

Chris K. Huebner, *Suffering the Truth: Occasional Sermons and Reflections*, CMU Press, Winnipeg, Manitoba, 2020. 111 pp. \$19.99. ISBN-13: 9781987986075.

Suffering the Truth: Occasional Sermons and Reflections captures the heart and spirit of John 18:36, where, in response to Pontius Pilate’s questioning, Christ says: “My kingdom does not belong to this world. If my kingdom belonged to this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here” (NRSVUE).⁶ Although John 18:36 may not include every nuance of *Suffering the Truth*, these two sources share two themes of importance: Christianity’s distinct existence and Christ’s call to surrender control. To renounce violence is to renounce power over a situation. Thus, when Christ bookends his kingdom’s countercultural identity around the doctrine of nonviolence, he stresses his hope for peaceable action and calls for Christians to cease their quest for control.⁷

In *Suffering the Truth*, Chris K. Huebner echoes Christ’s words and calls for Christians to embrace Christianity’s tough assignment of cruciformity. Rather than viewing something uncontrollable or surprising as chaos in need of management, Huebner challenges Christians to embrace the “grammar of gift”—to equate the unexpected nature of Christianity to the unpredictable nature of a gift (4, 62–63). Since the giver maintains primary control over the nature and purpose of a gift, receiving a gift precludes the recipient’s control; similarly, Christians should see their lives and Christ’s truth as God-given gifts and not objects to be controlled (20–21).

Huebner unveils how much of our lives revolve around our conscious and unconscious efforts to gain or maintain control. Many harmful behaviors, such as violence and coercion, possess an underlying motivation—the search for mastery—that is the same as some relatively harmless and routine behaviors, such as searching for love, knowledge, and comfortable exegesis (26, 34, 72). *Suffering the Truth* showcases the author’s concern for the latter behaviors.

To articulate this point, Huebner delves into the relationship between the concepts of self and power. Someone’s pursuit of control takes many forms, and Huebner often identifies such pursuits as symptoms of self-orientation—i.e., our need to control stems from our need to maintain luxury or comfortable

⁶ Unless otherwise stated, all scripture references and quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition* (NRSVUE).

⁷ In Chapter 11, titled “Suffering the Truth,” Huebner references John 18:38 and later concludes: “The truth of Christ is not that of the world. And yet we who claim to be shaped by it also live in the world. And so Christianity names a life that is simultaneously truthful wisdom and the most absurd folly” (77–78). Jesus’s words in the Gospel of John serve as formative words for Huebner’s assessments and conclusions.

ideologies (59, 107). Such goals, however, will misguide our steps: “In our lust for comfort we are often pointed in a direction that causes us to miss the heart of the gospel” (56).

For example, in the opening chapter, Huebner calls upon Dante’s character development in *The Divine Comedy*. After unmasking self-serving preaching—when the pulpit becomes a platform from which preachers exchange performances for the audience’s praise—Beatrice, Dante’s guide, encourages Dante to see creation as something to serve instead of something to conquer (1–4). Instead of focusing on ownership and self-absorption, Huebner challenges his readers to live sacrificially (3). Another example pertains to the church’s knowledge of the Triune God. Instead of conforming to Christ’s image, Christians often mold Christ into their image and create a proverbial Christ—a Messiah that imitates their norms—in an attempt to understand him (15–16). In Huebner’s words: “We long for a messiah who seems familiar, a friend we feel like we already know. . . . The emphasis is not on a God with whom we are becoming increasingly familiar, but on a God who remains exceedingly strange” (16). Huebner calls for the church to step out in faith and embrace the uncontrollable and mysterious nature of the Triune God (15–17; also see 35, 48, 59, 66, 78).

In lieu of control, Christians should seek the truth only found in Christ and reject “any version of Christianity that offers a means to escape suffering” (76). Huebner rightfully places suffering at Christianity’s core to underline the challenge of preaching Christ’s “upside-down” gospel to a “right-side-up” world (77).⁸ Thus, Christians joyfully and painfully bear the message of the cross since we simultaneously experience Christ’s truth and the world’s rejection (77). Moreover, Christ’s truth is gifted to creation, not uncovered, and truly understood amid suffering and infirmity (hence the book’s main title) (78).

Additionally, Huebner ties the distinct nature of Christianity to not only orthopraxy and orthodoxy but also time. *Suffering the Truth* correlates our distinction from the world to the liturgical calendar, and by structuring the book around this calendar, Huebner demonstrates how our uniqueness arises from our special occasions (9–10). Our existence stems not only from our theology but also from our temporality, thus speaking to the strange and occasional nature of our lives and worship (hence the book’s subtitle) (9–10).

Each chapter challenges commonly held beliefs regarding the Christian calendar, relating most holidays to abdication and rejoicing in God’s mysterious nature. In the final chapter, for example, Huebner challenges Mennonites who think they have fully grasped the concepts of peace and justice (107–8). While addressing Peace Sunday, he says: “I suspect Mennonites may be tempted to feel a certain sort of triumphalism. . . . We might be tempted to think that we have

⁸ In line with this thought, another source to consider is Donald B. Kraybill, *The Upside-Down Kingdom* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1990), 35.

got this peace thing figured out. . . . This happens, for example, when we speak of peace as an ideal and see ourselves as those whose task is to work toward it in a sort of linear fashion” (107). Huebner calls for Mennonites to rethink their comfortable beliefs and to welcome the difficult, unknown journey at the forefront of seeking *shalom* (107).

Huebner calls for Christians to live according to the values of God’s kingdom, not the world’s, and underscores how we should see the concepts of self and control. *Suffering the Truth* spurs reflection on the unhealthy levels of individualism in many churches and ideologies. An increase in individualism occurs when dying to self does not define someone’s theology of power and self-understanding. When this happens, we cast aside our cruciformity and see the cross in terms of how it serves us instead of how we should serve it.

When control and individualism undergird the doctrine of salvation, the cross becomes an object to control as opposed to a call for self-sacrifice. Instead of submitting to the cross, salvation becomes solely about ensuring control. In extensive detail, Huebner articulates salvation’s sacrificial nature and the theme of abdication to guide us away from serving ourselves and toward the service of others (4–6). Huebner illuminates this path to encourage the servitude needed for *shalom*.

Furthermore, glorifying religious violence demonstrates a distortion of the cross rooted in the world’s link between control and violence. Religious violence arises from “dominion theology,” which offers a violent reading of Genesis 1:28: God created humankind “in the image of God” and bestowed authority and dominion upon creation, which dominionists see as an entitlement to rule.⁹ Thus, dominion theology encourages violence to ensure dominance and establish a theonomy.¹⁰ *Suffering the Truth* unveils the motivations behind dominionists. Their concept of self stems from a violent reading of *imago Dei*, propelling them to seek control over creation. As such, conforming to Christ’s meekness counters their identity and purpose.

Among other things, a motivational factor behind dominion theology is securing control over the eschaton. Dominion theology sees Christian rule as the catalyst for the second coming, meaning violence and conquest in Christ’s name will lead to his return and the realization of God’s kingdom.¹¹

⁹ Paul Maltby, “Fundamentalist Dominion, Postmodern Ecology,” *Ethics and the Environment* 13, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 119.

¹⁰ Maltby, 120. Also see T. David Gordon, “Critique of Theonomy: A Taxonomy,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 56, no. 1 (1994): 23–43; 23.

¹¹ Maltby, 120. Also see George Hough, “American Terrorism and the Christian Identity Movement: A Proliferation Threat from Non-State Actors,” *International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies* 3, no. 1 (2006): 83.

For dominionists, the waiting period between Christ's ascension and the *parousia* is within our grasp. Scripture's ultimate test of patience—suffering for Christ's gospel without knowing when he'll return—is sidelined in the name of control. Subsequently, dominionists sideline Christ's authentic image to control the uncontrollable. The unrecognizable, nonviolent Lamb who calls for cruciformity becomes a recognizable, combative leader asking Christians to fight on his behalf—an example of, in Huebner's words, when “we long for a messiah who seems familiar, a friend we feel like we already know” (16). Moreover, whereas Huebner calls for Christians to relate Christ's Advent to God's unpredictable nature, dominionists see Advent as an event within their power, and religious violence becomes the catalyst for peace (15). Ultimately, Christian dominionists find hope inwardly—in their power.

Huebner calls for the church to relinquish control and accept the mysterious nature of God and our faith. His book should be an encouragement to any Anabaptist—whether teacher, preacher, missionary, or layperson—who serves God's kingdom in areas where pressures to conform to the world are present. Anabaptists have historically found themselves on the margins of society, and Huebner challenges us to stay true to our convictions in the midst of our challenging placement in the world.

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