

## IS GOD INNOCENT?

This past Friday's (November 2) University of Minnesota campus lecture sponsored by the Institute was especially provocative, and therefore it was not surprising that the room was packed with students and community members. What was surprising, in the minds of many on the outside, was that a distinctly theological question was being debated in the halls of a major secular university where ideas are considered critically. The speaker, Udo Middelmann, a resident of Switzerland and longtime Francis A. Schaeffer Fellow of the MacLaurin Institute, came to argue for another answer to the age-old question of God's sovereignty and human freedom.

The central issue, said Middelmann, is that the injustice and horrors of this world seriously call into question whether God is just. Were it not for God's self-revelation, history alone would tell us that "God has failed us, or is absent, or is weak," said Middelmann.

There have been two traditional answers to the problem of God's justice in an unjust world, broadly speaking. One, generally represented by those known as Calvinists, makes the claim (or something approximating it) that God sovereignly rules history, so that history, no matter how unjust it may appear, accords with God's sovereign plan. On the other side, those long known as Arminians accord greater weight to human freedom in shaping history, including injustice. Some Arminians, known as "openness theologians," go so far to argue that God does not fully know the future. Middelmann looks for a third, and what he thinks a better answer.

His claim is that while God fully knows the future, he nevertheless does not control it but, rather, engages human actors in the unfolding of what God knows will unfold. Middelmann builds his argument on several assertions. First, he observes that God made humans, from the very beginning, as agents with real, though limited, sovereignty, and, thus, if it were true that God's sovereignty is supreme, then human sovereignty would be no more than illusion. Second, the God of the Bible, said Middelmann, is not timeless but "the hero in the face of an uncertain future," and thus Jesus himself endured many cruelties within history. God, while knowing all, nevertheless must experience history, as we do. Thirdly, because there are "many actors" who shape history, "history is not the revelation of His will; it is revealed in His word."

Bob Osburn, the Institute's Executive Director, observed that while the Institute takes no official position on the age-old dispute between Calvinists and Arminians, "Udo's biblical and cultural sensibilities have been honed by over 40 years of intense conversation with thousands of people (many at L'Abri Fellowship), and so we need to take him very seriously."

The lecture was the occasion of the national launch of Middelmann's book, *The Innocence of God*, which has been published by Paternoster, a London-based publisher. Middelmann's itinerary over the November 2-4 weekend included several discussions

with students, and lectures at both St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Edina as well as at L'Abri Fellowship in Rochester, southeast of the Twin Cities.