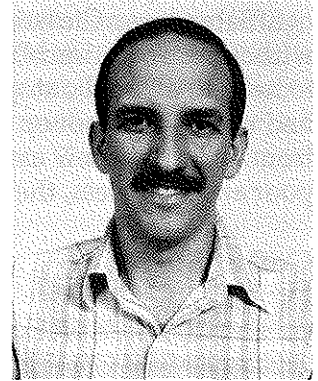


# Suffering and Leadership

Mark D. Baker



**D**riving down the hill from my house in Tegucigalpa, as an evening rain began, I noticed a common sight. Someone was walking along the road carrying a bundle. Those of us with a lot more money speed along in cars; others with a little more money bounce by on buses. Occasionally I like to surprise the walkers by offering a ride. Usually they say, "*Voy aqui no mas*" (I'm just going up here a little ways), but that can mean half a mile or more.

When I stopped I found that the bundle was a baby, sick for five days with diarrhea; the mother had no money and was walking four miles to the hospital. (The bus cost 20 cents.) I asked her what happens at the hospital if you arrive without the 50-cent fee. She said they would let her see a doctor but would not give any medicine. In a tone of resignation the mother said she would just have to figure out later how to get the medicine.

By now it was pouring. I was glad I could give her the ride and a few dollars for the hospital, medicine, bus ride home and supper. But what about tomorrow with nothing changed? I could try to find and help her, but she and her baby were two of thousands. I drove away from the hospital sighing.

In Honduras, where I have lived for twelve years, suffering is a way of life. I daily see blind or lame beggars. Within recent weeks three different friends encountered the problem of not having money to buy basic medicine doctors had prescribed. I visited a refugee camp and heard the experiences of El Salvadoran Christians who had seen family and friends, whole villages, without provocation brutally slaughtered by soldiers. I tried unsuccessfully to help an alcoholic stop drinking. A friend arrived at our door because he had no food or money to provide for his family. Suffering here is not hid from everyday view as in the United States where the aged and dying, the poor and homeless, the socially "abnormal," are largely out of sight.

### **God of Suffering**

During those weeks I read *God and Human Suffering: An Exercise in the Theology of the Cross* by Douglas John Hall.<sup>1</sup> He deals with the age-old question: "If God is a God of love, and at the same time all-powerful, why does he allow so much suffering in the world?" Hall does not offer one of the theoretical answers but attacks the presupposition that assumes God could simply eliminate suffering if he wanted to. The very way a question is posed can obscure the issue. We must question the power assumption itself. "The Judeo-Christian tradition does not deny the power of God, but neither does it magnify this attribute; moreover, and more to the point, it does not abstract the divine power from the divine-human relationship" (p. 97).

Through power God could eliminate suffering only by eliminating human freedom, or by killing us all. Power cannot solve all human problems. Parents cannot force their children to give up drugs or alcohol. Governments use power to enforce laws, yet people continue to break them. But that does not mean God does not address the problem. Hall's basic aim is to show that "the response to human suffering coming out of the tradition of Jerusalem is nothing less than the suffering of God" (p. 16).

Hall affirms two realities: suffering is real, the lot of "fallen" humanity; suffering is not the last word about the human condition and therefore not our ultimate preoccupation. Christians in the North—where society believes

in progress, emphasizes positive thinking and hides as much suffering as possible—need the first message. People in the South, however, need to know that the reality of their suffering is met by an even greater reality: The conquest of suffering by the God of suffering love evidenced in the cross. Jesus' life and death on the cross brings a new perspective on our suffering; God is with us, Emmanuel. "The cross of Jesus Christ is after all not a theological statement—not a soteriology! It is an event, a deed, an enactment" (p. 107). The conquest is not one of external overwhelming power but one of suffering love from within. Suffering is where God and all human beings meet.

### **God of Power?**

Hall does not ask us to disregard the power of God, but rather to transform our way of thinking about it to understand the biblical view: The power of love "made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). Since Constantine our culture has influenced our thinking about God and power. "The language of our religion has been so consistently informed by the spirit of might, winning, success and related concepts that it is difficult to use any of the scriptural nomenclature of glory and triumph without conjuring up the whole ideology of empire (p. 106).

Our view of God and power has implications beyond the topic of suffering. Over the centuries the church has viewed God more like the powerful kings of its own society than the paradoxical triumphant Lion of Judah represented as the Lamb with marks of death (Rev 5). Latin America has not been an exception. The majesty of Spanish colonial rule easily spilled over into the church.

Hall writes as a North American to North Americans; I read his book as a North American living in Central America. Here other factors in the culture prevent seeing God's power through the lens of the cross. Authoritarianism is a way of life on all levels. An older child bosses a younger; the father bosses the mother. In the street the soldier exerts power; in turn he submits to the officer above him. In the classroom the teacher is

king; students cannot even question the teacher's word. Commonly this attitude prevails in the church where the pastor is king. So it is natural for people to look up to God as an authoritarian figure.

Thinking of God as a father figure complicates things. In this machoistic society many men desire to demonstrate their manliness by having children, but not necessarily by caring for them. Men do not want to appear weak and so present themselves as strong and stern. Often, then, saying to Hondurans that God is a father presents him as someone who likely abandoned them when they were young; or if he is still at home, someone who shows strength by making demands upon their mother.

Seeing God through the lens of the cross, however, gives a radically different concept of power. God, in Jesus, was willing to be seen weak, naked and dying. Jesus portrays a suffering love that clashes with machoism.

Picturing God as distant, stern and authoritarian leads to a "God of the big unkindly eye," an angry figure watching our every move, ready to punish us. Veteran missionary and theologian John Mackay observed that the Jesus brought to Latin America by the Spanish did not offer a "kindly eye" to balance the unkindly eye of this God figure<sup>2</sup>. Rather they knew only Jesus the baby and a dead figure still on the cross. It was the compassionate Mary to whom people could relate and share their concerns without fear. Protestants brought Jesus' life of love and compassion on earth; they emphasized the reality of his living presence today. This was an improvement over the Christ of the conquistadores. But it leaves an unbiblical dichotomy between a kindly Jesus and an authoritarian God.

The Honduran who is converted and reconciled to God does not necessarily have a biblical view of God. She may still experience the God of the big unkindly eye, only now through Jesus she is on his good side. Although she no longer fears ultimate punishment, her Christian actions are likely to be motivated by fear, or at least pressure to serve this God.

By contrast, if a person's conversion includes a realization that God the Father has a kindly eye, actions then flow out of gratitude to this God of love. What a difference it would make in the churches if people could realize that God is not really a big unkindly eye. On the cross Jesus reveals a God who is willing to become one with us—fully human—to know our suffering.

### **Christian Suffering**

The New Testament contains passages that talk about Christians suffering (Rom 5:1-5, 8:17; Phil 3:10; 1 Pet 4). In the past I have felt uncomfortable about these verses as I read them in a comfortable context. Should I go out and find a way to suffer? Hall confirmed my thoughts that simply as humans we are suffering creatures. The suffering of the Messiah was not only physical; Jesus suffered loneliness, desertion by his closest friends, rejection by family, peers, society. "The object, surely, is not to create more suffering, a special sort of religious suffering which can be recounted afterward. . .but to identify oneself with the suffering that is already there in one's world, to let oneself be led by the love of Christ into solidarity with those who suffer" (p. 145). Discipleship sacrifices the little defenses and stratagems by which we shield ourselves from life.

I have asked myself what that means for me in Honduras as a person who does not suffer hunger and lack of medicine. What does it mean to live in solidarity with these suffering people? I have experienced the heat, noise and dust of barrio life; the cramped conditions of slow public transportation; the inconveniences of strikes with milk, gas and flour shortages. But I have not really suffered with the Hondurans; I have a blue U.S. passport and know I can leave. I can take a taxi for less than a dollar. We did not live in a barrio because we had to; after seven months we left.

Instead of artificially attempting to suffer like the people (however important), acknowledging my own suffering has been a place to start suffering with them. If "the only answer that we ourselves know and that we are obliged and glad to share with others, is the ongoing presence of the crucified one" (p. 141), then I need to have experienced that presence in my

own sufferings of misunderstanding, fear of rejection, failure.

As an activist I will continue to try to "fix" other people's problems—lack of medicine or shoes or food. But now I have found another way to begin to suffer with others: Slow down a little, try to feel a person's pain rather than taking immediate action that can be a way of avoiding it.

Here in Honduras I have put my time, energy and money into a number of good projects, some not specifically Christian. Many non-Christians have done the same or better. Suffering with and bringing the Answerer, Jesus Christ, into the situation is uniquely Christian. Suffering with the people leads to actions, but neither the action nor a doctrinal package about suffering is the answer. The only answer is "the ongoing presence of the crucified one." □

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Douglas John Hall, *God and Human Suffering: An Exercise in the Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986).

<sup>2</sup> John A. Mackay, *The Other Spanish Christ* (New York: Macmillan, 1933).

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### Published Semiannually by

ASSOCIATES IN CHRISTIAN SERVICE

Barnstead, NH 03218

*Volume IV, Number 1*

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