

Jacob Brenton
21 November 2016

Dr. Rowan Fannin
THEO 7345-01

Research Project

1) Area: God

2) Topic: How theologians have understood the role of God in the human experience of suffering, and God's morality in allowing such pain.

3) Secondary Sources and Annotated Bibliography:

Stiltner, Brian. "Who can Understand Abraham? The Relation of God and Morality in Kierkegaard and Aquinas." *Journal of Religious Ethics* 21, no. 2 (September 1993): 221-245.

Stiltner proposes that we have traditionally tried to understand our moral imperatives and the morality of God by either appealing to God's will (voluntarist morality) or God's reason (rationalist morality). The author approaches this question by analyzing how Kierkegaard and Aquinas (a voluntarist and a rationalist) respond to the story of Abraham's sacrifice. After an in depth analysis, Stiltner reasons that both approaches conclude "that God is totally free and eminently holy", but still leave modern ethicists with glaring questions about the morality of God and the reason for human suffering. Stiltner does not necessarily provide a compelling alternative to these two approaches, but it is helpful to know the conclusions reached by respected theologians.

Sarot, Marcel. "Auschwitz, Morality and the Suffering of God." *Modern Theology* 7, no. 2 (January 1991): 135-152.

Sarot begins exploring the concept of suffering by explaining the common argument that any theology of suffering must be viewed considering what happened in the Jewish holocaust. Sarot then proceeds to analyze the Christian thought in constructing this view. In an interesting argument, Sarot contends that Christians should be slower to adopt this story in our theology, because it is not our story, and Christian belief caused the holocaust. Though the author cautions modern readers against adopting this story fully, Sarot goes on to argue that we have our own suffering stories and can still view God "in the gallows", but that we must not ignore our own past of causing the pain and suffering of others. This concept that we are not always the victim, but sometimes, if not often, the inflictor of pain, helps us to ask less about why we suffer, and more about why we make others suffer.

Dahl, Espen. "Job and the problem of physical pain: a phenomenological reading." *Modern Theology* 32, no. 1 (January 2016): 45-59.

Dahl uses this article to consider the overarching message found in the book of Job. The author suggests that Job is best understood to simply be telling the reader of how concrete and painful suffering is. Dahl gives a detailed analysis of the text, taking time to explain

how phenomenology impacts our reading. The author's closing argument is that, like Job, we often find ourselves in pain with little comfort from our laws and little hope from our promised future. In this space, Dahl argues, we can find truer, more meaningful, less mediated communion with the God of the universe. This message from Job is meaningful to a modern Christian, because much of our teaching on pain very quickly tries to console the victim with a message of redemption before they have a chance to grieve as fully as Job.

Lewis, C. S. *The Problem of Pain*. New York: HarperCollins, 1940.

In his signature work on suffering, Lewis treats the issue of pain in a historical and orthodox, if not cold and detached manner. Through a study of God, God's goodness, humanity, the afterlife, and even the pain of animals, Lewis argues that pain is not sufficient to disprove God. God's transcendence is too grandiose and God's goodness is too all encompassing to Lewis for pain to disprove a powerful and loving deity. Lewis also attempts to give some reasoning for the existence of pain, arguing that it produces courage, sympathy, and perhaps a greater understanding of the love of God. The author pulls from Aristotle and Aquinas like the previous authors, giving historical weight to his claims. The book gives orthodox answers for the problem of pain, but seems to be written more from a place of the publisher's request (this is obvious from the prologue), and is not written from a place of passion for the subject.

4) Primary Sources:

A. *Patristic/Medieval Era*: Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*. 1265-72. Translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province. 5 vols. New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1948. Reprint. Westminster, Md.: Christian Classics, 1981.

B. *Reformation Era*: John Calvin. Book 2, Chapter 1 of *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Edited by John Baillie, John T. McNeill, and Henry P. Van Dusen. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960.

C. *Modern*: Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of God*. Vol. 4, Part 2, §66 of *Church Dogmatics*. Edited by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance. Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, 2009. Study Edition book 25, pages 223-235.

5) Written section:

Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of God*. Vol. 4, Part 2, §66 of *Church Dogmatics*. Edited by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance. Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, 2009. Study Edition book 25, pages 223-235.

Explication

Navigating a work as prolific and voluminous as Barth's famous *Church Dogmatics* can prove challenging. The author is sure to address important subjects in a variety of ways while explaining their relevance to the topic at hand, even if the subject does not have an exclusive section or chapter. The impressive collection of books in *Church Dogmatics* surprisingly do not have a dedicated chapter to pain and human suffering, but Barth effectively addresses the problem from several angles in different portions of his work. Perhaps his strongest argument about pain comes as he discusses the sanctification of man and the dignity of the cross. In this section of his work, Barth's thesis is that the best way to understand human suffering is to understand the message, dignity, and suffering of Christ on the Cross; seeking to make sense of the humanity and divinity of the Messiah in his most vulnerable moment gives us endurance, sympathy, and an inarticulable confidence during trials.

After giving an extended analysis of the crown of thorns in his larger focus on the crucifixion, Barth comes to the pain Jesus felt on the cross. The author argues that the pain of the cross was integral to the mission of the Christ, and that such pain was inflicted in a specific time and place; a geographical and physical place that is at the same time held by a God of love and is also groaning in its intrinsic brokenness. It is this place, Barth argues, that we must be willing to enter, should we desire to "take up our cross". This place of suffering, the very suffering of Christ, can teach us much in Barth's view; therefore we should view pain as not just an educator, but a tool of our sanctification.

In a comforting section, Barth reminds the audience that though Jesus submitted to the will of God and took on unjust suffering, he did not wish to always place himself in that situation. In our own pain, the author contends, we don't have to be excited to accept suffering to

be an obedient servant in our sanctification. Going further, Barth even argues that though pain forms us in unspoken and powerful ways, Christians must not seek to glorify pain or find a pleasure in suffering. Such glorification and pleasure would, in the author's view, stand in contrast to a God who designed our emotions and nerve endings to scream in anguish. Enjoying or celebrating something that damages the body God provided and rejoicing in the activation of body chemistry that God intended for fear and pain is not holy, and in effect mocks the divine as incapable of knowing good from bad. This is a common theme for Barth throughout the section, and he will return to it again several more times.

At this point, the author spends quite a bit of time encouraging his audience that our pain, our sufferings, and yes, even our death is temporary in the hope given to us in Jesus. Barth chronicles the development of this hopeful encouragement, starting with the words of Christ, moving to Pauline affirmations, and on to the reformation voice of John Calvin. In closing this important section, Barth reminds the reader that it is because of Christ's suffering that our suffering is not eternal. It was through the very act of pain, that pain has an ending. Our pain, Barth contends, does not compare to Christ's, because we did not have to face God's rejection. The author reasons that even if we find ourselves as modern day Job's, losing family, possessions, and hope, we never lose the attention of God, because Jesus endured that for us on the cross.

Barth then moves from how the crucifixion is treated in the Gospel's to how Paul approaches the event. The author quotes a large section of Calvin at this point, and for the most part agrees with the reformer. Barth believes that one of Paul's overarching arguments about human suffering in the epistles revolves around being sanctified in the process of "carrying our cross" with Christ. The author uses Calvin's argument to show that even though Paul doesn't use

this same cross bearing terminology, the concept is still clearly present in the Apostle's theology. Barth continues to say that in our suffering we may even find verification of our faith. Paul considered suffering for the sake of the Gospel to be the highest honor to which he could aspire, thriving even in prison and potential martyrdom. The author warns that, though we can find comfort in the verification of our faith, we should not place too much weight in this thought, because it could lead to self-harm, a Christian persecution complex, and an odd feeling of superiority to other Christians if you have achieved more pain than others.

Barth ends his discussion of pain and the cross with two points that are familiar to the reader by this point. First, Christians should not seek out pain on their own, simply to feel verified in their faith or find superiority to others. Such attempts, the author continues to contend, are an insult to God by abusing the pain sensors given to humans, and artificially inflating the ego of the person attempting this feat. Secondly, Barth writes that though our suffering is a means of sanctification, it is not, and should not be confused with, a means of salvation. There is much to be learned in suffering, and the Scriptures teach that we become holier in our pain, but we must remember that suffering is not salvific in itself and our pain is not our focus as Christians.

Barth's conclusion ends with a short statement of hope for those suffering as they read. In our pain we have hope, reasons the theologian. As a Christian, we can still engage in our eternal joy with the suffering Christ, even when our fleshly nature says we should be focused on our own pain. At this point, Barth moves on to other subjects, but this section serves as a comprehensive, biblical, and historical treatment of human suffering through the lens of the cross; examining the perspectives of Jesus Christ, the Gospels, Paul, and even the reformer John Calvin.

Evaluation

Karl Barth approaches pain in light of the cross from both a biblical and historical viewpoint, creating a well-reasoned and coherent argument for the validity of human suffering, while using his experience with the issue to caution readers away from obvious pitfalls of human arrogance.

The author utilizes many appeals to scripture, both in quoted verses and in references to the narrative. Because this section is primarily about the crucifixion, any theological reflection without some direct appeal to the Gospels and their discussion in the epistles would be worthless to his mostly evangelical audience. While the biblical quotes and allusions bolster Barth's arguments, his extensive quotes from John Calvin tend to distract from the conversations at hand. Barth appears to almost use these block quotes as a transition tool between arguments, but in a work of theology published in dozens of volumes, a reader is probably not nearly as interested in reading what John Calvin said as they are interested in knowing what Karl Barth has to say.

Serving as both a strength and a weakness in this section, the author tends to emphasize the same points several times, while burying some points that could be greatly expanded beneath the surface. For example, Barth warns readers to not enjoy or seek out pain with the same line of reasoning three times in this section: near the beginning, middle, and end of the portion. In the midst of this consistent repetition, the author spends two sentences discussing the humility pain can bring about. This is a thought provoking point, and could have served to remain as one of the predominant themes in the work, but it was obscured by the plea to not seek out pain.

Barth presents an overall compelling case for how the suffering of Christ on the cross defines, promises, and redeems our suffering. Despite a few minor weaknesses, the argument remains valid and convincing.

Response

After reading Lewis' work, *The Problem of Pain* for the annotated bibliography, I was left without much hope for a theologian to say anything convincing on the issue of human suffering. Though he is still greatly respected as a great Christian mind, C. S. Lewis simply did not seem to write *The Problem of Pain* from a place acquainted with darkness, but more from a reasoned, logical approach. It was helpful to go from this cold treatment of the issue to Barth's discussion of pain in the larger context of the crucifixion. Though this work also does not appear to be written in response to a personally felt suffering, it is filled with biblical and historical reflections that validate, verify, and identify pain with much more precision and care than the fairly insensitive work I had read.

Because Barth approaches pain and suffering from so many different angles, it is difficult to disagree with the overarching arguments. Though these arguments are reasoned well and they provide some comfort in the midst of suffering, these few pages do not put the problem of human suffering to rest. To be fair, no theologian will be able to answer the issue of pain with any human created language, science, or art; but I'm glad Barth attempted to at least give some contribution to the ongoing conversation nonetheless.

Though I do think he over emphasized the idea of human arrogance causing some people to seek pain, this warning was surprisingly the most valuable addition to my theological toolkit in this section. The extended explanations of the problem helped me to identify those who might be seeking persecution or pain to verify their faith, and even gave me tactics for assisting them in moving toward their own joy in Christ, rather than a fulfillment in enduring pain.

I am not done researching the issue of pain, nor do I think I will be in this life, but I'm thankful for Barth's addition to the conversation and look forward to reading more of his work.