

A Critical Theological Examination of Little's Creation-Order Theodicy's Soteriology in Light of the Coexistence of Gratuitous Evil with the Benevolence and Sovereignty of God

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Abstract

This research, entitled "A Critical Theological Examination of Little's Creation-Order Theodicy's Soteriology in Light of the Coexistence of Gratuitous Evil with the Benevolence and Sovereignty of God", sought to evaluate the soteriological provision in the theodicy. Upon identifying inherent weaknesses in the soteriology, the research aimed to revise Little's Creation-Order Theodicy to account for a soteriology that is in harmony with the coexistence of gratuitous evil with the benevolence and sovereignty of God.

The integrative theology methodology proposed by Lewis and Demarest was utilized for the research. The chosen methodology allowed for the integration of information from various disciplines. The methodological steps followed were: (1) evaluation of Little's theodicy, (2) evaluation of major Christian monotheistic theodicies, both historical and contemporary, (3) exegetical analysis of pertinent biblical texts, (4) construction of theologically formulated revisions to the Creation-Order Theodicy, (5) apologetic interaction of the revised Creation-Order Theodicy with major Christian monotheistic theodicies, and (6) evaluation of theological relevance of revised the Creation-Order Theodicy.

The research culminated in a revised Creation-Order Theodicy. Most significantly, the revised theodicy contained a soteriology that provided salvation for all who would be saved. The following biblically, theologically, and logically sound revisions were incorporated into the original Creation-Order Theodicy: (1) a soteriological understanding of God's benevolence, (2) the actualization of the world in which all who would be saved are saved, (3) dichotomization between the best way to the best possible world from the best of all possible worlds, to include qualifying and quantifying criteria for each, and (4) a consistent position on the gratuitous nature of evil.

The revised Creation-Order Theodicy provided a paradigm shift on how to counsel the suffering, how to engage a fallen world, and the development of a new theological curriculum.

1. Introduction

The Creation-Order Theodicy is the work of Dr. Bruce Little. Little explores and defends the possibility of the coexistence of gratuitous evil with the sovereignty of God (Little 2013: 46-49). Antithetical to greater good theodicies, Little argues that God's benevolence is not undermined by the existence of gratuitous evil and is expressed through God actualizing the best of all possible worlds (Little 2005: 150-152). However, Little's theodicy fails to provide for the salvation of all who would be saved, a deficiency that is considered a fundamental weakness in Little's work. This research aimed at resolving the primary soteriological deficiency identified in the Creation-Order Theodicy.

In constructing a resolution to the soteriological deficiency identified in the Creation-Order Theodicy, revisions were necessary regarding Little's position on actualising the best of all possible worlds, and the lack of consistency on the nature of gratuitous evil. Little's stipulation for what constitutes the best of all possible worlds was determined to be incongruent with a biblical understanding of the benevolence of God. It negated a sound soteriology (2 Pt 3:9). Little's criterion for the best of all possible worlds only requires that God achieve the optimal balance between good and evil, and between the saved and the unsaved. Such an optimization could render a person saved in one world, but unsaved in another world. Their salvation, albeit through their libertarian free choice, would be a function of which world God chose to actualize. Revising the criterion of which world God would actualize, could remedy the optimization shortfall. By changing the criterion of which world to actualize to all who would be saved, no one would be lost as a function of God actualizing the world. In consideration of the benevolence of God, such a criterion would be reflective of the manifestation of his benevolence and coherent with the biblical record.

The initial research required an analysis of the chosen theodicies and was conducted based on the fundamental elements of Little's theodicy. The fundamental elements were: (1) evil, (2) creation-order, (3) benevolence and sovereignty of God, (4) libertarian freedom, (5) soteriology, (6) middle knowledge and the best of all possible worlds, and (7) gratuitous evil.

After analyzing Little's theodicy and identifying its critical deficiencies, the alternative theodicies were evaluated to see if they contributed to rectifying the soteriological and other associated deficiencies identified in Little's Creation-Order Theodicy. Upon completion of the theodical analysis, no resolution was found to the soteriological deficiency identified in the Creation-Order Theodicy.

After a careful analysis of Little's Creation-Order Theodicy, historical and contemporary major monotheistic theodicies, and the biblical text; a revision to the Creation-Order Theodicy that incorporated a soteriology that provides for the salvation of all who would be saved was constructed. The proposal of a sound theodical soteriology required a coherent understanding of the coexistence of gratuitous evil with the benevolence and sovereignty of God. The biblical text informed the position that the research would maintain regarding gratuitous evil, and the benevolence and sovereignty of God. The new theodical doctrine, once introduced back into the framework of the Creation-Order Theodicy, offered soteriological resolution, and provided for the simultaneous coexistence of gratuitous evil with the benevolence and sovereignty of God.

2. Analysis Of The Fundamentals

Evil

Like many of his predecessors and contemporaries, Little defines evil as a privation (Little 2005: 134; Augustine 1955, § 2.19.53; Aquinas 2014, § 1.49.1; Geisler and Bocchino 2001:233). Ontologically, God could not create a non-contingent and perfect creation because only God is necessary and perfect. Although God created humanity as close to perfect as possible, the contingent human cannot be equal to the necessary and perfect God (Little 2005:134-135). The contingent nature of humanity creates the privation of creaturely perfection and thus the potential for evil (Little 2005:141-142). While the act of creation does make evil possible, evil is not necessary (Little 2005:135).

Creation-order and Sovereignty

Creation-order, the "*modus vivendi*", is the structure whereby humanity interacts with God, (Little 2005: 135; 2010: 84-92). Creation-order stands in contrast to the macroevolution and natural order approaches proposed by Dembski and Hasker respectively (Dembski 2009: 42; Hasker 2008: 139). Within the creation-order, there are rules by which humanity must abide. Humanity's choices are limited within the creation-order (Little 2010: 87).

The limitations set the parameters for humanity, while simultaneously allowing humanity to have full libertarian free choice within the set of available choices. The individual has an authentic mind and can act volitionally, thus being fully culpable for their choices. Similarly, the physical laws of nature are part of the creation-order (Little 2010: 90). The predictability and regularity of the laws of nature throughout the universe allow humanity to live safely and harness the power of the physical world.

Also, within creation-order is covenantal ordering (Little 2010: 91). Within the created order, God has limited himself by adhering to covenants (Gn 9:11). The covenantal ordering bears directly on understanding and applying God's sovereignty. Those who hold to a meticulous providence understanding of God's sovereignty, such as Irenaeus and Augustine, insist that everything that happens in creation has a purpose (Irenaeus 2016, §2982; Augustine 2013, Loc. 5954-5965). The justification for God allowing evil to happen is that he has a purpose for each evil, either to bring about a greater good or prevent a worse evil. Little argues that the meticulous providence understanding of God's sovereignty would, in effect, make God responsible for the evils he prohibits (Little 2005: 181-182).

Antithetical to the meticulous providence understanding of God's sovereignty, Little suggests that God has voluntarily, without any external influence, decided on how he would interact with humanity (Little 2005: 136). God, being necessary, is ontologically different from contingent humanity (Little 2005: 136; MacGregor 2005: 1). To have a truly volitional relationship with contingent humanity, God sovereignly gave humans the ability to make real choices. Little and Olson agree that the construct of such a relationship requires that God, within the time and space of creation, self-limit the full expression of some of his attributes (Little 2005: 136; Olson 2009: 44). Scholars such as Fouts, Hendryx, Highfield, and Haas, consider any self-limitation of God to be a weakness which denies God of his sovereignty (Fouts 1993; Hendryx 2018; Highfield 2002; Haas 2011:13).

Benevolence

Little denies the greater good understanding of God's benevolence, namely that God must bring about a greater good or prevent a worse evil to justify each evil he allows (Little 2005: 112-113). Instead, Little suggests that through his middle knowledge consistent with his benevolence, God will

actualize the best of all possible worlds. God's benevolence would require the actualization of such a world (Little 2010: 95-99). Little stipulates that the best of all possible worlds will have the optimal balance between good and evil, and the optimal balance between the saved and unsaved (Little 2010: 121). Based on a definition of God's benevolence being the expression of his unselfish concern and welfare for humanity, it is argued that Little's criterion for the best of all possible worlds is irreflective of God's benevolence (Ryrie 1999: 44; Erickson 1998: 318-319). Little uses the optimal balance between the saved and unsaved as a standard of God's benevolence (Little 2010: 121). It is maintained that a standard that merely achieves the optimal balance between the saved and unsaved could render a person saved in one contingent world and unsaved in another. Even though each person freely chooses whether to accept or reject God, their salvation could be directly impacted by which world God chooses to actualize, even though the optimal balance between the saved and unsaved would be achieved. Therefore, the researchers propose that if God's benevolence is understood as being concerned for the welfare of all of humanity, then the manifestation of his benevolence would provide for the salvation of all who would be saved. Further, Craig suggests, that God would lovingly actualize those who reject him into their least culpable set of counterfactuals, while still honouring their libertarian free choices (Craig 1995: 9). Such a manifestation of God's benevolence would determine which world he actualized.

Libertarian Freedom

Libertarian freedom is the concept that God has given humans the ability to make free choices within the two or more possibilities that are available to them (Little 2010: 14). In deciding between the available choices, humans exercise moral evaluations. Although God, through his middle knowledge, knows what decisions man will make, God does not determine the decisions (Little 2010: 94). Libertarian freedom is congruent with the understanding of God's self-limiting sovereignty. Libertarian freedom conflicts with the predestination and deterministic views of reformed scholars such as Calvin (Calvin 2010, Loc. 896). Hasker notes that under the compatibilist view, a person's choices have been predetermined, yet that person is held responsible for their moral choices (Hasker 2008: 153).

Soteriology

Little's soteriology opposes an Augustinian type of gratuitous election and predestination-based soteriology. Augustine and Aquinas held that

God gratuitously elected to predestine some to salvation and others to reprobation (Augustine 2013, Loc. 171311-171321; Aquinas 2005: 580). Little's soteriology eliminates God's gratuitous election and predestination of individuals as the causation for who is saved and who is unsaved. Instead, Little's soteriology is demonstrated through his argument that the actualization of the best of all possible worlds would include the optimal balance between those who are saved and those who are unsaved (Little 2005, 155). Little explains that those who are unsaved are unsaved by their own libertarian free will choices and God is not responsible for their choices (Little 2005: 138,155,157,184). It is found that Little's criterion of achieving the optimal balance between the saved and unsaved to be a deficiency in his soteriology. The optimal balance between the saved and unsaved could be achieved depending on which world God chose to actualise. However, a particular person could be saved in one world yet unsaved in another world, although the optimal balance between saved and unsaved was still obtained. As a function of obtaining an optimal balance, Little's soteriology does not account for the salvation of all who would be saved. Therefore, it can be contended that God, being benevolent, would want as many people to be saved as is possible.

Like Little, Craig argues for the actualization of the best of all possible worlds, with the best world containing the optimal balance between the saved and the unsaved (Craig 1989:184). However, Craig also contends for the existence of Transworld damnation, the state of being whereby "any person who freely does not respond to God's grace and so is lost in every world feasible for God in which that person exists" (Craig 1989:184). Craig's theory of Transworld damnation suffers from shortcomings. The most significant shortcoming of the Transworld damnation theory is that it is based on facts that are not in evidence. Craig's entire theory rests on assumptions of counterfactuals that cannot be proven. Scripturally, 1 Samuel 13:13 and Matthew 11:23 indicate that counterfactuals can result in different outcomes. We do not know those outcomes; therefore, it can be concluded that Transworld damnation cannot be evidentially demonstrated. It is impossible to definitively state that an individual would be lost in every possible counterfactual situation. Thus, neither Little nor Craig provides a soteriology whereby all who would be saved are saved.

Middle Knowledge And The Best Of All Possible Worlds

Little has adopted a belief in the middle knowledge of God (Little 2005: 147). The concept of middle knowledge was introduced in Molina's

Concordia (Molina 2004, §4.52.9). Middle knowledge is the knowledge that God has of the undetermined acts of “His free moral agents in all possible circumstances” (Little 2005: 146). Also subscribing to a belief in God’s middle knowledge are Flint and Laing who use the term ‘counterfactual’ to describe the nondetermined acts of God’s free moral agents (Flint 1998: 40; Laing 2018, §8151).

Through God’s middle knowledge, his knowledge of all counterfactuals, Little postulates that God chooses which world to actualize (Little 2005: 147). Further, God must choose to actualize the best of all possible worlds due to his omnibenevolence. The best of all possible worlds, according to Little, would be that world which contained the optimal balance between good and evil as well as the optimal balance between the saved and unsaved (Little 2010: 121). Craig, alongside Little, proposes that the criterion for the best of all possible worlds is the achievement of the optimal balance between the saved and the unsaved (Craig 1989: 184). Molina, the architect of the theory of middle knowledge, determined that God’s selection of which world to actualize would be determined solely by his sovereignty and gratuitous predestination regarding the saved and unsaved (Molina 2004, §4.14.13.53.2.13; 2009, §7.23.4 – 5.1.11.7-10). Laing, also a proponent of God’s middle knowledge, denies that God must actualize the best of all possible worlds (Laing 2018, §5115). Laing reasons that God will actualize the world that best meets his purposes. Appealing to mystery, Laing asserts that we cannot know the goals and purposes that God intends, therefore we cannot accurately ascribe the criterion of what the best world would be.

Rennie argues against adopting the theory of middle knowledge, insisting that God would only have a probable knowledge of contingent choices in lieu of a certain knowledge of them (Rennie 2019: 5)

Geisler likewise argued against the existence of middle knowledge (Geisler 2010: 143-144). Geisler maintained that middle knowledge would undermine God’s sovereignty (Geisler 2010: 143). Additionally, Geisler contended that middle knowledge required a linear progression of God’s knowledge, God knowing things and then making decisions accordingly (p. 148). In lieu of a linear progression of knowledge, Geisler maintained that God knows all things intuitively and simultaneously, not progressively. Regarding Geisler’s claim that middle knowledge would require a linear progression of God’s knowledge, and can be argued that

God's middle knowledge is likewise intuitive and simultaneous, not requiring any linear progression of time or knowledge.

In defining the best of all possible worlds, Little puts parameters on defining what constitutes the world. Little defines the world as existing from the beginning of creation to the full manifestation of the kingdom of God throughout eternity (Little 2005: 147). Although Little contends that he has defined what the best of all possible worlds is, the world that has the optimal balance between good and evil as well as the optimal balance between the saved and the unsaved, I argued that his terminology does not give definitive qualifiers or quantifiers as to what the best would be. To require only the optimal balance between the saved and the unsaved could result in an individual being unsaved in the actualized world, where they would have been saved in an unactualized world. Little's optimal balance criterion does not provide individuals with the best soteriological situation.

Geisler, Bocchino and Corduan developed a dichotomized definition for understanding the best of all possible worlds (Geisler and Bocchino 2001: 235; Geisler and Corduan 1988: 345). Geisler and Bocchino denied that this actualized world is the best of all possible worlds (Geisler and Bocchino 2001: 235). Instead, Geisler, Bocchino and Corduan, maintained that the actualized world is the best way to achieve the best of all possible worlds – heaven (Geisler and Bocchino 2001: 235; Geisler and Corduan 1988: 345). Geisler, Bocchino and Corduan stipulated that the actualized world must have the most moral value and achieve the greatest good possible. However, they failed to consider the salvation of humanity as a qualifier or quantifier in determining what world would be the best world to achieve the final, best of all possible worlds. Additionally, they failed to offer any means to assess whether the actualized world is the best way to achieve the best of all possible worlds.

Regarding heaven, the best of all possible worlds, Geisler and Corduan explained that a sinless heaven is better than any existence on earth where there is sin (Geisler and Corduan 1988: 313). The state of being in heaven where there is no sin is a quantifiable measure of what is best. No sin is better than the smallest amount of sin. Although argued that Geisler, Bocchino and Corduan did not successfully quantify or qualify the best way to the best of all possible worlds, it can be argued that dichotomizing the actualized world from the future world in heaven is

a valuable construct in building a soteriologically centered revision of Little's Creation-Order Theodicy.

Gratuitous Evil

Little affirms the possibility of the existence of gratuitous evil (Little 2013: 46-49). In rebutting any greater good reason for God to allow evil, Little offers a six-point argument: (1) to fight for social justice would be to undermine the greater good that would be obtained if the evils went unchallenged, (2) the greater good makes God dependent on evil to do good, (3) there is no way to positively measure the value of the good that is associated with a particular evil, (4) it is a logical fallacy to argue that the end justifies the means, (5) a greater good reason requires an overly deterministic operation of God's sovereignty, and (6) if the greater good reasoning were valid, then the greater the evils that are allowed, the greater the corresponding goods will be, so evil should never be stopped. Borofsky contends the argument for the existence of gratuitous evil answers questions and resolves issues that the greater good theodical position does not (Borofsky 2011: 6).

Although Little argues convincingly for the existence of gratuitous evil, Little equivocates on his stance stating that even if most evils were gratuitous, it would not mean that all evils are gratuitous (Little 2013: 45). The researchers maintain that Little's equivocation is problematic. Having argued competently for the existence of gratuitous evil, and against a greater good rationale for evil, Little undermines his own argument by giving allowance for non-gratuitous evil. If, as Little presented, the argument against the greater good pertains to one evil, it should pertain to all evils.

Hasker likewise endorses a belief in gratuitous evil (Hasker 2008: 203-207). However, Hasker reaches his conclusion from an open theistic perspective. MacGregor also believes in gratuitous evil (MacGregor 2012, 174). Building a strong argument for gratuitous evil, MacGregor presents propositions similar to those in Little's argument (MacGregor 2012: 171-172; Little 2013: 46-49). Contrary to the equivocating position held by Little, MacGregor holds a consistent position regarding gratuitous evil, namely that all evil is gratuitous.

Unlike Little, historical and contemporary greater good theodicians deny the existence of gratuitous evil. Historically, theodicians such as Augustine,

Aquinas, Molina, and Leibniz all held to a greater good justification for evil (Augustine 2016, §XI, 7187; Aquinas 2014, §1.2.2; Molina 2004, §4.3.53.3; Leibniz 1996, part 1, pp. 62;86). The argument was simple, God must bring about a greater good or prevent a worse evil for every evil that is allowed. Similarly, contemporary theodicists Geisler, Bocchino, and Craig, have held to a greater good justification for evil (Geisler and Bocchino 2001: 239; Craig 2016: 3). Craig bases his argument on the epistemic distance between God and man; man simply does not know the mind of God and his purposes for allowing evils (Craig 2017, §958).

3. Formulation Of A Soteriologically Centered, Revised Creation-Order Theodicy

Little's Creation-Order Theodicy provides a strong theodical framework, yet it is considered it to be deficient in several aspects. The proposed revisions of the Creation-Order Theodicy provided rectification of the following deficiencies: (1) a definition and outworking of God's benevolence that better reflects the biblical text, (2) a soteriology that provides for the salvation of all who would be saved, (3) dichotomization of the best way to the best of all possible worlds from the best of all possible worlds, offering qualification and quantification for both timeframes of existence, and (4) a consistent position on the existence of gratuitous evil.

Benevolence and Soteriology

Little claims that God demonstrates his benevolence by creating the best of all possible worlds, consisting of the optimal balance between good and evil and the optimal balance between the saved and the unsaved (Little 2005:150;153; Little 2010:121). The contention is that a proper understanding of God's benevolence and his choice of which world to actualize must be soteriologically based. The researchers contended that the witness of scripture requires that the salvation of all must be considered (2 Pt 3:9; 1 Jn 4:10) arguing that the benevolence of God would not be satisfied by him actualizing a world that only achieves an optimal balance between the saved and unsaved, such a world would result in the inadvertent eternal damnation of some people. Such people may be saved if God selected a different world to actualize.

Therefore, it is proposed that God's benevolence is best demonstrated by assuring that all who would be saved are saved. No person who would ever be saved under some counterfactual circumstances would ever suffer eternal damnation. Given the infinitude of counterfactual possibilities,

resulting in an infinitude of possible worlds, it is logically possible for God to actualize a world in which all who would be saved are saved. Further, as a continued demonstration of his benevolence and in respect of their libertarian free choices, he would actualize those who reject him into their least culpable existence (Craig 1995: 9).

Dichotomize the best possible way from the best of all possible worlds. Little's definition of what constitutes the world is that which begins at creation and lasts throughout the manifestation of the kingdom of God on earth for all eternity (Little 2005: 150). While encompassing the entirety of the timeframe proposed by Little, it is proposed that the dichotomized framework provided by Geisler and Corduan (Geisler and Corduan 1988: 356) to be more acceptable. The dichotomization results in the following timeframes: (1) the actualized world as the best possible way to the best of all possible worlds, and (2) the future world of heaven as the best of all possible worlds.

While the sum of the dichotomized timeframes is equivalent to Little's timeframe, the dichotomization offered value and clarity. By dichotomizing the timeframes, a qualifiable and quantifiable definition of 'best' could be developed as was pertinent to each timeframe. The definition of best, as applied to each timeframe, clarified the totality of the theodicy as it undergirds the attributes of God while simultaneously providing for the salvation of all who would be saved.

Qualify And Quantify The Best Way To The Best Of All Possible Worlds

The researchers contend that the actualized world must be the world that contains all who would be saved if it is to be the best way possible. In defining the term 'best' as it pertains to the actualized world, the qualifier is those who would be saved, and the quantifier is all. Reflecting the biblical record, 2 Peter 3:9 and 1 John 4:10 it is argued that God's benevolence is most realized in his provision for the salvation of humanity. This argument rests on the premise that the number of people that comprise humanity is fixed, there are no contingent human beings. Therefore, the most benevolent situation in the actualized world would be for everyone who, through their libertarian free choices, would ever be saved to be saved.

Further, those who reject God's salvation would benevolently be actualized into their least culpable set of counterfactuals concerning their libertarian

free choices. Given the infinitude of counterfactual combinations, it is logical for God, through his middle knowledge and reflective of his omnibenevolence, to be able to actualize such a world. As defined previously, the actualized world is the best way to achieve the best of all possible worlds.

Qualify and Quantify the Best of All Possible Worlds

The best of all possible worlds is the future kingdom in heaven. In heaven, there will be no sin and all who would be saved are saved and will reside with God for eternity. Because the actualized world, as defined, contains all who would ever be saved under any counterfactual combination, heaven will likewise be populated with all who would ever be saved. Heaven will not be limited to a population resulting from an optimal balance of saved versus unsaved people. No person will suffer eternal damnation due to God's choice to actualize one world in lieu of another. By actualizing the world in which all who would be saved are saved, God provides the best way possible to guarantee the best of all possible worlds, the future world in heaven.

For those who, through their libertarian free choices, choose to reject God's plan of salvation, they will also experience their best eternal situation. Those who reject God will have their choices in the actualized world permanentized in eternal damnation. By actualizing such individuals into the counterfactuals that will make them least culpable, God thereby mitigates their punishment as much as possible, while respecting their libertarian free choices. Such an arrangement upholds God's benevolence and his demand for justice.

Gratuitous evil

Both Little and MacGregor demonstrate sound arguments against the greater good justification for evil and the existence of gratuitous evil (Little 2005:124-126; MacGregor 2012: 171-172). It is contended that all moral and natural evils are gratuitous as they pertain to God and, as such, do not infringe on the attributes of God. Evil is a privation, and because humankind is created, and thus ontologically not equal to the necessary and perfect God, humanity is subject to privation. Privation resulting from the ontological difference between God and contingent humanity, does not make evil necessary, it only makes it possible (Little 2005:135).

Logically, if Little and MacGregor's arguments against the greater good

justification for evil apply to one evil, they must apply to all evils (Little 2005: 124-126; MacGregor 2012: 171-172). Given the soundness of the arguments presented by Little and MacGregor, and in consideration of the biblical account in Lk 13:1-5, thus incorporating the position that all evils are gratuitous in my revisions of the Creation-Order Theodicy. The position on gratuitous evil included the self-limiting understanding of God's sovereignty and negates the meticulous providence sovereignty model held by greater good theodacists. When considered within the creation-order, the self-limiting sovereignty of God, as explored in Gn 9:11, along with the libertarian freedom of man, coexist with gratuitous evil (Olson 2009: 44). The gratuitous nature of evil does not infer that God is powerless to come against any moral or natural evil. Instead, because of his sovereign choice to establish and abide by a creation-order, which includes the self-limiting manifestation of some of his attributes, gratuitous evils are allowed in the passive sense. It is therefore maintained that gratuitous evils do not infringe on any attribute of God; they in fact, uphold the attributes of God.

4. The Soteriologically Centered, Revised Creation-Order Theodicy – A Summary Presentation

The soteriologically centered, revised Creation-Order Theodicy was based on the following two premises: (1) through his middle knowledge, God knows all counterfactuals, and (2) no person is contingent, God set a definitive number of people that he would create. In every possible world, every person would exist.

Knowing all counterfactuals, God chose to actualize the world in which all people who would ever be saved are saved. Further, for those who are unsaved, having rejected God by their own libertarian free choices, God actualized them into their least culpable set of counterfactuals, mitigating their retribution as much as possible. This construct demonstrates the benevolence of God and preserves the libertarian freedom of humanity.

Because the actualized world contains all who would ever be saved, and the unsaved are in their least culpable set of counterfactuals, the actualized world is the best way to achieve the best of all possible worlds. The actualized world can be considered the best because it can be qualified and quantified. Regarding qualification, the best refers to the state of being saved and the state of being least culpable. Regarding quantification, the best refers to all who would be saved and the mitigation of culpability of

all who would be unsaved. Therefore, the actualized world is the best way possible world to achieve the best of all possible worlds, the future world in heaven.

The future world in heaven is the best of all possible worlds. The future world can be considered the best of all possible worlds because it will contain all who would ever be saved under any set of counterfactuals. Further: (1) the saved will reside with God, (2) there will be no sin, and (3) evil will not exist. Those who are unsaved and will suffer eternal damnation, they will have their retribution mitigated as much as possible while having their libertarian free choices honored. The future world in heaven for the saved is qualifiably and quantifiably the best. The qualifiers are salvation and sinlessness. The quantifiers are all who would be saved and no sin. Likewise, for the unsaved, the state of eternal damnation is the best possible world. The qualification is the mitigation of punishment, and the quantification is all unsaved people receiving the most mitigation possible.

In the actualized world, God set up a creation-order, the *modus vivendi* whereby God and humanity can have a truly volitional relationship (Little 2005: 136 –137). Within the creation-order, God bound himself to self-limiting covenants. Because he freely entered the covenants, they do not impinge on his sovereignty. The self-limiting understanding of God's sovereignty negates the need for meticulous providence and makes possible libertarian free choices by humanity and the associated consequences.

Lastly, the soteriologically centered, revised Creation-Order Theodicy maintained that all evil is gratuitous as it pertains to God. With the actualization of the world in which all who would be saved are saved, and the unsaved have their punishment mitigated as much as possible, any gratuitous evil that should transpire would have no relevance to the benevolence of God, his benevolence being measured on a soteriological basis. Further, any gratuitous evil that should transpire would not undermine the sovereignty of God, God having sovereignly self-limited the manifestation of some of his attributes in the actualized world, and sovereignly bestowing libertarian freedom on humanity. No evil is necessary for God to bring about any good. While God may choose to bring about a good despite an evil, the evil is still gratuitous.

4. Conclusion

Little's Creation-Order Theodicy, while demonstrating many strengths, failed to account for the salvation of all who would be saved. This research intended to formulate biblically, theologically, and logically sound revisions to the Creation-Order Theodicy that would result in a theodical soteriology that provided for the salvation of all who would be saved. In formulating such a theodicy, the following major revisions were incorporated into Little's original theodicy: (1) redefinition of God's benevolence, (2) actualization of the world in which all who would be saved are saved, (3) dichotomization of the best way to the best of all possible worlds from the best of all possible worlds, providing qualification and quantification criteria for each, and (4) adoption of a consistent position on the gratuitous nature of evil. Further, the framework of the revised theodicy biblically, theologically, and logically accounted for the following: (1) the concomitant attributes of God, (2) the actualization of the best way possible world and gratuitous evil, (3) natural evil, (4) the cross, (5) eternal damnation, (6) miracles and prayer, and (7) the eternal state of all people.

In consideration of future research, the revised Creation-Order Theodicy should be evaluated within the disciplines of pastoral counseling, missiology, and Christian education. Adopting the revised Creation-Order Theodicy as an informing frame of reference could generate a paradigm shift in how to counsel the suffering, how the church engages in a fallen world, and how curriculum should be developed.

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Author's Declaration

The author declares that there is no financial gain or personal relationship(s) that inappropriately influenced him in the writing of this article.

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