Divine Suffering

Theology, History, and Church Mission

EDITED BY

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PICKWICK *Publications* • Eugene, Oregon

DIVINE SUFFERING
Theology, History, and Church Mission

Pickwick Publications
An Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers
199 W. 8th Ave., Suite 3
Eugene, OR 97401

www.wipfandstock.com

PAPERBACK ISBN: 978-1-7252-6827-2
HARDCOVER ISBN: 978-1-7252-6828-9
EBOOK ISBN: 978-1-7252-6829-6

Cataloguing-in-Publication data:

Names: Schmutzer, Andrew J., editor.

Title: Divine suffering : theology, history, and church mission / edited by Andrew J. Schmutzer.

Description: Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2022 | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: ISBN 978-1-7252-6827-2 (paperback) | ISBN 978-1-7252-6828-9 (hardcover) | ISBN 978-1-7252-6829-6 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Suffering of God—History of doctrines | Suffering of God—Biblical teaching | subject | subject

Classification: BT153.S8 D58 2022 (print) | BT153.S8 (ebook)

12/15/22

7. The Cruciform Vulnerability of God

Victor Shepherd

> . . . the personal God has a heart. He can feel, and be affected. He is not impassible. He cannot be moved from outside by any extraneous power. But this does not mean that He is not capable of moving Himself.[1]
>
> The sorrow which openly or secretly fills the heart of man is primarily in the heart of God.[2]

Abstract

At risk of projecting the tormented human situation onto God, the church has frequently insisted that God must be "beyond suffering" if God's integrity is to be preserved. Scripture, however, attests that God suffers in the anguish of the world, and suffers not least in the sin of the people whom he created. Concomitant with the denial of God's suffering is a philosophical notion of control or power that amounts to omni-causality and a false understanding of God's sovereignty. Crucial, however, is how such expressions are defined. In truth, God exercises his "almightiness" unambiguously in the cross of the Son Incarnate; there God does his most characteristic work (sheer, limitless love) and his most effective work (he reconciles a rebellious world to himself) precisely where, from a human standpoint, he appears utterly helpless. God's omnipotent sovereignty, then, is the limitless efficacy of his limitless vulnerability. Whereas romantic portrayals of Christ's resurrection depict him as finally having left his earthly suffering behind, the New Testament makes plain, in several places, that the risen, ascended Lord suffers still, and suffers pre-eminently

1. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II.1, 370.
2. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV.2, 225.

in the suffering of his people. Unless corrected, this romantic misunderstanding will then be matched by the church's misunderstanding of its mission; namely, that discipleship, both individually and corporately, can be rendered non-cruciform, even "prosperous."

Introduction

I RECEIVED THE TELEPHONE call in my church-study at 1:45 p.m., fifteen minutes before I was to step into the sanctuary and conduct the wedding of a congregant. The caller was a man who had spoken to me weeks earlier about his pending retirement, when he would be relieved of many of the stresses dogging anyone who must contend every day with turbulence and turpitude. Now he was telling me that his daughter, son-in-law, and two-year old grandson were dead.

Four years earlier I had married his daughter and her husband, both schoolteachers. They had had one child. The child's father, haunted by unshakeable depression, had been admitted to the psychiatric ward of a neighborhood general hospital. Discouraged at discerning no improvement in his condition and frustrated at the seeming hopelessness of his life-predicament, he had left the hospital, returned home, and retrieved an axe from the garden tool-shed. At that point he had decapitated his toddler-son in front of the youngster's mother; then he had decapitated the mother, his wife; finally, he had hanged himself in the basement of his home.

I hung up the phone, walked out in front of the gathered wedding-guests, and prayed God's blessing on the couple who had just finished vowing to remain faithful to each other regardless of what difficulties or even disasters beset their married life. Next, I went to the home of the older man who had telephoned me and endeavoured to minister to him and his wife in the name of Jesus Christ.

Three days later, in a church packed with congregants, relatives, and fellow-teachers from two schools, three victims (yes, the perpetrator was as much victim as those he killed) were commended to the care and keeping of the God whose "steadfast love never ceases," whose mercies "never come to an end" but rather "are new every morning," and all of this just because God's "faithfulness to us is great" (Lam 3:22). Could the horror be any less horrible if such mercies *did* come to an end?

What are the clergy to say on such an occasion? Who is the God in whose name and on whose behalf our vocation impels us to speak? And since devout people are quick to speak of "God's will" in situations of impenetrable opacity, what is to be said about the God whose "will is good

and acceptable and perfect"? (Rom 12:2). Six months later, the older man knocked on the door of my study ten minutes before I was to preside at Sunday worship. He wanted to tell me his physician had informed him days earlier that he had cancer. Throughout the ordeal the heart-broken man was at church every Sunday, his confidence in God unimpaired. For he *knew*, deep-down at a level skeptics and agnostics and nay-sayers of every sort could never access; he knew that God loved him. What God loved him? What sort of God could touch his pain? What kind of deity is it who can "comfort us in all our afflictions"? (2 Cor 1:7).

Reflecting on Sovereignty and Control

When I relate such pastoral incidents to my seminary students, they quickly interject, "But as horrible as the situation is you have just described, as Christians we have to believe that God is in control." Whereupon I ask them, "Who was in control at Auschwitz?" Plainly we were. "But don't you believe in the sovereignty of God?" they come back with a question that also sounds like an accusation. Of course, I believe in the sovereignty of God: the God who isn't sovereign simply isn't God. Unquestionably, God is sovereign; and no less certainly, we are in control.

By now the students are beginning to see the difference between "sovereign" and "controlling." To speak of God as sovereign is not to posit that God is all-controlling or omni-causal. Surely control is precisely what God relinquished (if ever he exercised it) when he submitted himself to misunderstanding and mistreatment at the hands of Israel, the "apple of his eye" (Deut 32:10), to whom he has pledged himself irrevocably and with whom his covenant is non-rescindable. Surely control is what God foreswore when he wept over, was enraged by, and pleaded with a "stiff-necked" people (Exod 33:3). Then there is the vulnerability of the Incarnate One. For our sakes, this God allows himself to be reviled, flogged, slandered (crucifixion, it must be remembered, was the Roman penalty reserved for military deserters, terrorists, and rapists—when no one ever suspected Jesus of the first two), then tormented and finally abandoned.

At this point a student from the Reformed tradition always exclaims, "I'm a Calvinist, and we Calvinists exalt the sovereignty of God." As gently as I can I reply, "How many times in Calvin's *Institutes* does Calvin use the expression, 'the sovereignty of God'?" In fact, Calvin nowhere uses the expression in his *Institutes*. Calvin speaks repeatedly of the majesty of God, as well as of the grandeur, goodness, holiness, and honour of God, but never of the "sovereignty" of God.

Just when the class is beginning to suspect me of rampant unbelief, I remind them that God does his most effective work—God reconciles a defiant, disobedient creation to himself—precisely where he appears most helpless. Who, after all, is more helpless than a Jew (someone the world persists in hating), executed between two felons at the city garbage dump, bound so tightly that he can't even wriggle? Here I must remind students that helplessness isn't the equivalent of uselessness. As humanly helpless as the crucified is, at this turn-of-events God-incarnate accomplishes his mightiest work: atonement has been wrought for sinners; evil engaged and routed; death absorbed and defeated.

The cross, after all, is God's victory, not his defeat; the cross is his glory, not his downfall.[3] Christ's triumphant exclamation, "It is finished!" is just that: a shout of triumph, not the lament of someone who is forced to admit he has failed, not the regrettable gasp of someone who knows his defeat is irremediable. The perfect tense, *tetelestai* (John 19:30), speaks of an accomplishment concluded in the past yet whose efficacy is operative in the present and will remain so into the future. "It stands *done*," declares our Lord, "and nothing will ever be able to undo it." "This is no cry of relief that all is over," Ronald Ward adjudges discerningly; "It is the Victor's shout of triumph. He came into the world with a task to be done, and he did it . . . . No part is lacking. The work *is* complete."[4] The resurrection, to be discussed shortly, is the manifestation or revelation of this victory, not the rescue of a failed endeavour.

Power and the Way of the Lamb

More than a little care must be exercised in using "almighty" as a circumlocution for "God." Admittedly, the word is used 68 times in Scripture, but 39 times in the book of Job alone. Most notably, nine occurrences are found in the book of Revelation, a document written (along with the Gospel of Mark and 1 Peter) specifically to sustain Christians undergoing persecution during the reigns of three different Roman emperors. Amidst the dreadful pain of lethal persecution, the author of Revelation longs for the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, a symbol of power. He is told to "weep no more," since this Lion has conquered (Rev 5:5). What he hears, however, isn't what he sees; for when he looks, he sees the haemorrhaging lamb (Rev 5:6). This

3. Martin Luther expands this theme in his celebrated "Theology of the Cross." For an exposition of this key feature of Luther's thought, see Shepherd, *Interpreting Martin Luther*, 115, 124, 131, 162, 172, 192, 242.

4. Ward, *Survey of the New Testament*, 94; emphasis original.

point must be given its full weight, for the 29 references to "the Lamb" in Revelation attest unambiguously the author's theological orientation. The work of God in establishing his people, in accompanying them throughout their tribulation, and in preserving them unto the end; this work of God is nothing other than the way of the Lamb.

It must be noted, in Revelation's depiction, that the lamb continues to bleed; it bears the marks of slaughter now and is identified by these marks. There is no suggestion that the Lamb's suffering is a thing of the past, having been long put behind it, a momentary, anomalous occurrence that it has since moved beyond. There is no suggestion that God's people are to be sustained by a seemingly victorious Lamb restored to wholeness and elevated beyond suffering. On the contrary, the only comfort the Lord of the church can supply is the comfort of the church's being accompanied by the Lamb who is devoid of comfort himself. Discerningly Karl Barth comments, "Jesus Christ has once and for all taken our need to heart. This was His passion. But although He did it once for all, He did not do it once only. Risen from the dead, He lives and takes it to heart with undiminished severity. This is His passion *today*."[5]

At the same time, Revelation doesn't reflect contemporaneity's romanticism wherein it is assumed that someone's mere proximity to another's suffering, someone's insistence, "I share your pain," comforts profoundly. On the contrary, Revelation insists that the Lamb has seven horns and seven eyes. "Horn" bespeaks strength, and "eye" wisdom, while "seven" is the biblical symbol everywhere for completeness, entirety, or perfection. The risen, victorious, yet still-suffering Christ doesn't merely sympathize uselessly; instead, he sustains, inspires, and comforts effectively. The still-suffering Christ embodies and enacts the omnipotence and omniscience of God.

Any perusal of Revelation entails a consideration of sovereignty. The question then must be asked, "Precisely who is sovereign, and how is such sovereignty exercised?" Revelation characteristically answers the question with the graphic pronouncement, "The Lamb in the mist of the throne will be their shepherd" (Rev 7:17). The Lamb, possessing seven horns, redefines omnipotence. From a biblical perspective, omnipotence can never be thought to be the capacity to do anything at all or the capacity to coerce. Power—sheer power, undifferentiated power, power for the sake of power—this is nothing less than sheer evil. Almightiness, without qualification, precipitates only terror. The almightiness of God is always the almightiness of that love which he is. Scripture insists that God *is* love (1 John 4:8). Since love is God's nature, God cannot not love. Ultimately every attitude and act of God can be only

5. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV.3.1, 396; emphasis added.

an expression of his love; even God's anger (Luther liked to say) can be only his "love burning hot." God's act is God's nature asserting itself. Were God even able to act in a way incommensurate with his nature, then God's action would be sheer arbitrariness, and God could never be trusted or loved. And if God could act in a way incommensurate with his nature, then God would be suffering what psychologists call *dissociative identity disorder*, therein exhibiting a different "face" in different situations. In light of the consistent apostolic testimony that Jesus Christ is Immanuel, God-with-us, there is no God lurking behind Christ; there is no possibility that God will act in a manner that contradicts what we apprehend in the face of Christ. Paul, who is one with all the apostles in this matter, insists that in the face of Jesus Christ we *know* the glory of God (2 Cor 4:6), where God's glory, as Karl Barth reminds us, is nothing other than God himself, in the simultaneity of all his perfections, self-disclosed so as to render himself indisputable and unmistakeable.[6] God's almightiness is the unimpedability of ceaseless love. Calvin knows as much, indicating in several places that a deity who is sheer power is a deity who can never be worshiped.[7]

Power, it must be reiterated, is not the capacity to coerce. Power, rather, is the capacity to achieve purpose. God's purpose is a people who trust, love and obey him,[8] a people who love their neighbor in self-forgetful self-abandonment and all of this "to the praise of his glory" (Eph 1:12). God achieves this purpose not through manipulating or coercing but through the vulnerability of defenceless self-exposure to suffering and death.

The point just made is reinforced frequently by Karl Barth, not least in his insistence, "It is the *Crucified* who was raised again from the dead and ascended into heaven, where He sits at the right hand of the Father Almighty . . . . The Lamb slain not only stood, but still stands, between the throne of God and the heavenly and earthly cosmos . . . . It is as such that He encounters us."[9]

The discussion above is gathered up in the multi-imaged pithiness of "The Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd" (Rev 7:17). The motif of shepherd-king is found throughout the Older Testament and is exemplified pre-eminently in Israel's greatest king, David (Ezek 34:23). The messianic covenant with David is eternal (2 Sam 7:25–29). As the fulfillment of the Davidic covenant, Jesus Christ rules eternally. This ruler is

6. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II.1, 608–77.

7. See Calvin, *Commentary*, Pss 38:4 and 39:10.

8. See Luther's discussion of the first of the Ten Commandments in his *Small Catechism*, "We should fear, love and trust in God above all things" (Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 351).

9. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV.3.1, 397; emphasis added.

the crucified one; the throne is the cross; his rulership is exercised as the shepherding (paradoxically) of a shepherd who gathers and preserves his flock by sacrificing himself for them. Any discussion of God with respect to "almighty," "power," or "sovereign" must be formed and informed by "The Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd."

The Wounded One as Christian Witness

An examination of other passages in the New Testament discloses as much. In the gospel of John, for instance, the crucified one is unambiguously declared to be raised, yet is raised *wounded*. He appears to Thomas, and Thomas is invited to touch the pierced hands and side of his Lord. The wounds, of course, identify the Easter morning visitor as Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified. At the same time, the apostle is not permitted to think that the cross has been put behind Jesus, an unfortunate episode that can be forgotten as anomalous to his mission and ministry. Instead, the resurrection reveals and confirms the cross to be the climax of the mission and ministry of Jesus; *the resurrection insists that Jesus is raised as crucified, not beyond it*. The Resurrection informs us that the cross is the leading edge of the risen Christ's action upon and within the world now, until the *Parousia*. Without denying the resurrection of Jesus in any respect (he is, after all, a beneficiary of the resurrection) Paul insists that the sum and substance of his witness is "the word of the cross" (1 Cor 1:18); and knowing that few people grasp something when hearing it only once, he adds, "I decided to know *nothing* among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:1). The apostles (unlike so very much of the church's thinking) never permit us to think that the resurrection of Jesus means that his cross has been left behind. Easter is not the reversal of the preceding Friday. Easter is validation of the cross, its revelation to hearers through apostolic preaching, and its vivification within them. Since Jesus Christ is raised *crucified*, the church must abandon its misunderstanding wherein it regards Friday as an unusually bad day that Jesus underwent but fortunately left behind. Rightly grasping the logic of apostolic testimony, Luther states summarily, *Crux sola est nostra theologia*—"The cross alone is our theology."[10] To persist in such misunderstanding is to overlook the cruciality of the following elements.

10. Luther, *Weimar Ausgabe*, 5.176.32.

Calvin's Teaching

Calvin maintains that Christ's entire life and ministry, from the Jordan to Golgotha, was cruciform in substance. From his birth to his appearance before Pilate, Christ's existence was nothing less than a protracted prolepsis of the cross. Profoundly Calvin insists, "We must still remember God's purpose, to keep His Son, from the beginning, under the elements of the cross . . . ."[11] Calvin's point is echoed faithfully in the work of Thomas F. Torrance, who insists characteristically that the entire earthly ministry of Jesus was cruciform in that from the time of Christ's baptism in the Jordan his ministry was sin-bearing as a prolepsis of the finished work at Calvary[12]—although the point both Calvin and Torrance make is significantly under-attended in the Reformed tradition, where the sin-bearing, defilement-absorbing aspect of Christ's earthly ministry as *effectually* anticipatory, "cross-on-the-way," receives little if any attention. In this regard too, it is important to note that while post-Calvin Calvinism speaks of "God's sovereignty" as it speaks of little else, nowhere in the *Institutes*, as was mentioned earlier, does Calvin use this expression. Calvin, of course, never doubts that God is sovereign, or else God wouldn't be God. The crucial point for Calvin, a point his followers often failed to discern, is the nature of such sovereignty. Calvin judiciously avoids importing a political or philosophical understanding of sovereignty into his understanding of God.

The Ascension and Session

The resurrection of the crucified is followed by ascension and session. This point is crucial, for the glorified Christ is now "seated at the right hand of the Father." While the Resurrection reveals the victory of the cross, the session indicates *how* the victorious One rules. The ongoing haemorrhage of the crucified/risen One does more than identify him; it instantiates the *manner* of his rule: sovereignty is exercised through a suffering that is effectually redemptive. Karl Barth is unambiguous on this point: "It is *as* the Word and Son of God that He exists as the man of Gethsemane and Golgotha."[13]

Related to the suffering of the exalted Christ, according to the apostles, is the suffering of the church and, ultimately, the suffering of the world. Concerning the calling of Saul, for instance, we mustn't read past the account in Acts 9 where Saul, heretofore preoccupied with inflicting utmost

11. Calvin, *Commentary* Matthew, 104.
12. See Torrance, *Incarnation*, esp. ch. 4.
13. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV.3.1, 396; emphasis added.

pain on Christians, is apprehended on the road to Damascus, and in the course of the encounter hears the risen Lord interrogating him, "Why are you persecuting *me*? . . . I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9:4–5). The reader expects "Why are you persecuting my people?" The resurrected, exalted One hasn't transcended his crucifixion: he continues to suffer—that is, he remains crucified—*in the suffering of his people*.

Realigning Friday in the Easter Story

Contradicted by the foregoing is the common notion, regrettably fortified by widely-sung Christian music, that resurrection and ascension entail the jettisoning of the cross. According to this notion, Friday is the day of pain, Easter the day of release; Friday is the day of defeat, Easter the day of victory; in light of his victory, the exalted Christ has put everything about Friday behind him and never looked back.

Such a notion is a gross misunderstanding of the Easter story. This misunderstanding seems to borrow from the realm of rocketry: Easter is the "lift-off" that boosts a triumphalistic Lord into stratospheric reaches that have him leave behind the turbulence, treachery, and turpitude of a fallen creation. Here the resurrection is viewed as flight from the world and the ascension as impassivity concerning it. Scripture, however, speaks of a creation that continues to groan in an anguish akin to that of a woman beset with birthing complications that prolong her torment when all she wants is relief (Rom 8:18–23). Pursuing the obstetrical image, the Older Testament speaks of God as someone in end-term labour who is pained in the attempt at bringing forth a people (who recalcitrantly resist being delivered) who mirror his word and way (Isa 42:14).

Yet none of this diminishes the cross as the glorification of Father and Son alike. Unambiguously Jesus utters, with the cross only hours away, "And what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour? But for this purpose, I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Whereupon he hears the voice from heaven confirming him in this understanding, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again" (John 12:27–28). In short, as surely as the earlier "signs" in Christ's earthly ministry glorified God, his death will do as much again as it climaxes such glorification, for the cross will be the purificatory accomplishment that the first sign (the water-to-wine wedding feast in Cana) anticipated. In the same way, it is Christ's *death* that defeats death—as his resurrection will disclose. Easter will vindicate the Son's obedience; Easter will confirm the Father's accepting the Son's obedience, and confirm the Father's honouring it; not least, Easter will

reveal all of this to apostles who heretofore have hugely misunderstood their Lord's ministry and passion. Without Easter, on the other hand, the efficacy of Friday would remain, even as no one would know of it, embrace it in faith, and live henceforth from it in love.

Cruciform Discipleship

If Easter is viewed as the cancelling or transcending of the cross of Jesus (i.e., he has left his cross behind rather than being raised crucified), then disciples too can expect their discipleship to be cross-free. If Christ's glorification means the cross is no more than a regrettable episode better forgotten in light of a mission to be engaged for which one can expect public acclamation, then disciples can expect a similar undertaking and similar acclamation.

Scripture, however, incontrovertibly attests that the risen One crucified *assigns* his followers (who are such only because they are beneficiaries of his resurrection) to a cross they can't escape: it is possible to become and remain a follower only as a cross is borne. *The only way to avoid cruciform discipleship is to apostatize*.

In this respect it is to be noted at all times that disciples are mandated to take up *their* cross, not their Lord's (Mark 8:34). Neither individually nor collectively have they been appointed savior of the world. No aspect of their discipleship, however intimately identified with their Lord in his cross-bearing, has atoning power. Jesus Christ alone can bear his cross; and just as surely, they alone can bear theirs. They *cannot* bear his, and he *will not* bear theirs.

A Christian, or a congregation, or a denomination who thinks that Christ's victory means his resurrection cancels his death will think that their resurrection means as much; they will think that discipleship is both cross-free and recognized by the world as an activity undertaken in obedience to Christ and empowered by him. Those who are "crucified with Christ" (Gal 2:20), however, are aware that all discipleship is inherently, irretrievably cruciform, and is met only with the world's non-understanding and scorn, even though such discipleship, in God's economy, is "the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and those who are perishing" (2 Cor 2:15).

Suffering of God in Scripture

Largely overlooked in discussions of the cross is the characteristic suffering of God attested throughout Scripture. The Older Testament speaks of God's anguish, anger, agony, and heartbreak occasioned by his unyielding commitment to a people that trifles with him, disobeys him, and disgraces himself and itself, as surely as a husband is pained and humiliated by an adulterous spouse (Hosea). *Where God's suffering is overlooked, God's vulnerability is minimized.*

God's Limitless Vulnerability

If, however, the cross, the public humiliation attending it, the utter self-identification with transgressors, the unqualified absorption of God's righteous anger at the sin of humankind, and the self-willed self-offering that withholds nothing ("No one takes my life from me; I lay it down of my own accord," John 10:18); if all of this is allowed its proper weight, and if all of this is gathered up in God's singular, mighty, cosmos-reconciling act, then the "power" of omnipotence must entail God's limitless vulnerability. Presupposing the same logic, the "all" of God's "almightiness" can be only the limitless efficacy of limitless vulnerability.

The limitless efficacy of limitless vulnerability rules out any suggestion of power as the capacity to coerce. The effectual vulnerability of that Person who defencelessly gives himself to persons made in his image rules out any suggestion of manipulation, since to manipulate is to treat someone as non-person, to regard a person as an object, to view a "thou" as an "it."

The resurrection, then, is the ratification of the limitless efficacy of limitless vulnerability, as well as, according to Scripture, the revelation of it, which revelation necessitates the declaration that the victory of such vulnerability is the leading edge of God's effectual incursion throughout the world as *the Kingdom gains visibility through the characteristically-vulnerable mission of the church*. To be sure, the Kingdom of God *has* come as surely as the death of Christ wrote "Finished!" to creation in its blind disobedience and pretended independence. Since the resurrection of Christ has declared him Messiah of Israel and Ruler of the creation; since there cannot be a King without a Kingdom nor a Kingdom without a King, Jesus Christ is the King who is such, inasmuch as he has brought his Kingdom with him. To pray "May your Kingdom come" is in truth to pray for the coming *manifestation* of a Kingdom that is in our midst as surely as the King himself is in our midst. We pray for the Kingdom's manifestation in that while the Kingdom

is real, is present, and is operative, it can be discerned only by faith. The Kingdom is not publicly evident; therefore, it remains publicly disputable. Even as a day has been appointed when the Kingdom will be undeniable and unavoidable (Phil 2:10; Rev 1:7), until then the church's mission is not to "advance" or "bring in" the Kingdom but rather to render it visible in anticipation of the day when faith gives way to sight.

The Suffering Mission of the Church—Illustrated by Corinth

It must never be thought that the perduring vulnerability of God with his concomitant anguish implies something less painful for the church in its mission; namely, to render visible the Kingdom that is in our midst as surely as the King's effectual presence cannot be denied. *Yet the church is always prone to succumb to the temptation that its mission can be undertaken less arduously than God's.* The congregation in Corinth had succumbed to just this temptation.[14] The problems that beset the congregation in Corinth are well known: contentious behavior at the Lord's Supper, incest (intercourse with one's stepmother following the death of one's father), bitter party-factions and attendant bickering, and the denial of the resurrection of the dead.

What underlay them? The Corinthian Christians' distorted understanding was informed and sustained by a theology of the resurrection, wherein they confused Jesus Christ, raised from the dead (no one at that time was denying Christ's resurrection) with a cultic deity belonging to a Hellenistic mystery religion. Plainly they regarded Christianity as the best of such religions, wherein Jesus was superior to other deities.

Unquestionably the Corinthian Christians were convinced of Jesus's Lordship; they celebrated it and exemplified it with their signs and wonders, dealings in mysteries, and Spirit-fuelled pronouncements of wisdom. Their understanding of the resurrection, however, was that the earthly Jesus, and pre-eminently the crucified Jesus, had been left behind. Their (mis)apprehension of the Spirit, however, found them crying "Jesus be cursed" (1 Cor 12:3), meaning that the earthy and earthbound Jesus had been left behind. To be sure, in the same outburst of "Jesus be cursed" there could be heard "Jesus is Lord," albeit the acclamation of an exalted Lord whose rocket-like ascension jettisoned the "first stage" apparatus so as to relegate it to utter forgettability. Even "Jesus is Lord" had relatively little to do with Jesus, according to the Spirit-enthusiasts at Corinth, for they insisted, not groundlessly it should be noted, that with Jesus's resurrection and exaltation the new aeon had begun.

14. In what follows I have been assisted by Käsemann, *Jesus Means Freedom*.

In terms of theology, they had collapsed Christology into soteriology. Hereafter it was but a short step from Christocentricity to anthropocentricity. And what else was this, ultimately, except a religiously-sanctioned narcissistic self-preoccupation? Absent now was any notion that discipleship is invariably cruciform. Present instead was the comfortable accommodation of self-to-world that rendered discipleship not an *imitatio* of their Lord in his perduring cruciform condition but rather a spiritualized inwardness that cocooned them amidst an environment of irreducible suffering and self-contradiction—the state of a fallen creation.

Not least their understanding of the sacraments was incorrect. The Lord's Supper was an anticipation of an earth-rejecting heavenly banquet, replete with the rejoicing of an eschatological fulfillment that was considered not to be superimposed on and therefore to overlap "this present evil age," together with the ecstatic expostulations of those whose deliverance had been accomplished definitively. Baptism was the occasion of party divisions, as the baptized lined up behind the one who had baptized them or at least behind the one with whom this or that group was identified.

Never did the Corinthians deny the resurrection of Jesus. They believed it—and believed with it that the earthly world had been transmogrified by the heavenly. From the stern tone of 1 Cor 15 it is apparent that the Corinthians disregarded the future raising of the dead, and this because they thought that Christ's resurrection, and their inclusion in it, had removed them already from the clutches of all earthly powers, not least the clutch of death. According to Hellenistic mystery religions, baptism effected such an escape from earth's grasp and mediated the powers of the supernatural. The Corinthians believed that in their Lord's exaltation they were exalted too, even as they misunderstood both his exaltation and theirs.

Debased in all of the above was a theology of the cross, of the Word, and of faith. As a result, those who were now citizens of heaven were gloriously freed from earth. The results were startlingly diverse: they varied from thinking one shared the asceticism of angels (and therefore normal marital relations could be suspended) to thinking one could participate in the promiscuity for which Corinth was famous, such as incest (and therefore sexual integrity could be suspended).

In assessing the predicament in Corinth, it cannot be emphasized too much: in their insistence on the exaltation of Jesus Christ, who now rules the cosmos, their theology was Christologically-crippled. For lost here was Christ's lordship, for how could he be Lord *over* them when they had been raised *with* him? What mattered now wasn't the crucified one currently alive and reigning; what mattered now was his gifts, as if he could be detached from them. Christology, again, had been collapsed into soteriology;

in turn, soteriology had been Hellenized into a religious (i.e., creaturely, cultural, cultic) anthropology.

In short, the Corinthians assimilated Jesus's dying and rising to a Hellenistic depiction of the dying god restored to life and able to translate his people into a new sphere. For this reason, the apostle Paul had to oppose the Corinthians' theology of the resurrection. Several lessons should be noted. First, to be sure, Paul does not begin his *riposte* by concentrating on the Corinthian church's soteriology; instead he recalls Christology, for from the first chapter of his missive he characterizes the Gospel as "the word of the cross" (1 Cor 1:18). While not denying the resurrection of Jesus (apart from it he would never have been apprehended on the Damascus road and appointed an apostle) he insists that the risen, exalted one remains the crucified one.

Cross and resurrection are not related contiguously as two consecutive events; the cross is not the last station (earthly) on Jesus's "trip" to his new home (heavenly)—contrary to the Corinthian enthusiasts. The risen Lord hasn't been exalted beyond his cross; by contrast, *he has been exalted as nailed to it*. Here Paul's understanding of resurrection is the antithesis of that of the Hellenists, whose dying gods journey through a hell of some sort on their way to a triumphalistic state. Paul insists that the apostolic word is, and forever will be, the word of the cross; the apostle will be found declaring always and only "Jesus Christ and him crucified." (2 Cor 2:2). Since the only Christ Paul knows and can announce is the risen one, the risen one must have been raised *as crucified*. Seared upon his mind and heart is the truth that the resurrection is the power of the cross, never that the resurrection is the sequel to the cross. Here his declaration is one with his letter to the church in Philippi; namely, that God has exalted the crucified Lord (Phil 2:9).

According to Paul, death is yet a power that disputes the sovereignty of Christ (1 Cor 15:25–28). While believers are not in doubt concerning Christ's lordship over the church, non-believers maintain his lordship over the cosmos remains arguable because it is non-evident, not least because of the ubiquity of death. For this reason, Christ's lordship over the cosmos will be an affirmation of faith until the *Parousia*. Throughout the creation, and not least in believers, the victorious one must continue to fight amidst all that contradicts him, for does not the one who has triumphed continue to struggle and suffer until he has been "formed" in them? And does not the apostle himself struggle in cruciform anguish until the same Christ is "formed" in the same people? (Gal 4:19).

In the second place, in correcting the Corinthians' Christology, Paul corrects their soteriology. He reminds them that in the Lord's Supper their

intimacy with the *crucified* Jesus is intensified. Here his pronouncement anticipates what he will tell the believers in Rome; namely, that in their baptism they were buried with Christ so that they might walk in newness of life, even as they *shall* be "united with him in a resurrection like his" (Rom 6:2–6).

Unquestionably the risen one is sovereign. As sovereign he claims our obedience. And since discipleship is characteristically cruciform (Mark 8:34), obedience is never less than arduous. How arduous? Paul deems Christians (i.e., bearers of the Spirit) to be not those who are Spirit-infused boasters or self-advertising possessors of unusual gifts or effusive ecstatics; he recognizes as Spirit-bearers only those who *bear on their bodies* "the marks of Jesus" (Gal 6:17). Christian existence that has been quickened by the cross is always identifiable by the marks of the cross.

To believe in Jesus Christ, the vulnerable, suffering Lord who can be victimized until the day of his glorious appearing, is to be set firmly, inescapably, on the earth. While disciples are never appointed to take up Christ's cross (they have not been appointed to be Savior and Lord), nonetheless, in taking up *their own* cross, they come to share in *Christ's* suffering, which suffering the Philippian letter clearly regards as a feature of Christ's risen, exalted life (Phil 3:10). Not surprisingly, then, Christians are "weak" in Christ as surely as he was "crucified in weakness" (with no suggestion that his cross has been left behind); yet as surely as the crucified One lives by the power of God (with no suggestion that his cross has been left behind), so Christ's people are raised by the power of God (2 Cor 13:4)—even as the world's harassment, hostility, and hatred evinces that neither has theirs been left behind.

With respect to the vulnerability of the Lord, Paul's conviction couldn't be clearer: while Christ's cross was an event in history, it cannot be reduced to or restricted to an event within history. In his exalted vulnerability, the risen One suffers still.

Karl Barth's Teaching on the Suffering of God

At this point, we should ponder the matter of God's suffering. To speak of it at all is to immerse ourselves in centuries-old controversies pertaining to the impassibility of God. Few have spoken on it as profoundly as Karl Barth.[15]

Barth insists that as sovereign Lord, God cannot be made to suffer by anything apart from God or opposed to God. Nonetheless, God is free to will

15. See Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV.1, 246–47.

himself to take on the creature's vulnerability, suffering, and death. And in the Incarnation God unites himself with humanity in order to take humanity's misery into himself to destroy it and thereby triumph over it.

The God who is impassible (he can't be made to suffer, can't be bribed or bought by suffering, can't have his being altered through suffering); the God whose impassibility ensures that he cannot suffer so as to be "bent" into non-God, freely takes on suffering and death—and yet isn't thereby threatened by them but rather prevails over them.

Because Barth's Christology is utterly non-Nestorian (i.e., Barth doesn't understand Christ's suffering in such a way that Christ's human nature suffers while his divine nature does not), therefore, *to say that God suffers in his Son is to say that God suffers in himself*. Once again Barth speaks profoundly here:

> It is not the case that God has no part in the suffering of Jesus Christ even in His mode of being as the Father. No, there is a *particula veri* in the teaching of the early Patripassians. This is that primarily it is God the Father who suffers in the offering and sending of His Son, in His abasement.[16]

Yet to what extent is the Father acquainted with *human* suffering?—" . . . He does suffer it in the humiliation of His Son with a depth with which it never was or will be suffered by any man—apart from the One who is His Son."[17] In short, the impassible God becomes passible by grace (otherwise God is unaffected by our suffering, unacquainted with it, and unable to do anything about it), yet simultaneously remains impassible in that he isn't merely victimized in it but rather triumphs over it. George Hunsinger profoundly summarizes Barth on this matter: "For Barth, God is never more truly God than in the freedom of his self-humiliation, never more basically impassible than when he overcomes suffering by his wounds, and never more fully alive than when he tramples out death by death."[18]

While the post-Calvin tradition, seemingly one-sidedly obsessed with God's sovereignty in a manner not found in Calvin and no less frequently appearing similarly to misunderstand God's immutability, Calvin must be allowed to speak for himself. For Calvin insists that God's immutability never suggests a frozen fixity in God that renders God effectually beyond any capacity for being affected; *God's immutability, rather, is the*

16. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV.1, 357.
17. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV.1, 357.
18. Hunsinger, *Reading Barth with Charity*, 167.

reliability of God's Word: God cannot undo his promise ever to be *for* us, and cannot fail to effect that purpose.[19]

An Autobiographical Declaration

"I have been crucified to the world, and the world has been crucified to me," the apostle Paul declares in his Galatian letter (6:14). Is he boasting? Is he putting himself forward as a spiritual super-achiever whom we are to recognize and congratulate? On the contrary, he insists it's *by the cross of Christ* he's been crucified to the world and the world to him. He claims no credit at all for whatever has happened to him. The crucified One has turned him from Saul to Paul, from persecutor to apostle, from someone who bragged he was "blameless" in terms of the law to someone who shamefully acknowledges he's the "the foremost of sinners" (Phil 3:6; 1 Tim 1:15), in light of the Gospel. Boasting about himself is the farthest thing from his mind. If he's going to boast at all he's going to boast in—that is, extol—the cross of Christ and this only.

Crucifixion always has to do with rejection. At the cross our Lord was rejected by religious authorities and civil authorities alike. He was even rejected by uncomprehending disciples. Not least, he was rejected by his Father: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt 27:46), even as Father and Son *alike* owned the Just Judge's judgment on sin and *alike* absorbed the Just Judge's condemnation of sinners, thereby pardoning all who cling to the Son in faith and find themselves at home with the Father. Crucifixion always entails rejection of some sort.

When Paul exclaims that "the world has been crucified to him," he means he's rejected the world's tinsel, trifles, and toys. None of it appeals to him. The world's superficiality, its tawdriness, its hollow promises; he craves none of it. What doesn't appeal to Paul can't hook him. Since there's nothing in the world Paul craves, there's nothing in the world that can seduce him or seize him. He can't be "hooked."

At the same time Paul insists "he has been crucified to the world." The world has rejected him. The abuse he's received over and over amply attests the world's rejection of him. To say he's been rejected by the world is to say there's nothing in him the world wants. Therefore, there's nothing in him he can sell. There's nothing in him the world can co-opt.

In short, there is nothing in the world the apostle craves and by which he can be "hooked"; at the same time, there is nothing in him the world

19. Calvin was convinced of this matter as early as the first edition of his *Institutes*, ch. 2.

wants and by which he can be co-opted. If he can't be hooked and he can't be co-opted, *then he's free*. It's only as we are crucified to the world and the world crucified to us that we are free. As long as there's something in the world we crave, we risk being enslaved by it. And, as long as there's something in us the world can co-opt, we risk being swept up into schemes that aren't God-honouring. But insofar as we are beyond such risks, we are free.

"Am I not free?" Paul cries to his detractors in the church in Corinth. "Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?" (1 Cor 1:9). It's his sight of the crucified One and his transformation by the crucified One and his public identification with the crucified One: this has made him free. He is free by the cross of Christ.

Luther and the Freedom of Cruciform Self-Renunciation

Luther posted his *Ninety-Five Theses* in 1517. In no time Christendom convulsed and would convulse (or glory in newly-delivered comfort) as a geyser of publications erupted from Luther's pen. Amidst it all his 1520 tract, *The Freedom of the Christian*, was taken to heart by millions, and has remained the most widely read item in all of Luther's writings.[20]

Not only is this tract moving on account of its understanding and expression; it is also comprehensive in its discussion as few other tracts are. Luther himself wrote of it, "Unless I am mistaken . . . it contains the whole of the Christian life in a brief form."

Before we probe Luther's tract, we must be sure we understand "freedom" in conformity to Scripture. In popular parlance, freedom is the capacity to choose among alternatives. A child at an ice-cream counter is said to be free to choose vanilla or strawberry or pistachio. Such freedom (so-called) is nothing more than indeterminism; that is, the child hasn't been coerced, outwardly or inwardly, to choose one flavor over another.

Yet when Paul reminds the Christians in Galatia, "For freedom Christ has set us free" (Gal 5:1), he cannot mean that Christ has set us free so that we may choose to obey Christ or disobey him (such freedom, so-called, is nothing less than the bondage of sin). The apostle can only mean that Christ has set us free to obey him—and this only. In other words, freedom is having Jesus Christ remove all impediments to our obeying him; to say the same thing differently, freedom is the absence of any impediment to acting in accord—and *only* in accord—with one's true nature.

20. In what follows, all references are taken from Luther, *Luther's Works*, 343–77.

Imagine a derailing switch placed upon railway tracks. The train is impeded from traveling along the rails. When the switch is removed, the train is said to be free to run along the rails. If someone asks, "But is the train free to float like a boat?" the proper reply can only be, "But it isn't a train's nature to float like a boat; it's a train's nature to run on rails."

Christ has freed his people to act in accordance with their true nature; namely, a child of God. In other words, Christ simultaneously frees us *from* all claims upon our faith and obedience that contradict our nature as a child of God and frees us *for* everything that reflects our nature as God's child. It is our nature as a child of God to love God and neighbor in utter self-abandonment—which love can be exemplified only in cruciform discipleship. In short, Christians are free insofar as they have freely shouldered their cross and now are one with their Lord in his cross-bearing. Luther succinctly sets out the theme of his tract:

> A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.
>
> A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.

Expanding on this statement Luther writes:

> We conclude, therefore, that a Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbour. Otherwise, he is not a Christian. He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbour through love. By faith he is caught up beyond himself into God. By love he descends beneath himself into his neighbour.

Christians, *freed* by Christ for their true nature—*bound* to Christ by faith and *bound* to the neighbor by love—live henceforth in sacrificial self-forgetfulness. Taken out of themselves, their self-absorption shrivels, and their anxiety evaporates. The Gospel effects this, and can effect it just because the Gospel, as all the Reformers after Luther insisted, isn't chiefly an idea but rather power. The Reformers everywhere reflected Paul's conviction that the Gospel is the *power* of God unto salvation (Rom 1:16).

Luther goes on to say that there is only one way of living in Christ by faith. There are, however, three ways of living in the neighbor by love. (1) We live in the neighbor by love as we share our neighbor's material scarcity, and do so out of our material abundance, even material superfluity. Luther admits that this costs us little. If I have five shirts, giving one to a shirtless neighbor exacts little from me. Luther notes too that when we do this, we also gain social recognition (today, we'd say an income tax receipt for "gift in kind").

(2) We live in the neighbor by love, in the second place, as we share the neighbor's suffering. Luther maintains this is costlier, in that proximity to suffering in others engenders suffering in us. Painful though it is, however, we feel good about it; and if we do it well, we are rewarded for it (e.g., the Lions' Club Humanitarian Award accorded Mother Teresa).

(3) Finally, says Luther not in his *Christian Freedom* tract but, by way of anticipation, in his earlier *Two Kinds of Righteousness*, we live in the neighbor as we share the neighbor's disgrace, the neighbor's shame.[21] This is by far the costliest way of living in the neighbor. Here there is no reward; here there is no social recognition. Here, on the other hand, there is nothing but social contempt and ostracism. Here we profoundly know what it is to be "reckoned with transgressors" (Luke 22:37), for was not our Lord before us publicly labelled with a hideous disgrace he didn't deserve? In concluding his discussion of this matter Luther insists that our service "takes no account of gratitude or ingratitude, of praise or blame, of gain or loss . . . . [the Christian] most freely and most willingly spends himself and all that he has"—including his reputation.

It is here that Christians are humiliated in the company of their Lord; they are exalted as they share in his resurrection; and neighbors are helped (without being demeaned), since cruciform discipleship elevates needy people without rendering them victims of a largesse that is given to them by superiors who haughtily withhold themselves from them.

Conclusion

The "prosperity gospel" appears to remain ascendant in North America. Its proponents insist that to "believe in the Lord Jesus" (Acts 16:31) is not so much to "be saved" as to find one's savings mount. To speak of prosperity as the divinely-sanctioned concomitant of faith, however, would precipitate in the man whose anguish I detailed at the beginning of my essay; to speak in this manner would elicit from him not credence but incredulity, even anger or contempt. Still, this man, and countless others like him I have been privileged to meet in my four decades of pastoral work, are aware that while the arms of the crucified are just that, they *are* nonetheless, simultaneously, the "everlasting arms" of the eternal God who forever is our "dwelling place" (Deut 33:27).

Jesus Christ, in whom we abide (John 15:4), alone is our dwelling place. By faith we are bound so intimately to him, says Calvin, that we cannot imagine any distance whatsoever between him and us. Christ has

21. Luther, *Luther's Works*, 303.

embraced us with his nail-printed hands. Enlivened by his embrace, we who are haemorrhaging from our wounds as surely as his blood still flows; we are now possessed of the desire and the capacity to embrace him. Herein we find his pain and ours gathered up in an intimacy that Calvin speaks of touchingly: "We ought not to separate Christ from ourselves or ourselves from him. Rather we ought to hold fast bravely with both hands to that fellowship by which he has bound himself to us."[22]

> They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more;
> the sun shall not strike them, not any scorching heat.
> For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,
> and he will guide them to springs of living water,
> and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes (Rev 7:16–17).

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22. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.2.24.