On Suffering, Violence, and Power

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In January of 1991, I attended a lecture by Rebecca Parker on the role Christianity plays in shaping women's acceptance of abuse. She told the tragic story of a woman who as a child had been sexually abused by her father. The father told the girl that she should be like Jesus and keep quiet or he would kill himself. The idea of Jesus' silent suffering was thus used against the girl. One might well imagine that this child had little choice but to believe that she had responsibility to "save" her father.

This distortion of elements of Christian teaching is an abomination that should never happen. Since children rely on the adults in their lives to mediate the church's message, these adults should be held accountable to do this with care. I know of no church leaders who would sanction that father's manipulation of scripture and his daughter. Yet I was appalled when I first learned about ten years ago that many pastors have been known to counsel a woman to continue living with a husband who treats her violently. Such pastors need re-education. How can a woman believe she is freed by God's grace in Jesus Christ, when she is told by one who is supposed to know about such matters that she should remain imprisoned by her husband's violence? How could the little girl in the story trust a gracious God when she was expected to be "like Jesus" and suffer abuse from her father?

Thus far I was moved by Rebecca Parker's account. But when she extended her argument to say that suffering is never redemptive and that women learn from the church only to be submissive, I disagreed. In this article I will explore the subtle issues involved in discussion of atonement theology and abuse, as well as the complex relationship between suffering, violence, and power.

The starting point for my discussion is the critique of the idea of atonement offered by Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker in an article entitled, "For God So Loved the World?" in *Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse*.[1] I will argue that the case they present demonstrates the urgent need for sound theology and great care in the teaching and preaching of the church.

I will begin with the general issues raised by discourse about atonement doctrine and the suffering of women. The first thing to be said is the obvious: The suffering and frequent victimization of women is real and must be addressed. Whatever plays a part in sanctioning violence against women must be examined, challenged, and changed. It is extremely encouraging to see many church bodies begin to deal with the problem of violence and abuse in families and with church leaders' sexual abuse or harassment of parishioners. Even though there is growing awareness about violence (physical and emotional) against women, there is much more which the churches might do in working to help stop it. If the manner in which the church

[1] Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, "For God So Loved the World?" in *Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse,* ed. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole Bohn (New York: Pilgrim, 1989), 1-30.

is communicating its message somehow plays a part in the sanctioning of violence against women, this should be addressed.

The second point that needs to be made regards the relation between theology and cultural practices. Brown and Parker state, "Christianity has been a primary—in many women's lives *the* primary—force in shaping our acceptance of abuse" (p. 2). This is a statement about a factor which motivates "acceptance," which in this case really means resignation to abuse, or passive nonresistance. Perhaps a prior question should be, "What facts make it difficult if not impossible to actively resist violence?" The perpetrator of the violence must not be forgotten. In most cases, greater physical strength on the part of the male is a major reason for nor-resistance. For thousands of years before and after Christ suffered crucifixion, male homo sapiens has not needed the Jewish or Christian idea of sacrifice or suffering in order to keep women submissive. Violence is the most blatant form of control. In addition, there are many social, economic, and psychological factors which come into play in women finding it difficult to resist violence and/or leave the situation of abuse, and thus they learn to accept it.

But this does not mean that Christian institutions and leaders historically and to this day have not in some ways supported or shown complicity in the victimization of women. It is the intent of the authors of "For God So Loved the World?" to probe the social and cultural facts, especially the teachings of the church, which have allowed for or supported—even if through silence—abusive treatment and/or submission to it. The interaction of religious beliefs with other cultural and social factors is extremely complex. It is likely that the domination of men over women in general cultural practices has a greater role in shaping women's acceptance of abuse than does the teaching of the church per se, but the subtle interplay of beliefs and behavior is difficult to untangle.

The formal theology of the church is mediated within the culture at several levels. Besides pastors, priests, teachers, and others who are seen as authorities, parents and other family members and friends regularly interpret scripture and church practices on an informal basis. That which is preached and taught is heard and adapted by persons who filter it through and combine it in various ways with the other "messages" they hear. For example, growing up in a German-American farm family, I heard the message of God's love, commands, and judgment mixed with messages conveyed in German-American farmers' emphasis on the virtue of hard work (and that not in the abstract!), independence, and Stoic longsuffering, along with women "doing for" men. This led to some (at that point unthematized) uncertainty on my part about the grace of God because of how much I felt I had to do and be in order to win approval.

In many parts of American culture, young girls and women hear very mixed messages: formal ones about self-respect and about being loved by God, and other messages about pleasing men at the expense of their integrity as persons, as persons of God. Much of the media still—one could even say increasingly!—sets up images of women as attractive and valued primarily as the object of male pleasure. Such cultural messages are probably a source of some women's tendency to accept abuse. Though the church and its theology may be able to do little to silence such messages, we should do all we can to counter them with a message which upholds the integrity of women as full human persons, valued along with all of God's creation.

Societal norms place restrictions upon persons—by law or other practices—which may be experienced as oppressive. Some of these practices protect life and liberty, and some protect privilege and power. The church's interpretation of the gospel must address the cultural practices

of power and the system of power which undergirds them, especially whenever the practices make it difficult for any child of God to hear and experience the freeing grace of God in the gospel.

Sound theology goes a long way to work against abuses of all kinds, though theology does not guarantee social practices which provide absolute protection. Ultimately, the love of God in Jesus Christ does provide not only a powerful protection but the motivation to resist evil in whatever form it takes. And the community of the faithful must be willing to act in support of this belief. Theology must be in dialogue with culture and must address situations which oppress, for the gospel's freeing power is for all.

Brown and Parker state, "Whether Christianity in essence frees or imprisons is the issue that must be considered" (p. 4). Practices which have gone on in the name of Christianity have often imprisoned. It is not Christianity itself, as the cultural and institutional expression of the Christian faith, which has the power to free. It is the gospel, the love of God in Jesus Christ, which frees. How does the theology and preaching of the church rate in its proclamation of that gospel, and in its condemnation of practices within the church or in the culture in which it is embedded which obscure the power of the gospel to liberate?

Much has been written and said in the history of theology and in popular piety, including contemporary TV evangelism, which romanticizes the cross and Jesus' brutal death. I would venture to say that where suffering is glorified, there precisely one does not find true gospel proclamation. Violence and the suffering it causes whether—speaking of Jesus, the martyrs, or victims of incest or abuse—must be decried for the horror it is. The glorification of suffering turns theology of the cross into a strange sort of theology of glory. *Theologia crucis* calls the Christian to be prepared to suffer—*for the sake of the gospel.* The Gospels report that Jesus warned that suffering could be anticipated, if anyone would follow him and his *challenge to* the structures of power. I would also venture to say that Jesus was *not* talking about submission to the abusive and violent assaults of a parent or spouse who is out of control. Suffering "for the sake of the gospel" is not the same as suffering for the sake of an abusive partner or parent!

One problem with the critique (and with some interpretations of atonement theory itself) is that it isolates the suffering and death of Jesus from his life and teaching—and from the resurrection. It loses sight of the historical and sociological context of the gospel story within the covenantal and prophetic tradition of the Jews. It too easily loses sight of the political realities surrounding Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, his trial and execution. Atonement must be held together with the life of the one who walked the roads of Galilee healing and teaching, who identified himself with the prophet Isaiah's mission to proclaim release to captives, to set at liberty those who are oppressed. Atonement theology raises the question of where Christology begins. As Wolfhart Pannenberg points out, we must examine first who Jesus was, in his socio-political context, before we can say who he is for us. "Soteriology must follow from Christology, not vice versa."[2] Beginning with soteriology is part of the problem.

Another side of this issue is the Christology reflected in the characterization of Jesus Christ as "the best person who ever lived" (Brown and Parker, p. 2). When Jesus is seen primarily as moral example, then to do as Jesus did is the highest virtue. Atonement must be held within the context of the doctrine of incarnation, of belief in the trinitarian God whose creative love is ever

[2] Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man,* 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), 48.

healing and restoring the world, who in Jesus frees all from the powers of evil, whose ultimate life-giving is in Jesus' resurrection and sending of the Holy Spirit offered for all. The Eastern church's emphasis on incarnation could be a source of renewal in the West, a counter-balance to the West's preoccupation with the suffering and death of Jesus as the basis for salvation.

Atonement theory must be held together with justification by grace through faith. The "event" of Jesus' life, death and resurrection which is for the world, when held together with the doctrines of creation and sanctification, breaks the bonds of sin, suffering, and death, and offers healing. The grace is that we do not have to, we cannot, save self or others. Here the Reformation principle of justification by faith can function as a guard against faulty interpretation. If it is God who "justifies," who "makes righteous," who forgives and heals, then Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection mean God identifies with us in suffering. The power of God to confront death and give new life empowers victims with the courage to confront perpetrators of violence in the confidence that God has ultimate power of life and death.

The christological interpretation of Brown and Parker, in line with much of American Protestantism, makes Jesus merely into the model for us. If the primary focus of Jesus' suffering and death is exemplary, it is a small step to the idea that we must *identify ourselves* with Jesus the victim. The exemplary model is easily abused as a justification for victimizing the powerless. The trinitarian/incarnational model is not. It is not coincidence that the former can miss the point of the gospel.

Theology which emphasizes the work of God in Jesus can legitimately function to comfort the afflicted: God identifies with us and the whole creation in Jesus' life, suffering, and death. We are not called upon to look for the chance to repeat the event. Martyrdom has come upon people like Martin Luther King, Jr., Oscar Romero, and others. But this happened *because* they supported *resistance to* the perpetrators of violence and abuse. It is important when talking about suffering and its function in the psychic economy of the powerless not to try to take from those who suffer what is often the only hope within a desperate situation: memory of Jesus and others who have suffered. It is also important to keep in mind that no one should be led to believe they are called to suffer in the footsteps of Jesus merely because they are caught in social conditions which function to keep the "mighty on their thrones." That is to say, the example of Jesus and the martyrs should never be used against the powerless to keep them in a place of suffering, or to lead them to accept needless suffering or death at the hands of violent people.

Brown and Parker are critical of liberation theology's use of the examples of King and Romero as figures of hope. Basically, the authors believe that suffering should never be taken as example for others. Here it is important to examine the authors' view of suffering and its relation to power and violence. In most cases, the person or persons in positions of power will not give up that power without struggle. In rare cases, they may be talked into more egalitarian ways. But the liberal ideal about the basic good nature of humans has not borne itself out in the civil rights movement nor in Central American life. So in King's experience, and that of many African Americans, no matter what they did, they faced suffering. King's way of confronting the violence and abuse of racism was nonviolent resistance. He did not have many choices. When he began to see that his path was leading him into dangerous waters, he could have backed off. But any way he turned, he would still have been faced with the violence of racism. The exemplary part of a martyr's life is not the suffering and death, but the life of courage in the face of death. If examined, it is the lives of persons like King or Romero which give hope to the oppressed, not their deaths.

Obviously, there are many reasons why people suffer. There are some forms of suffering to which everyone is potentially vulnerable. This includes every type of want and loss: hunger; death; loss of job, relationship, or loved ones; physical and emotional pain of illness, accident, and natural disaster. Some people are more susceptible to some of these forms of suffering because of racial, ethnic, or gender-related conflict, or poverty. And anyone may be vulnerable to suffer violent assault at the hands of someone who abuses some form of superior power. Violence is frequently used by persons or groups who feel a need for control, fear loss of control or wish to assert their position of power or dominance.

Some of the above forms of suffering may be seen as inevitable, but this category would include only those forms to which everyone is vulnerable. There must be societal solutions in cases of social conflict, as well as in cases involving the abuse of power, because the victim may face violence whether or not she or he resists. This is where the entire community and culture must cooperate in clear rejection of such abuse. And the church's message needs to be a strong voice in leading opposition to violence and abuse of power of all kinds.

I do not believe that the church needs to give up on atonement doctrine, but it must be careful in its interpretation. I have gradually come to agree with Brown and Parker's statement in the conclusion of their article, "Suffering is never redemptive, and suffering cannot be redeemed" (p. 27). Suffering—in the abstract or in a generalized concrete—is not redemptive. And in the final analysis, statements about suffering being redemptive can be dangerous. They are not necessary to an adequate soteriology, at least not if it is placed within a broad based Christology and trinitarian theology. And to say that *suffering* is redeemable is not the language of biblical faith. It is a person's *life* which is redeemed *from* suffering, bondage, sin, and death. It is in the light of such redemption, seen as healing, that that which someone has suffered can be interpreted in such a way that it is not determinative for the rest of her or his days. This is not to say that one can or should forget past abuses, only that they need not be held on to in order to define the future, or oneself as victim.

Brown and Parker suggest that women who see oppression in the church should leave (p. 3). The reason I stay in the church is that I have heard the gospel here. The good news is that I do not have to save myself through my suffering; the good news is that I could not even if I wanted to save anyone else; the good news is that in Christ I am free from any earthly power and am given the courage to resist mistreatment directed against me and fight it wherever else I see it. In its role as the body of Christ in the world, healing and making whole, the church can be "the place where cycles of abuse are named, condemned, and broken" (p. 4). Whether Christianity frees or imprisons is crucial—for if and where the gospel is truly preached, the freeing power of God is present and effective to release victims from bondage. And where the law is properly held up to confront perpetrators of violence and abuse, there is the merciful power of God effective to convert the abuser. And the church needs to support both former victim and former perpetrator in transformed ways of living.