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Reformation
& REVIVAL
JOURNAL

**CHRISTIAN
COUNSELING:
THE CARE OF SOULS**

A Quarterly for Church Renewal

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Neo-orthodox theologians of the Lutheran tradition (like Bultmann) emphasized that God's grace accepts us just as we are and frees us from the necessity of having to do or achieve anything to make ourselves worthy of God's and other's love and acceptance. Neo-orthodox theologians influenced by the Calvinistic tradition (like Brunner, Barth, and Bonhoeffer) also knew about this "justifying" grace of God but believed that it leads to passivity, self-centeredness and irresponsibility unless it is complemented by an emphasis on the "sanctifying" grace of God that confronts and exposes human sinfulness and requires and enables changed lives. The neo-orthodox revival of this classical Lutheran-Calvinist debate still reminds pastors of the danger of emphasizing one form of grace without the other, and of the importance of both "being" and "becoming" for authentic human existence.

SHIRLEY GUTHRIE, *DICTIONARY OF PASTORAL CARE AND COUNSELING*, 781.

In contemporary pastoral care and counseling, technique and skill present an important, largely unresolved issue. For while there are specific techniques that can be learned, the church has historically sensed that care and counseling require qualities of faith, integrity, and wisdom in the pastor that exceed any mere application of technique.

BRUCE M. HARTUNG, *DICTIONARY OF PASTORAL CARE AND COUNSELING*.

The Art of Bearing Burdens



Diane Langberg

The art of bearing the burdens of others without being crushed by them is of crucial importance to someone in my profession. The bulk of my time is spent, hour following hour, in hearing about suffering in the lives of others. Actually, it is far more intimate than simply hearing about it, for it involves an entering into the suffering with them in ways that have deeply touched me. Such work is not the peculiar domain of those in the counseling profession though we may engage in it more intensely. The Word of God calls all of us to carry one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2) and so that means that burden bearing should be characteristic of the Church of Jesus Christ. What does it mean to bear the burdens of others and how can we do it effectively?

One of the ways that we as human beings learn is by watching another do what it is we need to learn to do. I am sure most of you have memories of learning to swim or ice skate or play tennis. Part of the way you were taught was by the teacher saying over and over again—"No, not that way; do it this way. Watch me." You would watch and try again.

For me, the best way I know to learn what it means to bear the burdens of others is to look first at the one who has done so perfectly. "Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows" (Isaiah 53:4). That statement means many things

and surely one of them is that Christ was the Chief Burden-Bearer. If we are to learn to bear one another's burdens then we must know Christ. Paul gives us a marvelously rich statement in Philippians that will help us understand the art of bearing burdens. The statement begins with knowing the one who has born ours: ". . . that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings" (Philippians 3:10). I would like to use this verse to show you what I believe are the characteristics of a true burden-bearer.

The first and foremost characteristic of one who is going to bear burdens is that we know Christ. Bearing burdens has to be rooted in something or we will be utterly crushed by it. To sit with the suffering of others for its own sake will eventually lead to despair, for there is no end to it. No matter how much brokenness you minister to, how much death you sit with, how many hurt people you hold, there will always be more. And even beyond that, there are many we can give to deeply and see no change or response. None of us can stand that for long without being crushed or fleeing from it. And so, Paul starts us with our foundation—"that I may know him."

When we consider the life of our Lord Jesus Christ we notice that his first obedience was always to the will of his Father, not to the needs of humanity. He taught us again and again, that the greatest commandment was to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:37).

If obedience to God is not primary several things will happen. One is that we will try to enter into the suffering of others in a way that is truly self-motivated. It is simply disguised selfishness. We like how it makes us appear to others, we like how it makes us appear to ourselves, or it meets some need in ourselves, such as the need to feel important, significant, or valued. When this is the case, the relationship is governed by our own needs, not those of the other person. We end up structuring the relationship so that it takes care of us, often at the expense of the one who is suffering. One obvious, though sadly not uncommon, example of this is when a counselor or pastor ends up sexually involved with a client. However, all of

us have been guilty of using another to meet our own needs in more subtle ways. We make a comment to elicit a compliment or we manipulate someone into doing something for us and we do it all under the guise of being there for them.

Another motivator might be that we enter into the suffering of others to avoid dealing with our own pain. I will help you, tend to your wounds, and be there for you in an attempt to not face my own pain. It is our nature to hide from our own struggles or brokenness. We don't like pain of any kind, least of all our own. Sometimes the best way to run from mine is to get lost in yours.

Without some grounding, you and I will either avoid the suffering of others or drown in it. We may end up trying to help from selfish motives or out of some skewed, messianic view of ourselves. It is only as we know Christ, seek him, and obey him that the delicate adjustment of our two callings: to love God and to love others, can be brought about. The Spirit of God and the Word of God can only bring about this adjustment, for they ever put first things first. The first thing is love and obedience to God, and the second, service to humanity. How quickly we reverse them!

John 1 tells us "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. . . grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (1:14,17). Knowing him who is both grace and truth will be what enables us to bear the burdens of others in such a way that we reflect who he is in this world.

Knowing him who is grace keeps us humble before God and before others. If we truly know his grace we will never approach others with condescension or impatience. If we know him who is grace we will not quit when the way is long and hard. If we truly know his grace we will not judge or condemn when the struggles of others do not make sense to us and it would be easy to callously say that they brought their suffering on themselves. To truly know and experience the grace of God toward us is to know that we can never despair of another human being and that we will never encounter anything in another that God has not or cannot locate in us.

As we are steeped in God's grace toward us, we will extend that graciousness to others. We who have received grace upon grace upon grace will willingly, delightedly extend that same grace to those who suffer. And we will know that when we find ourselves ungracious, judgmental, selfish or harsh in any way, that it is a reflection of our failure to know him in some way, or to love him in some way, rather than a problem with the person who sits before us. If I am impatient with you it is not because you are slow (though you may be), but rather because my heart is full of impatience. Every encounter with a lack of grace in our hearts will have the effect then of sending us back to our knees to know him yet even more.

Knowing him who is truth is what will keep us grounded in the truth. Sitting with suffering has great potential to keep us from truth. One of the ways this can happen is that we lose sight of God and who he is. We begin to believe that he is not good. We begin to believe that he is not love. You cannot sit with the sexual abuse of little girls, a baby dying from Aids, a battered wife, parents who are grieving over the loss of a child, the erosion of a life by cancer and a thousand other things without asking questions. If you do not ask questions, I doubt you have truly entered into the suffering of others. Suffering rarely makes sense. Oh, we work very hard to try to make sense out of it. We write books on why it happens and the good that comes out of it. I often think that the ability to most easily explain suffering is the clearest indication of never having suffered. However, if we look suffering full in the face and do not truly know Christ, it will end up in our slandering him, hating him. And so we must continually seek the one who is truth, reminding ourselves of his truth, when all the evidence screams to the contrary.

The second aspect of knowing him who is truth is that we are continually hindered from taking ourselves so seriously. We know the truth of whom we are, sinners saved by grace and who, like our Master, we have been called to serve. Our self-importance, our certainty that our way, our system is better, end up falling by the wayside, replaced instead by the desire to see ourselves in truth before him. It is only this that

will keep us from deceiving ourselves. Otherwise we will end up pushing on others, saying it is for their good, when in reality it is because of our discomfort with their pain. We will insist someone get their act together because they are hurting us or making us feel incompetent, all the while fooling ourselves into thinking it is for their benefit. It is only as we continually sit before him who is truth, that we will see ourselves in truth, we will call the things we see in ourselves by their right name and therefore be enabled to walk before others in truth.

Paul first gives us our grounding, "that I may know him". We would be foolish to attempt to bear the burdens of others without a vital relationship with Jesus. Paul then speaks of "the power of his resurrection". What does that have to do with the bearing of burdens? The resurrection is about life swallowing up death, it is the culmination of redemption.

Paul says in his letter to the Corinthians, "If Christ has not been raised then our preaching is in vain, your faith also is in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:14). If Christ is not raised your burden bearing is in vain, for what would be its purpose? You would relieve some suffering momentarily. More would immediately take its place. You would be offering healing to those who will only die. But if Christ be raised? Then there is hope. Then there is purpose. That is what Paul says at the end of the fifteenth chapter—"Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:58). Burden bearing is not in vain because of the resurrection. And that is not simply because of our eternal hope, though of course that is part of it. But keep in mind that the eternal in anything is the unseen, the spiritual. Whenever we encounter the suffering of another in a way that glorifies God, then that encounter belongs to the things that are eternal. No matter the outcome, when the simplest thing is done for the glory of God it belongs to the eternal. It is the spiritual that is deathless, that abides.

I believe however, that knowing the power of his resurrection goes much further than that. We are not simply to know and believe the *fact* of his resurrection, but to experience the

power of that resurrection in our own lives, with the result that it will then spill out into the lives of others. Ephesians 2:4-5—“But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made *us* alive together *with* Christ.” God brought life out of death, first in Christ, now in us. And the marvel does not stop there. Not only is God now doing in us what he did in the life of Christ, but he goes even further in that he will now use our lives as a vehicle for redemption in the lives of others. As we know him and walk with him, the power of his resurrection begins to make us look like him and touch others with his life. It is God transfiguring agony into redemption again and again.

How did he do that? First, he did it by immersing himself into our world, our experience. He became flesh. He became weak with the weak, tempted with the tempted, abused with the abused. He is God with us. He is the God who emptied himself and became as we are. You all have hopefully had the experience, in the midst of your own suffering, of having someone sit with you. Their *presence* is the gift, not necessarily their advice or suggestions. God with us is an extraordinary gift.

The second way he transfigured agony into redemption was by giving us a manifestation of who God is. Wherever he found himself, whatever he did, he revealed God to us. John 1 tells us that Jesus has explained God. Jesus said in John 17:6—“I have manifested your name to the people you gave me”. He was the Word made flesh. He was a flesh and blood demonstration of the faithfulness of God, the truth, the light, the unfailing love, the graciousness, the strength and the comfort of God. He continually brought life into the place of death by demonstrating who God is no matter what he encountered. And “whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same manner as he walked” (1 John 2:6). The power of the resurrection working through us in our relationships with others means that we continually manifest who God is by the way we speak, act and think. Do our lives continually explain or reveal the Father to others?

The next phrase in our verse is one that many of us fear—

“that I may share in his sufferings.” Again, let us reiterate that to do so without truly knowing him on a perpetual basis, and without knowing the power of his resurrection will lead to flight or a terrible despair. To do so, knowing him and the power of his resurrection, will be costly. Scripture says that he who builds a house or wages a war without counting the cost is foolish. To enter into the fellowship of his sufferings will cost. It cost the Son of God scars he will bear for eternity. We cannot expect then to not be impacted deeply. However, the suffering of Jesus also led to the glory of redemption, the glory of which is so great that eternity will not be long enough to sing his praises.

So let us look more closely at what it means to share in his sufferings and how that relates to bearing one another's burdens. The word share has to do with the condition of being mutually associated with someone; a companion; a partner; part of a pair of similar things used together. The concept reminds me of Jesus' words in Matthew 11—“Come to me . . . take *my* yoke upon you, and learn from me.” Keep in mind that our fellowship is with him first and foremost. Again, that takes us back to our grounding. The primary focus is our relationship to Christ not to the sufferer in front of us. We are joining with him first, not others.

Amy Carmichael expressed it this way:

At last a day came when the burden grew too heavy for me; and then it was as though the tamarind trees about the house were not tamarind, but olive, and under one of those trees our Lord Jesus knelt, and He knelt alone. And I knew that this was His burden, not mine. It was He who was asking me to share it with Him, not I who was asking Him to share it with me. After that there was only one thing to do: who that saw Him kneeling there could turn away and forget? Who could have done anything but go into the garden and kneel down beside Him under the olive trees?¹

We are entering into *his* sufferings. It is *his* burden we are called to share. The cost of doing so never outweighs the

privilege. Peter says, "to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of his glory, you may rejoice with exultation" (1 Peter 4:13).

There is a description of the sufferings of Christ in Isaiah 53. We are told that

he was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hid their faces, He was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows . . . He was wounded for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities . . . He was oppressed and he was afflicted" (Isaiah 53:3-5,7).

For us to enter into the fellowship of his sufferings is to enter into despising, abandonment, sorrow, grief, sin, oppression, violence and affliction. It is immediately clear when we hear this list, why we cannot enter in to these things without truly knowing him and the power of his resurrection. There is no other way we could bear up under such a burden.

Let us consider what we mean when we talk about bearing burdens and then move on to some more practical thoughts about how to do that. A burden is something that is carried. It suggests feeling the weight of something; it suggests fatigue or heaviness. To carry a weight requires effort, energy. To walk down the street free of weight is an entirely different experience than walking down the street shouldering a burden. I will arrive in an entirely different condition if I have borne a weight.

To bear something is to carry the weight of it or to sustain it, help hold it up. To bear something also carries the meaning to give birth to. If you are moving from one house to another and you come asking me to help bear the burden of your furniture that will mean I expend effort, feel fatigue, help shoulder the load. The result will be that your load is less heavy. You will expend less energy and feel less fatigue. It also means that together we will give birth to something—you will end up in a different place, a new place. What a picture that is of burden bearing!

In order for you and I to be effective burden bearers, burdens must be both known and borne. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). "Surely he has borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows" (Isaiah 53:4). What is required of us if we are to know another's burden? The first thing we must give is time. You cannot know another's experience without an investment of time. Time is precious commodity and most of us feel we have little enough to give anywhere. However, you cannot shoulder another's burden with them without a time commitment. I will have to be willing to give you some of my time if I am to walk with you and carry a load with you. It also means that the time I give to you is largely time to be used at *your* pace. If you are carrying a burden and I come alongside to help, I will be a hindrance if I am proceeding at twice the pace. How hard it is for us to allow another to determine our pace. How hard it is to wait while they struggle to articulate what the problem is. It is hard to wait for them to be able to hear things we think are important to say, and it is hard to manifest the patience and faithfulness of God when another's pace is about one-quarter of ours.

A second thing that is required if we are to know another's burden is listening. God has continually taken into account who we are as creatures. He remembers that we are dust. He listens to our prayers, spoken and unspoken. How often in wanting to help others with their burdens we fail to take who they are into account. How often we fail to listen. We speak before we hear, which Scripture says is foolish. We hear a little bit and assume we understand. The mighty God of the universe, the one who knows all things, became like us so that when he says, "I know," we can be certain that indeed he does. Yet how little we allow others the respect and space to teach us about themselves. When someone says they are terrified, depressed, crushed, or abused, how rarely we stop and say, "Teach me what that means. What is that like for you?" We assume we know, and often assume we know the remedy as well.

A third thing required if burdens are to be known is endurance. To give of one's time, to truly listen to others

means to wait, to last it out. It requires staying power. How easily we fall by the wayside. Someone takes longer to grieve than we expected. Someone still struggles with depression, anxiety or an addiction. We get impatient, we leave, and we fail to endure. We tend to focus solely on getting rid of the burden, yet oftentimes it would seem that God is in no hurry to eliminate the burden. Rather redemption seems to arise from seeking after him while bearing the burden. As we endure in our bearing of another's burdens, we have the privilege of manifesting who God is to them in the midst of their suffering, which, of course, is exactly what Jesus did. And a far greater task it is than simply pushing them to get better or than simply supplying them with some answer. Does our burden bearing explain the Father to others? Are we willing to endure long enough with them so as to demonstrate something of who God is?

Burdens must not only be known, they must be borne. I can know about your burden and maintain my distance. God did not do that. He knew and entered into. No ideal is of any practical value unless it is incarnated. What is required if we are to enter into the suffering of others? The first thing is compassion, to suffer with, to feel with. Have you let yourself be touched by the suffering of others? We run from pain. We fear it. We work hard to distance ourselves from it. Over and over again, people say to me—"I don't know how you do what you do. Better you than me." Now on one level that can certainly be true. Not all of us are called to counsel, or sit with others hour after hour as I do. However, all of us are called to share in his sufferings. All of us are called to look like Jesus in this world. What might that look like? It might mean suffering with someone who is dying, learning to sit with them and minister to them, even when you hate hospitals. It might mean suffering with someone who is grieving, learning to sit with sobbing and disturbing questions, when tears make you uncomfortable and you have no answers.

The art of bearing burdens means that the burden of another is carried as if it were my own. My responses are fitted to the other rather than myself. If we fail to do this then we end up orchestrating things to care for ourselves rather than

the sufferer. I leave the hospital because I can't stand it anymore, rather than because you are ready for me to go. I hand you a tissue because I want you to stop crying, rather than because you are through crying. I give you a verse, not because I have listened carefully and you have asked for a response, but because I want you to stop talking about things that make me uncomfortable. To bear another's burden is to suffer with *them*. It is to respond to their suffering as if it were our own.

Burden bearing also requires taking risks. If you are moving and I come to help with the furniture I run the risk of injury. If you are a survivor of sexual abuse and I enter into the torment of your memories I risk a loss of naiveté and ignorance that is comfortable for me. If you are grieving the loss of a child, I will be confronted with possibilities I would rather pretend do not exist. If you are dying of cancer and I sit with you, I must face my own mortality and the transitory nature of life in this world.

"And behold a leper came to him, and knelt before him saying, 'Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean' (Matthew 8:2). And moved with compassion, he stretched out his hand and touched him." Jesus ran the risk of contamination, the risk of being affected by the sickness of another. Again, remember that the one we follow entered into our suffering in such a way that he carries scars he will bear for all eternity. If you allow yourself to be touched by the suffering of others, it will leave an imprint on your life. But again, keep in mind that it is by way of the scars, by way of the cross that our healing and redemption come.

Lastly, if burdens are to be borne, then discipline is required. If you are going to have what Oswald Chambers calls "staying power in the alarm moments of other lives,"² then discipline will be necessary. The discipline of prayer, of listening to God, is required or your perspective will be quickly skewed. A nature disciplined and chastened by self-knowledge is necessary or you will end up serving your own ends or serving with arrogance. The discipline of being steadfast must be present or you will fold when the forces of hell rise up in another's life to thwart the work of Christ. The discipline of a

love that endures all things is vital or you will collapse under criticism and rejection from those you have served. The discipline to run the race with endurance, with eyes fixed on Jesus, will be the only thing to keep you from growing weary and faint in your heart.

In closing, I want to briefly consider the person of the burden bearer. Oswald Chambers said this: "The sheep are many and the shepherds few, for the fatigue is staggering, the heights are giddy and the sights awful."³ How is one to survive such conditions? We cannot sit with suffering and evil in the lives of others without being devastated, unless we find ways to protect ourselves. You cannot enter into such things as depression, sexual abuse, rage, death, hopelessness, grief and fear without precautions. Such things are of the nature of death and you will be swallowed up by that death or end up pretending it does not exist unless you are in fighting trim. Those things which we encounter as we enter the suffering of others are the antithesis of who God is. He is light, truth, beauty, order, hope and love. If we are not careful, we will fail to nurture the life of God in us.

Earlier we said that our grounding, our foundation, is in knowing him. And of course, that is our refuge first and foremost. We must know him and the power of his resurrection for that is what redeems and transforms us. It is in knowing him and the power of his resurrection that enables us to beget after his likeness, so that we reveal him to others. Two of the ways that we know him are through prayer and the Word. You cannot enter into the suffering of others, the fellowship of *his* sufferings, without constant feeding on the Word and without watchful prayer. The perfect, sinless Lamb of God continually went apart to pray. How much more necessary for us. If prayer and Scripture are not ever-present realities in our lives, what began as life producing or redemptive, will become of the nature of death.

However, I believe that in order to be an effective burden bearer who does not burn out, we also need other clear and practical ways to find sustenance and nurture. In dealing with evil and suffering, we must also have times of joy and beauty

and laughter. Each of us may do that a little differently, but we all must find ways to do so. I have found three things that nurture me as I learn more and more what it means to know the fellowship of his sufferings. When I have listened to evil and ugliness for several hours, a sunset or a hike in the woods does amazing things. When chaos, past and present, has been spilled out in my office, Bach reminds me there is order. And when a terrible sense of isolation sets in, joyful companionship, laughter and the prayers of God's people are, for me, incredibly healing. Find those things that nurture you, that remind you that though we live in a broken, evil and chaotic world, we also live in a world of beauty and order that reflects to us the nature of the God we serve.

To know him and the power of his resurrection means you will be transformed so that you can redemptively enter into the fellowship of his sufferings. Knowing him will result in a life that makes the character of God clearer to others. It also means that you will bear the griefs of others and carry their sorrows. It means you will confront the inevitableness of evil and peril in this world. Very few of us will face these facts, for we prefer our fictions. But Christ, who is truth, teaches us to look things full in the face. As we enter into the sufferings of others, as we bend to bear their burdens with him and with them, may we be grounded in knowing him and the power of his resurrection. May we maintain our integrity as believers in a dark world, and manifest the life of Jesus while we are here among the sons of men—knowing this world will never be what it ought to be, until the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and Christ.

Author

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Notes

1. Amy Carmichael, *Gold Cord* (Fort Washington, Pennsylvania: Christian Literature Crusade, 1960), 31.
2. Oswald Chambers, *Christian Disciplines, Volume 1* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Discovery House Publishers, 2000), 276.
3. Oswald Chambers, *Christian Disciplines, Volume 1*, 275.