

Theology for Troubled Believers: *A Lenten Journey*

5. Responding to God

Sunday, April 17, 2011
10 to 10:50 am, in the Parlor
Presenter: David Monyak

St. John in the Wilderness

■ **March 13 and March 20: The Nature of God.**

- Topics: Introduction to Theology. The Holy One of Israel. The Maker of Heaven and Earth. The Limits of Science. What is Meant by “God”

■ **March 27: Suffering**

- Topics: Nature as a Witness and Innocent Suffering. Innocent Suffering and Life Beyond Death. Suffering from Nature and Extreme Human Cruelty.

■ **April 3: The Divine Sacrifices.**

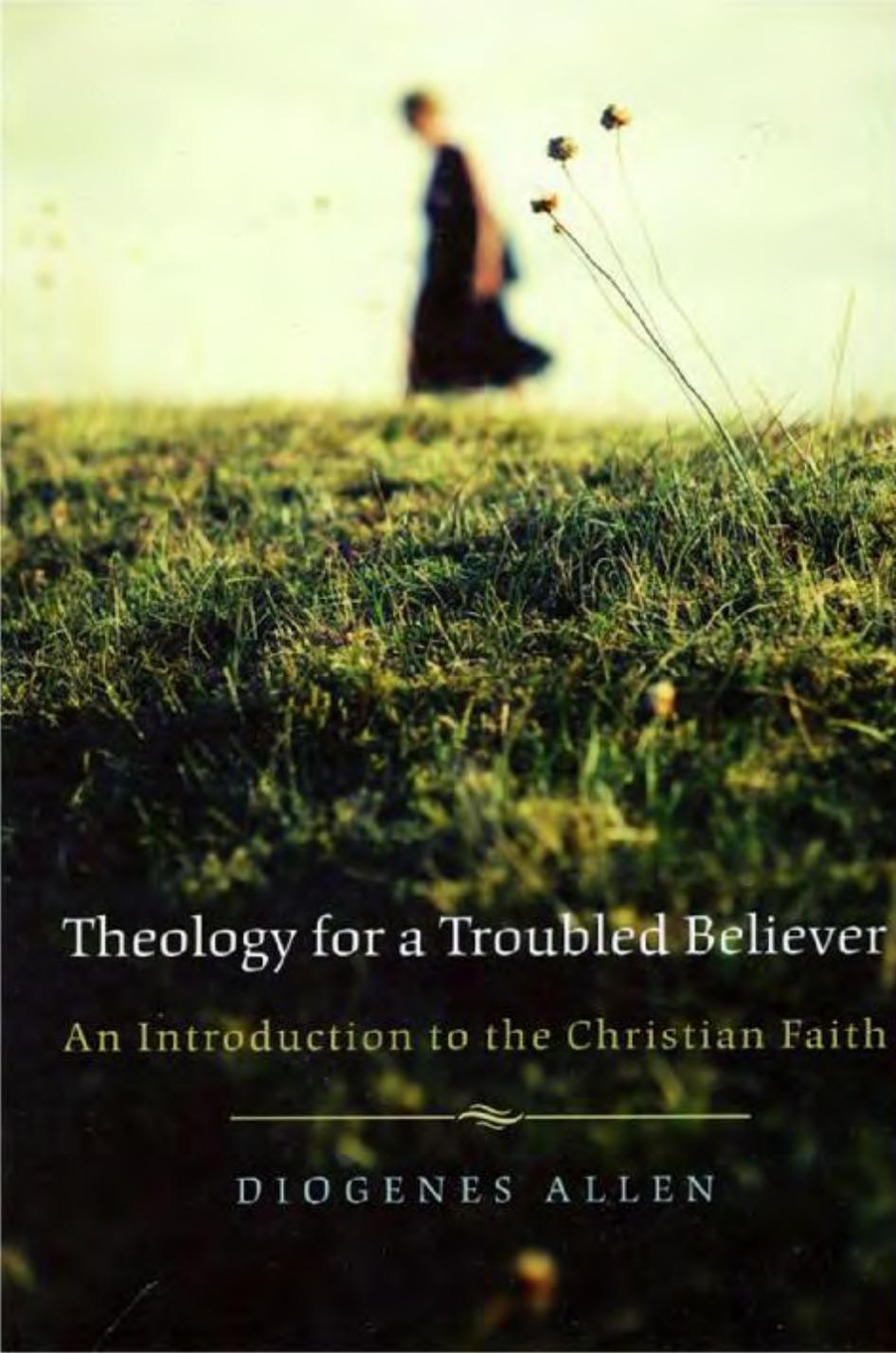
- Topics: The Sacrifice in Creation. Incarnation as Sacrifice. The Temptations in the Wilderness. The Sacrifice of the Cross.

■ **April 10: The New Life in God.**

- Topics: The Resurrection of Jesus and Eternal Life. Jesus as Lord and Jesus as Servant. Revelation and Faith.

■ **April 17: Responding to God.**

- *Topics: The Holy Spirit, the Church, and the Sacraments. Sin, Evil, and Hope for the Future.*



Theology for a Troubled Believer
An Introduction to the Christian Faith

DIOGENES ALLEN

Reference

- **Theology for a Troubled Believer. An Introduction to the Christian Faith.** Diogenes Allen, 2010.
Chapters 16, 17

"Theology for a Troubled Believer is one of the richest expressions of theology in years. Allen invites the nonspecialist into the worlds of philosophy, literature, and Scripture in ways rarely made so accessible and compelling at the same time. A very wise work."

—**W. Mark Richardson**, Professor of Systematic Theology,
The General Theological Seminary, New York

"In this powerful book, Allen brings a lifetime of philosophical and theological reflection to the task of explaining how contemporary Christians can fully embrace their faith without compromising their reason and ably addresses the concerns of committed Christians as they strive to make sense of their faith in a complicated and frequently hostile world."

—**William Greenway**, Associate Professor of Philosophical Theology,
Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary

■ **Theology for a Troubled Believer. An Introduction to the Christian Faith.**

Diogenes Allen, 2010

Lord Jesus Christ, you said that you are the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Help us not to stray from you, for you are the Way;
nor to distrust you, for you are the Truth;
nor to rest on any other than you, as you are the Life.
You have taught us what to believe, what to do, what to hope, and where to take our rest.

Give us grace to follow you, the Way, to learn from you, the Truth, and live in you, the Life.

Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam, 1467-1536

Priest and Theologian, Christian Humanist

This week:
Responding To God

A photograph of a person walking away from the camera in a field of tall grass and dandelions. The person is wearing a dark, long-sleeved top and dark pants. The background is a bright, hazy sky. The text "The Church: A Colony of Heaven" is overlaid in a bold, purple font, centered on the image.

The Church: A Colony of Heaven

A Colony of Heaven

Birth of the Church

- The Church began on the day of **Pentecost**
 - The apostles receive the Spirit with the authority and power to carry out their *mission* as **apostles** = messengers.
 - Their *mission* had been given to them by Jesus. The result of their witness is a new community, the **Church**.
 - On the Day of Pentecost itself, Peter's proclamation of Jesus as Savior and Lord causes some three thousand people to be baptized, and they devote themselves "**to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers**" (Acts 2:42).

A Colony of Heaven

A Community of Common Property

- At first within the community, all possessions are held in common and are distributed to all as they have need.
 - In part, this practice was possible because of an expectation that Jesus would soon return and fully establish the kingdom.
 - Although a community of common property did not continue, genuine community remains an ideal, and it is approximated by the church's care for the needy of the world.

A Colony of Heaven

Inauguration of the Kingdom

- The failure of Jesus to return quickly, as the early church expected, did not lead to a severe crisis:
 - The death of some believers before Jesus' return apparently troubled some of the Christians in Corinth (1 Corinthians 15:12-56), but in general the delay of Jesus' return did not cause a crisis of faith.
- This was because the early Christians believed that the kingdom of God *had already come* with the ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

A Colony of Heaven

Inauguration of the Kingdom

- That is: the kingdom of God had already been *inaugurated* with the ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, and the gift of the Holy Spirit
- The *full* establishment of the kingdom of God would not happen *until* Jesus' return.
- Jesus brought the dawning of the kingdom of God, and Jesus' followers live *between* Jesus' inauguration of the kingdom of God and its consummation.

A Colony of Heaven

Inauguration of the Kingdom

- Christians thus believed they were already living “**in the last days**” (Acts 2:17), or last eon, characterized by the beginning presence of *final reality*, the kingdom of God.
 - **Eschatological** = concerning ultimate or final things, such as the destiny of humanity.
 - The Church was an **eschatological community** living in the light and from the power of the kingdom of God.

A Colony of Heaven

An Eschatological Community

- As Paul put it in his Letter to the Philippians, the local church of which they were a part was a **colony of heaven** (3:20)
 - The city of Philippi was in fact literally a *colony* of Rome, founded as a Roman settlement in Greece for retired legionnaires. Its inhabitants lived as much like Romans as possible, even though they were far from Rome.

A Colony of Heaven

An Eschatological Community

- The church as an **eschatological community**—a community that lives in the light and from the power of the **kingdom of God**—gives its members a new identity:
 - **“If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”** (2 Cor. 5:17).
- This new identity created a new pattern of relationship with others in the church, breaking down barriers between people.

A Colony of Heaven

A Radical New Community

- The breaking down of barriers showed the radical nature of the new community:
 - The admission of Gentiles (non-Jews) into the church on equal footing with Jewish Christians has been called a “sociological miracle.”
 - Galatians 3:23-29: **“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.”**

A photograph of a person in a dark dress walking through a field of tall grass and dandelions. The person is out of focus, and the background is a bright, hazy sky. The text "Baptism and the Eucharist" is overlaid in a large, bold, purple font.

Baptism and the Eucharist

Baptism and the Eucharist

Children of the Same Father

- Through baptism into Christ, we are related to Jesus' Father as our Father and are privileged to address God as Jesus taught us pray: **“Our Father in heaven”** (Matt. 6:9).
- Our relations to each other are as *children of the same Father*, who takes precedence over our earthly parents and establishes us as brothers and sisters.

Baptism and the Eucharist

Children of the Same Father

- Our union with Christ is strengthened and renewed with every celebration of Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension in the **Eucharist** (= "thanksgiving"), or **Holy Communion**.

Baptism and the Eucharist

Nature of the Eucharistic Bread and Wine

- One of the most contentious issues over Holy Communion is the nature of the bread and wine in Communion. In what sense are they the body and blood of Christ?
- In the early church all theologians were “**realist**”: all believed that the consecrated elements of bread and wine were the body and blood of Jesus.

Baptism and the Eucharist

Nature of the Eucharistic Bread and Wine

- This has been understood in two different ways.
- The first makes a distinction between the visible elements or *sacramentum* (the bread and wine) and what they *signify and mediate* by God's power: the *res* (the body and blood):
 - The bread and wine are *signs* of a reality (the body and blood) that is somehow actually present, though the reality is apprehended only by faith.
- This was the view of such great theologians of the early church as Athanasius, Tertullian, and Augustine.

Baptism and the Eucharist

Nature of the Eucharistic Bread and Wine

- The second interpretation was a later tendency to explain the identity as being the result of an *actual conversion* of the bread and wine, so that they *become* the *actual* body and blood of Christ.

Baptism and the Eucharist

Eucharist as a *Anamnesis*

- Holy Communion includes a remembrance of Christ's death and resurrection—an *anamnesis*—recalling a past event in such a way as to bring it before us, so that the past becomes a reality in the present.

Baptism and the Eucharist

A Celebration of the Community

- Holy Communion is a celebration of the community, the body of Christ, the people of God,
 - It is not just a “collection” of isolated, personal acts.
- In Holy Communion we *together* are in communion with Christ and, because of this communion, we are in communion with each other.
- Sharing a community meal within the “colony of heaven,” the eschatological community, anticipates a just sharing of all the gifts of creation in justice and love”
 - This is why the worship service ends with a challenge, such as **“Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.”**

A soft-focus photograph of a person walking through a field of tall grass and dandelions. The person is in the middle ground, slightly out of focus, wearing a dark sleeveless top. The foreground is filled with green grass and several dandelion stalks with their heads. The background is a bright, hazy sky. The text "The Holy Spirit" is overlaid in a large, bold, purple font across the center of the image.

The Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit

God Present Personally

- After Jesus ascends to the Father, the **Holy Spirit** remains as a presence that comforts, strengthens, and encourages the church and each believer (John 14:18, 26; 15:26; 16:14).
- **God the Holy Spirit** is the way God is present to us individually and personally. As Basil the Great (339-379 A.D.) put it:
 - **After the likeness of the sunbeam, whose kindly light falls on him who enjoys it as though it shone for him alone, yet illumines land and sea and mingles with the air. So too, is the Spirit to everyone who receives It, as though given to him alone, and yet It sends forth grace sufficient and full for all humankind, and is enjoyed by all who share It.**

The Holy Spirit

Active Power of the Truth

- The **Holy Spirit's** activity also enables Jesus' followers to understand more fully Jesus' teachings, and inspires obedience to them as the "active power" of truth:
 - Simon Weil (1909-1943): **There is a great difference between a truth which is recognized as such and introduced and reviewed in the mind as such, and a truth which is active in the soul [the whole person] and endowed with the power to destroy within the soul those errors that are clearly incompatible with it. The active power of the truth is the *pneuma hagion* [Holy Spirit], the divine energy.**

The Holy Spirit

“Wounds” Caused By the Spirit

- Julian of Norwich (1342-1416) suggested the **Holy Spirit**, the Active Power of the Truth, “batters” our ego, our self-centeredness, our evil inclinations, our indifference, and our conformity to the ways of the world, and so “wounds” us.

The Holy Spirit

“Wounds” Caused By the Spirit

- Julian specifies three wounds in particular:
 - 1. **The wound of contrition.** Repentance and continuing repentance for our disobedience.
 - 2. **The wound of compassion.** Love for neighbor, wrings our heart because love involves our sorrow for human distress.
 - 3. **The wound of longing.** As love for God increases, we suffer a longing for the fullness of God’s presence in the kingdom, as does a lover for the beloved.

The Holy Spirit

Summary

- By means of the **Holy Spirit**, by means of the **Active Power of Truth** within us:
 - We are led us into Christ's truth by the destruction of those errors incompatible with God's Word; and thus
 - We are brought closer to the fullness of Christ in our lives.
- Within the Church, the eschatological community, the "colony of heaven," the **Holy Spirit**, the **Active Power of Truth**, inspires activities for the building up of the church and the spreading of its life.

A photograph of a person in a dark dress walking away from the camera in a field of tall grass and dandelions. The person is out of focus. The text "The Power of Sin and Evil" is overlaid in a large, bold, purple font.

The Power of Sin and Evil

Power of Sin and Evil

Failing To Conform Our Lives to Christ

- Despite of being part of the body of Christ and having the Holy Spirit's presence in our lives, we fail to conform our lives to Christ (= to live Christlike lives)
- Paul, Romans 7:18-20: **I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.**

Power of Sin and Evil

Definition of Evil and Sin

- **Evil** and **sin** can be understood only in relation to:
 - God, as understood in the light of Jesus, the true human being that we fail to be.
 - the kingdom of God, the future that God has in store for us.
- **Sin** and **evil** = that which is opposed to the will of God.
 - They are thus profoundly *theological terms*

Power of Sin and Evil

The Fall and Original Sin

- What accounts for our own (and Paul's) “tendency” to sin?
- Among the ancient Jews, the idea of a “fall” arose. Their reasoning:
 - God creates only good.
 - Therefore the inherent tendency to sin does not belong to human nature as it was created.
 - So some time after the creation, there must have been a “fall,” causing a corruption of human nature and the inherent tendency to sin.

Power of Sin and Evil

The Fall and Original Sin

- Allen notes scholars have suggested this idea of a “fall” arose only after the return of the Jews to Palestine from their exile in Babylon in the sixth century.
- The Jews then looked for confirmation for this view in the Scriptures:
 - Some found it in the story of the lustful angels that sexually assaulted mortal women in Genesis 6:1-4.
 - However this interpretation of the origin of sin (“**original sin**”) was largely replaced by finding the fall in the story of Adam and Eve.

Power of Sin and Evil

Modern Version of “Original Sin”

- Allen proposes a modern version of the origin of sin (= “original sin”) consistent with a the modern understanding of life evolving over time:
- Because of our needs as contingent beings, we are easily distracted by the material world, which is closer to us and attractive, and many of its goods meet many of our needs.
- So a people or a “pre-people” in our evolution turned their attention and efforts in the direction of the material world and so lost their orientation to God and God’s purposes.
- This *orientation away from God* = “original sin.”

Power of Sin and Evil

Modern Version of “Original Sin”

- This disorientation led to disorder among appetites and desires, and affected the sense of judgment as to what is good, right, true, and honorable.
- Networks and other social relationships developed that were not as God intended.
- By being formed and shaped by the inherited social network, each individual was “weakened” in their ability to wrestle with the temptations to which their nature as finite creatures subjected them to.
- The “original sin” was thus perpetuated

Power of Sin and Evil

Modern Version of “Original Sin”

- Individuals are born without an awareness of God, with a “neutral” orientation (neither towards nor away from God)
 - Allen rejects Augustine’s idea we are born with the **inherited guilt** of the Adam and Eve’s “original sin.”
- However, as we grow and mature and reach the age of reason, we “buy into” the values of the flawed social networks with their orientations away from God, and at that point become guilty of “original sin” ourselves.
- We walk away from God by pursuing earthly goods and in seeking to meet our needs for security and significance apart from God.

Power of Sin and Evil

Modern Version of “Original Sin”

- God calls us back in many ways. God’s Spirit, the “Active Power of Truth” for example, makes us aware of:
 - the inability of finding any lasting satisfaction in the things of this world,
 - The inability to make ourselves secure in this world,
 - The futility of our efforts to establish significance in this world.

Power of Sin and Evil

Modern Version of “Original Sin”

- If we repent—turn around, orient ourselves towards God—we can start to become aware of God.
 - The Greek word for “repentance” is *metanoia*, which means turning around in life and reorienting one’s entire outlook to God
- No longer is God behind us, so to speak, but now we face toward God.
- But even when repentant, we still are not *fully* oriented on God, since we are *distant* from God through having walked away from God by our evil thoughts and actions.
- Our understanding is still clouded, and our motives are not fully ordered on God.

Power of Sin and Evil

Modern Version of “Original Sin”

- Since we are now facing in the direction of God, we are **justified** = regarded as **righteous** by God, but we are still not fully conformed to God’s will.
- Some of us have walked *further* into evil than others. So we have *different* distances to walk to return to God:
 - Some people who have repented and begun their walk toward God are still more evil than some people who have not repented, but who have not walked as far away from God as some repentants had done.
 - So it is not surprising that there are some non-Christians who, for a time at least, lead better lives than some Christians.

A photograph of a person walking away from the camera in a field of tall grass. The person is wearing a dark, sleeveless top and dark pants. The background is a bright, hazy sky. In the foreground, several dandelion stalks with their heads are visible. The text "Partners with God" is overlaid in a large, bold, purple font.

Partners with God

Partners with God

Adam and Eve's Responsibilities

- The story of Adam and Eve is helpful not only as a story demonstrating the nature of sin, but also is extremely valuable for its insights into our relation to God.
- Adam and Eve are charged with ruling over the animals and caring for God's garden or paradise.
- Although Adam and Eve thus have responsibilities, they are *limited* in their knowledge of the effects of their actions for good or evil.
- But they are clearly told to leave the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil alone – even though it might give them knowledge that they need.

Partners with God

Adam and Eve's Responsibilities

- They must therefore act on the garden and the animals as best they can, but *without* full knowledge of the consequences of their deeds.
 - *That is:* they must trust in God's providential care that things will turn out well and, if things do not seem to be working out as they think they should, to continue to have faith in God's providence.
- Adam and Eve were thus called to seek to meet their responsibilities for creation as **partners with God.**

Partners with God

Our Daunting Situation

- We too are called to meet our responsibilities as a **partner with God**.
- We must make every effort to act responsibly, to learn from experience, to succeed.
- But we must balance our efforts with an acceptance of our ultimate dependence on God's providence.
- We can go wrong either by:
 - an overdependence, so that we neglect our responsibility for the future, or
 - by losing faith in God's providence, and so in effect reject God from our lives, as individuals, as a colony of heaven, and as a society.
- Our situation is a *daunting* one.

Partners with God

Adam and Eve's Daunting Situation

- It was daunting for Adam and Eve, who were perhaps tempted to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil so they could better fulfill their responsibilities without having to trust God's providence.

Partners with God

Hope for the Future

- The undetermined and uncontrolled future is a source of anxiety for us. We have responsibilities to meet.
- We are tempted to:
 - go it alone (like perhaps Adam and Eve in eating of the fruit)
 - or to become wholly passive and let God sort everything out without us.
- But **partnership** is the way God has specified for us, a much more *demanding* path to follow:
 - We are neither to think and act as if we can fully control our fate and make ourselves secure, nor to despair of trying to improve our situation.
 - We are to have **hope** for the future, a future lived according to God's way.