*The Reformation of Suffering*, by Ronald K. Rittgers, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. 263 pages.

Ronald K. Rittgers (PhD, Harvard University) holds the Erich Markel Chair in German Reformation Studies at Valparaiso University and serves as professor of history, theology, and humanities.

***Overview***

The 16th Century stands out in church history because of a massive shift in the way that the Reformers taught and applied the doctrine of justification. This shift affected many different aspects of life. But how did it affect the way that clergy and laity perceived and dealt with suffering? This is what *The Reformation of Suffering* seeks to demonstrate as the author traces theological tendencies from the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) through the close of the 16th Century.

Suffering has a way of revealing our deepest religious convictions. Lateran IV was an effort to direct people away from unorthodox, pagan practices in hopes of relieving their suffering. In their place, the laity found comfort in the words and rites performed by clergy (18). The sacraments that brought the most benefit to the sufferer were unction and confession. Clergy treated affliction as penance for sin. Therefore, suffering became a way to atone for sin’s penalty and establish merits for others (28). In other words, the purpose of suffering was to reduce punishment for transgression.

Rittgers goes on to demonstrate how this theological framework differed little from philosophies such as Stoicism that sought to suppress emotions like grief. In fact, Stoic concepts shaped much of the consolation literature from the Medieval Latin Church. In many ways, they “engaged in the same effort: to remove the sting of death, to render it somehow less foreboding…and thus to try to make sense out of the sorrow and suffering that were part and parcel of the human mortal condition” (41). Suffering then afforded the individual an opportunity to reduce their punishment for sin and cultivate virtue, making them fit for heaven (61).

With the emergence of German mysticism, suffering became more directly connected to Christ’s passion. This form of devotion focused more on “Christ as the Man of Sorrows rather than as Pantokrator or Judge” (69). The humanizing of Jesus gave the afflicted one an example to imitate as they conformed to God’s will instead of their own. Consolation in suffering seemed irrelevant. The goal rather was to embrace affliction and enter into union with the weak and bloodied Savior. In this way, the afflicted one purged their penalty and achieved righteousness (83).

There is a marked shift in the book as Rittgers focuses on the life and work of Martin Luther. By citing Luther’s lectures on the Psalms and Romans, he demonstrates the early development of Luther’s approach to tribulation. The most significant difference between Luther and his predecessors was that faith had taken central place over love in the life of a Christian (88). God was at work in the sinner to create something out of nothing (100). So now the purpose of affliction moved away from reducing the punishment for sin or conforming to God’s will as a means of salvation. Through faith, the Christian received God’s righteousness as a gift and affliction served to test, refine and prove God’s work in that individual (108).

Over time, this crystalized for Luther into the “theology of the cross”. As long as humans looked to cooperate with or perceive God in strength and wisdom, they would trust in themselves and their efforts. Therefore, God chose to reveal himself in weakness. For Luther, the severest (but not only) tribulations were terrors of conscience, fear of death and despairing of God’s goodness and grace in Christ (122). So Rittgers sums up the heart of Luther’s theology, “the only God available to human beings was the suffering God, the God who suffered with and for humanity. This meant that Christians had to look for God in suffering, both Christ’s and their own” (118). In this Christ and his cross, God revealed his “friendly heart” toward us and his urgent desire to redeem us for himself (114).

What kind of implications did this theological shift have on the newly formed evangelical church? It’s worth noting that some other reformers such as Ulrich Zwingli didn’t share the same convictions as Luther. Rittgers writes, “From Zwingli’s perspective, Luther’s Christology was deeply problematic: he thought it confined the infinite God to Christ’s humanity and threatened the very deity of the sovereign God by making him subject to suffering” (127).

Other reformers went on to embrace a more radical form of adversity. Thomas Muentzer and Conrad Grebel taught that if Christians weren’t experiencing persecution on account of the gospel, something was wrong. They felt that Luther and others “preach ‘a sinful, sweet Christ’ whom the majority find appealing, because he demands so little and gives so much” (156). The purpose of radical suffering then was to prove that someone was a true Christian.

Nevertheless, as the evangelical movement began to spread so did the need for pastors who were trained to minister to the suffering. Even in the development of church ordinances (printed guides for Protestant worship, belief, and behavior), they “paid special attention to the internal struggles of conscience that could attend afflictions of the body” (174). This is why private confession and absolution stand out in the Lutheran tradition. As time went on however, consolatory works began to flood the market. Some of these books even went on to address topics like difficult marriages, misbehaving children, or struggles with anger or greed (188).

The closing chapters of the book show how later evangelical consolation literature became focused on the confessionalization of early modern Germany. One of the goals of this literature was to improve pastoral care (226). In the last chapter, Rittgers demonstrates how difficult it still was, especially in rural areas of Germany, to maintain a distinction between evangelical teaching and traditional Christian and traditional pagan sources (230). However, there are sources written by middle-class laity in Germany that prove they were putting into practice what their pastors taught them.

Rittgers concludes the book by addressing the lack of lament in premodern Christian consolation literature. He attributes this to “a strong emphasis on divine sovereignty and on human bondage to sin in Protestant theology” (258). In the author’s mind, not allowing room for lament has had a detrimental effect on the faith and life of those who follow the Western Christian tradition.

***Uses for Ministry***

*The Reformation of Suffering* is extremely well researched and constructed. The author cites a multitude of primary sources and demonstrates a strong familiarity with the period in history that he is addressing. So the first benefit for use in the ministry is to gain a refreshing perspective on church history from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century. Another benefit is to consider how theology informs the way people perceive and deal with suffering. As clergy who ourselves will experience affliction and will minister to others who endure hardship, this is a reminder to “keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Timothy 4:16, ESV).

Furthermore, at a time when self-help material and how-to tutorials promise to alleviate suffering and failure in life, *The Reformation of Suffering* gives a clear picture of the foolishness of the gospel. God chooses weakness, suffering, the cross and death to wound and to bury so that he might create a life that is worth living.

Finally, it is good to consider the subject of lament. Is there a place for it in communal worship life and as individuals? How do we help to foster a proper understanding and practice of lament as we experience affliction and trials as the children of God? May God both continue to console the afflicted and give us patient endurance as we seek to “comfort others with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.”