

GOD AND SUFFERING

INSIGHTS

The Faculty Journal of Austin Seminary



FALL 2005

BABINSKY • FARLEY • BRUEGGEMANN • BILLMAN
BAESH • JONES • SLOANE COFFIN
JOHNSON • MAYKUS • EVANS

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COVER: *Foreground: "Unleashed," 2005 (stitched muslin-wrapped cord); Background: "Witness," 2005 (8'4', Shibori dyed calico) by Clare Revolta. From the collection of the artist; used with permission.*

"Unleashed" is a dyed shroud cloth, wrapped and stitched around an unbroken line of cord, a depiction of the seismograph reading of the tsunami on December 26, 2004. "Witness" is Shibori dyed cloth showing water as a witness to events across time, providing a sense of constancy and beauty which conceals its power and danger.

Cover photograph by Richard Hopper. Revolta's work was part of a Holy Week exhibit, "After the Tsunami," at Holy Trinity Church in South Wimbledon, London, UK, www.holytrinity-southwimbledon.org.uk. For information about the exhibit, see: <http://holytrinity-southwimbledon.org.uk/tsunami/index.html>. The image on page 3 is a detail of "Unleashed."

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NEGOTIATED DEATH

Abigail Rian Evans

INTRODUCTION

I will never forget the phone call I made to an older, wiser friend—a pastor with whom I had spent an important summer internship after my first year of seminary. Word had reached me of the diagnosis of a brain tumor—a tumor which eventually took his life—and I was calling to touch base with him. It was a stammering, fitful conversation on my part, for I felt compelled to offer some word of sense into a situation that made no sense at all. Thankfully my friend interrupted me to say, “I just want you to know that I see this next chapter of my life as an exciting process, and I am looking forward to what I am going to learn about God and God’s presence with me in the midst of suffering.” After that statement, my partially rehearsed words of comfort and (God help me) explanation fell clattering to the floor, unspoken.

I still think back to that statement of faith—one that he lived out from that day until his last. An exciting process? He spoke of his diagnosis—news that any of us dreads hearing—as a kind of blessing, and I believe he embraced it in a way that still dumbfounds me.

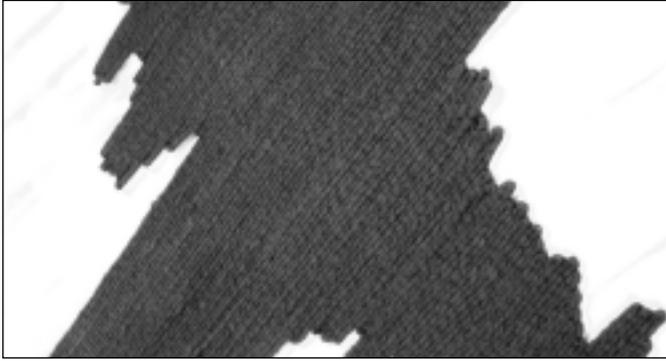
We North American Christians tend to see blessings far more narrowly. “I have been blessed with financial abundance,” we say. “I have been blessed with ambitious and successful children.” “I have been blessed to be born in the greatest country in the world.” These are the “God things” we point to when we search for clues of God’s presence with us. Eventually, though, we encounter things that just don’t add up. Bad things happen to good people, illness takes the life of a saint, airplanes piloted by terrorists fly into iconic buildings and kill thousands of innocent people. And the thought crosses our minds: If God lets these sorts of things happen, what’s the point of believing?

What follows in this issue of *Insights* is a thoughtful exploration of the God who may be acting on a wider canvas than our neat little sets of expectations. Our own Ellen Babinsky joins forces with Wendy Farley, Walter Brueggemann, and Kathleen Billman to explore the biblical and theological clues that point to that bigger God. I must warn you, though. Reading of such a God takes courage, for this God is unpredictable. This God doesn’t necessarily come every time we call, doesn’t necessarily punish our enemies and prosper our friends, doesn’t necessarily fix our problems and keep us healthy and turn all red lights into green ones. This God is the one, in fact, who exists on the other side of our disillusionment.

But, as Barbara Brown Taylor has put it (in *The Preaching Life*), disillusionment is not all bad. It is, she says, “the loss of illusion—about ourselves, about the world, about God—and while it is almost always painful, it is not a bad thing to lose the lies we have mistaken for the truth. Disillusioned ... we glimpse our own relative size in the universe and see that no human being can say who God should be or how God should act. We review our requirements of God and recognize them as our own fictions, our own frail shelters against the vast night sky. Disillusioned, we find out what is not true and are set free to seek what is—if we dare.”

I dare you to read on!

Theodore J. Wardlaw
President, Austin Seminary



BOUND TOGETHER FOR LIFE: GOD'S SOVEREIGN LOVE AND HUMAN SUFFERING

ELLEN L. BABINSKY



central European peasant woman discovered her only horse was missing. Her neighbors said, "What a terrible calamity. Your son cannot plow your fields without a horse." The woman responded, "Who knows whether it is a terrible thing or not?"

Two days later the horse returned, accompanied by a second horse. The neighbors rejoiced. "What a blessing!" they exclaimed. "Now you have two horses!" Again the peasant answered, "Who knows whether it is a blessing or not?"

A few weeks later her son was riding the new horse, and it threw him breaking his leg and crippling him. The neighbors were quick to offer sympathy: "What a terrible thing. Your son will always walk with a limp." And she replied, "Who knows if it is a terrible thing?"

Not long afterwards, the king's men came through conscripting men for service in

Ellen Babinsky is associate dean for student academic affairs and professor of church history at Austin Seminary. She translated and wrote an introduction to a 13th-century French mystical text, Marguerite Porete's The Mirror of Simple Souls, published in 1993 as a volume in the Classics of Western Spirituality series. Professor Babinsky was appointed to the Theology Committee of the Caribbean and North American Area Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in 1993, and most recently was elected to the General Assembly Committee on Ecumenical Relations. Babinsky earned an MDiv from McCormick Theological Seminary, an MTh from Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, and the PhD from the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. She is an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

a bloody war. When they came to the son and saw his limp, they did not take him. And so the story goes on ...

I love this very old story because in it I find the peasant woman's quiet comfort and trust in God's providential care regardless of her circumstances. In one instance the woman suffers what her friends could only understand to be a debilitating tragedy, for it looked very much like she would starve. When the circumstances reversed it seemed obvious to her friends that the woman had been blessed indeed, and that she no longer had to worry about her future wellbeing. Regardless of the turn of events, the peasant woman remained centered in her humility.

In this essay I present my reflections on human suffering and the providence of God. In what follows I maintain that the suffering we undergo must be contemplated only in the context of the providence of God, not apart from God, and that the evil we encounter must be contemplated only in the context of the sovereign goodness of God.

I think of the providence of God as God's sovereign love for "everybody and everything."¹ This sovereign love is magnificently expressed in the Heidelberg Catechism, Question 26.² God's sovereign love in God's providential care flows from the assertion that God the Creator, "the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who out of nothing created heaven and earth with all that is in them, who also upholds and governs them by his eternal counsel and providence, is for the sake of Christ his Son my God and my Father."

God is the one from whom all things come, who is the sovereign dispenser of all things in their time. The paragraph continues: "I trust in him so completely that I have no doubt that he will provide me with all things necessary for body and soul. Moreover, whatever evil he sends upon me in this troubled life he will turn to my good, for he is able to do it being almighty God, and is determined to do it, being a faithful Father" (4.026:62).

The last sentence of this paragraph has troubled, vexed, and pushed at me over several years' time and it won't let go of me. The sentence states quite flatly that God sends the evil I experience. The logic is that that since God is the creator of all things—since God is the one from whom all things come—that God sends evil. Such a concept has dismayed more than one person who hears this portion of the Heidelberg Catechism. I have several reflections about this difficult assertion.

First, in the context of my conviction about the sovereignty of God's love and goodness, this sentence makes me wonder whether I really know the difference between good and evil. In fact, it has occurred to me that maybe I do not have the capability to discern good from evil in any absolute sense. While I might have an inkling that something is very wrong, only the God who is sovereign in love and goodness knows good from evil. Catherine of Siena, a late-14th-century Italian mystic, has been a spiritual companion for me over the years, and she teaches me in this regard. She wrote *The Dialogue*³ which takes place between God and the soul who is struggling to learn God's way. In the following excerpt, God is teaching the soul that she is always subject to confusion and error because the devil is always looking for an opportunity to deceive her. The soul is even more susceptible if she is turned in on herself away from God.

[The devil] catches [souls] with the hook of pleasure under the guise of good. There is indeed no other way he could catch them, for they would not let themselves be caught unless they found some good or pleasure in it for themselves, because the soul by its very nature always craves what is good.

Still it is true that the soul, if blinded by selfishness, cannot recognize or discern what is truly good and profitable for soul and body. So the devil, evil as he is, when he sees that the soul is blinded by selfish love, proposes all sorts of sins to her. But they are all disguised as something profitable or good (89).

Catherine teaches me that the devil has never stopped his deceitful ways. It seems to me that, despite my best intentions to be open to God, it is far more likely that I am self absorbed. If this is true, and I believe it is, then the devil is always lurking at the edges of my attempts at holiness. The devil is at his deceiving best when I am assured that I will know good and evil (Gen. 3:5). I suspect that when I am absolutely certain that a particular situation, or person, is evil, or good, that the devil may, in some way, be having his way, and I am deceived. I do not know good and evil, for I am not God. For this reason I prefer to speak, not of evil, but, rather, of calamity or tragedy, of affliction or adversity.

Second, the sentence states clearly that God “sends” the evil. In classic Reformed thinking, evil has never been understood to be the equal opposite to God. God is sovereign, in love and goodness, over all things, including evil, so that the sentence goes on to declare that God will turn evil that befalls me to my good. For me it follows that, if God sends evil, then I am challenged to commit to being on the lookout for signs of God’s good gifts. The French Confession of 1559⁴ speaks to this claim with an enduring clarity: “God’s will is the sovereign and infallible measure of all justice and equity. Even so, God has marvelous means for making use of devils and evil doers, transforming into good the evil they do and for which they remain guilty” (VII:7).

And so that disturbing sentence of the Heidelberg Catechism gently and persistently challenges me to pray to find and recognize the gifts in any circumstance, to pray for the capacity to trust the hope that is given to me.

Third, that same sentence summons me to humility and patience in the face of extreme difficulty and danger. God is in charge. God’s providential care is there to be trusted. Question 27 of the Heidelberg Catechism expands on this thought to tell me that God “rules in such a way that leaves and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and unfruitful years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, and everything else, come to us not by chance but by his fatherly hand” (4.027:63).

This declaration does not leave much room for me to decide that God has nothing to do with this particular calamity or those adverse circumstances. I am challenged to wait upon God’s goodness with humility and to pray for the capacity to perceive God at work in all manner of conditions. The French Confession echoes this thought in a slightly different way:

Thus, confessing that nothing happens outside the providence of God, we remain humble before the secrets that are hidden from us, not questioning what is beyond our understanding. Instead, we avail ourselves of what is shown to us in Holy Scripture for our peace and security: that God, who is

almighty over all things, watches over us with such parental care that not a hair will fall from our head apart from his will. Thus, God restrains the devils and all our enemies so that they can cause us no injury without God's permission (VIII:7).

Here I am assured that in the context of God's sovereign love and goodness I can rest in the comfort and confidence of God's presence and care regardless of the situation.

Having said this, however, I am aware of the troubling notion that whatever comes my way; no injury can befall me without God's permission. More than once I have heard the questions, Why God's permission? Why would God permit injury to happen? The Westminster Confession offers this response:

The most wise, righteous, and gracious God, doth often-times leave for a season his own children to manifold temptations and the corruption of their own hearts, to chastise them for their former sins, or to discover unto them the hidden strength of corruption and deceitfulness of their hearts, that they be humbled; and to raise them to a more close and constant dependence for their support upon himself, and to make them more watchful against all future occasions of sin and for sundry other just and holy ends (6.028:179).

Once again we are on the verge of entering some dangerous quicksand. In my view, the Westminster Confession is not helpful with these sorts of questions. This response gives too many reasons why suffering might occur which in turn leaves too much room for either blame or despair. According to this way of thinking, afflictions and adversity come as punishment for sin, or as a time for one to be humbled, or as a way to discover hidden corruptions of the heart, and so on. I find little comfort in these words for whatever affliction I might experience. I find even less help for ministering to those who are suffering because in this response I am tempted to pretend I know why there is suffering, when I do not. In my view, the question is not, Why did this happen? nor Why did God permit this? In my experience, the more helpful question is, How shall I live? That is, perhaps God is challenging my ways of making decisions, my easy comfort with my privileged life.

I learned this more thoughtful approach from my friend and colleague, David Johnson. He wrote an essay reconsidering the story of Jesus' healing of the blind man. Reflecting on Jesus' answer to the disciples' question about whether the blind man or his parents sinned, Johnson writes:

People seem to have a strong need to make sense of their world—particularly to suppose that there is some sort of moral calculus behind all the bad things that happen to good people, and the good things that happen to bad people, and so on. According to this calculus, where there is suffering, or injury, or limitation, or disability, there is sin ... Otherwise the world doesn't make sense.

Jesus' answer to the disciples' question is, it seems to me, the answer to all such reasoning: "Neither sinned. No one sinned," he said. "This happened so that God's work might be revealed in him." It's not a sin thing; it's a God thing. It's not a punishment; it's an opportunity. And this is true whether or

not there is healing involved. Sometimes, as the case for that blind man ... there is a healing. Sometimes there isn't. Sometimes there's just the living.⁵

And "the living" is, for me, the great gift. I find Johnson's perspective deeply comforting. And so instead of, Why? the relevant questions for me are, How shall I live? and What do I need to do?

I like to read medieval mysteries. I especially enjoy a series by Margaret Frazer whose main protagonist is a Benedictine nun named Dame Frevisse. In one story, Dame Frevisse is undergoing a particularly agonizing time dealing with a punitive prioress⁶ who seems to delight in inflicting physical pain. As she awaits her coming punishment, which she knows will be a beating, she prays:

"Firm is my heart, God, firm is my heart ... I will sing ... I will rouse the dawn." [Frevisse] loved the courage of Prime's prayers. They promised that there had been days before this one and that there would be days after it, and if there was ill, there was also good, and that though the two were inextricably joined in this day, in every day, in all of life, it was not the good or ill that mattered but the firm heart that could turn to God. Today was only this one day. It was not all of her life. She would endure it.⁷

I desire a "firm heart that could turn to God," to pray for the strength to trust that somehow the adversity will be turned to good, and that I might be given the spiritual sight to recognize the gift and praise God.

John Calvin helps me in this view when I remember his definition of faith found in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.⁸ He writes: "Faith is a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us, founded upon the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit" (III.2.7:551).

Faith, then, strengthens in me a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence in *all* things so that when a time of adversity comes, I say that I am given an opportunity to grow through the pain and affliction into praise. For Calvin, faith is a fundamental orientation toward the cosmos, toward all events, exchanges, interactions, and relationships. I regard his definition of faith as a lens which allows me to see events as somehow expressive of God's sovereign love for all. In the time of adversity, God's benevolence, then, is shown to me in this particular community. God's benevolence is shown to me in the hands of professionals, when that is the need. God's benevolence is shown to me in the prayers of those who lift me up and hold me close, not only to their hearts, but to the heart of God. Within the community of faith together we can pray that God's sovereign love might be made known to those who suffer under whatever calamity has befallen them.

Times of adversity and affliction have come upon each of us in one form or another and such times will come again. George Macdonald (1824-1905) was a Scottish preacher and writer of fiction. He lived in poverty and in the face of failure most of his life. He suffered from tuberculosis. His writings caught the attention of C. S. Lewis, through whom I came to be introduced to them. His little book of sonnets, titled *Diary of an Old Soul*,⁹ has been on my desk for many years. The following sonnet hangs on

the wall above my desk:

Thy will be done. I yield up everything.
“The life is more than meat”—then more than health;
“The body more than raiment”—then than wealth;
The hairs I made not, thou art numbering.
Thou art my life—I the brook, thou the spring.
Because thine eyes are open, I can see;
Because thou art thyself, 'tis therefore I am me (Sonnet 16:11).

I drink deeply from this sonnet because it reminds me daily who I am, and, more importantly, whose I am. As the Heidelberg reminds me, “I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful savior, Jesus Christ” (4.001). Because I belong to Christ, nothing can remove me from God’s faithful protection. And so, from this well-spring of living water, come the questions, What shall I do? and How shall I live?

The response that comes to me is “Get to work!” I have indicated the vexing and unhelpful questions that threaten to bog me down in the swamps of blame and despair. I believe God challenges me to look beyond myself to all those who are living under God’s sovereign love and goodness. Given calamities and tragedies, afflictions and adversity, there is much work to do. There was the tsunami and there are hurricanes; there are floods and famines; there have been terrorist attacks and genocidal policies. The gap between the world’s richest and the world’s poorest grows wider. A Ugandan woman commented to a missionary that God must hear the prayers of the “Bazungu” (white people) more, “because the Bazungu have motor cars, nice clothes, nice stuff and money.”¹⁰ I think The Confession of 1967 has much to say at this point. The framers of this confession intend the overarching theme to be reconciliation; however, a close reading of the confession shows that the foundation of the confession is obedience. And the obedience which is called for in this text is, I think, grounded in the sovereign love of God in Christ that we are to show to the world in proclamation and in action.

God the Holy Spirit ... creates and renews the church as the community in which [human beings] are reconciled to God and to one another ... In spite of their sin, he gives them power to become representatives of Jesus Christ and his gospel of reconciliation to all men (9.20).

... the Spirit brings God’s forgiveness to [human beings], moves them to respond in faith, repentance, and obedience, and initiates the new life in Christ (9.21).

To be reconciled to God is to be sent into the world as his reconciling community ... Christ has called the church to this mission and given it the gift of the Holy Spirit. The church maintains continuity with the apostles and with Israel by faithful obedience to his call (9.31).

According to these declarations, the Holy Spirit empowers us to be obedient to the challenge of the Gospel and faithfully to proclaim the reign of God to all who are so desperate to hear this word of life. It seems to me that in response to the sovereign love of God for everybody and everything, we can pray for the wisdom and strength to make manifest God’s sovereign love for all people. When I note the ways God’s benevolence

has been shown toward me, I am also acutely aware of the claim that others' well being has on me. There is ample opportunity all around for me, for everyone, to get to work, to pray, to praise, and to be a praise to God's sovereign love. For instance, in the story of the peasant woman at the beginning of this essay, one could ask why her friends did not take care of the plowing, or why they did not lend her a horse. I think of a man whose wife died after a long struggle with illness. When another couple asked the pastor what they could do, he commented that he guessed the house hadn't been cleaned in a while, given the situation. With the man's permission, the couple went to the house and cleaned it top to bottom. That's what I mean by getting to work, to pray, to praise, and to be a praise to God's sovereign love. *The Larger Catechism of the Westminster Standards* tells us that our chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy God forever (7.111). This living in praise, of course, is in no way a guarantee that there will be no further calamity or affliction.

Prayer and praise is such a commonly easy thing.
 It is our calling even in the midst of such lament, doubt, trials, and pain ...
 Living as praise is our way of life.
 There are no assurances that we will be well, or the way we want ...
 None of that is promised in scripture.
 There is just this.
 We are and always will be
 "... alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 6:11b)
 Praise the Lord.¹¹

These words from the Reverend Gail Snodgrass, pastor of Genesis Presbyterian Church in Austin, ring so deeply true for me. If we have given ourselves over to the proclamation and the work of the reign of God, our eyes will be opened. As we are gifted with the capacities for recognizing the work and power of God's grace among us, we likewise will be deeply gifted with praise of God. For among God's richest gifts, we are most assuredly gifted with praise. ❀

NOTES

¹ At the end of the children's time at Genesis Presbyterian Church in Austin, Texas, "Everybody and everything" is one of the answers one or another young person answers when the pastor asks, "Who are we going to pray for today?"

² *Book of Confessions: Study Edition* [Part I, Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A)] (Louisville, Kentucky: Geneva Press, 1996).

³ Suzanne Noffke, O.P., *Catherine of Siena: The Dialogue* (Ramsey, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1980), 89.

⁴ *The French Confession of 1559*, Ellen L. Babinsky & Joseph D. Small, translation [The Office of Theology and Worship, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.): 1998], VIII:7.

⁵ David W. Johnson, "Do Not Despise the Body," keynote address, Called to Welcome: A Conference on People with Disabilities in Seminaries and Congregations, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, Pittsburgh, PA, April 11, 2005.

⁶ In the medieval era, the prioress is elected for life by the community of women religious. The prioress is their leader and spiritual guide; everything pertaining to the life of the community is under her authority.

⁷ Margaret Frazer, *The Prioress' Tale* (New York: Berkeley Publishing, 1997), 101-2.

⁸ John T. McNeill, ed., *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Ford Lewis Battles, trans. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960).

⁹ George Macdonald, *Diary of an Old Soul: 366 Writings for Devotional Reflection* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1975).

¹⁰ From an email sent June 26, 2005 from Emily Bogle, who is doing mission work in Jinja, Uganda, along with her husband, Spencer, an Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary alumnus.

¹¹ Gail Snodgrass, "Commonly Easy," a sermon preached at Genesis Presbyterian Church, June 19, 2005.

ELLEN L. BABINSKY:
TRUSTING GOD ...
AND GETTING BUSY

One of the interesting things about your essay is that you draw from a range of sources—from Catherine of Siena to John Calvin to a Margaret Frazer mystery set in the fourteenth century. Can you say more about how you understand the relationship between medieval mystical theology and Reformed theology?

I started studying medieval and mystical literature in graduate school. It has found a home with me not only in my heart but also in my intellectual life. The mystics have guided my path for my studies, for my research, for my thinking, and for my teaching. When I first began reading them my response was: “I’ve never encountered this material, this is wonderful, I’m being taught something brand new.” But over the years I began to reread materials from the sixteenth century—especially the confessions, but also John Calvin. The echoes are simply unmistakable. In other words, our Protestant forebears in our Reformed tradition all knew this material so well that they made it part of their own. It was part of their souls. I’m convinced of it. And I believe that the mystical tradition is as much our tradition as it was the tradition of our Reformed predecessors. So, it is no accident that Catherine of Siena found her way into the discussion. She belongs there.

You’re saying that she had a formative role in the Reformers’ thinking on God’s relationship to suffering?

She absolutely informed their thinking. I don’t mean that the Reformers quoted her. But her ideas clearly found their way into Reformed thinking. We see them reflected in the teaching that we do not know good from evil and that the devil continues his deceitful ways even to this day. That’s Catherine of Siena; that’s also John Calvin.

Why are you so confident that the *Book of Confessions* offers us insight into modern theodicy?

I love that question. And my answer is: Because it’s true!

As a historian, do you read each confession with consciousness of the context in which it has been written? Does knowing something about the context surrounding the writing of the confessions help you better appreciate what they say about God’s relationship to our circumstances?

It is true that the historical setting of these confessions is notable. It’s fraught with danger in every case, and certainly in the sixteenth century. The Heidelberg Catechism, for example, is written as the Elector Frederick is ready to risk war to defend his territory against the Lutherans. Because of his strong insistence on the Calvinist accents in the



MY CONFIDENCE LIES IN THE FACT THAT THESE CONFESSIONS ARE WRITTEN BY CHRISTIANS WHO KNOW WHAT IT IS TO BE IN DIRE STRAITS, WHO KNOW THAT THEIR LIVES ARE FRAGILE AND AT ANY MOMENT CAN BE SNUFFED OUT FOR ANY NUMBER OF REASONS. SO THESE ARE TESTIMONIES BY CHRISTIANS WHO KNOW THEY BELONG TO THEIR FAITHFUL SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST.

Heidelberg Catechism, he knows not only his life but also the lives of his people are in danger. Every single confession has a story like that behind it. But historical context is not the reason for my confidence in the confessions. My confidence lies in the fact that these confessions are written by Christians who know what it is to be in dire straits, who know that their lives are fragile and at any moment can be snuffed out for any number of reasons. We're not talking just about wars here; we're talking

about plague, we're talking about a myriad of physical diseases that can just take a toll. So these are testimonies by Christians who know they belong to their faithful savior Jesus Christ. The mystics are the same way. I talked about Catherine of Siena. Did you know that she is writing in the middle of one of the major crises within the Roman Catholic Church of that medieval era? The papacy is in shambles. She's taking her life in her hands as she preaches that the papacy has to move back to Rome. All of these writers know that life brings with it terrible adversity, horrific adversity.

Sometimes I think people read the *Book of Confessions* and picture some ivory tower committee writing these documents. It's too easy to lose sight of what was actually going on. Can you think of other examples from the *Book of Confessions* of the kind of suffering people were experiencing at the time they wrote about trusting in the sovereignty of God?

You know we talked about confidence. The Westminster Confession strikes me as odd for the very reason that it reflects a confidence that borders on arrogance, in my opinion. At the same time it is important to remember that the Westminster Confession is written in the context of civil war in England. That parliament is first at war with the armies of the king, eventually morphing into a radically violent body that decides to behead the king. This is the context in which the writing of the Westminster took place. It's a shocking set of circumstances that are difficult to get one's mind around, in

this day and age. I think of another familiar one: the theological declaration of Barmen. In the early 1930s the national socialist party [in Germany] is on the upswing and so is the violence that is attached to that. The extraordinary risk-taking on the part of the writers ... the conviction behind these documents ... all of this is absolutely stunning. What strikes me is that it is not merely the violence that characterizes these circumstances. It is also the strenuous efforts that people are exerting to maintain or take over the leadership of a country to establish a church. We're not talking, here, about democracy. And so on the one hand, we see the leadership insisting that they have the plan that is according to scripture. On the other hand, there is in many of them a humility founded in their conviction that God is in charge, that God is the one who is the great orchestrator of all of this. That God is the creator of the world and all that's in it.

One of the things I love is that you have such conviction about the *Book of Confessions* and then you get to the point where you introduce the quote from the Westminster Confession and say, "This doesn't make any sense!"

When I went to the Westminster Catechism and reread the portion I discussed in the essay, I remember shaking my head and thinking: No. I was clear in my mind that this is not the way to go. But why? I concluded that the Westminster simply gives me too much leeway for blame or despair. Either I don't have to look at myself, blaming everyone around me or—if I am strung together differently—I don't need to look at any big picture, but just at myself and how horrible I am. I am why all this is happening. I just saw that as a recipe for disaster. Because whatever else it was calling up in me, it was not calling up trust. It wasn't bringing forth humility. It was provoking the opposite.

And I'm not confident in my or anyone else's capacities to withstand that kind of temptation in this issue.

So why is it that we keep asking why questions and not getting busy? Why do we keep asking, Why? Why? Why? Theologians tend to blame the "why" question on modernity. But one thing I was thinking when I read your article is that the "why" question has been there all along, from Job to Catherine of Siena and beyond. It seems like it's built into the fabric of human nature and it's not just the modern question.

I'm grinning because you say 'the fabric of human nature.' This is one of my talking points in my mysticism course and so I'm going to give you one of those. The basic outline of human spiritual growth is to ponder (first) who we are by nature, (second) who we have become through sin, and (third) who we might become through grace. Who we are by nature is revealed to us in scripture. We are made in the image of God. Who we have become through sin are those who have distorted, bent, disfigured, and even obliterated that image. And then who we become through grace is known in Jesus Christ. We look to him and see who we might become. So, I don't like the "fabric of human nature" way of thinking. I like to say we ask the wrong questions because of who we have become through sin. We've distorted who we are by nature. Catherine of Siena gives us a clear sense that we do not understand that God is our creator and our redeemer; that the God who loves us also gives us a way to be healed of sin. The real reason we ask "why" is because we've lost the sense of who we really are. It's not that the "why" question is wrong. It's just that it's not helpful. It doesn't move us. It doesn't get us anywhere. As an alternative to the "why" question, I think there is a lot to be learned

from the Heidelberg Catechism, Question 26. There, the writers make reference to “whatever evil God sends.”

That’s a tough one to swallow!

True. When students, or whoever, hear about God sending evil, of course they get upset, they get furious. Usually, they outright reject the statement, saying, “This is not scripture.” I always try to ask them, as gently as possible, “Where would you prefer evil to have come from? Would it be better if it were to come willy-nilly for no reason, just out of nowhere? How does it help anything to say God is not sovereign?”

That’s just what Calvin would have said.

I love this response in the Heidelberg because it forces me to reconsider my own assumptions about what I know and don’t know. It suggests that maybe I don’t understand what evil is. If God is turning it to my good, then is it really evil? Is it any less evil because God turned it into good? Once a student told me, “I don’t see how I can say that God has sent evil, and then turned it into good, in relation to anything that has ever happened to me.” I said, “Oh, really? Why is that?” “Because God only does good. If I see something that’s evil it cannot be that God sent it,” she answered. I remember that I paused, and then said: “So tell me about Easter Sunday.” My observation is that we tend to compartmentalize Easter Sunday to one day a year rather than embracing it as a way of life. There’s a folk song, a Christian folk song, that uses the phrase, “We are a resurrection people.” If we are resurrection people, then the cross that stands in our sanctuaries—the cross that’s at the center of our lives—also points to the bad things, it seems to me. So the “evil” of Good Friday (and I’m going to put quotes around that word) is connected to the total unmitigated life-giving gift of Easter Sunday, it seems to me.

How do students respond when they hear this?

Not very well. That is, I think it’s too much, at first, until they’ve had time to process it.

Are they unwilling to see the cross as evil?

Probably. It just doesn’t make sense to them. But God is God of all, sovereign over all things. Not just over some things and not just over stuff we like.

What would you say is the role of a person’s experience of suffering in relationship to their theologies of suffering? In a couple of our reflection pieces, authors alluded to the fact that they had not experienced severe suffering in their lives.

I’ve had the same thought of the hubris involved in this topic of discussion, for those of us who are so highly privileged. Certainly I am aware that there are plenty of folks in this country who suffer and I absolutely don’t think establishing a hierarchy of who suffers more and who suffers less is helpful. Even so, there are those who suffer in a particular way that I don’t know how to address with the ideas I have presented in this issue: those who suffer the debilitating effect of depression. I have known a number of people who have suffered from depression, and they remind me that I have been gifted with a capacity not only to look for the drops of grace in my life but to find grace

and to hold on to it. And to trust it. And that's a gift.

I am acutely aware that the things I say in my essay won't resonate with everyone. Some forms of suffering prevent you from being able to see how things are working for the good, even if you do agree, theologically speaking, with the points I am making. I don't have an answer to this quandary except to pray for the ones who are suffering. To intercede for them, as a sister in Christ, with prayer and praise.

I was really moved by the fact that you saw trust in God's sovereignty as leading to "getting busy," because those things sometimes don't go together. In fact some theologians reject the concept of God's omnipotence because they think it leads inevitably to passivity. In other words, God is sovereign, God is in control, God is going to take care of things, God is going to work everything together for good, so our job is simply to sit back and wait.

I don't think that trust in the sovereignty of God generates passivity. I think laziness generates passivity. I think of the work of a wonderful young couple, Spencer—a graduate of Austin Seminary—and Emily. I quoted them in the article. They are right now ministering in Uganda, all the while surrounded by these questions. They're working and trusting that somehow what little bit they're doing will be brought to fruition. That's trust in the sovereignty of God. It's easy for me to sit here in my comfortable office and my air conditioning so on. But they're doing it. People like Spencer and Emily are out there. On TV last night I saw a story of a young man who was shot thirteen years ago and has since been confined to a wheelchair. He has been mentoring wheelchair-bound people ever since. He's doing it. That's what I mean about getting busy. He's trusting the sovereignty of God that his teaching folks to shoot baskets from a wheelchair somehow matters. And I believe it does.

Reminds me of Mother Theresa's expression, "God has no hands but ours ..."

Exactly. That's it. Can you imagine Mother Theresa saying "Why?" and sitting around trying to figure it all out? Or think of the doctors without borders who have discovered this peanut formula that is now being packaged and handed out to starving babies. You don't ask why, you just give them the peanuts. Get to work. There's a lot of work to be done, and a lot of people are doing it. This business of faithful living is tough stuff and it's not for the faint of heart!



OVERCOMING THEODICY

WENDY FARLEY

It may be that every generation of humanity, regarding its own suffering and disasters, believes it has a particularly strong need to consider the questions of theodicy. Who among us, what generation, has magically avoided confrontation with the wounds of grief and physical suffering, the brutalities of injustice of one sort or another, the relentless gnawing of unsatisfied desires? Certainly as we look at our own time and recent history, we have much that calls us to reflect on how faith in the tender mercies of God can be reconciled with the “tears that soak the earth from crust to core” (Dostoevsky). Theologians like myself often feel compelled to find a way to ease the pain of this tension through theories about the way God is related to the world and what God has in mind by afflicting us so severely. I sometimes wonder if the biblical witness gives us much support in this enterprise, though.

People do find theodicies in scripture, but of course, that is part of the problem: we find several, and many of them are mutually exclusive. There is a thread of scripture that seems to associate the sufferings of the children of Israel with wrath and punishment. But the Voice in the Whirlwind strongly chastises Job’s “comforters” for imposing this theodicy upon Job. The story of the Exodus does not try to justify the suffering of Israel but rather describes a massive effort at liberation. John of Patmos does not theorize about why the early Christians were subject to horrific ordeals of torture, imprisonment, exile, and execution, but instead describes a cosmic overcoming of evil which will open upon a time and place in which God “will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away” (Rev. 21:4). For Christians, Christ himself is the great revelation of how God responds to evil: out of an intoxicating and apparently relentless love for humanity, God dwells with us in all of our suffering and stupid cruelty, bringing the incalculable sweetness of divine love to us as intimately as possible.

What I notice about most of these examples is that God does not answer Job’s

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question with an explanation but rather with God's own presence. God does not provide a theory about evil but a practice. This is aggravating to anyone who labors under the terrible burden: Why me? or Why us? When our lives are torn apart and sufferings come upon us that destroy minds and bodies and whole communities or societies, we want to know that there is some reason for it. We want some justification for what is going on. We want to understand how it is possible to believe in a good God and witness brutalities in our own lives and in history itself. But I am not sure we are granted satisfaction of this desire.

I would like to propose that in the spirit of these scriptural examples, we try to avoid exhausting ourselves looking for reasons and instead engage a practice of theodicy. A practice of theodicy is not an explanation for, but rather a response to, suffering. In fact, we do this all the time. If we are mothers and our children are sick or in danger, we fight for them. We bathe their heads with cold rags to bring down fever and we find the courage of mountain lions to oppose those who are hurting them. Even if watching them suffer from illness or injury or abuse feels like being tied to a stake and being burned alive, we do everything we know how to do to relieve them and protect them. We do this even though we have no idea why our beautiful and undefiled children should suffer. When twelve grievously lost souls flew planes into the towers that dominated New York's skyline and the world as we knew it fell apart, we sought to aid the victims. Before we knew the efficiency of death, thousands of people lined up to donate blood and millions more sent money to save lives and rebuild from the disaster. All around the world, people of every race and religious persuasion offered prayers of compassion and sorrow for what had happened. Whenever we become aware of some fragment of the infinity of evil and suffering around us, we can try to respond to it by alleviating when we can and comforting those beyond the scope of concrete help. Every tuna casserole or pan of lasagna we take to those who are ill or in trouble or grieving over their dead is a holy sacrament in the practice of theodicy.

These natural expressions of compassion for suffering are signs of the practice of theodicy that are around us all of the time. It is important to understand these practices theologically. These practices are refractions of the divine power that is constantly at work to redeem humanity. Scripture presents us with an annoyingly untheoretical God. God does not answer our questions about evil. God intervenes on our behalf. God moved over the void darkness and brought creation from nothing. When, as the story goes, Adam and Eve lost their innocent paradise, God gave them clothes (Gen. 3:20). The world outside of Eden would be harsh. When the children of Israel languished in slavery, God empowered a stuttering shepherd hiding out from the law to stare down the god-king of Egypt and bring them to a land of milk and honey. Over and again the chosen people failed to live up to the powerful vision of justice and mercy God called them to, over and again they succumbed to the temptations to cherish wealth over justice and tradition over compassion, just as we do. But over and again God sent prophets, heroes, and psalmists to set them on their feet again. The infinity of love we call God became incarnate in time and history to manifest as vividly as possible, not a theory about evil, but a response to evil. We find Jesus wandering among the outcast in a small, rag-tag occupied country healing the sick, feeding the hungry,

giving heart to those in despair, befriending despised women, cleaning the poisoned hearts of the selfish, breaking down every social and religious barrier he came across to show us that love is the only response to suffering God shows much interest in. He reminds us of the dangers of clinging too insistently to our views of good and evil, right and wrong: “judge not lest ye be judged.” He enacts an indifference to social boundaries and moral clarity that was appalling then and is no less distressing now. He paints a picture of what that clarity really looks like by imagining a judgment day when the only thing that divides the sheep from the goats is whether or not we were able to perceive Christ in the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick; in the stranger or the imprisoned (Matthew 25). At a time when the fledgling Jewish religion was trying to find a way of practicing their faith in the midst of an empire that made worship of one God dangerous and sometimes illegal, Jesus borrowed the words of the Rabbi Hillel and laid only one commandment on us: that we love God and our neighbor. Christians ever since have found the simplicity of this commandment impossible to bear.

When we practice compassion for one another we bear witness to the deepest dimension of our faith: God dwells among us. We fantasize about a savior who could remove the conditions of suffering or inflict suffering exactly as it is “deserved.” When we do this, we are depicting God in the image of Caesar, meting out rewards and punishment exactly according to his unmediated will. But drowning in sorrow, we are all like Job, begging for a reasonable universe where unjust suffering would never occur. The abyss between this fantasy of power and our experience of undeserved and afflictive suffering tears us apart and erodes the certainty of our faith. If we are to endure the sufferings of life with grace, we must practice putting this fantasy away and looking instead to the example of Christ, whose kingship is marked by a birth in a barn and a death on a Roman instrument of torture. We must practice theodicy by bearing witness to our savior, who did not overthrow Rome or recreate the world so there were no more germs, no more dishonest tax collectors, no more poverty. Since we see in Christ’s actions a constant response to suffering, it is hard to imagine this failure is because God is indifferent to suffering. Therefore in our own suffering and in our awareness of the suffering of the world we should not attribute either indifference or retribution to God. But in the daily practices of compassion that opens our heart in ever-expanding awareness to the depth and varieties of suffering, we rest in intimacy with Christ. This intimacy and this compassion are not solutions to the logical problem of theodicy, but they are the nearness of God to the world which is a light in the darkness, which the darkness did not and cannot overcome.¹ ❧

NOTE

¹ I am paraphrasing John 1:5.

THE TRUSTING PATH FROM CERTITUDE TO FIDELITY

WALTER BRUEGGEMANN

The hunger for rational explanation of the unbearable and unmanageable in our lives is powerful. Such explanations offer a kind of cognitive satisfaction and result in a variety of reassuring certitudes. Perhaps it has always been so; it has certainly been so in the modern period with Enlightenment notions of autonomous reason whereby we seek to explain and understand everything. Folk of both genders and from every part of the ideological spectrum all want to be, in Kant's formula, "Man Come of Age," capable of fully explaining and understanding.

And of course long before Kant, the modern, peculiarly modern, issue of theodicy had been framed in categories of rational explanation whereby "God's ways" can be "justified." While the attempt of theodicy by Leibniz was ridiculed and dismissed by Voltaire,¹ one can nevertheless notice that the temptation to rational explanation continues in response to the reality of evil, even by pious, well-meaning people, as if unjust pain can be "explained." The seduction of this process for the church and for pastors is enormous, as if in some way the violent death at the Columbine school or the massive destruction of the tsunami goes better if God is seen to be purposeful in these sorts of tragic losses.

But of course the offer of logical, reasonable, intelligible certitude finally does not touch the lived issue of pain, hurt, and loss that bear the face of evil. Such argumentation may be satisfying to those who live in their heads, but for those assaulted by evil, the argument is mostly beside the point and serves only to cover over and deny.² The practice of explanatory reason is a more-or-less Joban attempt to reduce the profundity of evil to manageable proportions, an attempt that is swept away by the undeniable reality that will not yield to explanatory denial.

If we seek an explanatory response to evil in the biblical witness, we do better first to admit that negating evil is indeed on the loose in God's creation. While the defeat

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of that negating power by God is promised, it is only promised and not yet in hand; that promise, moreover, requires not reason but defiant trust. This more centrally biblical response to evil that eschews modernist defense of the divine is articulated by Karl Barth in his brief (for him) exposition of *Das Nichtige*:

But the peculiar factor now to be considered is that between the Creator and the creature, or more exactly the creaturely sphere under the lordship of the Creator, there is that at work which can be explained neither from the side of the Creator nor from that of the creature, neither as the action of the Creator nor as the life-act of the creature, and yet which cannot be overlooked or disowned but must be reckoned with in all its peculiarity . . . For here we are confronted by what is not only abhorrent to ourselves but also primarily and supremely to God himself, and therefore terrifying to His creature faced with its ultimate and mortal threat.³

Barth, moreover, is echoed and paralleled, *mutatis mutandis*, by Jon Levenson in a Jewish read of the biblical truth:

The confinement of chaos rather than its elimination is the essence of creation, and the survival of ordered reality hangs only upon God's vigilance in ensuring that those cosmic dikes do not fail, that the bars and doors of the Sea's jail cell do not give way, that the great fish does not slip his hook. That vigilance is simply a variant of God's covenantal pledge in Genesis 9 never to flood the world again. Whatever form the warranty takes, it testifies both to the precariousness of life, its absolute dependence upon God, and to the sureness and firmness of life under the protection of the faithful master. The world is not inherently safe; it is inherently unsafe.⁴

Both Barth and Levenson, following the biblical text, can anticipate the overcoming of the power of evil that continues to be visible in creation. In the end, however, that overcoming will be accomplished not merely by power, but by power that is in the service of fidelity.

The conclusion I draw, then, is that the pastoral issue of theodicy in the contemporary world concerns the transposition of categories of witness from the more-or-less Enlightenment focus on *certitude* to a relational-covenantal-dialogical engagement with *fidelity*. That move from *certitude* to *fidelity* is the hard work of theological interpretation in our contemporary world, a work that requires yielding up the categories of control that are so prominent in an acquisitive economy and in the ideology of the national security state, categories of control that trickle down into personal self-understanding and that produce endless struggles for control in the church, all in the self-righteous name of certitude.

The two great moments in the Old Testament when the question of theodicy is frontally posed both receive not *cognitive answer* but *personal engagement*. It is important, at the outset, that in both cases the question put forward is not, Why do bad things happen to good people? but rather, Why do good things happen to bad people? Apparently both Jeremiah and Job after him accepted that bad things happen all around. But they assumed that good things were to be distributed only according to the Torah.

In Jeremiah 12, the question is: “Why does the way of the guilty prosper?” (v.1). The divine response in verses 5-6 is not an explanation. It is a reassertion of Jeremiah’s prophetic call and of divine governance. Indeed, the presenting question is completely disregarded; the message is, You must come to terms with *me!* In Jeremiah 15:15-18, the prophet again poses the question. Again, the divine response is a tough insistence that a performance of covenantal loyalty will yield divine attentiveness and deliverance:

And I will make you to this people
 a fortified wall of bronze;
 they will fight against you,
 but they shall not prevail over you,
 for I am with you
 to save you and deliver you,
says the Lord.
 I will deliver you out of the hand of the wicked,
 and redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless. (Jer. 15:20-21)

But no explanation!

In Job 21 the case is not different. The question is posed in v. 7:

Why do the wicked live on,
 reach old age, and grow mighty in power? (Job 21:7)

Then in verses 8-16, specific evidence is offered to support the “accusation” against the God who does good for the wicked. But no answer! Finally, when the divine response of Job 38-41 is given, there is still no explanation. It is simply a doxology from the midst of the whirlwind attesting that Job must come to terms with the inscrutability of God. Thus the question of theodicy is transposed into an invitation to *praise, obedience, and vocation*; the invitation is a rejection of reasonable explanation of the sort Job’s friends want to provide, and a refusal to engage in such explanatory discourse. What is offered ... and required ... is face-to-face interaction with the God who is present, powerful, and sometimes compassionate. The response to the question of theodicy is a personal one of *presence* that no explanatory mode of discourse can offer.

The voices of Jeremiah and Job, moreover, arise from and in the midst of Israel’s long practice of lament that is not explanation but disputatious encounter wherein the reality of life is thrown into the face of the Holy One:

It is between the Scylla of simplistic faith and the Charybdis of stoic resignation that the lament runs its perilous course. The cognitive pressure on faith and realism to fly apart from each other is, in every generation, so intense that the conjunction of the two in these texts continues to astound. The *cri de coeur* of the complainants is unsurpassable testimony not only to the pain of their external circumstances, but also to the pain of their internal dissonance, which only the creator God of old can heal.⁵

The Holy One, moreover, is offered no protection by Israel at prayer, but must make the best response possible. The best treatment of this issue in the Psalms known to me is by Fredrik Lindström, a book that has been almost completely disregarded in

contemporary theology.⁶ Lindström's thesis is that the Psalms of Lament do not doubt YHWH's capacity to govern evil, if YHWH is attentive to the need of Israel in the grip of evil. But YHWH, in such crises, is sometimes inattentive, absent, asleep, or away, and evil will readily occupy the vacuum left by divine disregard. The work of lament psalms then is to summon YHWH back into play; for Lindström that resumed activity by YHWH is in the temple where issues of life and death are to be adjudicated. When YHWH is brought back into play by the summons of Israel, evil stands no chance. Consequently, everything depends upon the summoning power of Israel at prayer. It is this summoning that is Israel's characteristic response to the crisis of injustice.

Lindström's dramatic sense of this engagement focuses completely on the issue of divine fidelity. When YHWH is faithful, evil cannot make its way. But this mode of "theodic discourse" fully allows for infidelity, for the awareness and articulation that God has, on occasion, failed to be fully present to and for and with God's partner in covenant. Thus theodicy is transposed into a dramatic transaction in which the victimized party, victimized by evil, speaks truth—the truth of abandonment, loss, pain, and indignation—and does so in full confidence that the God who has been absent can, by the shrill practice of covenantal faith, be summoned into the crisis and thereby make all things new. This evangelical practice of theodicy is a bold and daring exercise of dialogic interaction in which YHWH, in the drama of faith, is summoned into new and dangerous dimension. Such a way of responding to evil is congruent with Barth's compelling exposition of prayer. Prayer, he has said, is "simply asking."⁷ And then, in a daring evangelical maneuver, Barth concludes that God "does not act in the same way whether we pray or not. Prayer exerts an influence upon God's action, even upon his existence."⁸ Engagement in theodicy thus requires not so much cognitive explanation as daring faith that brings to speech before the God of all need our deepest yearning and our covenantal entitlement.

Before I finish, I state two caveats. First, I understand that such a "primitive" dramatic notion of encounter flies in the face of much classical theology that is historically crucial at this publishing seminary as at my seminary as well. But of course "classical theology," when it is thawed out of its frozen certitude, is about a dialogic transaction that concerns truth and power that inescapably includes transient seasons of infidelity in the narrative of long-term fidelity. This exposition is not a summons away from classical theology; it is rather a hunch that when reread underneath layers of imposed certitude, the true work of classical theology is pastoral interaction in which silence is broken by imperative demand and urgent plea, gestures that bespeak unflinching trust.

Second caveat: I have personally experienced no shattering crises in my life. It may be, then, that my thought is like the pre-pain, pre-loss explanations of C. S. Lewis. But I do not think so. I have lived long enough to know that down-and-dirty dialogic expressions about the truth of pain is truth that mobilizes holiness and that sets free; it is, moreover, truth in shrillness that the Holy One of Israel can tolerate, receive, and honor. This dramatic mode of encounter has served theodic insistence since the initial cry of the Egyptian slaves: "After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up

to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered this covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them” (Exod. 2:23-25).

I have no doubt that we Christians, too often seduced into hegemonic certitude, may relearn from Jewish discourse (mediated by Freud and his heirs) that pain brought to speech summons all parties involved—including the victim who becomes the petitioner, the Holy perpetrator, and even other perpetrators—to the reality of life. This is the God from whom no secret can be hid. But the secrets, when given utterance, are not given in syllogistic logic. They are given in truth-telling, shrill demand that expects divine engagement. Such a cry is never by sight; it is always by faith. Seen in such a way, theodicy in evangelical faith is never explanatory; it is truthful engagement out of which arise fresh gifts and new calling. ❧

NOTES

¹ Gottfried Leibniz published his *Theodicy* in 1710, arguing that because God is both good and omnipotent, this must be “the best of all possible worlds.” In 1759, following the tragedy of the Lisbon earthquake, Voltaire published a novel satirizing Leibniz’s thesis.

² See Terrence W. Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2000).

³ Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of Creation: Church Dogmatics* III/3 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1960), 291-92, 303.

⁴ Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 17.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁶ Fredrik Lindström, *Suffering and Sin: Interpretations of Illness in the Individual Complaint Psalms* (*Coniectanea Biblica* 37; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1994).

⁷ Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of Creation: Church Dogmatics* III/3, 268.

⁸ Karl Barth, *Prayer According to the Catechisms of the Reformation* (50th Anniversary Edition; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 13. See the lucid exposition of Barth by John Hesselink, “Karl Barth on Prayer,” *ibid.*, 74-94.

PRAYING THEODICY QUESTIONS

KATHLEEN D. BILLMAN

Last January, following a presentation I gave at a conference on lament, healing, and prayer, someone asked me an unexpected question: “Kadi, have you ever prayed this kind of prayer?” *This kind of prayer* meant the kind we had been talking about—the prayer that includes the cry of abandonment, anger, protest, and despair found in some of the biblical Psalms of Lament; the kind of prayer that addresses God as the source of the suffering being experienced or, if not the source of the suffering, the God who is doing nothing about it; the kind of prayer that believes God *can* help, if God chooses; the kind of prayer that believes things can change. She was asking me if I knew from personal experience the kind of prayer to which I had pointed as a source of grace, an expression of faith rather than faith’s opposite.

Her question was both an experience of judgment and grace for me. It was first a word of judgment because I realized that I had *studied* the psalms far more than I had *prayed* them. There was a gap between what I was teaching and my actual faith practice, and her question exposed that gap. But the exposure of that gap was also a gift.

Her question was a gift because it reminded me that I was pointing others to a way of entering into the mystery of a relationship with God that, truth be told, I both long for and dread. Praying the Psalter (the lament psalms need to be understood in the context of the psalms as a whole) takes those who pray both into the farthest reaches of praise and into the abyss of theodicy questions. The psalm writers evidence a mighty struggle with these questions, but they ask them not as an academic exercise addressed to other human beings, but as a cry to God from the depths. God *exists*—always, even in absence, for the psalmists. I am embarrassed by their wheedling, why-saying, bargaining, and tugging at the sleeves of a God who seems distant and silent or angry and punishing. It would be so much easier (and it is the road I have learned to take all too well) to slink away, turn my own cold shoulder, or tell myself my expectations were unrealistic in the first place. Maybe so, but the problem is not about the realism of my

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theological expectations or explanations but learning how to engage in a living relationship with a God who cannot be contained in them.

One of the most stunning examples of this kind of prayer in our own time is found in Elie Wiesel's "A Prayer for the Days of Awe." Reprising the questions that "have been haunting [him] for more than five decades" about God's absence during the Holocaust, Wiesel laments to God that he "did not expect much from human beings but I expected everything from you."¹ If only experience makes a theologian, as Luther attested, then mine is incomplete, for I have never learned to expect so much from God. Perhaps only the despised or unnoticed know how little they can expect from human beings.

I have long made a theological home with the God known *in* the cross—the suffering God who participates in the passion of Christ; the Christ who is "God-with-us" in the midst of suffering, participating in it and protesting it simultaneously. But even in the suffering I have witnessed in the lives of others and experienced in my own life, I have tasted how quickly theological explanations dissolve in the mouth. I want to tell my questioner that I read and pray the lament psalms, in community and alone, *whether or not I experience firsthand the agonies they describe*, as a practice of solidarity with those for whom the agonies are all too real, and as a means of preparing for the times when explanations will fail and only God, or the hope of God, remains. I find it immensely comforting that Jesus is remembered as praying someone else's prayers on the cross, whether "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" (Psalm 22:1) or "Into your hands I commend my spirit" (Psalm 31:5).

Kathleen Norris quotes Benedictine Sebastian Moore as saying, "God behaves in the psalms in ways he is not allowed to behave in systematic theology."² This is a more playful way of noting that sometimes speculation about God is a barrier to God; sometimes what we think about God makes it nearly impossible to pray with real fervor or hope that things can change. When said at a superficial level, the statement "We cannot know the ways of God" may be experienced by hearers more as an indication of shallowness and laziness than genuine humility. But in the depths may be found the God who is not only in the cross but behind it, too. That is, there are places of such suffering and evil where no speculation or explanation could ever suffice to make meaning of what is happening, and God is experienced as Adversary and Mystery beyond the edges of human reason. In Vitor Westhelle's forthcoming book on the theology of the cross, he writes

This double sense to be found in Luther [the God hidden *in* and *behind* the cross] need not represent alternative options for interpretation. Both are valid and one does not exclude the other. [The second sense of] God's hidden work is a way of naming in a radical way our experience of being abandoned by God as Jesus himself was. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, Gregory Nazianzen could speak of an uproar, dissension, uprising (*stasis*) in the Trinity itself ... This is the reason for the biblical tradition of lament and even revolt in the life of faith itself ... it is better to admit that there is an inscrutable shadow-side to God than the other options available to us. And we let that stand as simply a descriptive statement of our finite experience, and of

the very finitude of our reason. If it is blasphemy, it is the one of Job; this is the one God is great enough to take.”³

Those who speak of theodicy from the biblical lament tradition remind me that there is a promise hidden in relational engagement with God—a promise potentially more enlivening and hope-nurturing than the best answer we could ever offer to a “why” that, at least for the person in excruciating pain, defies any answer.

Finally, at this point in my spiritual journey I would tell my questioner how deeply I have come to need the psalms as an antidote to my indifference when it comes to the suffering that is everywhere visible yet so often not “taken in”—as close as the images on my television screen, and as distanced. When something occurs that forces me to see it and “take it in,” I experience an anguish in need of both judgment and mercy. (How often, I wonder, does true mercy come clothed in judgment?). The psalms “catch up” in their embrace the cry for justice and deliverance from evil and the experience of being complicit in evil; of experiencing punishment for that complicity. When I walk the “Magnificent Mile” in Chicago, with elegant shops on one side and gorgeous flowering boxes stitched down a street crowded with gas-guzzling SUVs on the other, I “walk the mile” with scores of bedraggled and ill-looking people holding out their paper cups close to the doorways where vast amounts of money will be dropped daily (including some of my own bills, which I do not place in all the outstretched, empty cups). I am worried about how inured I seem to be becoming to the pain I see all around me; how adept at barely seeing even the things that are stealing life in sips; numbed by the consumerism that Garrett Keizer calls “a soft form of cruelty” and unable to take action to close the distance between myself and others who are close enough to trip over. In commenting on Lukan stories of these kinds of gaps that exist among God’s children, Keizer writes

Whether Luke is the composer or merely the editor of these stories, we recognize his signature in the theme of the small spaces that we turn into vast chasms. The priest and the Levite pass within several yards of the wounded man in the good Samaritan story; they might as well be a thousand miles away. The elder brother of the prodigal son will not join the feast that welcomes him home but stands outside, several feet from the door and as far away as the planet Neptune. It is as if Luke is saying that we come within inches of love, yet if we fail to close that small gap, it amounts to an infinity of separation. The distance between heaven and hell.⁴

I need the psalms to confront me with suffering and to my complicity in “soft forms of cruelty”; the questioning of my contribution to evil that comes from the outstretched cups on the Mag Mile and the God of the poor and desperate who is the God to whom the psalmists pray their praise and questions.

I need the psalms, the prophets, and the anger of Jesus as an antidote to any understanding of God’s love that pushes aside God’s justice. I need the defiance voiced in Psalm 2: 2-6, in which God is portrayed as laughing at the “kings of the earth” who “set themselves” against God, imagining a control that is unlimited and that can never come to an end. Any theology that makes us too at home with God does not serve us well. Finally, questions about how the love and justice of God can be justified in the face of

evil boomerang back on us, and on the justifications we offer for the choices we make. I am drawn, again, to Keizer's depiction of hell.

Do you know what I imagine the torments of hell to be? Not the wrath of a sadistic God, that's for sure. Not even the anguished reaching out to the needy on earth that Dickens talks about. The torments of hell are nothing but the eternal sting of remorse for the missed pleasure that would have been ours had we made a more just world.⁵

I need a life of prayer that reminds me that I am not, finally, the one who justifies God's ways. Rather, I am a creature who is justified by God's grace and charged with not missing the pleasure that comes from trying to make a more just world. ❧

NOTES

¹ Elie Weisel, "A Prayer for the Days of Awe," (*New York Times*, October 2, 1997).

² Kathleen Norris, *The Cloister Walk* (New York: Riverside Books, 1996), 91.

³ Vitor Westhelle, "Usus Crucis: The Use and Abuse of the Cross for Life," (unpublished manuscript, used by permission).

⁴ Garrett Keizer, *Help: The Original Human Dilemma* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), 226-27.

⁵ Keizer, 239.

We asked our respondents to describe how they counsel people who are suffering. Here is what they told us:

What do you say when parishioners ask where God is in relation to their suffering? How is your response shaped by your own experience?

LEV BAESH, RABBI OF TEMPLE ISRAEL, DOVER, NEW HAMPSHIRE:

I rarely get this question. After the Holocaust, the Jewish community basically split into three parts on its response to the question, Where is God in the suffering? Either we withdrew from God completely for failure to attend to us in our suffering. Or we blamed ourselves and our lack of attentiveness to ritual living, believing we caused God to punish us with our suffering. Or we understood God as neither the cause nor effect of our suffering. The third part is the one most of my community relate to. Suffering is then a part of life and a way of understanding difficult circumstances. My response is not about God in the suffering, rather, God as an opportunity to shift outlooks and move through the suffering.

Therefore I might say, “God is a perspective of openness and expansiveness and understanding in Judaism. Reconnection with God is when you are better able to see the possibility of life beyond your own suffering. To see an important and powerful and yes, often painful, strength that comes from suffering. That strength is God and that vision is God and that hope is God. It’s my task to offer you connection to pieces of Jewish learning, prayer, ritual, and community that can point you toward that vision.” And all this is said while holding great love and respect for the person or persons in the midst of their suffering.

BOBBI KAYE JONES, PASTOR OF ST. JOHN’S UNITED METHODIST CHURCH, AUSTIN, TEXAS:

Much of my practical thinking comes from [Harold] Kushner’s, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. I talk about the presence of God with them in their suffering, mediated through others as well as the personal feeling of that presence of God. I encourage self-reflection.

If God is wholeness, then one way I will know that God is in my life is when, in those places where I know that I am broken and less than whole, I have been in some way completed. If I am shy, but I felt more confidence yesterday—that is God with me in my brokenness. If I am feeling that I can’t get through the day, but in fact I do—that is God supplying the lack. Just identifying those places where I was more than I thought I could be—that is the presence of God. So the question to ponder is, What have I been able to do through this tragedy and suffering that has surprised me?

I wrote a sermon on the “road to Emmaus” text. It had to do with Ross Dunn, an ethics teacher and a close personal friend. I was an adult woman before that kind of personal tragedy happened to me in that the first death I suffered through was Ross’s. I was looking back at that text just a couple of years ago and thought—things have changed. I still consider myself not to have suffered much. But when my children’s father was killed by a drunk driver nine years ago, that was an experience of suffering with their suffering, and a suffering that goes on. That’s my garden plot of suffering. That is the place I learn from, and weed in, and think from, and tend.

I do share a little bit of that with people. I might say, “My suffering is not your suffering, but because I, too, have suffered, I am with you in your suffering.” It’s just a tiny place where the rough edges of raw experience connect. So I have my own experience with me when I am with the people I counsel.

WILLIAM SLOANE COFFIN, FORMER PASTOR OF THE RIVERSIDE CHURCH, NEW YORK:

I think that God is not found in the causality but rather in our response to what happens to us. In other words, Why did I have this automobile accident and not someone else? We can’t answer that. There is no special providence. We can never say, How come I didn’t die and somebody else did? and say that was the will of God. We don’t know enough about how God operates.

What do you say when someone asks you, “Is this God’s will for my life?”

LEV BAESH:

I have come to understand that “my life” is often too narrow a focus. By helping the person see that he or she is part of a bigger picture, his or her suffering is given a broader perspective and the possibility of framing the question, If this were God’s will for you, what might you do to put your life to good use, now, with these new circumstances?

WILLIAM SLOANE COFFIN:

The president of Dartmouth, [James] Freedman, had a very bad bout of cancer. He was in Boston, retired from Dartmouth, and realized that there was a Dartmouth graduate, a Congregational minister, nearby. Freedman asked him to come by. So along comes this long drink of water, looking like the last Puritan, standing at his bed, and Freedman, in great suffering, says, “I have to ask you the Job question: ‘Why me?’” And the minister, without smiling or frowning, waited for a second or two, and said, “Why not you?” Friedman said, “That was the best thing anyone could say to me.”

Cancer hits. That’s a mystery, but God can be found in the response to it. If you have incurable cancer, no doctor can cure you, but God can heal you, in shaping the way you respond. That may sound trite, but there’s a lot of truth in it.

Do you encounter parishioners who feel punished by God? What do you say to them?

LEV BAESH:

“Punished by God” would require a God that would hurt us. This is not the God of Judaism as I was raised, and therefore my answer to the question would be one of deepening the conversation into the questions around the person’s sense of guilt and their subsequent feeling of a need to be punished.

If the person was not willing or able to hear my Jewish perspective, I would offer the path of repentance that Judaism lays out. This includes speaking, out loud, the deed that caused the need for punishment. This is followed by discussing and praying about it, creating or finding rituals to develop options for new behavior, and asking forgiveness in our world as well as in relationship with God. Finally, I would suggest checking in periodically as to his or her movement in this new direction.

WILLIAM SLOANE COFFIN:

Yes. There are more people who have only enough religion to make themselves miserable. The context is important—why do you feel you are being punished? I think you can say, for instance, that we don’t break the Ten Commandments so much as we are broken on them. Basically sin is better used in the singular. Sin is separation of our true self from God, separation from our neighbor and separation from our selves—the punishment is experiencing the bond of love rent. We belong to one another. Christ died to keep us that way. Our sin is only and always that we put asunder what God has joined together. Sin is rending the bond of love, and punishment is experiencing the bond of love rent.

Guilt is the last stronghold of pride, because guilt represents my opinion of myself. Forgiveness represents yours, or God’s, and I am too proud to allow anyone else to do for me what I cannot do for myself.

It is a lot easier to be guilty than responsible—response-able, able to respond to God. An example of that is on Calvary, in Luke. The crowd gathered, not to cheer, but also not to protest the crucifixion. And when they saw what happened, they went home beating their breasts. Big deal. It is a lot easier to beat your breast than to stick your neck out. It is easier to be guilty than to be responsible.

Who comes to mind as a person of great faith, courage and/or profundity in a situation of terrible tragedy? Why?

LEV BAESH:

I have, in my life, the examples of many women and men who held to their convictions and practice on their way to the death camps in Europe. But the most influential people in my life were the ones who fought back—with the last bit of their energy—so that one more person might escape the suffering. It is the people who put their own lives on the line, in times of great suffering and hopelessness, for the sake of others and the future, whom I honor.

These are the people who live Jewish values at the highest. And, if I've got it wrong, and there is a God paying attention to our deeds and frailties, it is these people whom God can smile upon.

BOBBI KAYE JONES:

Today I have Christopher Reeve on my mind. He was a privileged person—he had the money to do everything, and he could have suffered privately, keeping to himself. But he kept his condition, the complete end of his life as it was, right out among us. We were all in community around that. He was an incredible model of staying with what he had been dealt, and not blaming or cursing or whining, but just going along with that. He was a public figure. But there are hundreds of private people, such as a woman whose husband was severely injured in a stroke about twenty-four years ago. She cared for him, tended to him, and loved him all with the joyful spirit and presence in the world of someone who might have had everything. It wasn't physical suffering, but she carried this difficult work of compassion and love in a situation that completely changed her life.

WILLIAM SLOANE COFFIN:

So many people at Riverside were HIV-positive. I remember one in particular who had AIDS. He said to me, "You have to teach me how to die." I said, "No, you have to teach me how to die. I will try to teach you how to live." He was really wonderful. We had a service about AIDS and I asked him to speak from the pulpit. He was frightened at the prospect, but agreed. He told his story briefly that morning to 1500 people who accepted him, and then he said, "Now I know what love is all about," and led the congregation in the Twenty-third psalm.

We also had the Gay Men's Chorus, a group that lost members regularly to AIDS, but they found new members and sang on.

Courage is beautiful. It is the most important virtue in that it makes all the other virtues possible. 

REQUIRED READING

Books recommended by Austin Seminary faculty

CHRIST PLAYS IN TEN THOUSAND PLACES: A CONVERSATION IN SPIRITUAL THEOLOGY, Eugene H. Peterson.

Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005, 368 pages, \$25. *Reviewed by David W. Johnson, director, Supervised Practice of Ministry and Certificate in Spiritual Formation, Austin Seminary.*

Several years into his Retirement, the culmination of Eugene Peterson's life work is only now beginning to appear.

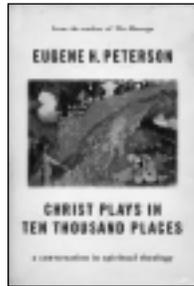
Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places is the first of a projected five-volume series on spiritual theology, which has the potential of shaping our thinking about Christian spirituality for many years to come. It is simultaneously a synthesis of the themes of the Christian spiritual tradition and a critique of much of the contemporary phenomena that are identified by the rubric "spirituality." But primarily it is a work of biblical exposition.

Peterson is well known for his many books on living the Christian life, often directed at the spiritual life of pastors, and for his Bible translation, *The Message* (Navpress, 2002). It is unusual nowadays for a single person to produce a translation of Scripture; usually such enterprises are the work of committees. To have translated the entire Bible is surely a signal accomplishment for one person—it is indeed a lifetime's labor. But there is a sense in which the work of *The Message* is prolegomena to this series. All of Peterson's work is centered in his understanding of Scripture, and the work of producing a new rendering of the scriptural text has led to a new

consideration of the character of the Christian life.

The organization of *Christ Plays* reflects a central theme of the book: the Trinitarian context of Christian spirituality. In Peterson's own words, "'Trinity' is the theological formulation that most adequately provides a structure for keeping conversations on the Christian life coherent (6)." After an initial section titled, "Clearing the Playing Field," which articulates the central thrust of the book against the background of contemporary spirituality, the book's three divisions are essentially Trinitarian: "Christ Plays in Creation," "Christ Plays in History," and "Christ Plays in Community." While these topics clearly reflect the classical Christian division of the activities of the three persons of the Trinity, Peterson's stress is upon the unity in that activity. His image of the God's work as a dance is drawn from the literal meaning of the Greek term *perichoresis* ("dance").

The heart of the work is Peterson's exposition of six "grounding texts"—one Old Testament and one New Testament text for each of the three theaters of Christ's play: Genesis 1-2 and the Gospel of John for Creation, Exodus and the Gospel of Mark for History, and Deuteronomy and Luke/Acts for Community. Each of these texts expresses an aspect of the Christian *kerygma* (Jesus' birth, death, and resurrection, respectively), counters one of the threats to the Christian life (gnosticism, moralism, secularity), and provides the basis for spiritual disciplines (wonder, hospitality, and love, which Peterson correlates to worship, Eucharist, and baptism). The result is a sketch of



what it means to base one's life on and in the Christian story.

A word is in order about the prominence of words such as "play" and "dance." The actual title of the book is taken from a line of Gerard Manley Hopkins' poems: "For Christ plays in ten thousand places,/Lovely in limbs and lovely in eyes not his/To the father through the features of men's faces." Peterson suggests that such terms express the joy and freedom inherent in God's life, and present in ours insofar as we share in God's life. The Bible reveals God at play, God's dance that is creation, redemption, and renewal. To live as a Christian is to enter into this play, to dance with God and God's people.

Beldon Lane, a fine expositor of the Christian life in his own right, has observed that the natural language of theology is discursive, while the language of spirituality depends upon metaphor.¹ If true, this means that any work of spiritual theology must honor both ways of speaking. Peterson is a master at this: His language is colloquial and straightforward, interlacing scripture, reminiscence, and contemporary observation in a highly organized structure of exposition. He has read broadly and deeply, as is apparent from the notes to each chapter, but his learning is not obtrusive and his vocabulary is the language of the street-corner café rather than the scholarly seminar. Consequently, people without any special training in theology will find the work understandable and helpful, while religious professionals—pastors and teachers—will find it stimulating and challenging.

As the subtitle suggests, this work is indeed a conversation, rather than a sermon, lecture, or instruction manual. It demonstrates that the Christian life is always a story-shaped life, and that the

story, albeit ancient, is thoroughly contemporary and supremely relevant. It is a book for people who want to see Christianity as a way of living and not just a pattern of believing, but who will understand that the living and the believing are always intertwined and can be distinguished but never separated. Eugene Peterson has once again given great service to the church through his writing, and that service promises to continue through the volumes yet to come.

NOTE

¹ Beldon Lane, "Spirituality as the Performance of Desire: Calvin on the World as a Theatre of God's Glory," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Spring, 2001), 1-30.

GILEAD, Marilynne Robinson, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004, 256 pages, \$23. *Reviewed by Janet L. Maykus, principal, College of Pastoral Leaders and director, Christian Leadership Education, Austin Seminary.*



For years I worked as a chaplain to the dying and the bereaved. People asked for recommendations of books that would ease their suffering and hasten their grief process. They expected suggestions of self-help,

psychology, or religious works. I surprised them by suggesting poetry, psalms, and good novels. Sometimes truth is better seen obliquely through the art of narrative or poetry.

Today, I work with pastors throughout the United States who look at themselves and decide what they need

for rejuvenation of mind, body, and spirit. They ask for books to read that will give them insights into leadership skills, spiritual invigoration, and coping with the loneliness of pastoral ministry. I continue to suggest good works of fiction and poetry. *Gilead*, by Marilynne Robinson, is an elegant novel that should be on the short reading list of pastors everywhere.

Gilead has won national acclaim, including the 2004 National Book Critics Award for fiction and, in 2005, the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. *Gilead* is a letter from an aging pastor, John Ames, to his young son. Ames has been told that he has a failing heart. He realizes he will die before seeing his son grow to be a man. He knows there is much that he will never be able to tell this young boy, so he begins a letter that is full of his life's history, his family's mythology, theological reflections on everything from baseball to predestination, and his life's regrets.

The novel's superb crafting keeps it far from sentimentality. Faced with a shrinking life, the narrator delves deeper into his prayer life and examination of his ministry. It is as if knowing he will not be called upon to answer for any of his ramblings (since this letter is to be read upon his death), Ames allows himself to write the vulnerable theological questions most of us in ministry find ourselves pondering at one time or another.

Unlike many authors who undertake novels with religious themes, Robinson seems to have done a great deal of research in preparation for *Gilead*. We see this in Ames's reflections on Calvin's reference to humanity as

actors on a stage with God as the audience or when he writes about the importance of the fifth Commandment and how it ultimately pertains to right worship. Familiarity with Scripture and theology never wander into casual friendliness. Robinson's protagonist remains reverent of God and the faith to which he has devoted his life.

Since this is a reflection on a life, the story is filled with joy as well as pathos, humor as well as anger. One of my favorite passages of humor deals with a dish that repeatedly appears at church dinners—an orange gelatin salad filled with shredded cabbage, anchovies, and stuffed green olives. It seems the recipe was found in a popular ladies' magazine on the same page as an article about Americans' religious beliefs. John Ames and his best friend, another older pastor, agree that there should be laws to prevent recipes for gelatin salads being near articles on religion!

A turn in the novel takes place with the appearance of a younger man who is John Ames' namesake and godson. He also happens to be the town's prodigal son. Pastor Ames struggles with what to tell his son about this young man, struggling to understand the complexities of forgiveness, personal character, and redemption.

Again, Robinson is skilled in allowing her main character to ponder these deep concepts without making him sound pompous or perfect. He comes across as well read, honest with himself, and not afraid of living with ambiguity.

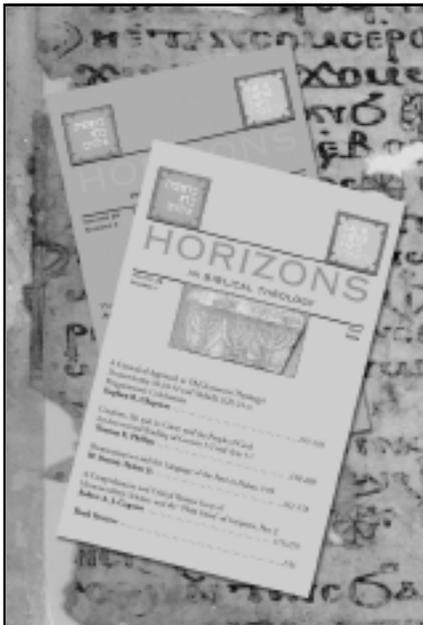
I recommend this book to pastors not merely because it is a good read, but because it addresses the common questions of a life in ministry. Are my

sermons relevant? Do I have the courage to say what I believe to be true? What does the congregation think of my spouse? What does my spouse think of the congregation? How much access to my private life should the congregation have? Do I say what the congregation needs or just what I want to hear myself say? Where is God working in my life? What happens when the people to whom I minister have more faith than I?

Pastors have precious little free time.

What they read, what they watch, and to whom they listen are important. *Gilead* offers entertaining respite from the never ending pace of ministry. It also offers ample sermon illustrations. Finally, *Gilead* may challenge pastors to dig deeper into themselves and ponder the questions of life and ministry (if the two can be separated) that John Ames allows himself to ask. These are the questions a good leader must ask. ❧

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NEGOTIATED DEATH: END OF LIFE ISSUES AND CHRISTIAN FAITH

ABIGAIL RIAN EVANS

The Terry Schiavo case has galvanized the American public in record numbers to consider the importance of executing advance directives. However, there is a great deal of misunderstanding about them and about what we mean by euthanasia, physician-assisted suicide, refusal of treatment. The time has come for the church to not only speak out on these issues but also help to educate its congregants about making sound decisions. Furthermore, pastors need more awareness and training about the issues at stake. In this essay I will argue that in order to provide effective pastoral care, clarity of terms and distinctions are necessary among views of life, death, the

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process of dying, and how death occurs.

Pastors ought to assist patients and their families facing death to sort through intense and painful health care choices to determine what is best for themselves and their loved ones. Compassion Sabbath in Kansas City showed clearly what can happen. Eighty thousand people—faith leaders and their congregants—from all faiths on one Sabbath preached to their respective congregations about ministering to seriously ill and dying people. Sunday school classes, as well, taught how to have caring conversations with those near death. Several training workshops and educational materials about topics such as the role of healing rituals at the end of life, ideas for sermons and homilies, and information about community resources that help dying people and their families were offered.¹

OUR VIEWS OF LIFE

The ethical questions surrounding the dying process and the end of life should be set in the context of the meaning of life and health, sickness, suffering, death, and dying. Theology deals with ultimate meaning and purpose and can assist us in answering these deep questions. Our views of life influence end-of-life decisions. These vary as follows: an absolutist perspective (*vitalism*), which holds that life is good at any cost with no qualifiers, it has intrinsic value; a *prima facie* value, which holds that life is good but can be laid aside for higher values; and a *relative* value, which holds that life is only worthwhile if a certain level of existence is possible. The Schiavo case was to some degree about what life is worth living. For her parents her life had value; they could communicate with her. For her husband, her life had lost meaning and he believed she would no longer want to be kept alive; she was simply a breathing corpse.

The quality of life arguments refer to taste and preferences; what is acceptable to some people would not be tolerated by others. The criteria used to establish quality of life generally fall into five categories:

- *The presence of incapacitating pain with only misery and uncontrollable suffering.* John Fletcher, for example, adopts this standard for the ending of life.
- *Standard of awareness, when the patient is unconscious or unaware of his or her surroundings with no prospect of change in the quality of life.* This could include Paul Ramsey's "beyond the reach of care" (Lesch-Nyhan syndrome) group or the never-alive-in-the-first-place group, e.g., the anencephalic infant.
- *Potential for relationships.* Life still has value but this value cannot be realized in physical existence. In other words, physical life may not be the best place to realize value if there is no longer any potential for human relationships, since the essence of being human is living in relationship. Richard McCormick's "no potential for human relationships" view illustrates this.
- *Personhood assessment.* If there is only biological human life and no person who can generate rights, hence possess value, then the obligation to preserve life would be removed. Tristram Engelhardt's "social person" concept is an example of this approach.

- *Comparative life.* Some people's lives are more valuable than others when resources are scarce. Peter Singer's "trade-offs" position illustrates this.

Our view of life is also affected by the degree of possible recovery. In other words, whatever view we have of life, our decisions about whether to hasten death depend on the chances for recovery to the level of life we deem necessary. This level of life can be to a fully autonomous, rational life, or life where relationships are possible or care can be received. As McCormick points out, it can mean at least three things: (1) return to a full state of health; (2) return to a lesser state, perhaps with severe physical or mental disturbance; or (3) return to vital functions without consciousness. Those who give an absolute value to life would advocate treatment if any of these three levels were possible, whereas those who desired a very high quality of life would only desire recovery if it included the first two categories.

I believe that life is a gift, full of meaning, a trust that we are to care for and cherish. All human life is of equal value and infinite worth and is not dependent on any criteria of personhood or human-hood. Decisions for treatment should not be based on an assessment of personhood, but on what is wrong with the patient. Life's *prima facie* value, however, may be laid aside for other higher values, e.g., for protection of another, duty to country if the existence of the country is threatened, or to defend one's values. However, these are all cases of heroic self-sacrifice, not euthanasia.

OUR VIEWS OF DEATH

Is death good, evil, or morally neutral? Death is a mystery which we can never totally comprehend. It is beyond our ability to reduce it to rational explanations. There are a variety of perspectives on death. One is that death is good. This position can either be based on a belief in immortality or future resurrection if these states are better than a physical one of suffering. Others view death as freeing our souls from the prison of the body (the Greek view), or freeing them to unite with God or a friend (à la Socrates). For others, death is good because it is a natural part of the process of life. Another view posits that death is evil. It is the cessation of all that we are and all we hold dear. Death, according to the apostle Paul, is the last enemy which Christ conquered (1 Corinthians 15). Yet another view is that death is morally neutral. It is a state of non-being, the absence of pain and pleasure, and a natural event which takes place in the fullness of time. If life is absurd as some existentialists hold, then death removes that absurdity and meaninglessness.

I believe that death is evil, an undesirable state. If this is true then euthanasia is not a welcome accomplice to free us from a painful life but an act which moves us closer to the very state of death we want to avoid. If life is of primary value then death is evil but inevitable.

THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE PROCESS OF DYING AND THE STATE OF DEATH

The conflating of death and dying has led to considerable misunderstanding. There are also differences between extending life and prolonging dying. First, extending life is

concerned with using life support measures for a patient who would otherwise shortly die. At this point, the patient is not in the process of dying and there is hope for recovery. In these instances, passive euthanasia would never be justified. Second, there is the question of prolonging dying. Ramsey spends a good deal of time distinguishing between those who are already in an irretrievable process of dying and those whose lives are being extended. We should be choosing the way we live until we die, not choosing the means or end of death. Stopping treatment for comatose patients does not mean we are practicing passive euthanasia, because we are not choosing the means or ends of death. Instead, we are merely moving from curative to caring treatment. The disease is what ends the life.

It is in the dying process that we seek the best way to die—with grace and dignity, as free from pain as possible, surrounded by those we love, and receiving the best medical care. So rather than euthanasia we should refer to *euapothnesko* (good dying). When death occurs—that is, death itself—it is beyond our control. The *way* we die, however, is not.

HOW DEATH OCCURS

How we die is perhaps the most relevant moral point. How death occurs determines what is labeled murder, homicide, or allowing to die and may be the pivotal issue in deciding if a certain death is, in fact, a good death; that is, whether it is morally acceptable or unacceptable.

Within the medical context, death may occur by natural causes; by a person bringing about his or her own death through suicide; or by someone causing another's death against his desire, without his consent, or at his request. It is within this context of how death happens that the morality of euthanasia is considered.

REFUSAL OF TREATMENT

Many struggles around end of life decisions concerning loved ones are due to confusion over euthanasia and refusal of treatment. Refusal of treatment refers to the patient's decision for herself. Euthanasia is an act performed on behalf of the patient. If a patient is competent, rational, and autonomous, based on the principle of respect for persons, it is morally permissible for her to refuse any treatment whatsoever, even if it is life-sustaining. This is grounded in the right to informed consent, which logically leads to the right to refusal. We have a right to choose the way we live while dying but not to choose death itself. Furthermore, as a partner in the covenant relationship, the physician has a duty of beneficence and nonmaleficence which generally falls on the side of preserving life. The physician, on her side, must be assured that the patient is fully informed and may either refuse or cease curative treatment with knowledge of all the consequences.

On the other hand, if a patient is incompetent or of diminished autonomy, i.e., defenseless and unwanted, based on her great need, she is to be protected at all costs. Only if a Living Will has previously been written by the patient when competent, or a physician, relative, or friend can bring corroborated oral testimony that the person did not want extraordinary treatment if in the irreversible process of dying, may life-sus-

taining treatment be withheld or terminated. However, if the wishes of the incompetent patient are not known, then, based on the sanctity of life, the need to protect the defenseless, and the difficulty of applying the reasonable person standard, it is neither morally nor legally justifiable to withhold lifesaving treatment unless the person meets the brain-death criteria.

Refusal of treatment is an unhappy phrase because what it really means is choosing our treatment rather than ceasing it, i.e., having control over our dying process. So, for example, terminal patients may accept pain medication, food, and water but not a respirator or the twentieth operation, which they view as prolonging their dying.

CONCLUSION

I suggest that conceptual clarity in often misunderstood categories of actions at the end of life is the key to providing effective pastoral care. Pastors and chaplains can assist the dying and their families in making choices consonant with their own values and religious convictions. God is Lord over life and death, the loving Creator who wills our health, but who walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death and welcomes us into Christ's arms when we enter into everlasting life. ❧

NOTE

¹ Renie Rutchick, "Compassion Sabbath: Improving Ministry at Life's End," *Partnership for Caring*, vol. 2, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 1ff.

FOR FURTHER READING

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