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TSF BULLETIN

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 1982

TSF BULLETIN VOL. 5 No. 3

(Formerly *TSF News & Reviews*)
 Published by Theological Students
 Fellowship, 233 Langdon, Madison WI
 53703. ISSN No. 0272-3913

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FOUNDATIONS

(Doing theology on the basics of classical faith)

PARTICIPATING IN THE SUFFERINGS OF GOD

By Patty Taylor, student at Fuller Theological Seminary.

Introduction

The mysteries and meaning of suffering cannot be discussed simply as an academic topic. Theology needs to provide a framework for knowledge and for living. My work here on Bonhoeffer's concept of "Participating in the Sufferings of God" is not so much a theological exercise as it is an attempt to examine the value of this concept for life and ministry.

Bonhoeffer's biographer, Eberhard Bethge, remembers him in his early years of teaching youthful catechism classes saying that "the hardest theological pronouncements of Barth were worth nothing if they could not be explained *in toto* to these Grunewald children" (Bethge, p. 65). This article is an attempt to take one theological theme from Bonhoeffer and explain it to myself and my contemporaries.

We will look first at the scriptural basis for the concept; second, we will observe its development in the theology of Bonhoeffer; third, we will discover how he lived out this theme on a personal level; and fourth, we will consider how all of this can have significance in the lives of believers in contemporary America.

Scriptural Basis

As is true with most of Bonhoeffer's theological themes, "participating in the sufferings of God" has strong New Testament foundations. Paul refers to it in at least three letters:

For just as *the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance*, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ. (2 Cor. 1:5)

... we are afflicted in every way but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always *carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus*, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. (2 Cor. 4:8-10)

But even if *I am being poured out as a drink offering* upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I rejoice and share my joy with you all. (Phil. 2:17)

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake and *in my flesh I do my share* on behalf of His body (which is the church) *in filling up that which is lacking in Christ's afflictions*. (Col. 1:24)

Of these passages, Bonhoeffer says: "Although Christ has fulfilled all the vicarious sufferings necessary for our redemption, *his suffering on earth is not finished yet. He has, in his grace, left a residue . . . of suffering for his Church to fulfill in the interval before his Second Coming.* . . . The Body of Christ has its own allotted portion of suffering. . . . Blessed is he whom God deems worthy to suffer for the Body of Christ. Such suffering is joy indeed" (CD, pp. 273, 274; italics are mine throughout article unless otherwise noted). Note that Bonhoeffer is careful to separate Christ's vicarious atonement on the cross from the suffering of the church.

As early as 1934, Bonhoeffer had written a sermon on 2

Cor. 12:9, from which are taken the following lines: "Why is suffering holy? Because *God suffers in the world through men.* . . . *Human suffering and weakness is sharing in God's own suffering* and weakness in the world. . . . Our God is a suffering God. Suffering forms man into the image of God. The suffering man is in the likeness of God" (GS, p. 182).

In these few passages, we have not exhausted the scriptural basis for Bonhoeffer's writing on the subject of "participating in the sufferings of God." As we see it developed in his theology, we will note an even broader range of Scripture interpretations from the Gospels as well as from the Epistles.

The Theme in Bonhoeffer's Theology

Christian theology in its classical phase would have shrunk from all talk about "the sufferings of God." Suffering meant being acted upon by exterior forces outside one's control and it was difficult to see how one could reconcile belief in God's omnipotence and self-sufficiency with talk about his "suffering." But there was the problem of the crucifixion which necessitated Christians saying that in some sense God suffered. Eastern orthodox theology has always held that suffering in the sense of sacrificial self-giving love is of the essence of God. God empties himself in the creation, in Incarnation and in re-creation (redemption). It seems that *Bonhoeffer was moving towards a fresh expression of this belief in his presentation of the Christian life as one of self-giving love* in the real (not idealized or romanticized) world. (Tinsley, p. 88)

Before we look more closely at the idea of *participating* in the sufferings of God in Jesus Christ, let us look at Bonhoeffer's *conception* of those sufferings. The evangelical church in America today may be guilty of regarding the sufferings of Christ too lightly. Because our churches have empty crosses, our focus is not on the suffering of Christ, but on his exaltation. Bonhoeffer does us a great service in helping us see the awful scope of our Lord's suffering in his life as well as his death on the cross.

In his Christology lectures at the University of Berlin in 1933, Bonhoeffer spoke of Jesus Christ as the "Humiliated One and the Exalted One." "In humiliation and in exaltation, Jesus remains wholly man and wholly God. *The statement, 'This is God,' must be made in exactly the same way about the humiliated one as about the exalted one.*" "The God-Man in history is always and already the humiliated God-Man from the manger to the cross" (CC, pp. 106, 107). He goes on to describe this humiliation in terms of Paul's phrase in Romans 8:3, "sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh."

In the humiliation, Christ, of his own free will, enters the world of sin and death. He enters it in such a way as to hide himself in it in weakness and not to be recognized as

TSF BULLETIN (ISSN #0272-3913, formerly *TSF News & Reviews*) is published bimonthly during the academic year (September-June). A regular subscription costs \$10.00 per year (\$8/yr. students), and includes in addition three issues of *Themelios*, the theological journal of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students. A subscription to *TSF Bulletin* without *Themelios* costs \$6.50 per year. Bulk subscription rates are available on request.

TSF Bulletin is published by Theological Students Fellowship, 233 Langdon, Madison, WI 53703. Application to mail at second-class postage rates is pending at Madison, WI.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to TSF Subscriptions, 233 Langdon, Madison, WI 53703.

And yet, we can feel the depth of his suffering in his powerful poem "Who Am I?," part of which reads:

Am I then really all that which other men tell of?
Or am I only what I know of myself,
restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,
struggling for breath, as though hands were compressing
my throat,
yearning for colours, for flowers, for the voices of birds,
thirsting for words of kindness, for neighbourliness,
trembling with anger at despotisms and petty humiliation,
tossing in expectation of great events,
powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance,
weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,
faint, and ready to say farewell to it all?

(LPP, p. 348)

Before he was imprisoned, "the clearest, sharpest picture" in Bonhoeffer's life "comes from [his] exuberant sense of freedom, the incredible agility and independence with which he moved, thought and lived" (Kuhns, p. 270). His greatest suffering was in the loss of that freedom. He expresses the loss vividly in his poem, "Stations on the Road to Freedom" (LPP, pp. 370-71).

In a letter to Bethge on Feb. 1, 1944, Bonhoeffer describes himself in the role of neighbor and brother to others who were suffering after a series of heavy bombing raids on Berlin: "You may know that the last few nights have been bad, especially the night of 30 January. Those who had been bombed out came to me the next morning for a bit of comfort. But I'm afraid I'm bad at comforting; I can listen all right, but I can hardly ever find anything to say. . . . It seems to me more important actually to *share* someone's distress than to use smooth words about it" (LPP, p. 203).

In a very unselfconscious way, it seems, Bonhoeffer lived out his own words, "that new nature we now enjoy means that we too must bear the sins and sorrows of others" (CD, pp. 341-42).

On August 21, 1944, in one of his last letters to Bethge, Bonhoeffer writes a passage closely resembling his last known words (cf. Bethge, p. 830n):

The key to everything is the 'in him.' All that we may rightly expect from God, and ask him for, is to be found in Jesus Christ. . . . If we are to learn what God promises, and what he fulfills, we must persevere in quiet meditation on the life, sayings, deeds, sufferings, and death of Jesus. It is certain that we may always live close to God and in the light of his presence, and that such living is an entirely new life for us; that nothing is then impossible for us, because all things are possible with God; that no earthly power can touch us without his will, and that danger and distress can only drive us closer to him. It is certain that we can claim nothing for ourselves, and may yet pray for everything; it is certain that our joy is hidden in suffering and our life in death. (LPP, p. 391)

Contribution to the Church Today

As a community of believers entering the 1980's in America, we can be grateful to Dietrich Bonhoeffer for several important insights:

1. He reminds us that Christ continues to suffer in the world wherever any human being suffers. "Lord, when did we see You hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not take care of You?" Then He will answer them, saying, "Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me" (Matt. 25:44, 45).

2. He reminds us that as His body we share in that suffering. "If children, [we are] heirs also, fellow heirs with Christ, *if indeed we suffer with him* in order that we may also be glorified with him" (Rom. 8:17). "For you have been called for this purpose since Christ also suffered for you, *leaving you an example for you to follow in his steps*" (1 Pet. 2:21).

3. He reminds us of our responsibility to bear one another's burdens as well as our own. "Bear one another's burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ. For each one shall bear his own load" (Gal. 6:2, 5).

4. He reminds us that we must not judge another's discipleship. "Every Christian has his *own* cross waiting for him. . . . Each must endure his allotted share of suffering and rejection. But each has a different share. . . . It is one and the same cross in every case" (CD, pp. 98, 99). "Peter therefore seeing him said to Jesus, 'Lord, and what about this man?' Jesus said to him, 'If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow Me!'" (John 21:21, 22).

5. He contributes new ways of thinking about "being in Christ" as a community. "This 'holy worldliness' will necessitate a great amount of involvement, reflection, and confession. Certainly it will mean different things to different people, and the comparing of 'notes' will be of the utmost importance as each Christian attempts to determine the degree to which his own life must be aesthetic or intellectual, simple or complex, meditative or occupied. Perhaps a new concept of 'Christ existing as the church' will emerge out of just this 'comparing of notes'" (Phillips, pp. 243-44).

Let us remember the words of this most wise and human of men:

One must completely abandon any attempt to make something of oneself, whether it be a saint, or a converted sinner, or a churchman, . . . a righteous man or an unrighteous one, a sick man or a healthy one. By this-worldliness I mean living unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes and failure, experiences and perplexities. In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously, not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world — watching with Christ in Gethsemane. . . . How can success make us arrogant, or failure lead us astray when we share in God's sufferings through a life of this kind? (LPP, 369-70)

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