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GOD'S LIFE-GIVING CHARACTER

And the Double-Dimension of Sin in Paul's Romans: A Revisit of Romans 8:20 in the Context of Ecological Crisis

Dennis T. Solon[71]

Abstract

In his letter to the Romans, Paul shows God's character as life-giving. This premise suggests that the sufferings of the world that lead to decay as described in Rom 8:18–30 are not directly attributable to God. Thus, other elements in creational existence could also play a negative role. An understanding of Paul's hamartiology in view of a double-dimension of sin could guide readers in discerning a meaning of Romans 8:20 in the context of ecological crisis.

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8.1 Introduction

My task today is to share something from my own context with regard to Eco-Theology, Climate Justice and Food Security and how we in the Philippines do theological education in such a context. In our small theological faculty of Silliman University, a subject on *Creation Theologies* has been integrated in the revised basic curriculum since 2009 as a dedicated course that deals with ecotheological issues. The idea is that Eco-theology is incorporated also in other theological disciplines, such as Ethics, Practical Theology, and Biblical Studies. A New Testament Seminar on Romans, which I handled last year, has offered exciting paths toward understanding Romans in today's context of ecological crisis and social injustice.

Like many theological schools and seminaries in Asia, we in the Philippines do not have the luxury of having updated resources for theological education, such as books and journals. Such a lack of resources calls for conscientious creativity in doing theological education. That is the case in our small theological faculty at Silliman University, where especially the area of Biblical Studies remains a weak link. Always available, however, is an equally significant source for doing theological reflection – our own experiences as a people.[72] Given the scarcity of resources, a method some scholars call *constructive or contextual Biblical hermeneutics* becomes appealing.

[72] See the overview of Kinast, Robert, *What are they saying about theological reflection*, New York/Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 2000.

8.2 Early Struggle of Understanding God in Contexts of Natural Calamities

In order to put my own interpretive method in context, I would like to share a personal story: On the night of 1September 1984, I heard strong winds accompanied by heavy rains. Minutes later, a neighbour tried to convince my family to leave our house and stay in his family's home over the night. As a young boy, I followed suit along with my other family members, without completely understanding what was going on. Not long after our quick evacuation, I heard a whirling of strong winds above the house of our neighbour, hitting trees and other objects. After some moments there was silence, then suddenly, the hurling winds came again. There were sounds of iron sheets thrown away, banging posts and walls. At times they came with other objects pummelling our neighbour's house. Everybody inside looked scared and worried. I was silently wondering what could have happened to our house: *What about my friends, where are they now? Are they safe?*

In the morning the next day, after the rain and winds subsided, I rushed to check our house and my toys. The roof of our house was completely gone. Everything was wet. Our cabinets lay flat on the floor. Some of my toys were destroyed, while some were nowhere to find. This was the aftermath of typhoon Ike (local name "Nitang") that left the southern and central area of the Philippines with more than 1,000 people dead.[73]

I grew up early in life learning an important Christian understanding that "God is love" and that "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so". But at that very moment, I was looking for validity and veracity of such Christian expressions: *How can a loving God allow such things to happen?Are they part of God's love for me?*

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[73] Cf. http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/pnabg249.pdf.

8.3 Paul and the Ecological Crisis: Some Impulses

My recent preoccupation of Paul's letters has reinforced my interests in discerning God's activities in the world and in understanding the situation of the created order. For the interest in time, I would like to summarize only two themes from Paul's letter to the Romans.[74]

8.3.1 Paul's Understanding of God: God as Creator and Constant Giver of Life.

In his letters, Paul pays considerable attention to God and God's action. His letter to the Romans alone mentions "God" 143 times and has more occurrences of the word than the gospels of Matthew and Mark combined. While many gods in Paul's context were connected with violence, exploitation and oppression, his God is very much identified with peace, compassion, encouragement, and justice. Paul refers to God as the subject who does things. For him, God is the source of love and at the same time actualizes love (e.g., Rom 5:5, 8); God is the author of grace and peace (1:7). God is the author of justice (cf. 1:17–18).

For Paul God is not so much known for who God is but for what God is doing. In the first chapter of the letter, Paul portrays God as correcting the offenders – those who do not give God due praise and honour (cf. Rom 1,24ff). In chapter three, God is described as justifying the offenders (but also implicitly their victims), through the death of Jesus Christ (Rom 3,21ff). And in Rom 4:17, Paul strikingly expresses it: God gives life to the dead. The verbal phrase "to make alive" comes

[74] Some of the arguments contained in this short essay are based on my published dissertation: *Rechtfertigung der Sünder und Solidarität mit den Opfern. Eine befreiungstheologische Auslegung des Römerbriefs*, Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2015.

in present participial form *zoopoiountos*. It literally conveys an idea of God *who continually gives life.*

Paul's point is clear: God is and remains pro-life. God is against anything that endangers life. God's commitment to life is powerfully manifested in the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ (4:17). Christ's resurrection, which demonstrates that God is a God of life, can inspire Christ-believers today to fight ecological degradation, all forms of injustice and the violence of poverty because these are subtle forces of death that slowly bring helpless victims to the grave.

8.3.2 Paul's Hamartiology

In our context in the Philippines, Paul is often criticized for seeing human beings as generally sinners, without consideration of various human situations and without distinguishing between rich and poor, between doers of injustice and their victims. The result is: People tend to turn to the Gospels when it comes to issues concerning social justice.

We could find a solution by looking into the concept of sin in Paul writings, and that is in view of the victims of sin. My contention is: Paul in his expressions about the sin of humankind also has in view the suffering of the people caused by others' sins.

A very familiar expression is found in Rom 3:23: "all have sinned and lack the glory of God." It describes the *conditio humana* in general sense, i.e. all have been found guilty beyond reasonable doubt. Everybody has been affected by God's wrath (ὀργὴ θεοῦ; Rom 1:18). In Romans, sin (ἁμαρτία) is an overarching terminology for impiety/ godlessness (ἀσέβεια) and injustice (ἀδικία). *Asebeia* is a manner of living without sense of accountability to God. *Adikia* is a manner of living without a sense of accountability to others, causing harm and pain on other beings. The two – ἀσέβεια and ἀδικία – are closely related.

Sin, as I perceive it in Paul's letter to the Romans, has two dimensions: the active dimension, i.e. the sin itself; and the passive

dimension, that is, the suffering caused by that sin. Paul makes this implicit in Rom 1-3. Sin may also mean suffering as a result of someone else's sin. With this understanding we can fine-tune our definition of injustice: Injustice is an offense, whereby an agent inflicts involuntary pain or suffering on another individual or entity.

The understanding of God as author and giver of life and its benefits, as well as that of the active and passive aspects of sin can aid in making sense with Romans 8:20 today.

"For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope" (ESV).

This verse is part of the section (Rom 8:18–30), where Paul deals with the reality of suffering. Notably, the second part of this verse (Rom 8:20) is skipped by Somen Das when he quotes it in his article "Biblical Foundations of Ecumenism through Asian Eyes".[75] I believe that the second line is equally crucial in discerning Paul's message for today's context of ecological crisis and social injustice. Paul's perceptions about the world and humankind are indicated as follows:

1) The creation experiences suffering in the form of subjection to futility (*mataioteti he ktisis hypetage*). The creation (*ktisis*) could refer to both human and non-human;
2) The suffering of the creation is involuntary (*ouch hekousa*). In other words, the suffering is not because of the creation's own guilt (cf. Menge: "nicht durch eigene Schuld"[76]); and
3) An unnamed external agent (through a pronoun) is referred to as the cause of subjection/subjugation of the creation (*dia ton hypotaxanta*).

[75] Das, Somen, "Biblical Foundations of Ecumenism through Asian Eyes", in: Antone, Hope/ Werner, Dietrich et al. (eds.), *Asian Handbook for Theological Education and Ecumenism*, Oxford: Regnum, 2013, 115-122, here: 119.
[76] The editors could no reconstruct the reference for this quotation.

The question now is: Who can be identified as agent of the creation's subjugation? Various proposals have been offered: Adam (G. Lampe),[77] humankind (J. Lambrecht),[78] and the fleshly nature of humankind (as a "body of sin").[79] Some Bible translations, however, present God as the agent of subjugation, e.g. the Good News Translation/ Today's English Version and many of those who follow the Dynamic Equivalence translation principle.

"For creation was condemned to lose its purpose, not of its own will, but because God willed it to be so. Yet there was the hope" (TEV).

A very common local Bible in the Philippines, *Ang Bag-ong Maayong Balita Biblia* (*ABMBB*), is also apparently based on such a translation principle:

"Kay gitugotan sa Dios nga mahimong kawang ang kabuhatan, dili tungod sa kaugalingong pagbuot niini kondili tungod sa pagbuot sa Dios. Apan bisan pa niini, nagpabilin ang paglaom." English: "For God permitted it that the creation becomes futile, not due to its own will, but due to the will of God. But in spite of this, it remains in hope" (translation D.S.).

Similarly, the German *Gute Nachricht Bibel* conveys the idea about God's direct involvement with the suffering of creation:

"Denn alles Geschaffene ist der Sinnlosigkeit ausgeliefert, versklavt an die Vergänglichkeit, und das nicht durch eigene Schuld, sondern weil Gott es so verfügt hat. Er gab aber seinen Geschöpfen die Hoffnung".

In view of those who unnecessarily experienced or are experiencing the unbearable pain of losing their homes, properties, livelihood and loved ones as a result of natural calamities, I find the understanding

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[77] Lampe, Geoffrey W.H., "New Testament doctrine of ktisis", in: *Mid-Stream 4*, 1964, 71-83.
[78] Lambrecht, Jan, "The Groaning of Creation: A Study of Rom 8:18–30", in: *LouvSt* 15, 1990, 3-18.
[79] Solon, Dennis, *Rechtfertigung der Sünder*, 210ff.

based on Rom 8:20 to the effect that suffering is willed by God to be less helpful. It could lead many people to fatalism and to concede to hopelessness since suffering is authored by God anyway. What about the many innocent children and women who got killed by tsunamis and other natural disasters? What about those who are being victimized by development projects that actually only cater to the whims of the privileged?

Rainer Stuhlmann is correct when he writes that nowadays societies are more doer-oriented (*Auf die Täter fixiert*) and tend to forget the victim of human offenses.[80] Taking for instance the Mining Act of 1995 in the Philippines, it has caused not only the loss of sources of living and militarization in the affected regions, but also various forms of physical ailments. These are sufferings that cannot be readily attributed to God. Rather, they are sufferings that are caused by the unjust activities of power-holders. The same thing can be applied to many recent natural calamities in various tropical regions borne by climate change. Indeed, one can raise doubts as to whether these sufferings can be directly attributed to God. Perhaps indirectly, one may say, since God is construed as all-sovereign. But could we not also consider the many stakeholders, who have exacerbated the ecological crisis or at least accelerated climate change because of their own drive for profit, as perceivable culprits? Then, as a result, peoples from other parts of the world are suffering – those who did not practically take part in ecologically destructive activities.

An understanding about the double dimensions of sin (*hamartia*) could help readers in making sense of what Paul says in Rom 8:20. The passive *hypetage* – that the creation has been *subjected* to futility – namely, as a result of foreign sin or external offenses (here we can

[80] Stuhlmann, Rainer, "Auf die Täter fixiert", in: *Zeitzeichen*, 4/2011, 35-37.

include social injustice as well as environmental exploitation or ecological injustice) – can relate to the passive aspect of sin. Moral responsibility of human actions is inherent in this passive statement. Nevertheless, every human activity and event within the ecosystem cannot escape God's justice/ righteousness (*dikaiosyne*).

8.4 Conclusion

In contexts of ecological crisis and social injustice, Romans 8:20 could find meaning today when it is read in view of Paul's understanding of God (God's justice) and human sin (its active and passive aspects). The statement from Paul invites readers to think of suffering as a result of human sins, not just their own, but also those of others. Inflicting suffering is not God's main business, but to create and to uphold life.

Awareness of human sin [and, we can include here, God's forgiveness] calls for a positive response by means of repentance (*metanoia*; Rom 2:4). Related to repentance is what Paul calls "the renewal of the mind" (*anakainosis*; Rom 12:2). *Anakainosis* is crucial since it entails joining the Creator's cause to promote and uphold life – the life of the ecosystem and the life of humankind in its holistic sense.

Paul, in the midst of many existential sufferings of the creation, is not ready to give up his hope for the fullness of salvation through God's intervention. May all people who live in God's *oikoumene* also live in that hope and join God's cause for the salvation of the world, here and now.

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