# Reflections in Light of Marie Hoffman’s Address.

I have eight reflections.

(1) First, one about following promptings. Your opening story reminded me of one someone told us in chapel here a while ago. I may get the details wrong, but it went approximately as follows. The preacher was sitting in an airport, and she noticed a disheveled elderly man sitting the other side of the waiting area. She felt God prompting her to go and comb his hair. This seemed a crazy thing to do, but eventually she did it. The man wept. He was on his way to visit his wife who was in a care facility, evidently some way away. He was overwhelmed by the sadness of the circumstances, and no doubt this situation was partly why he hadn’t been paying attention to his appearance. He was now more positively overwhelmed by this women’s care. She herself was so relieved that she had given in to that crazy prompting.

Afterwards someone else who heard the story told me about an occasion when she had felt a similar prompting. She’d been in a bar listening to a singer-songwriter. In the introduction to one of the songs, the singer told the audience that she had written this particular song after her mother had died at the age of 48. The song reflected poignantly and sadly about her loss of her mother. The woman who was telling me about this experience was herself 48, the age the singer’s mother had been when she died, and after the set this woman felt prompted to go and give the singer a hug in her mother’s name, but it was hard to do it because the singer was then involved in talking with other people and the moment passed, but the woman so wished she had been able to give her that hug.

Both stories now remind me of something that happened to me not long before I left England. A new rector was being installed at a church I had a link with, and I was there with my first wife, who was disabled and in her wheelchair. As the bishop climbed the pulpit steps to preach, I sensed God telling me that I had to say to the bishop “The Lord has anointed you.” I didn’t have to interrupt the service to do so, but I had to do it. The obvious time was the reception afterwards. It was quite understandable that God should put this obligation on me, I realized, because nearly all the other clergy there were under the bishop’s more direct authority, whereas as a seminary professor, I wasn’t under his authority in the same way, so I didn’t have as much to lose. Nevertheless I felt pretty odd about it. So I said to God that if I found I had a natural chance to do it at the reception, I would, but if not, I’d take that as a sign that I didn’t have to. In the reception, the bishop made a beeline for us to say hello to Ann in her wheelchair. So I had no option but to tell him that I thought God had given me these words to say. (Incidentally, it was only five words, and my experience is that when God gives you something to say to someone like that, it’s usually brief, and the more you go on, the more likely it is to be your words not God’s. That fits with the nature of prophecies in the Bible, which tend to comprise a few succinct lines. So speak up and shut up.) Anyway, I didn’t get much of a reaction from the bishop, but next day his wife called and told me that he’d been tired and discouraged, and that the words had been important to him, even though he hadn’t quite been able to say so to me at the time.

The moral of the stories is: if you sense God’s prompting, take the risk of following it. Two times out of three you will be wrong or it won’t be very significant, but one out of three will be important, and that one is worth the risk.

(2) Now to the body of your paper. My second reflection concerns what we mean by suffering and how it affects us. One evening I was having dinner with some Fuller students and I was giving a speech I sometimes give, about the way Fuller students talk about wanting to be more relational and more community-oriented and less isolated as individuals, yet in practice they avoid anything that involves being relational and they all want to live in their isolated studios or apartments. One of the students was a clinical PhD candidate, now a therapist, who protested with feeling, “But they’re disabled for relationship, they’re disabled for intimacy. Half of them come from broken homes, to start with.” The protest has stuck with me for a decade. Yes, they’re “lonely, suffering, and in need of comfort,” a phrase you used. They look bright and bushy-tailed, but inside they’re afraid and anxious. As you put it, they wander into our offices, our counseling centers, our rehabs, known, yet unknown, in their bustling church metroplexes, and they take part in our retreats; and they wander into our seminary. They are us. There’s more anxiety among psychology students than among other students, which is presumably why they’re studying psychology. They’re seeking healing for themselves and it’s important that they find some, important not least for the people to whom they will minister. Their experience of loneliness, suffering, and need of comfort is a key potential resource in their ministry, as long as it their ministry doesn’t become mainly the way they deal with their loneliness and their suffering and their need of comfort. I worry about the students who come to study psychology who are people who want to find themselves, to find healing for their inner hurts. If their inner hurts and their experience of healing do come to be a resource in ministering to others, then the dynamic of that process is positive. If their inner need continues to be the reason they are involved in this ministry, it’s more like demonic. We all know about how many psychologists end up sleeping with their clients or otherwise abusing them.

Your focus on suffering made me think about what we mean by suffering and what the Bible means by it, and in light of what you said I‘ve been trying to analyze what the Bible means by it. I think that the suffering of which the Bible speaks most often is the physical suffering we cause to each other. When the Old Testament talks about suffering, in the Psalms and the Prophets, it’s that kind of suffering, and when the New Testament talks about suffering, it similarly focuses on persecution, on the cost of taking up your cross. It indeed assumes that this suffering contributes to our maturing as believers.

Of course we in the West don’t have much experience of that suffering. The disablement from intimacy of which I spoke is a pain in our inner being. The anxiety that students feel isn’t caused by a fear that they may get shot. Conversely, there isn’t so much talk of inner pain in the Bible, though maybe it does get first mention in the Bible. The first pain it speaks of is the pain that Eve will experience in having children. I assume Genesis is not implying that childbirth in Eden wouldn’t have involved much physical pain. The nature of giving birth would be bound to involve pain. But death in childbirth is common in traditional societies, and presumably wouldn’t have happened in Eden, so maybe Genesis has that pain mind. Yet Eve’s own first experience of suffering comes when she watches her first son kill her second son. The suffering of motherhood comes from watching the grim things your children do and experience.

I suspect that the dynamics of how suffering plays into growth and healing are different with the two kinds of suffering, inner pain and persecution, and I suspect we have to be careful about applying what the Bible says about persecution to our feelings of anxiety about whether I will get a good grade for my paper or a good review for my book.

(3) There’s a link here with your comments about the cosmos being broken, and I have been trying to think about the sense in which it is broken. So this is my third reflection. I don’t think the Bible says that the physical planets and the physical earth have become rebellious. On the other hand, it’s clear that the cosmos is broken if by the cosmos we mean the human community. Both kinds of suffering reflect the fact that the human community is broken. In Isaiah 56—66 where the prophet speaks of a new heavens and a new earth, the context makes clear that this new world is embodied in the city of Jerusalem. It is the city that needs renewing.

I was going to say that there’s nothing wrong with the heavens and the earth, but that wouldn’t be quite true. To judge from Genesis, God didn’t create the cosmos finished and perfect. It was still a work in progress. The way God decided to take it to its destiny was by involving humanity in doing so. When we were created, our task was to have a part in taking the created world there, to rule it and subdue its unruliness. We failed to do so, so the cosmos is still wondering when we’re going to fulfill our vocation. That’s why it’s still groaning, as Paul puts it.

(4) Fourthly, your talk of trauma generated two points of connection with things I had been thinking about. There’s some interest in trauma in Old Testament study. One of my PhD students is writing a dissertation on the book of the prophet Joel. The student is arguing that the experience of trauma is key to understanding this book—the trauma of the fall of Jerusalem in 587, the prolonged experience of dislocation in which this event issued, and subsequent experiences of adversity that aroused the buried memory of that earlier trauma on the part of people who lived long after the event, but for whom it is part of their community memory. It is against this background that Joel articulates the nature of hope. So trauma theory may help us understand the scriptures, and the scriptures may help us understand and minister to trauma.

The other reflection arises from a piece I read in *The* *New Yorker*. It concerned two women, mother and daughter, living in Glendale, refugees from Iraq. In 2003 they had been driving home with the men in their lives during the darkest days of trouble in Baghdad when they had been shot at by marines who thought they were insurgents. The mother’s husband and her sons were killed and the daughter badly injured. But the women are Armenian Christians, and as time has passed they’ve found some peace in relation to what happened. On the other hand, one of the marines who lives in San Diego has found no relief from the burden of what he and his fellow-marines did that day. But he managed to find the two women and he came to see them. The fact that they were willing to see him and did not hold what he had done against them didn’t suddenly bring him healing, but it did enable him to turn a corner.

(5) Fifth, suffering and the coming of God’s kingdom, and J. N. Darby. I was struck by your two accounts of the relationship between suffering and the coming of God’s kingdom.

Some believers have recognized within their suffering the incremental revelation of God’s kingdom on earth—the progressive transformation of innumerable shards of human brokenness into God’s mosaic of redemption.  Others conceive of God's kingdom as futuristic, spiritual, and separated from the evils of a corrupted material world. They believe suffering is to be tolerated here until final escape through death or rapture. These eschatological visions---one optimistic…, the other apocalyptic and waiting for deliverance—typify the divergent theologies on earthly suffering.

It was great to hear you speaking of J. N. Darby. What an amazing fact, that in the United States his ideas spawned a theological sea-change. I joke to students that we did invent dispensationalism in Britain but we knew it was silly so we exported it. We don’t think much about post-millennialism either.

Given that Darby had little long term influence in Britain, I wondered about why he became so influential in the United States. Maybe there’s a link with the parallel fact that we don’t really have fundamentalism in Britain either, which makes one wonder why fundamentalism is so important in the United States. I like to relate an illuminating remark made to me when I came here, that in Britain people do theology looking over their shoulder at the Germans, while in the United States people do theology looking over their shoulder at fundamentalism.

Another recent issue of *The New Yorker* reviewed a British movie called *56 Up*, the latest in a series of movies tracing the lives of fourteen people. The research began when they were seven years old. They are now 56. The *New Yorker* reviewer comments that Britain is characterized by a pragmatic survivalist ethos; “the safety net is so much stronger than it is here” (universal health care and so on). None of the fourteen people in the survey has fallen into poverty or become alcoholics or drug-addicts. On the other hand, their fates are predictable. They “don’t seem to have the seething ambitions and the restlessness of so many Americans,” says the reviewer. “They may be happier than we are, but they’re also less colorful.” Although I stand before you as the exception that proves the rule, having come from a working-class background to occupy the best Old Testament chair in the world, and stand before you as not as the least colorful member of the Fuller faculty, I recognize the truth in the reviewer’s characterization of the two countries. Does that difference link somehow with the way Americans make heavier weather of suffering than any other nation does, and also the way the United States fell in love with dispensationalism?

I liked your implicitly critical comment on the following assertion by Darby:

Everybody says that a citizen of the country, a Christian, should be interested in the government of the country to which he belongs, and ought to vote, so as to help to put good men in power. God says differently; in many places and ways He tells me that, as His child, I am not a citizen of any country, or a member of any society; my citizenship is in heaven.

My gloss on that observation is that the current version of this abdication from responsibility is the claim that we as Christians need to see ourselves as in exile from the mainstream culture. We are a democracy and we cannot make that move. We cannot evade responsibility from what our country is and does. It is our country. The government is one we chose. Its decisions are ours.

(6) Sixthly, eschatology. I like to tell students never to use the words eschatology or apocalyptic because no one knows what they mean, or rather because different people mean such different things by them. But you pointed out that even Moltmann uses these words, it is obviously hopeless for me to attempt to ban them. Instead I’ve been trying to analyze some of the things eschatology can mean. There’s no basis for saying that one meaning is *the* correct one; we rather need to be clear what meaning attaches to the word in a particular context.

Here’s my attempt to work out what “eschatology” might be referring to. The End or the eschaton is the time when God’s final or ultimate purpose is put into effect, when God’s ultimate goal is definitively reached. But understandings of the nature of that goal and the means of achieving that goal then need to be understood in relation to several axes. I’ll call them (a), (b), (c), (d), and (e).

1. There’s individual, communal, worldwide, and cosmic eschatology. That is, there’s what happens at the end of an individual’s life, there’s what happens to communities such as the city of Jerusalem, there’s God’s ultimate purpose for his people and for the nations, and there’s what happens to the cosmos as a whole.
2. Eschatology may think in terms of an End after which there will be nothing. Or it may think in terms of historical experience giving way to an era of timeless blessing. Or it may think in terms of our era of flawed history and experience giving way to a new, wholesome era of history and experience, in which life (and even death) will go on.
3. Eschatology can involve the belief that God is putting that ultimate purpose into effect now, through events that can be seen in the world, so that it’s already being actualized or realized. Or it can involve the belief that God will do so at some time in the future by means that we cannot at the moment see.
4. Eschatology implies a radical distinction between this age and a coming age. But it can see the coming of the new age as gradual. Or it can see it as involving a dramatic transformation, reversal, and discontinuity.
5. Eschatology can imply a future that is imminent. Or it can imply a future that is far away.

(6) Seventh, I was fascinated by your comments on the place of Psalm 88 in Darby’s life, not least because just a few days ago my Old Testament class for psychology students was studying that psalm. Your comments provoke reflection, or at least questions, on the place of such Psalms in our spirituality. Darby’s preoccupation with the psalm contrasts sharply with the traditional place of these protest psalms in evangelical spirituality. Traditional evangelicalism is big on our sinfulness, and it has been a bit nonplussed by the protest psalms. These psalms claim to have lived a life of obedience and claim not to have deserved to be abandoned by God in the way they speak of. It comes more naturally to us to see ourselves as sinners. And while we are happy to speak of God *seeming* to have abandoned us, we’re uneasy about saying that God has *actually* done so. There’s a question that sometimes features on church bulletin boards: “If God seems far away, guess who moved?” The Psalms are willing to say, “God did.”

In recent years the protest psalms have been rediscovered by evangelical spirituality; indeed, I doubt if there is any aspect of Old Testament study that comes as such a positive revelation to my students. And a bit of me rejoices in that fact, but another bit of me worries about it. In Israel, there are psalms that protest and that claim to live a life of obedience. There are also a number of prayers, more outside the Book of Psalms than within it, that do major on confession of sinfulness and that assume that our troubles issue from our waywardness. One of my colleagues who teaches Ethics was saying to me that it’s hard to get students to take seriously the idea that we are supposed to do what the Sermon on the Mount says. They have been well-liberated from bondage to obedience, it seems. I find that fact interesting, set alongside your description of Darby’s apparent blindness to the contrast between his position of privilege and the needs of the people around him.

So we need to be wary both of marginalizing suffering and of marginalizing commitment to walking God’s way.

(7) That leaves me, eighthly and finally, to express appreciation for your observations about binaries, some of which the other two lectures will take up. You commented:

Splits and collateral dissociations in religious leaders can potentially deploy as theological dualisms, and are manifest in the history of the Christian church as controversies over: 1) Good vs. Evil; 2) Suffering vs. Glory; 3) Jew vs. Gentile; 4) Male Strength vs. Female Need; 4) Individual vs. Communal; 5) Earthly vs. Spiritual; and 6) Present vs. Future.

You note that Darby’s mandate to ignore suffering in the present, to witness concerning the future rather than the present, and his privileging of the individual over communal experience of faith permeates hymnology and even some contemporary music of the church. One reason why this can happen is that reality is complicated but we wish it was simple, so we choose one side of the binary or the other; it’s easier than recognizing both. But there is truth in both, the Bible talks about both, and thus we can justify either of the binaries from the Bible. Let the person who is without sin cast the first stone. The challenge is to hold onto both poles.

Thank you.