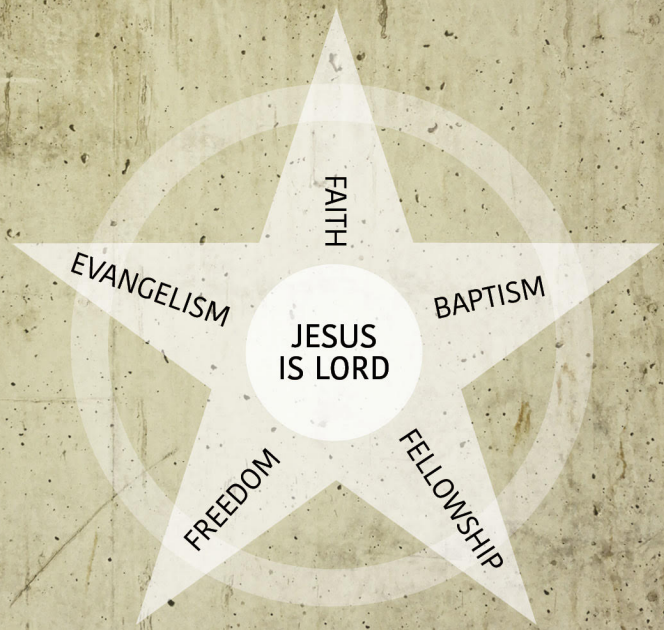


ISSN 2634-0275

Journal of Baptist Theology

in context



Issue 8 (2023)

Suffering, Perseverance and Hope: Two Views of Romans 5:1-5 and their Implications for Pastoral Care¹

Marion L.S. Carson

1. Introduction

In 2000, Stephen Pattison wrote of an “almost absolute and embarrassing silence” with regard to the use of the Bible by practical theologians writing on the subject of pastoral care.² As Pattison noted, this was in large part due to the predominance of the historical-critical method, whose focus on word study and historical context tended to take attention away from contemporary application. Recently, however, practical and pastoral theologians have begun to discuss the place of the Biblical text within their discipline.³ The need for serious in-depth study on the use of the Bible in pastoral theology has been recognized and begun to be addressed, most notably in a series of studies overseen by Stephen Pattison and David Spriggs.⁴ In addition, the growth of interest in hermeneutics within the academy has considerably ameliorated the situation: feminist, liberationist, and cross-cultural hermeneutics (amongst others) have opened up the text for contemporary application in new and fruitful ways. It is good to note that some Biblical scholars are beginning to explore how these

¹ This is a revised and expanded version of an article which appeared in Czech in “Utrpení, naděje a svatost: Dva pohledy na Ř 5,1-5 a jejich důsledky propastoraci” *Teologická Reflexe* 24 (2018): 57-68.

² Stephen Pattison *A Critique of Pastoral Care* (3rd ed.; London: SCM), 106.

³ See Mark J. Cartledge “The Use of Scripture in Practical Theology: A Study of Academic Practice” *Practical Theology* 6 (2013): 271-83; Zoë Bennett *Using the Bible in Practical Theology* (London: Routledge 2013); see also the collection of papers in *Contact* 150.1 (2006).

⁴ Paul Ballard and Stephen R. Holmes, *The Bible in Pastoral Practice: Readings in the Place and Function of Scripture in the Church* (London: DLT, 2005). Gordon Oliver, *Holy Bible, Human Bible: Questions Pastoral Practice Must Ask* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006); Stephen Pattison, Margaret Cooling, Trevor Cooling, *Using the Bible in Christian Ministry: A Workbook* (London: DLT, 2007).

ancient texts might be able to address contemporary pastoral issues, for example in the areas of disability and bereavement.⁵

In this paper, I wish to contribute to this growing area of interest by considering the pastoral implications of one Biblical passage, namely Romans 5:1-5. In it, Paul begins to explore the consequences for believers of having been justified by faith and what it means to be a new creation in Christ. Believers have access to God through Jesus Christ, and have hope of sharing in the glory of God (5:1-2). On this basis, they can rejoice when they suffer for suffering will lead to perseverance, character, and ultimately, to hope (5:3-4). Furthermore, they will not be disappointed in that hope, because God's love has been poured into their hearts (5:5).

Clearly this passage, in which suffering and hope are directly linked, is a rich resource for those involved in the pastoral care of people who are experiencing difficult times. But how is it best understood and applied in pastoral situations? In my experience, many if not most "ordinary" readers of Scripture instinctively look to the Bible to provide them with the knowledge and instruction they need to live their lives.⁶ This way of approaching Scripture has its roots in foundationalism, which looks for certainty with regard to the truthfulness of beliefs. Grenz and Franke write:

According to foundationalists, the acquisition of knowledge ought to proceed in a manner somewhat similar to the construction of a building. Knowledge must be built on a sure foundation. The Enlightenment epistemological foundation consists on a set of incontestable beliefs or unassailable first principles on the basis of which the pursuit

⁵ Examples include Grant Macaskill *Autism and the Church: Bible, Theology and Community* (Waco: Baylor University Press 2019); Sarah Melcher, Mikeal C. Parsons, Amos Yong (eds) *The Bible and Disability: A Commentary* (London: SCM 2018); Walter Brueggemann "The Formfulness of Grief" *Interpretation* 31 (1977): 263-75.

⁶ By "ordinary" I mean Christians who have little or no theological education. See Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Learning and Listening in Theology* (London: Routledge 2002), 56.

of knowledge can proceed. These basic beliefs or first principles must be universal, objective and discernible to any rational person.⁷

When it comes to the use of the Bible in pastoral care, it is common, from this foundationalist perspective, for readers to look to the text to provide an appropriate word or instruction which can be given to the person being cared for, much as a physician might prescribe medication.⁸

In recent years, the idea that human beings can have absolute certainty has become discredited.⁹ Moreover, the emphasis on proposition and instruction which is so prominent in foundationalist thinking has been challenged by character ethicists who are more interested in what kind of people we should be rather than what individuals ought to be doing. From this perspective, the question the reader asks of the text becomes “what kind of people ought we to be?” rather than “what ought I to do?”. The focus is on character and narrative rather than proposition and law.

Here, I would like to consider Romans 5:1-5 from both perspectives in order to compare how they influence its use in the pastoral setting. I shall first explore the passage from a foundationalist perspective and highlight certain limitations and drawbacks of this hermeneutic with regard to pastoral application. I shall then conduct a second interpretation, this time using Stanley Hauerwas’ character ethics as a hermeneutical lens, and suggest that this approach offers us a more nuanced and compassionate understanding of how the text might inform pastoral care. Before exploring the text using these two hermeneutical lenses, however, it will be valuable to set the passage in its literary and historical context and present an initial exegesis.

⁷ Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 23.

⁸ Marion Carson, ‘Deep Heat and Bandages? Historical Criticism, Bounded Indeterminacy, and Pastoral Care’, *Evangelical Quarterly* 82 (2010): 340-52.

⁹ See for example Amos Yong, *The Dialogical Spirit: Christian Reason and Theological Method in the Third Millennium* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press 2014), 19-46.

2. The content of Romans 5:1-5

The statement that suffering leads to hope comes in the context of an argument in which Paul tells the believers in Rome that salvation is on the basis of faith. He has been keen to ensure that the Roman believers do not fall into the all too human trap of thinking that adherence to a moral code or religious observances is the way to be righteous in God's sight. What is important is an interior attitude of faith which he describes as "circumcision of the heart" (2:29). Here, Paul is preparing the way for his attempt later in the letter to tackle just such a problem which has arisen in the Roman church (14:1-15:13).¹⁰ Having argued this case, he now says that followers of Christ are justified, declared "innocent of all charges", and so they have peace with God.¹¹ They have access to God himself and stand in a "state of grace". They also have hope – hope of the glory of God. While we might be tempted to conclude that suffering is incompatible with this new way of being, it is in fact something to rejoice in, for perseverance in suffering leads to a tested character, which leads to hope. We will now begin to unpack this rather compressed train of thought.

The first important term is *thlipsis* which means trial or trouble. Paul may well have had persecution in mind here, as the church in Rome struggled to survive in a hostile environment. However, the term can refer to trials and hardships of all kinds, and so it is legitimate for us to understand it here as referring to suffering in general.¹² Suffering, he says, brings about *hupomonē*, which the NRSV translates as

¹⁰ Here I will not enter into the debate as to the relationship between the church and Judaism in Paul's thought. The point I wish to make is that Paul sees the temptation to elevate religious observance over faith as one to which all religious people are prone. See further Marion Carson 'Circumcision of the Heart: Extrinsic and Intrinsic Religiosity in Romans 1–5', *Expository Times* 128 (2017): 376-84.

¹¹ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1996), 298. Along with most commentators, I understand *exomen* and *kauxometha* to be indicative rather than subjunctive.

¹² W. Bauer, W.F. Arndt, F.W. Gingrich, and F.W. Danker *Greek-English Lexicon of the NT and Other Early Christian Literature* (2nd ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 362.

“endurance”. This seems to denote a “moral strength” in which we do not allow trouble to defeat us. If we are able to get on with our lives in the midst of trials without collapsing under the strain, we are enduring, or persevering. And as we persevere we will become stronger. The next term is *dokimē*, which probably should be understood as “tested character”.¹³ However, this is problematic for the word has no referent. Traditionally, it is understood to mean that perseverance brings about a tried and tested character in believers. John Ziesler, however, thinks it refers to “God’s constant support”, which is “tested and found adequate”. He thus translates, “endurance proves God’s sustaining power”.¹⁴ Nevertheless, since the subject of suffering and perseverance of which Paul has been speaking is best understood as referring to human beings, it seems reasonable to say that that this applies to *dokimē* too.

Persevering in suffering produces people who are strong, resilient and productive. We speak of people who consistently make good moral decisions, who have integrity, as having “strong character.” If they are believers we would also say that they are able to hold on to their faith, despite the problems and suffering they experience. These are the strong people whom others respect, whose good example we follow, and whose lives are attractive and coherent. “Weak” characters are those who crumble under the strain, who seize up. Clearly, without perseverance, the “tested” character to which Paul refers here cannot become evident.

At the end of this process, hope comes about. But what is this hope? On one level, it may refer to a kind of expectation that our desires will be fulfilled. Learning from experience, we see that setbacks need not be crippling, that things can improve, and so we are able to keep going. Hope is therefore a positive attitude of mind which enables us to carry on from day to day. However, it would be wrong to limit the idea of hope to this psychological understanding. Paul is working in the Jewish

¹³ Moo, *Epistle to the Romans*, 303. Cf. Robert Jewett *Romans: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2007), 354-5 who thinks it refers to a faith that has been tested and found authentic.

¹⁴ John Ziesler, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans* (London: SCM 1989), 138-9.

wisdom tradition which taught that people of faith would encounter trials, and so be strengthened.¹⁵ For example, Sirach 2:4-6 says,

Accept whatever befalls you,
and in times of humiliation be patient.
For gold is tested in the fire,
and those found acceptable, in the furnace of humiliation.
Trust in him, and he will help you;
make your ways straight, and hope in him.

Paul, like the author of Sirach, sees this positive attitude as grounded in faith. Withstanding trials, with the attendant strengthening of character, leads to a deepening in faith, in the sense of an ability to trust in God. So perseverance in suffering leads to stronger character both in a moral and a spiritual sense. Hope therefore is based on the knowledge of God's love for us – not only because of what he has done through Christ in the past but because of our experience of what he continues to do in the present through the work of Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5). It is this that spurs us on from day to day – it is this that makes life worth living.

However, for Paul hope is not simply a state of mind, it has a specific content. In 5:2, Paul speaks of one day sharing in the glory of God, which he explains further in 8:18-25. Our current knowledge is only partial; one day the full glory of God will be revealed *eis hemas* (8:18). The NRSV translates this as “the glory of God will be revealed to us”, but it can also be translated as “in us” (NIV). All the might, honour and splendour that belongs to God, and which human beings were originally intended to reflect (Psalm 8:1,5-6), will one day be revealed in us too.¹⁶ In the meantime, both we and the world groan, and the Spirit groans alongside us. Thus hope, as John Webster puts it, “is the confident longing for full realisation of life in Christ”.¹⁷ However, the

¹⁵ E.g., *Wisdom* 3:5-7; *T. Jos.* 2:7; *2 Maccabees* 6:12-16. *Proverbs* 17:3; Cf. also *James* 1:2-4; *2 Tim* 2:12.

¹⁶ Jewett, *Romans*, 510.

¹⁷ John Webster, ‘Hope’ in G. Meilaender, & W. Werpehowski (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 302.

eschatological hope concerns not only people, but the world as a whole:

The originally intended glory of the creation shall yet be restored, including specifically the glory we humans were intended to bear.¹⁸

All of creation will be redeemed by God and returned to its original splendour.¹⁹ And in the meantime, we can stand firm, sure of the hope we have “because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us” (5:5).²⁰ For Douglas Moo,

it is this internal, subjective – yes, even emotional – sensation within the believer that God does indeed love us – love expressed and made vital in real, concrete actions on our behalf – that gives to us the assurance that ‘hope will not disappoint us’²¹

That is to say, believers do not seem to have to rely solely on their own ability to develop the kind of hope Paul speaks of here, but they have the help of the Holy Spirit, who assures them of God’s love for them in the present.

3. A “foundationalist” approach

This reading of Paul’s teaching about suffering and hope has important pastoral implications. It suggests that suffering is not to be avoided, denied, or disparaged, but is to be rejoiced in for it has eschatological significance and purpose in the life of the believer. Our lives in the present are of a “larger reality”, to use N.T. Wright’s phrase.²² But how does it help believers as they try to cope with the reality of

¹⁸ Jewett, *Romans*, 510.

¹⁹ See further Edward Adams *The Stars Will Fall From Heaven: Cosmic Catastrophe in the New Testament and its World* (London: T&T Clark 2007).

²⁰ J.M. Everts, ‘Hope’ in *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters* (Leicester: IVP 1999), 416.

²¹ Moo, *Epistle to the Romans*, 305

²² NT Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection and the Mission of the Church* (London: SPCK 2012), 174.

suffering in the present time? How is the idea that suffering can lead to hope to be applied pastorally?

As we have seen, readers adopting a “foundationalist” hermeneutic look for propositions which provide certainty – a foundation for belief and right action.²³ Thus, the purpose of reading Scripture is to discover what we should know and what we should be doing. From this perspective, this passage reminds us of the basis of our faith, of our future hope, and of the love of God in our lives and so provides the certainty that we need in order to withstand difficult times. According to Douglas Moo, for example, there is little doubt that Paul here wants to encourage “any who are faltering or downhearted to contemplate again what he or she has in Christ”.²⁴ From this perspective, then, no matter what individuals might be going through, they need to be reminded of these truths in order to help keep them from giving up. If someone is struggling and finding hope difficult to maintain, the pastoral carer’s responsibility is to remind them of the faith that is theirs, the future that they can look forward to, and that the Holy Spirit is, at this very moment, pouring love into their hearts.

Now there is little doubt that in certain circumstances a reminder of the basis of faith and of our future inheritance may be sufficient to help someone who is going through a difficult time. For some, the simple act of hearing the passage read may be enough to bring comfort and encouragement. However, it is worthwhile exploring some possible implications of such an approach. First, this interpretation suggests that there is an implied imperative within the indicatives in this passage: Christians ought to be able to persevere in suffering and hold on to hope, because of their new relationship with God.²⁵

²³ See further, Nancey Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism: How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy set the Theological Agenda* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International 1996).

²⁴ Moo, *Epistle to the Romans*, 314.

²⁵ For many scholars, following Rudolph Bultmann, this is the correct way to understand Paul’s writings. Rudolph Bultmann, ‘The Problem of Ethics in Paul’ in *Understanding Paul’s Ethics: Twentieth Century Approaches* ed B.S. Rosner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1995), 195-216. For Victor Furnish, for example, the dynamic of indicative and imperative lies at the centre of his thought. Others, however, point out that it is only one aspect of Paul’s ethical thinking.

However, periods of profound distress such as bereavement, dislocation or serious illness can bring about severe spiritual crisis. In such circumstances, the ability to hold on to a future hope can be well-nigh impossible. There is a need for tangible reassurance now – not just a promise of something that is to take place at the end times. It is hard enough to battle through from day to day let alone hang on for an eschatological promise which can, in Ernest Bloch’s words, seem to be “empty promises of another world.”²⁶

Second, it is easy to infer that if someone is not rejoicing or being hopeful there must be something wrong with that person’s faith. If hope (along with faith and the love of God) are things that believers ought to be sure of, then any loss of certainty in times of crisis becomes a pastoral problem which needs to be fixed. The responsibility of pastoral care then must be to dispense the spiritual medicine which will correct the problem. Pastoral care becomes a matter of reminding, exhorting and perhaps even rebuking those who are failing to do what God requires of them.²⁷ An unequal relationship is established between the pastoral carer and the one who is struggling, for it follows that those who are untroubled by lack of certainty must be superior Christians to those who are. Further, there is a risk that those who are struggling feel their suffering compounded (however unintentionally on the part of the pastoral carer) by an additional burden of shame and guilt. As in all pastoral care, so much depends on personalities, life stages and circumstances, and religious or traditional

See, for example, Volker Rabens, “Indicative and Imperative” as the Substructure of Paul’s Theology and Ethics in Galatians? A Discussion of Divine and Human Agency in Paul’ in Mark W. Elliott, Scott J. Hafemann, N.T Wright and John Frederick (eds) *Galatians and Christian Theology: Justification, the Gospel, and Ethics in Paul’s Letter* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2014), 285-305.

²⁶ Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* Volume 1. Translated by Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice & Paul Knight (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986).

²⁷ For this approach to the use of the Bible in pastoral counselling see for example, Jay E. Adams, *Competent to Counsel: Introduction to Nouthetic Counselling* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970).

background.²⁸ We cannot and must not assume that any one approach can be used as a “blanket” solution for every situation.

4. Character ethics and Paul

It would be easy to fall into the trap of using this text insensitively, thus adding to the burden of suffering. There is, however, an alternative to the moralistic tendencies of foundationalist-influenced hermeneutics which, I believe, can help us move towards a more compassionate understanding of how this passage might inform pastoral care. Due to the influence of Alistair McIntyre’s work, character (or virtue) ethics is increasingly prominent in many walks of life from philosophy to psychology and medicine.²⁹ Instead of focussing on what we should do in any given situation, character ethics urges us to think about what kind of people we ought to be. Instead of emphasising command and rules (although we should not dispense with these completely), character ethics suggests that we should be asking how we can become people of good character, for in that way we will be more disposed to ethical conduct, rather than simply be people who “do what they are told”. Important in this way of thinking are the ideas of virtue, community and narrative.³⁰ The virtues are habits of mind and behaviour which are developed over time and enable us to become people of character who can build up stable and thriving communities. Virtues such as fortitude (i.e. perseverance), temperance, prudence and justice are acquired through habit and practice. They can be developed - learned, according to Aristotle, through doing.³¹ Without them we would live selfishly, pleasing only

²⁸ See, for example, James W. Fowler *Faith Development and Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) and Donald Capps *The Decades of Life: A Guide to Human Development* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox 2008).

²⁹ See, for example, Christopher Peterson & Martin E.P. Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (NY: OUP 2004); Rita Charon, *Narrative Medicine: Honoring the Stories of Illness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2006).

³⁰ Alistair McIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Virtue* (3rd Ed.; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 2007).

³¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* II, 1, 1103a33, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, (ed) Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 952.

ourselves.³² Further, in Roman Catholic tradition (but less familiar to most Protestants), faith, hope and love are “theological virtues” given to us (infused) by God.³³ Importantly, for Aquinas, the aim of exercising the virtues is not to live happy lives, as it was for Aristotle, but to live righteously, and have union with God.³⁴

Stanley Hauerwas, who is currently the most prolific and influential proponent of character ethics in Christian theology, is concerned that Christians have fallen into the trap of individualism, becoming preoccupied with their own personal morality and salvation.³⁵ We are in danger of losing a sense of community (and may even have lost it already). In his view, Christian communities are made up of people who know they have a part to play in the story or narrative brought about by the death and resurrection of Christ. Scripture is the sourcebook of that story and from it we learn of the values (or virtues) which are important our communities to flourish and be the “communities of character” which they are meant to be.³⁶

In the next section we will bring these ideas to bear on Romans 5:1-5. Before we do this, however, we need to ask if it is appropriate to do so. Are the ideas of community, virtue and narrative compatible with Paul’s thinking? Recent scholarship, particularly that influenced by social-scientific criticism, has shown clearly that community, and community formation, are central to Paul’s thinking. He writes as a pastor to small groups, helping them to live and work together in often hostile environments.³⁷ But what of the virtues as the basis of good

³² Daniel C. Russell, ‘Introduction’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Virtue Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2013), 1.

³³ See Augustine *Enchiridion*; Aquinas *Summa Theologica*, I-II 55.

³⁴ Aquinas *Summa Theologica* I-II.63.3.

³⁵ Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 1981), 96.

³⁶ On the importance of the link between character, community and story see further Richard Bondi ‘The Elements of Character’ *Journal of Religious Ethics* 12 (1984), 201-18.

³⁷ For an account of the rise in scholarly interest in the earliest Christian communities see David G. Horrell ‘Social-Scientific Interpretation of the New Testament: Retrospect and Prospect’ in *Social-Scientific Approaches to New Testament Interpretation* (ed.) David G. Horrell (London: T&T Clark 2000), 3-28.

character? We know that the virtues were important in philosophies contemporary to Paul, but are they a feature of the apostle's thought?

The dominance of Protestant biblical scholarship over the last couple of centuries has meant that the idea that Paul might have had the virtues in mind has largely gone unconsidered. While the idea of the virtues was very important in ancient and medieval philosophy and theology, it fell into disuse amongst Protestant Christians after the Reformation.³⁸ The suspicion has been that to embrace the virtues is to veer too much toward the idea of acquiring merit, and a reliance on personal goodness rather than on God's grace.³⁹ Gilbert Meilaender notes that the notion of character seems to suggest

habitual behaviour, abilities within our power, an acquired possession. And this in turn may be difficult to reconcile with the Christian emphasis on grace, the sense of the sinner's constant need of forgiveness, and the belief that we can have no claims upon the freedom of God.⁴⁰

Such reservations, together with the Enlightenment emphasis on law and principle rather than the virtues, produced a climate in which the idea that the virtues were part of Paul's thought was either suspect or uninteresting, and so it dropped out of the interpretive picture altogether. In recent years, however, Pauline scholars have become aware that the virtues do play an important part in the apostle's thinking. Paul does think that traits such as temperance and courage are important in Christian life. In 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, for example, he urges temperance, patience, prudence, amongst others, albeit in negative form (cf. also Romans 1:29-31; 1 Cor 5:10-11; 2 Cor 12:20).

³⁸ For Luther, 'Almost the entire Aristotelian ethics is fundamentally evil and an enemy of grace'" Martin Luthers *Werke* (Hermann Böhlau) vols 1 and 2, 1883. Vol1 p226 sententia 41. 'The Historic Decline of Virtue Ethics' by Dorothea Frede in *The Cambridge Companion to Virtue Ethics*, 124-49.

³⁹ Jean Porter, 'Virtue' in *The Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics* edited by Gilbert Meilaender and William Werpehowski (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 205.

⁴⁰ See Gilbert Meilaender, *The Theory and Practice of Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), x. But cf. Thomas O'Meara OP 'Virtues in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas', *Theological Studies* 58 (1997): 254-85, who emphasises grace as the source of the virtues.

This line of thinking is particularly in evidence in Galatians 5:19-23, where he speaks of the fruits of the spirit as including perseverance and self-control.

There is, however, an important difference between Paul and ancient philosophical schools such as the Stoics for whom the virtues were important.⁴¹ Ancient thinking about the virtues was concerned with what kind of attitudes would make a person a good citizen, and ultimately, what makes for a good society (Aristotle: *polis*). For Paul, on the other hand, the primary aim was to have a greater knowledge of Christ and to share in his death and resurrection (Phil 3:10-11).⁴² Since believers live in the “now and not yet”, life is full of struggle against the principalities and powers; in Paul’s thinking the virtues are important character traits for members of the community to have if they are to be able to live well as disciples of Christ.

It is also important to notice that these ideas were not confined to Greek thought. The virtues (although they are not called such) were to be found in the wisdom tradition of the Hebrew Scriptures. According to Ellen Davis, we can understand Old Testament Wisdom literature, especially the book of Proverbs, as an exegetical base for renewing a biblically informed virtue tradition. For Paul, she writes,

⁴¹ Troels Engberg-Petersen, *Paul and the Stoics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark 2000); Jennifer A. Herdt, ‘Frailty, Fragmentation, and Social Dependency in the Cultivation of Christian Virtue’ in (ed. Nancy E. Snow) *Cultivating Virtue: Perspectives from Philosophy, Theology, and Psychology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 227-49. Note, too, that in the Stoic tradition, hope for the future should be rejected: the wise man concentrates on the present, “so as not to be disturbed by prospects of the future which eludes his control.” Bernard N. Schumacher, ‘Is there still Hope for Hope?’ In *Hope. Claremont Studies in the Philosophy of religion Conference 2014* edited by Ingolf U. Dalferth & Marlebe A. Block (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2016), 215.

⁴² Daniel J. Harrington & James F. Keenan *Paul and Virtue Ethics: Building Bridges between New Testament Studies and Moral Theology* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield 2010), 104-5. On the virtues in Paul see further, Joseph J. Kotva, *The Christian Case for Virtue Ethics* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press 1996), 119-31.

schooling in the virtues is simply one form of the work his ancestors called “teach[ing] the fear of YHWH (Ps 34:11; cf Prov 1:7).⁴³

We are, then, justified in seeing the ideas of community and the virtues in Paul’s writings, but what of narrative? It must be admitted that it is far from obvious that Paul is operating within what we would now call a “narrative framework”, and for years, many scholars would have said that it is foreign to his thought. Of late, however, there has been a growing appreciation that story is, in fact, very important for Paul. Indeed, everything he writes to his congregations has its basis in the story of what God has done in history through the person of Jesus Christ. Not only that, he sees this story as the central part of the history of the Jewish people – from the creation of the world, through the patriarchs, the Exodus, the giving of the Law and the teaching of the prophets. When he writes to his congregations, then, part of his aim is to help his churches to understand where they fit into the story of God’s redemption of the world.⁴⁴

It is easy to lose sight of this, for rather than spell it out, Paul often assumes that his readers will know it.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, as we look more closely, it becomes evident that this metanarrative is very important in all his epistles, not least the letter to the Romans. Paul’s message of the gospel, and his understanding of the justification of believers, is set in the story of creation, of God’s dealings with the Jewish people, of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Messiah has come, and the

⁴³ Ellen F. Davis ‘Preserving Virtues: Renewing the Traditions of the Sages’ in *Character and Scripture: Moral Formation, Community and Biblical Interpretation* edited by William P Brown (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2002), 184.

⁴⁴ See N.T. Wright *The New Testament and the People of God: Christian Origins and the Question of God* (London: SPCK, 2013); Richard B. Hays *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1993).

⁴⁵ See the collection of essays in Bruce W. Longenecker (ed.), *Narrative Dynamics in Paul: A Critical Assessment* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002); Richard B Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1-4:11* (2nd Ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002 [1983]); Stephen E Fowl, *The Story of Christ in the Ethics of Paul: An Analysis of the Function of the Hymnic Material in the Pauline Corpus* JSNTSup 36 (Sheffield: JSOT Press 1990).

period of the “now and the not yet” has begun as we wait for the completion of the story at the end times.⁴⁶

5. An alternative interpretation

It is, then, quite in order for us to bring these ideas to bear on our passage in Romans. Narrative and the virtues, although not necessarily to the fore in Paul’s writing, form part of his intellectual and cultural world, and play an important role in the fabric of his thinking. While we cannot by any means say that Paul himself thought in the same way as modern character ethicists such as Hauerwas do, we can say that elements of what we now call character ethics are to be found in his writings. In other words, we cannot describe Paul as a character ethicist, but we can say that these central ideas are not foreign to his thinking and indeed were part of the cultural and intellectual air (both Jewish and Hellenistic) which he breathed.

These ideas provide a quite different hermeneutical lens through which to view Romans 5:1-5 from that of foundationalism. What message does our passage contain when we see perseverance as a virtue (rather than merely an act of obedience), character in terms of community wellbeing as well as personal obedience, and faith, hope and love as theological virtues? First, perseverance becomes not so much an act of the will as a God-given capacity. Thus, perseverance is no longer solely a matter of gritting our teeth - we already have the ability to learn and practise it. Further, our ability to persevere cannot be divorced from the Christian narrative. As Hauerwas and Pinches remind us in their book *Christians Among the Virtues*,

Christians can endure because through Christ they have been given power over death and all the forms of victimization that trade on it. The ultimate power of Christ is the victory over death that makes possible the endurance of suffering: we can endure because we have confidence that though our

⁴⁶ Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul’s Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2001).

enemies may kill us they cannot determine the meaning of our death.⁴⁷

The ability to persevere rests on the fact that God has acted in history through Christ's death and victory, and that believers have a changed relationship with God. It is because of this that we are enabled us to withstand the trials which will and indeed must come our way as we participate in the continuing story of Christ's work in the world (8:17).

Second, we have seen that from a foundationalist perspective the character of which Paul speaks (understood in terms of moral and spiritual strength) results from obedience to the implied imperative to cling on to faith and persevere. Now, it is true that such strength is a mark of being a new creation in Christ. But how does it come about and what happens when we fail or make mistakes? According to Barth, God in his grace allows us continually to make mistakes and continually restores us - over and over again.⁴⁸ However, this seems to suggest that Christian life is static, a matter of repeated failure and divine rescue. A character ethics perspective, on the other hand, encourages us to think in terms of the Christian life as a journey. The believer is *homo viator* – on a journey of spiritual and moral growth into maturity and wisdom.⁴⁹ Moreover, this takes place in community. While it is true that personal holiness is important, as we have seen, the virtues are practised not for our own benefit primarily, but in and for the sake of the community, and indeed humanity, as a whole.

Third, when faith, hope and love are understood as theological virtues (in Aquinas' terms), the emphasis moves away from the idea of an act of will, to that of divine gift. Certainly, the belief that Christ has been raised from the dead is the foundation for our ability to persevere in

⁴⁷ Stanley Hauerwas and Charles Pinches, *Christians Among the Virtues: Theological Conversations with Ancient and Modern Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 1997), 123.

⁴⁸ Karl Barth *Church Dogmatics* II/2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 644-45 cited in Hauerwas and Pinches *Christians Among the Virtues*, 113-28.

⁴⁹ Gabriel Marcel, *Homo Viator: Introduction to a Metaphysic of Hope*. Translated by Emma Craufurd (London: Gollancz 1951). See also Gilbert Meilander 'The Place of Ethics in the Theological Task', *Currents in Theology and Mission* 6 (1979): 199.

suffering and cling on to hope. We choose to believe that God has acted in Christ and we maintain that belief as an act of will. The same may be said for trust – we choose to trust that God continues to work through the Holy Spirit. But also important is the idea of faithfulness – of our being faithful to God as he is faithful to us. The crucial point is, though, that we are given the grace to be believing, trusting and faithful people and these God-given characteristics enable us to shoulder the responsibility of discipleship. As we participate in the continuing story of Christ’s work in the world, we grow in our understanding of the nature and implications of our belief, learn how to trust more fully and are enabled to be faithful.

Hope too becomes something that we are given – the expectation of the end time vindication and glorification is a gift from God. It is something that Christians have, as part of their identity, and they have it only in community. As Gabriel Marcel notes, “there can be no hope which does not constitute itself through a we and for a we... all hope is at bottom choral”.⁵⁰ Further, as the mean between the extremes of triumphalism (sometimes called presumption) and despair, this hope enables us to continue on our journey in the “now and not yet”.

According to Pieper,

Despair means that the wayfarer no longer believes that the journey is doable. Presumption means that the journey is doable, but that we do not need to rely on God. In neither vice do we in fact rely on God. God is beyond our needs for the journey.⁵¹

We may be tempted to despair that we will never be able to get to the end of the journey, or to presume that we are able to carry on without God. The mean between these two extremes is a realistic view both of our own abilities in avoiding these temptations and of our relationship to God.

Lastly, besides being a subjective assurance of God’s love for us, *agapē* is a gift which must be exercised, and it is through this that hope of the

⁵⁰ ‘The Encounter with Evil’ in *Tragic Wisdom and Beyond* (trans.) Stephen Jolin and Peter McCormick (Evanston: North Eastern University Press 1973), 143.

⁵¹ Harrington & Keenan, *Paul and Virtue Ethics*, 104-5.

future glory is glimpsed. The phrase “the love of God” in 5:5 may be understood not only as God’s love for us but as our love for God.⁵² Moreover, our response of love for God must also express itself in love for others. God has already revealed this hope to us, in the person and work of Jesus Christ, whose example of kenotic love is one which his disciples should imitate (Phil 2:1-11). Moreover, whenever believers exercise this gift of *agapē* love, the pervading pattern of power-seeking and selfish behaviour which characterises the world is challenged and undermined. In our weakness, and indeed because of it, we are bringing the kingdom of God into the here and now. We are bringing something of the future hope of God’s justice and the revelation of his glory into the present time.⁵³ In the expression of Christ-like love, imperfect though it may be, we see something of how things will be when the full glory of God (who is love) is revealed. In the love which believers demonstrate, within their own community and to those who are outside, glimpses of the eschatological hope which we have can be seen in the present.

In this interpretation, then, when Christians encounter suffering, they are able to persevere, grow in character and hold on to hope because of the gifts they have been given. They are able to withstand the suffering which is part and parcel of being a part of God’s story because of the “distinctive excellences” which characterise their communities. Certainly, these gifts must be used on the journey towards the time when God will be all in all. However, from a character ethics perspective, faith, hope and love become less a matter of obedient assent and grim determination, than one of using the gifts we have been given and being changed “into his likeness” (2 Cor 3:18) as we do so.

From a character ethics perspective, then, how might this passage inform pastoral care? We have seen that, when the question “what ought I to do?” is asked of the text, implicit imperatives to hold on to

⁵² Augustine, *The Spirit and the Letter* 5.3. See Gerald L. Bray & Thomas C. Oden, *Romans: Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. New Testament Volume 6* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP 2005), 126.

⁵³ See Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and Implications of a Christian Theology* (London: SCM, 1964).

the tenets of faith and to the eschatological hope are found within it. When trouble comes, then, individuals need to hold on to certainties as a matter of obedience, and if this is proving difficult, pastoral care involves reminding of and reinforcing what is already known. A character ethics approach changes our understanding of the passage and also of our understanding of the nature of pastoral care. Now, rather than looking for instruction, we are looking to Scripture to help us be the kind of people God wants us to be. From this perspective, Romans 5:1-5 tells us that we are a community of people who have been given the gifts we need in order to be resilient in times of trouble. Called to a journey of participation in the continuing story of Christ's work in the world, we have the resources we need to shoulder this responsibility together. Pastoral care is a matter of accompaniment and mutual support along the way. If and when some find it difficult to exercise their gifts of faith, hope and love in times of trouble, the community can support them and provide for their needs, drawing wisdom and encouragement from the Scriptures as it does so. As those who find it difficult to hold on to hope are cared for by the community, they may well catch glimpses of God's future hope in the here and now and so find strength for the journey.

Conclusion: Suffering, hope and pastoral care

We began by noting an increasing interest in the use of Scripture in writing on pastoral care, and the importance of hermeneutics for that endeavour. Here, as a contribution to this still nascent interdisciplinary work, I have undertaken a study of Romans 5:1-5, asking how it might inform the pastoral care of people who are struggling to hope in the midst of severe crisis. I have offered two interpretations, one informed by foundationalist hermeneutics and another by character ethics. I have suggested that a foundationalist hermeneutic is unconsciously adopted by many readers of the Bible, who read in order to find out what they should be doing in their everyday lives. A character ethics informed hermeneutic, on the other hand, is less concerned with doing than with being: what kind of people ought we to be? We have seen that the hermeneutical standpoint adopted by the reader has the potential to influence not only how the text is interpreted and used in the pastoral setting, but how pastoral care itself is understood and carried out.

From a foundationalist viewpoint, Romans 5:1-5 might suggest that the onus is on individuals to persevere in suffering, and to cling on to faith, love and hope as a matter of obedience. While there is some truth in this, as far as pastoral care is concerned, there could be a risk that the passage is used merely as a means for reminding people of propositional truths and of the necessity of obedience to inferred imperatives. There is, in turn, a danger that those who, for whatever reason, are unable to do this will be deemed to suspect and in need of exhortation or even rebuke. For those who are struggling, this could add a burden of guilt and shame to an already heavy load, and might even suggest that their suffering is incompatible with their faith.

An interpretation of this passage from the perspective of character ethics helps us avoid these pitfalls. Its focus on being rather than doing, on narrative and the virtues rather than rule and obedience, and community rather than individualism, means that the Christian life becomes a matter of growing in character in community, rather than of individual effort. When we apply this hermeneutical lens to Romans 5:1-15, we see that the passage is still full of encouragement. But rejoicing in the link between suffering and hope is less a matter of what we ought to be doing than something we are enabled to do because of the gifts we have been given by God: Christians are faithful, hopeful and loving people. As we participate in Christ's redemptive sufferings, and learn from our experience, we reach out to others in *agapē* love. The community of faith suffers, endures, grows together. Pastoral care becomes a matter of accompanying rather than of prescription and instruction, of sharing rather than attempting to fix perceived problems. When some find it difficult to trust or hope in times of suffering, the community of faith, through the exercise of *agapē* love, dares to do so on their behalf.

Notes on Contributor

Marion L.S. Carson is Senior Research Fellow International Baptist Study Centre, Amsterdam