

THEOLOGICAL TEACHINGS ABOUT DISABILITY: IS GOD RESPONSIBLE?

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that to know that God is or is not responsible for someone's suffering is a special kind of knowledge, namely first-person knowledge. First, two examples are discussed: Maggie who feels it to be oppressive that others say that God is responsible for her disability; and Robert who, contrary to his rational beliefs, experiences God behind the crisis in his life. The shift of Paul from praying to remove the thorn in his flesh to accepting it, then, shows that both Maggie and Robert are within the bounds of paradigmatic Christian language. After discussing some inadequate theological ways of speaking about being in God's hands, it will be concluded that knowing about God's responsibility for someone's suffering is first-person knowledge, comparable to our language about feeling pain. Theological teachings about disability – either claiming God is responsible or not – therefore are both pastorally inadequate and conceptually confused.

1. Introduction

Theological teachings about disability are often very controversial. Either you hurt someone suffering from disability by connecting her disability to God; or you seem to diminish God's sovereignty by denying God's responsibility in this case. In this article we will be looking for a way out, starting by two practical examples: Maggie who lives with a disability and Robert who did go through a crisis – both respond to their suffering very differently.

2. Is God responsible for Maggie's disability?

"I often get comments about the reasons for my disability. Some of them say sin is the cause. Or they say God has given me this disability because He wants me to carry it with great courage," so we hear a certain Maggie from Polokwane, South Africa, say in a flyer titled 'Are people with disabilities at home in the church?' (CLF, no date). Maggie's remarks represent a fairly common experience for people with disabilities in the church. Whether or not it is said explicitly, people in the church want to see God in everything, so He must be behind disabilities as well somehow. Is God responsible?

This question does not just concern people with disabilities: people who are bereaved or who are involved in an accident, often hear their pastor tell them that what happened, is God's will. The flyer quoted here suggests that this makes people less at home in the church. Disabled people, bereaved people, or people suffering otherwise, often resist this explanation. They would rather have their pastor tell them that God is not responsible for their misfortune, that God is on their side, against the evil that happened to them.

In the flyer from which Maggie's quote is taken, the quote is headed "Some teachings have an oppressive effect on people with disabilities". Does that mean that it is wrong to hold God responsible? Did God give Maggie her disability, or should the teachings of the church exonerate God? If it is oppressive to say that someone's disability is either caused by sin, or an opportunity for

courage, as Maggie has been told as well, does that imply that we should tell people with disabilities that it is not God who has given them their disability, that God is not responsible? What is the problem with telling Maggie that God has given her this disability?

In this paper I will argue that the problem is to make general claims about God's responsibility at all: we should neither say that God is responsible for Maggie's disability, nor should we deny it. A pastor should neither tell Maggie that her disability is God's will, nor should he deny that God is responsible for this disability. I will argue that it is pastorally wrong to say that God is or is not responsible for someone else's disability: the pastor should neither force this conception of one's condition upon someone, nor should the pastor block the congregant to discover that God is behind his disability. It will make people less at home in the church if God is presented as an opponent who inflicted this disability upon someone. But it will equally make people less at home in the church if the church does not allow to see God's will in their condition. There should be space in the church for people who do connect their suffering to God as well. Denying people space in either way is wrong pastorally – the church should be a home for all kinds of people – but, beyond that, I will argue that on a deeper level it is also conceptually wrong to claim that God has given Maggie her disability or not. It is using religious language – in this case: the concept of God – outside of the context in which it has its sense. Both people who told Maggie that her disability was caused by sin, or an opportunity of courage, and those who would deny that God is responsible, were pastorally insensitive, but, on top of that, they were conceptually confused as well, as I will try to show in the course of this paper.

To their defence, the people I am criticizing here, could refer to different texts from the Bible. For example, the story in the Gospel of John 9:1-12 about Jesus healing a man born blind. Jesus and his disciples encounter a man blind from birth, and the disciples ask Jesus: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" This suggests that the disciples presupposed that there was a connection, and most likely a causal connection, between blindness and sin. Jesus denies this connection, at least in this specific case: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned." And Jesus offers an alternative perspective: "This happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life", presumably by the healing that Jesus continues to conduct.

Different readings of this story are possible: does Jesus deny the connection between sin and disability that his disciples presume, in general, or just in this specific case? On the one hand, the telling of this story at all suggests a broader application, however, on the other hand, the alternative perspective of immediate healing by Jesus in his human form is not available for Maggie and other people living with disabilities today. To tell Maggie that God has given her this disability so she can carry it with great courage, may be an application of Jesus' mentioning of displaying the work of God, but there is a big difference with how this works in the story as it is in the Gospel. The case of the blind man is so particular, that it is difficult to draw consequences from it. If we nonetheless try to do so the story can be taken in many different ways. Jesus' initial denial of a connection between sin and blindness may serve as support for denying that God is responsible for, for example, Maggie's disability. However, Jesus' alternative perspective in the case of the blind born man, still ascribes God responsibility for his blindness: "so that the work of God might be displayed."

The particular nature of a story like that of John 9 makes it difficult to deduct either the statement that God is responsible for Maggie's disability, or that He is not responsible.

3. Is God responsible for Robert's crisis?

To say that God is not responsible for Maggie's disability seems to be the obvious alternative if one wants to avoid "teachings [which] have an oppressive effect on people with disabilities" as it is

phrased in the flyer quoted above. Practical theologian Leonard M. Hummel (2003:93), from whose study I will take the second example to discuss in this paper, refers to this alternative teaching that God is not responsible as the "seminary-informed theology of suffering." In most seminaries, at least from mainline denominations, pastors are more often instructed to tell their congregants that God is not responsible for their suffering, in order to avoid the oppression referred to in the flyer. Pastors are warned not to draw immediate connections between misfortune and sin. The Lutheran pastor Robert, whom Hummel quotes, calls this "poor theology". That is what he has been taught to think in seminary, and that is what he still thinks intellectually, however, during a personal crisis he felt very differently. I think this contrast can throw light on the issue of whether to ascribe responsibility to God for disabilities as well.

At some point in time, the American pastor Robert co-signed a loan for a young acquaintance to start a business (Hummel 2003:64f). The business went down, the acquaintance was nowhere to be found and Robert found himself left with an overwhelming financial debt. This crisis resulted in experiences contrary to what he had always taught and preached himself about suffering and sin:

I had thoughts that God was really saying to me, 'You blew it here, you know' even if that's not part of my theology. I hear people saying, 'What did I do wrong that I got sick and everything else?' And I'm always telling them, 'God doesn't work that way. You didn't do something wrong.' But I have to admit when I was in the financial part of it [his difficulties], I did look at it that way (quoted in Hummel 2003:65).

He continues:

I really did examine my life and said, 'What all went wrong? There must be some things that I've done or didn't do that this is related to.' Even though I think that's poor theology. Because I yelled at somebody today or didn't read my Bible or whatever – I coveted my next-door neighbor's new car – God doesn't say, 'Okay, you're going to have economic disaster this week and cancer next week.' But during the economic disaster, that's exactly what I wondered, if God had done just that (quoted in Hummel 2003:93).

Interpreting this, Hummel (2003:154) concludes: "It is noteworthy that one clergy person, Robert, held beliefs about the wrath of God that 'even though ... not a part of [his] theology,' could not be dispelled by that theology."

How are we to interpret this? We could say that it was simply weakness on Robert's side to succumb to this 'poor theology'. However, would this really do justice to his experience? It is not like he had forgotten his 'seminary informed theology of suffering.' It would not have made any difference if anyone at the time had lectured him on that, since he himself was very aware of it. Intellectually, all the time, he did still hold on to the idea that God does not hand out suffering as punishment for mistakes, however, he found himself unable to resist looking at his situation like that. It would have been pastorally insensitive to have told Robert that he should not look at his life like that, just as much as it was pastorally insensitive of people to tell Maggie that her disability was caused by sin. These approaches are denying the real-life experiences of people in the church, thereby excluding them from feeling at home in the church.

So, both connecting suffering and sin, as in the case of Maggie, and not connecting suffering and sin, as in the case of Robert, can be pastorally wrong. It is pastorally advisable to leave it to the congregant him- or herself to personally judge whether he or she sees a connection between his or her suffering and sin. From the fact that it is wrong and oppressive teaching to say that difficult conditions are caused by sin, it does not follow that it is the correct teaching to deny the same. Both

statements are, first, pastorally inadequate, but beyond that, conceptually confused as well. The issue is not whether it is true or not that God is responsible, but it is insensitive to say so, either way. It does not fit the conceptual context in which our statements about God have their sense. The issue are not the personal sensitivities and weaknesses of people like Maggie and Robert, but the way religious language is used in general. This is supported by the fact that we can identify both Maggie's and Robert's position right next to each other in the Bible, the paradigm for our religious language.

4. Paul's shift concerning the thorn in his flesh

In 2 Corinthians Paul mentions that a messenger of Satan has given him a "thorn in my flesh" (12:7). He does not explain what he means by that, but he tells us that he has pleaded three times with the Lord to take it away. But the Lord told him "My grace is sufficient for you," and now Paul boasts in his weakness. Paul, first, fights to get rid of his weakness, but, then, a change happens and he accepts it, he even boasts in it. We would not have done justice to the praying Paul, if we would have preached to him that his thorn is God's will. We fail to do justice to the later Paul, if we preach to him that his thorn is not God's responsibility. Both preachings are insensitive towards his feelings, and, beyond that, they fail to do justice to the characteristic religious struggle which is portrayed in this passage.

How we can account for the shift between wanting to get rid of something, and accepting it? Is it a decision, and therefore, someone's personal responsibility? Or is it more like a discovery: discovering what God tells you, as in the case of Paul, or discovering something about yourself? And would this make the shift between fighting and accepting, less a personal responsibility? In the flyer it is suggested that Maggie does not experience a connection between her disability and sin. Is this a discovery of a fact which contradicts what people told her, or is it her decision not to look at her disability like that? Robert did experience a connection between his financial suffering and a mistake he made. Is this a discovery of a fact which contradicts what he has been taught in seminary and what he still holds intellectually, or is it a decision of his heart to feel differently?

In these kind of statements it is hard to distinguish between decision and discovery. The situation has many similarities with what philosopher Peter Winch describes when he talks about someone who considers both the story of Genesis and the theories of Darwin: is there a contradiction between the two, or not?

What a man finds it possible or impossible to say, the difficulty or ease with which he can combine diverse ideas, are important indications of the kind of man he is. And in clarifying his own mind about what he can and can't accept, a man is making important discoveries about himself: discoveries that may be barely distinguishable from decisions about what manner of man he wants to be. All these issues are involved in the examination of what seem to be deep contradictions in one's thought. It is not just a mechanical exercise in which the work has, as it were, already been done in a hidden realm by logic and simply needs to be revealed to view. (Winch 1987:138)

Likewise, in this kind of knowledge it is hard to distinguish between decision and discovery. It is personal, but not a matter of preference, you cannot choose to accept this kind of knowledge at will.

It is a discovery, but no one else could make the discovery for you, or check whether it is true afterwards.

Since seeing a connection between suffering and sin is what is most often contradicted in seminary-informed theology like expressed in the flyer quoted above, I will focus here on what is involved in reaching just that position as Paul does in the passage from 2 Corinthians. Paul finds himself first in the situation of Maggie: he prays to God to be healed, so he assumes that God is not the one responsible for his thorn in the flesh, and it would have been insensitive to have told him that God himself gave him this thorn for a reason. Later on, Paul finds himself in the situation of Robert: his theology has not changed, but now he sees his thorn in the flesh as given by God for a reason and purpose. Now, it would be insensitive to force on Paul the seminary-inspired theology of suffering that God has nothing to do with his thorn in the flesh. So we are talking here about the same thorn in the flesh, but first it is pastorally insensitive to say that God is responsible, whereas later, it is pastorally inadequate to deny that connection. How do we move from one to the other? What is involved in reaching the point of seeing a connection between suffering and sin, the point of saying of something bad that 'It is God's will' and God's responsibility?

The two interrelated questions that I will focus on here are: what kind of knowledge it is to say that God is or is not responsible for suffering, and, is there a reason why it would not just be pastorally insensitive to express this kind of knowledge to a congregant, but also conceptually inadequate?

5. What is it to know we are in God's hands?

Paul says of the thorn in his flesh that it is "a messenger of Satan, to torment me," but after three prayers he learns to accept it, and now even boasts in it. It remains a weakness and hardship, but he now sees the will of God in it as well. Someone might learn to see his or her disability as something within the will of God, like Robert learned to see his financial disaster as the will of God, but I would like to add two more examples.

The German theologian Bonhoeffer, during the second World-war, took part in an assassination attempt at tyrant Hitler. It failed and he ended up in prison on death row. Earlier on he had had the opportunity to flee Germany, but he decided to stay. And now from prison, awaiting his death, he writes: "I must be able to know for certain that I am in God's hands, not in men's. Then everything becomes easy, even the severest privation" (1954). He wants to know that it is God's will that he is about to be executed. He would still be in prison, but, he says, then everything becomes easy. Can knowledge do that? What kind of a knowledge is that? What makes it so hard to attain?

In Calvin's description of vocation we see a similar kind of knowledge, in everybody's ordinary life. Every job or vocation has its downsides, but Calvin (1960:725) writes:

Each man will bear and swallow the discomforts, vexations, weariness, and anxieties in his way of life, when he has been persuaded that the burden was laid upon him by God. From this will arise also a singular consolation: that no task will be so sordid and base, provided you obey your calling in it, that it will not shine and be reckoned very precious in God's sight.

If someone is persuaded that God gave him his task, then however dreadful it is, it will shine. To know 'it is God's will', is a strange kind of knowledge. It is a kind of knowledge that lets you boast in

weakness and hardship, that makes everything easy, and that brings a singular consolation. What kind of knowledge is this, that brings people to say, even of bad things, that it is God's will?

In line with the seminary-informed theology of suffering mentioned above some theologians argue that we should never say of something bad that it is God's will. Some seventy years ago the American pastor Weatherhead (2011) did so in an acclaimed book with sermons on the will of God. He phrases as an objection to his position: "People get a lot of comfort from supposing that their tragedies are the will of God. [...] Your view is robbing men of comfort. When they feel a thing is the will of God, they can bear it with equanimity," but he responds: "There is never any final comfort in a lie." Is it a lie to see God's will in something bad?

The Canadian theologian Clark H. Pinnock (2001:134), one of the main proponents of open theism, argues: "Jesus did not attribute things like deformity, blindness, leprosy and fever to the providence of God. He viewed them as evidence of the reign of darkness, which he was engaged in defeating." Pinnock's exegetical claim is debatable, but it shows that we need to be careful in describing what we mean when we say of something bad that it is God's will.

The Reformers emphasized God's will in everything through his providence, however, they were careful not to attribute the evil itself to God. They argue it is subject to God's use and control. Luther (2005) states: "God cannot do evil Himself, for he is good. He uses evil instruments. [...] He cannot but do evil by our evil instrumentality, although he makes good use of this evil for his own glory and for our salvation." God does not do evil, but he uses evil, since that is the material he finds in the world. But does it follow from this that we can say even something bad that it is God's will?

Regarding the will of God, Luther (2005) emphasizes the "distinction between God Preached and God Hidden": "God Preached desires this: that, our sin and death being taken away, we might be saved [...] But God Hidden in Majesty neither deploras, nor takes away death, but works in life and death and all things [...] He does not 'will the death of a sinner,' that is, in his word; but he wills it by that will inscrutable." Discussing these issues it is quite common, at least in Reformed theology to distinguish between different kinds of 'the will of God'. Theologian R.C. Sproul (1992:71-74), for example, distinguishes even three kinds of the will of God in the Bible: the preceptive will, God's commands; the will of disposition, that what pleases God; and the decretive will, the sovereign, efficacious will of God.

In a way this solves our problem, but in another way it does not solve it at all. We could say it is not God's will of disposition that Paul has a thorn in his flesh – God does not want Satan to torment Christ's apostle, but as far as everything is within the will of God in his decretive will, it still is the will of God. God does not want disabilities, but yet everything is in his hands, even one's disability. When we apply it to the case of Bonhoeffer, however, we encounter a problem.

Bonhoeffer wants to know for certain that he is in God's hands – what does he want to know? I don't think that 'everything is in God's hands, everything falls within God's decretive will' would be an answer for him. 'Everything is in God's hands' may be part of the way he would express the knowledge he is looking for once he had found it, but we would not be telling him anything new, if we told him that everything is in God's hands. That he can see his imprisonment as being God's will, does not follow from the general assertion that everything is in God's hands.

Likewise, when Calvin (1960:725) talks about "being persuaded that the burden was laid upon him by God," he is not talking about believing in general that everything is willed by God: one needs to be convinced that this particular task is given to him by God. That is something different,

and it does not follow from intellectual assent to the statement that everything happens according to God's decretive will.

What kind of knowledge is involved in reaching the point of saying of something bad in one's life that 'It is God's will'? People tried to impose this kind of knowledge upon Maggie, but in her case it did not fit. Robert discovered the truth of this knowledge despite the fact that he was taught and intellectually held it to be false. And Paul first took this knowledge to be false, but changed his perspective after prayer, without changing his relationship to God. There is no indication in the text of a conversion or a different way of looking at God, Paul simply first saw the thorn in his flesh as something that God could remove, and, later on, he accepted that very same thorn as a gift from God's hand.

6. First-person knowledge

You have to reach this conclusion that it is God's will for yourself. It is a kind of knowledge that only a person him- or herself can attain. It is strictly a first-person knowledge. You cannot tell or teach someone this kind of knowledge. The whole weight is in someone's embracing of this kind of knowledge him- or herself. It cannot be known for someone else. This is what makes forcing this kind of knowledge upon a congregant at once pastorally wrong and conceptually inadequate. People who told Maggie that her disability was connected to sin, or that it was a gift intended to glorify God through courage, thereby showed to fail to see this character of drawing connections between God and suffering. Similarly, someone who would have told Robert or Paul that God is definitely not responsible for their suffering, misses the personal aspect of such statements. These are statements that can only be done by someone him- or herself.

Strange as it may sound, someone cannot say 'Your disability is an opportunity given by God for you to show courage', but you can say 'My disability is an opportunity given by God for me to show courage.' Someone cannot say 'Your financial disaster is God's way of telling you "You really blew it here, you know",' but you can say 'My financial disaster is God's way of telling me "You really blew it here, you know".' Now, it is important to add that this 'cannot' is a grammatical 'cannot': of course, someone can utter these words, and he can even intend to mean them, but that is not using these words in which they currently have meaning. We could have had a different grammar, but, for now, this is the way we use such expressions. Questions like whether in an objective sense God is or is not responsible for Paul's thorn in the flesh, we do not ask, that is part of the grammar of how we talk about these things. This is part of the grammar we use, and which I want to bring out here.

D.Z. Phillips (2003:53) presents us with many clear illustrations of such grammatical investigations, for example, he writes:

If I say 'My headache has gone now,' I don't ask 'Where has it gone to?' If I say 'I have put the book in the drawer' I don't ask how I know it is still there a second later. These questions simply do not arise. If someone tried to ask them, it would show a failure of understanding of what has been said. So the sign that questions are not asked is not a sign of obscurantism, but a grammatical claim about our use of certain concepts. Which questions we do not ask depends on which concepts we are talking about. ... part of what we mean by a headache or a book ... is shown in the fact that certain questions are not asked.

Similarly, if someone him- or herself sees a connection between his or her suffering and God, or

absolutely not, then we do not ask whether it is true that there is this connection. That is not obscurantism, but simply part of the grammar in this respect.

Peter Winch (1987:67) writes in connection with a mother who is comforted by seeing God's hand in the death of her severely disabled child: "My understanding of the words [of this mother] is revealed in my response." Whether or not one is able to give an adequate philosophical description of a particular statement, is irrelevant for the question whether one understands this statement. Understanding is shown in one's response. This connects the pastoral and the conceptual perspective: if your response is insensitive or pastorally inadequate, this often shows at the same time that you fail to understand the concepts that are involved. It is not just pastorally wrong to say that God is or is not responsible for someone else's suffering, but, on a deeper level, it is conceptually wrong as well. It is using religious language outside the context in which this makes sense.

The fact that Maggie feels less at home in the church when people tell her that God is responsible for her disability, this signifies at once a pastoral deficiency and a conceptual one: their misunderstanding of language about God is revealed in their response to Maggie's situation. Connecting one's suffering and God is a first-person kind of knowledge. Wittgenstein (1998:78e) describes this kind of knowledge, giving the example: "It's like searching for a word when you are writing and then saying: 'That's it; that expresses what I intended!'. Your acceptance certifies the word as having been.. the one you were looking for." Nobody can tell you which word it is that you are looking for, only your confirmation turns a particular word into the one that you are looking for. It is strictly first-person knowledge.

There are many other cases of such knowledge as well. For example, nobody else can feel your pain, nobody can forgive wrongs done to you, nobody can know what you want, nobody can make a promise for you. This is simply part of the grammar of the concepts involved in these expressions. Similarly, I want to propose, nobody can tell you that God is or is not responsible for suffering. As we saw in the cases of Maggie, Robert and Paul, this is a first-person statement as well.

This does not mean that the community is not important. Just like in the cases of pain, forgiveness, desires and promises, we have learned our language within the community in which we find ourselves. But, in fact, the grammar we do learn from the community, implies that these concepts are strictly used in first-person. The grammar did not have to be that way, but I want to suggest that the grammar of connecting suffering and God's responsibility is like that, currently. And here again, the proof that these statement belong to this category, is for the most part that you recognize this, like you recognize that nobody else can feel your pain, nobody can forgive wrongs done to you, etcetera. That is how we use these concepts.

7. Conclusion

Just like nobody else can feel your pain, nobody else can tell you that God is behind your suffering. Someone may assume to be able to feel your pain, but that would be both offensive and showing that he misunderstands the concept of pain. Similarly, someone may assume that he knows that God is or is not responsible for your suffering, but that would be both oppressive, as we see in the case of Maggie, and revealing a misunderstanding of what is being expressed, as we would see in someone explaining Robert the seminary-informed theology of suffering of which he is aware already perfectly fine. Paul could not have been helped by a pastor to tell him that God is or is not behind the thorn in his flesh, neither the Paul praying for it to go, nor the Paul who found his peace. Paul's struggle was a struggle he had to go through himself in front of the face of God. This first-person character of connecting suffering and God is what is ignored if one tells Maggie that God is or is not

responsible for her disability. Telling this would be both pastorally insensitive and conceptually inadequate at once.

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