) than sending Bibles. We cannot—now that we know oodles more than we ever have about what can be done to eliminate and totally exterminate various disease pathogens—we cannot go on just praying for people. We worship a God who urges us to do what we are able to do to fight back against the works of Satan which harass and ravage not only millions of precious children and believing families in the Sudan but invade and plague our own people in the USA with rampant heart disease and diverse cancers.

How long will our pre-scientific theologies allow us to go on believing naively that if we will just "live right" and "eat the right thing" that we will not succumb to any of the virulent viruses, bacteria, parasites, and many other violences that pervade our sad world?

In other words, what may well be "all to the good" is definitely not always good enough. Urging sick and dying people to "praise the Lord" becomes much more inspirational if we

and they understand that our faithful God is not only mindful of the nature of evil but He is, with our help, in the process of conquering it. Only in that process of conquest can the full meaning be glimpsed in John's brief statement that "the Son of God appeared for this purpose that He might destroy the works of the devil (1 Jn. 3:8)."

We can ask, "Where were our theologians when one of the most outstanding theologians of all time, Jonathan Edwards, sought—against theological opposition—to do away with smallpox?" Massachusetts pastors back then condemned him for "interfering with Divine Providence." What kind of Satan-favoring, God-distorting theology is that?

Why did it take another 200 years for any concerted effort to eliminate smallpox from the face of the earth? And why, when it did happen, was it not any kind of direct result of Christian initiative?

Can we not better worship and glorify a God who is pleased by the ending of the horrible annual toll of two million people dying by smallpox, that most terrible of all deaths?

Why is our mission to this evil-ridden world not more strategically obedient to God's concern to triumph over that evil? Maybe it is, as my pastor (Gordon Kirk, Lake Avenue Church, Pasadena) put it, "Satan's greatest achievement is to cover his tracks."

What happens to the quality of our worship if we only go around the world making plain by "actions that speak louder than words" that the God we worship is able merely to offer malarial ridden sufferers a bed on which to die? Does this not mean He does not know or care, or even with our help is unable to do anything, to *eliminate* malaria once and for all?

Or, does it not affect our worship if we worship a God that does not ask us to do anything about the fact that

four children die every sixty seconds from the work of that devious, ingenious, metamorphing parasite called malaria? At the minimum, are we not shouting to the world that the God we worship has not enlisted us on His side in this endeavor?

Don't blame Calvin. He did not have the faintest idea about germs and he only faintly understood the evil intelligence embodied in the masses of parasites that inflict us. With greater knowledge comes new responsibility.

And, worse by far, it may very well be that Calvin, along with Thomas Aquinas, Luther, etc., were infected by an Augustinian pagan syncretism from neo-Platonism that conceived of God as actually orchestrating evil for good—not after the fact, but in its very initiation! The idea is, we must not fight evil but simply resign ourselves to it, knowing that a good God would never have anything but good in mind for us in "doing these harmful things to us."

How much more logical to believe what the Bible clearly assures us, that God is able to use for good—and with our help ultimately triumph over—the evil deeds of Satan after they happen, but that He does not guide Satan or "put him up to" evil.

I personally don't put great stock in mere philosophizing, but I am very concerned that so very, very little of the vast energies of the world's millions upon millions of followers of Christ are so marginal and distantly related to the major matter of eliminatable evil. And I believe that to many intelligent observers of Christianity our integrity and credibility are at stake.

In many spheres of international mission, even among non-literate (but intelligent) people, the very viability and impact of our preaching is gravely blunted. Are we misrepresenting a zealous and loving God in stopping short of the true depth of His mission? 🌐