Urgent patience in uncertain times

Paul Doerksen

> *"Only people who carry a certain restlessness around with them can wait, and people who look up reverently to the One who is great in the world."*
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> *–Dietrich Bonhoeffer*[1]

> *"For in the patience of love's delay lies human blessedness."*
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> *–Pilgram Marpeck*[2]

That we find ourselves in a time of transition, turmoil, upheaval, anxiety, unease, and uncertainty seems, on the surface of things, to be a truism. The obviousness of such a description should not mute the significance of that characterization, but neither should it dupe us into thinking that we live in utterly "unprecedented times," as that ubiquitous phrase would have us believe. Nevertheless, the current lived experience of some significant level of uncertainty provides an opportunity for us to consider what kinds of Christian practices we might cultivate in these times. One such Christian practice I am putting forward here for our consideration is that of Christian patience, a practice that can sometimes drop from view in times when it's easy to think that the primary need is quick action to respond confidently to uncertainties. Oliver O'Donovan's dramatic conclusion to an essay concerning issues faced by the church generated the prompt for my consideration of patience. There he asserts "one word of caution for those who speak and for those who listen when God's word is abroad. The first, and surely the hardest

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1 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Collected Sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. Isabel Best, trans. Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 8.

2 John D. Rempel, ed., *Jorg Maler's Kunstbuch: Writings of the Marpeck Circle* (Kitchener, ON: Herald, 2010), 312–13.

demand that it makes on them is: patience."[3] Where we might have expected O'Donovan to name the importance of leaping into action, we find instead a demand to exercise patience.

I begin my considerations on patience with reference to two passages of Scripture, which serve as a brief display of the broad strokes of a biblical view of patience—namely, (1) that God practices divine patience toward creation, and (2) that humans are also called to practice patience. Regarding divine patience, the apostle Peter writes,

> *But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. . . . Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish, and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation. (2 Peter 3:8–9, 14–15)*

Peter describes God as exercising patience with people, an offer that opens the possibility of repentance and salvation, and exhorts his readers, who are ostensibly the recipients of God's patience, to wait in peace for the renewal of all things.

James adds a call for human practice of patience with an emphasis that is notably different than Peter's:

> *Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. . . . As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Indeed, we call blessed those who showed endurance. You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful. (James 5:7–11)*

James counsels patience on the part of the reader, offers encouragement in the fact that the coming of the Lord is near, and provides examples

3 Oliver O'Donovan, "Homosexuality in the Church: Can There be a Fruitful Theological Debate?" in *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Eugene F. Rodgers, Jr. (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2002), 386.

to follow in the prophets of Israel, explicitly offering the blessed pattern displayed by Job.

Neither divine nor human patience is waiting devoid of shape or content. Christian patience is delusionary if seen as "an invitation to escape from the tasks of large struggles against gargantuan and fast moving whirls of destruction";[4] patience is misguided if taken to mean the preserving of the status quo;[5] patience is false when it is of the sort that derives from indifference, weakness, or short-sightedness.[6] Further, I am not suggesting that Christian patience is fully expressed in what we might call "natural patience," the kind of actions taken by a hiker who pauses to rest on her way to a destination, a worker putting down of a heavy burden until new strength is found, a farmer waiting for a crop to grow, a mother with her children. While these examples qualify as the exercise of patience, they can also be construed as providing the instrumental condition for attaining what is desired, for "gaining what is coveted."[7] Rather, for Christians, the understanding of patience begins with God—that is, God's patience displayed in creation toward humans specifically, revealed most explicitly in Jesus Christ and in the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit.

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The patience of God

According to Karl Barth, "patience exists where time and space are given within a definite intention, when freedom is allowed in expectation of a

4 Stanley Hauerwas, "The Politics of Gentleness: Random Thoughts for a Conversation with Jean Vanier," in Stanley Hauerwas and Romand Coles, *Christianity, Radical Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary: Conversations between a Radical Democrat and a Christian* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2008), 193.

5 Stanley Hauerwas, *A Better Hope: Resources for a Church Confronting Capitalism, Democracy, and Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009), 277.

6 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II.I, *The Doctrine of God*, ed. G. Bromiley, T. Torrance, trans. T. Parker et al. (London: T&T Clark International, 2004), 423.

7 Soren Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, trans. Howard Hong, Edna Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 161.

response. God acts in this way. He makes this purposeful concession of space and time."[8] Barth's assertion of God's purposeful concession of space and time is part of a much longer treatment of what he terms the "perfections of God." Barth puts forward a provisional understanding of God as the God of love and freedom. Any discussion or description of God must not make the mistake of speaking of "attributes" that have an existence apart from, independent of, God's own being. That is, if one speaks of grace or mercy, it is important *not* to say that God *has* grace or mercy, but that God *is* grace, God *is* mercy. Further, when the various perfections of God are spoken of, it is essential never to abandon other perfections when beginning to speak of any particular one. So, as Barth contemplates the perfections of divine loving, he turns to a lengthy analysis of the grace and holiness of God, the mercy and righteousness of God, and then the patience and wisdom of God. God's patience is *not* some isolated "characteristic" among other "characteristics" of God. It is a dimension of what God *is*—or as Barth puts it, "the perfection of divine patience is a special perfection of love and therefore the being of God."[9] In patience, God thus "conced[es] to this existence a reality side by side with His own, and fulfilling His will towards this other in such a way that He does not spend and destroy it as this other but accompanies and sustains it and allows it to develop in freedom."[10] God is not thereby suspending the reality of the human experience, but rather "the fact that God has time for us is what characterizes His whole activity towards us as an exercise of patience."[11]

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Jesus's display of patience in the Passion

We also see patience in action in the earthly life and ministry of Jesus, perhaps especially evident in the Passion of Christ. Christopher Vogt's work is instructive here. He understands Jesus's experience during the entire Passion as displaying four dimensions of patience. First, Jesus displays a

8 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II.I, 408.

9 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II.I, 407.

10 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II.I, 409–410.

11 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II.I, 417.

reluctant endurance of suffering, which is to be avoided if possible but endured if necessary. Second, the patience of Jesus depends on a profound sense of Providence and desire to be obedient to God, thus compelling him to wait for events to unfold so that God's purpose may be made known. It is important at this point to also recognize that we are part of the unfolding of history as participants, calling for discernment and endurance at the same time. Third, Vogt finds in the Passion a willingness to endure the difficulties entailed in sharing the task of controlling our destiny with others, most importantly with God. Vogt highlights the fourth and last dimension of Jesus's patience as something that is practiced out of love for God, his friends, and the world, bringing to view the fact that the practice of patience is fundamentally social in nature.[12] Vogt's work, done within the context of a discussion of Christian care for the dying, brings into sharp relief the fact that the patience of Jesus is not just one thing, that it is neither quiescent nor passive but rather an active shaping of a response to the fact that Jesus is going about the will of God.

Patience in the power of the Spirit

Before Jesus went to Jerusalem to be crucified, he promised his disciples that he would ask the Father for another Advocate who would be with them forever. This reference to the coming of the Holy Spirit as the coming of the gift of an Advocate is central to John's account of things, especially in chapters 14–17 of John's Gospel. Here Jesus tells his disciples that while he will leave their immediate presence, they will not be orphaned because the Spirit will come to abide with them, teach them everything, and remind them of all that Jesus has said to them. The apostle Paul, in Romans 8, shows his readers that life in the present circumstances ought to be shaped in part at least by an understanding of the glory that will be revealed. Such an eschatological posture is not some misguided notion that we know the future and how things might unfold or that we can control the shape of

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12 Christopher Vogt, "Practicing Patience, Compassion, and Hope at the end of Life: Mining the Passion of Jesus in Luke for the Christian Model of Dying Well," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 24, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2004): 138–43.

that unfolding. Rather, the future remains open precisely because it is the arena of God's activity, which Christians can understand to some degree, not in terms of apocalyptic timelines or calendars or some such speculative activity but in terms of the shape of things that we have seen in Christ by the power of the Spirit. Thus we have a high calling "to offer to the world in the present a foretaste of the ultimate glory that God is bringing definitively in the future."[13] But a reminder to look to the future, an eschatological posture, is not a call to ignore the present; rather, the present becomes an opportunity to be open to the work of the Spirit, who helps us in our weakness, intercedes for us, makes known the will of God, and so on (Romans 8:1–30). Put another way, the work of the Spirit provides the power of the possibility of living the life of patience within the space and time provided by God's patience revealed so clearly in Jesus Christ. In sum, God's patience is expressed in Trinitarian form, which is essential for the faithful life of the church. As David Lauber writes, paying "close attention to God's patience will enable the church to reflect more faithfully on God's presence and action in the world, and to grasp the profound effects of the affirmation that God acts slowly; God takes time; God has time for his creatures and makes time for his creatures. God acts in this fashion not because of inattentive indifference but because of the strength of his resolve to bring his creatures to saving perfection."[14]

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Human patience

The practice of human patience is related to divine patience but is not analogous to it. Turning our attention to human patience ought *not* to lead us too quickly to a facile conclusion that runs something like this: because God is patient, humans too ought to be patient—or that the pa-

13 Philip D. Kenneson, *Life on the Vine: Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit in Christian Community* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 125. Kenneson's chapter "Cultivating Patience in the Midst of Productivity" informs much of my discussion here.

14 David Lauber, "'For the Sake of This One, God Has Patience with the Many': Czeslaw Milosz and Karl Barth on God's Patience, the Incarnation, and the Possibility of Belief," *Christian Scholar's Review* 40, no. 2 (Winter 2011): 169–70.

tience to which humans are called can be understood as being modeled directly on God's exercise of that virtue. In a perceptive account of God's work in creation as a display of patience, Paul Daffyd Jones, drawing on Karl Barth, focuses on God's granting of space and time to the created world, wherein "space is opened for creatures, empowered by God, to combine forms of activity, passivity, receptivity, invention, and collaboration as they heed and make good on God's patience."[15] Jones observes that seeking to conform human striving to God's action and attitude toward the world seems to seek for analogy which is *not* necessarily present in the relationship of God and human.[16]

God's patient provision of time and space includes Christ's urgent petition that each and every one of us should act, without delay, in a manner which honors the covenant of grace. God's patience, one must even say, awaits a *dis*-analogous response. We are not asked to do the impossible: correspond ourselves to the God who has time and space, and who gives time and space to act in freedom and obedience. Nor, for that matter, are we asked to exercise restraint or to take on the responsibility of incarnating God's patience. Our task is otherwise: to move toward and purposefully to inhabit the Kingdom that is the in-breaking gift of the patient God.[17]

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Even while acknowledging the disanalogous nature of human patience, nonetheless, Christians are called to exercise patience. To see what this might look like, I turn to the early Anabaptist tradition. In particular, I turn to the work of Pilgram Marpeck to reflect briefly on the nature of human Christian patience, especially as he relates patience to peace. For Marpeck, the pursuit of peace is not primarily a technique or strategy

15 Paul Dafydd Jones, "The Patience of God the Creator: Reflections on Genesis 1:1–2:4a," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 21, no. 4 (October 2019): 384.

16 God's patience toward creatures does not involve as logical consequence that humans ought to under all circumstances exercise only patience. Hans Frei, "God's Patience and Our Work," in Hans W. Frei, *Unpublished Pieces: Transcripts from the Yale Divinity School Archive*, ed. Mike Higton with assistance from Mark Alan Bowald and Hester Higton, 1998–2004, 94.

17 Paul Dafydd Jones, "On Patience: Thinking with and beyond Karl Barth," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 68, no. 3 (2015): 288.

but rather an expression of a vibrant and real *Christian spirituality*, which finds that expression in the exercise of patience. Patience makes peace possible (insofar as it is possible), and that patience is itself made imaginable through the humanity of Christ, understood within a Trinitarian framework, enlivened by the Holy Spirit, and practiced by the church both internally and externally. Marpeck offers this succinct description concerning true patience: (1) patience is made possible when we are mindful with all our heart of our entry into this world with its fragility and suffering; (2) every injustice and sin must be punished with the severe justice of God; (3) we must offer up our own will and surrender to the will of God; and (4) if someone arrives at this point, "then the innocence of Christ becomes his innocence, and he suffers as one who is innocent." Therefore, at bottom, "genuine, true patience flows from this basis"—namely, the work of Jesus.[18]

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Marpeck directly connects Christ's practice of patience with what becomes possible for the Christian: "He, through patience, conquered it all, just as we also overcome, even in death, through Christ our Lord, if we are truly related to Him in the covenant by His grace, and we persevere until the end."[19] And again, with reference to an "outer ceremony," Marpeck directs his readers to eat the bread and drink the cup, and thereby "show that Christ died for you, giving His body and spilling His blood for you, and show that, in the death of Christ, all your solace and life is directed. *In this* act, too, are seen the works of Christ, which are *love, patience, humility.* Each believer is called upon to continue them."[20]

Thus it is clear that Marpeck does not understand the practice of patience as a series of actions, or even a disposition, as much as the receiving of a gift, the receptive posture of which makes sure not to seize God's offered grace. Rather, God allows sinners glimmers of hope, which we must

18 Rempel, *Jorg Maler's Kunstbuch*, 386.

19 Pilgram Marpeck, *The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, ed. William Klassen and Walter Klaassen (Kitchener, ON: Herald, 1978), 165.

20 Marpeck, *Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, 274, emphasis original.

anticipate with patience.[21] God's generosity, not human effort, is central here; generosity extended by God, by whose gifts, including patience, will "be found among true believers until the end."[22]

Marpeck makes extensive use of horticultural images to intensify his admonitions regarding the Christian practice of patience. Discerning the difference between weeds and fruit is not the only task facing the faithful Christian; discernment is also necessary to be able to distinguish between blossom and foliage, on the one hand, and mature fruit, on the other, making sure not to judge people before the right time, understood as the appearance of fruit, not blossoms or foliage.[23] Here too Marpeck asserts that mature fruit is only made possible by the work of Jesus Christ. Life before the incarnation of Jesus Christ was like a winter storm, indicative of sin and sleep, conditions which are now past and gone. The coming of Christ is our summer, and now flowers can bloom, argues Marpeck, whereas before Christ, the fig tree and vine developed buds or blossoms but no fruit, while with the advent of the Holy Spirit, the first fruits were borne.[24]

Just as it takes time for sin to produce its real fruit, so too does it take time for faith to bring forth its fruit.[25] In both cases, the flowering of sin and of faith, the exercise of patience is crucial for the body of Christ, if it is to avoid sin as it seeks to be faithful in relation to the non-coercive passing on of the faith, the non-coercive practice of church discipline, and more generally the living out of Christian faith. The church opens the possibility of what Marpeck terms as "improvement" in the Christian life; judgments made in love and patience are always concerned with improvement, but never before its time.[26]

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21 Marpeck, *Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, 394. Marpeck claims that Christians simply assume too much: "Oh God, how utterly impatient we are to await your comfort" (394).

22 Marpeck, *Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, 72, 73.

23 Marpeck, *Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, 323.

24 Rempel, *Jorg Maler's Kunstbuch*, 111.

25 Marpeck makes this point as part of an argument against the practice of infant baptism: "If it were the case that there is no abomination of idolatry in infant baptism, and people place or seek no trust or salvation therein, they would certainly have no haste in baptism, but would patiently allow faith to proceed, which is the true salvation for all who are baptized." Marpeck, *Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, 243.

26 Marpeck, *Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, 333, 347.

The uncontrollability of the world

Living in uncertain times highlights what Christians know but sometimes forget—namely, an acknowledgement of the uncontrollability of the world in which we find ourselves, which is nonetheless God's world. While practicing patience within the space and time given to us by God's divine patience is important, it cannot stand alone as *the* practice; it does not stand alone as a panacea. Surely we must be aware of how patience may be distorted in different ways, how it may be falsely equated with inaction or slowness as a self-standing virtue. The practice of Christian patience in a time of uncertainty is an urgent call and demand made on the Christian, precisely because God's word is abroad in these times. And, like the father in the biblical parable hurrying in joy to embrace his wayward son, we know that the final urgent sprint of that story is shaped by and comes only after and as part of enduring, waiting, watching, and hoping.

About the author

Paul Doerksen is associate professor of theology and Anabaptist studies at Canadian Mennonite University (CMU). He acknowledges with gratitude financial support of a research grant from CMU, which enabled spending three months of research time on the topic of Christian patience as a visiting fellow at New College, School of Divinity, at the University of Edinburgh. Paul is married to Julie, a pastor at River East Church, Winnipeg, Manitoba.