

# Pain as a Spiritual Barometer of Health: A Sign of Divine Love, 1780–1850

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*A popular nineteenth-century spiritual barometer displays the steps one might take in the Christian life to bring oneself closer to either 'glory' or 'perdition'. Near the top of the barometer, nearing 'glory' is the bearing of painful tribulations, connected to the cross of Christ. Whilst pain was undeniably an undesired presence in life, it was also a hallmark of spiritual progress. The denouement of Christian health, therefore, was often to be in pain. Looking at pain narratives of six evangelical Dissenters, this article explores how pain was perceived by these individuals through the lens of the atonement. As the atonement was a loving aspect of God's providence, so too was pain in the Christian life a quotidian display of divine love. The meaning and purpose of pain was sanctification, understood as a retributive, though mainly redemptive, implement of God's fatherly love. Whilst sharing a common framework of atonement, case studies from different denominations display nuanced differences in their pain narratives: the Baptists and Congregationalists examined here emphasized the sin that required the atonement, whereas the Quakers emphasized suffering with or alongside Christ.*

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A popular nineteenth-century spiritual barometer found in evangelical magazines displays the steps one might take in the Christian life towards (or away from) spiritual health. This barometer is classified as 'a Scale of the Progress of Sin and Grace'. It assesses behaviours and character traits on a sliding scale, showing whether readers are closer to glory (at the top), treading in the dangerous territory of indifference (in the centre), or nearing perdition (at the bottom). At the top of the barometer, listed as the penultimate category towards 'glory', immediately preceding 'desiring to be with Christ' and 'death', is pain and tribulation as a cross an individual

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doi: 10.1017/stc.2022.10

must bear in the Christian life.<sup>1</sup> Whilst pain was undeniably an undesired presence in life, it was also a hallmark of spiritual progress. The denouement of Christian health was ostensibly to be in pain.

Such ‘barometers of spiritual health’ were common amongst evangelically inclined Dissenters throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and they took diverse forms. The Quaker Elizabeth Fry developed her own ‘spiritual barometer’ which was republished in her memoirs. She provided three points to measure spiritual health, the second of which concerned the manner in which one handled affliction: ‘every time that trial or temptation assailed thee, didst thou endeavour to look steadily to the Delivering Power – even to Christ who can do all things for thee?’<sup>2</sup> Unsurprisingly, affliction or pain was an expected component of life on earth for many. Pain was not only expected in the Christian life but for many it was integral to it. Conversely, as will be discussed below, pain could also be an indicator of spiritual demise. The aforementioned barometer named the penultimate stage before ‘perdition’ as ‘disease and death’, reflecting the Christian’s belief that non-believers endured earthly pain as a foreshadowing of eternal misery. This article will present several examples of pain narratives, which aimed to assist sufferers to comprehend, process and prepare for the experience of pain, and will show how pain was conceived as a stage in Christian spiritual growth.

An example of this interconnection can be seen in the interpretation of a biblical passage by Jane Saffery Whitaker. The daughter of the popular Particular Baptist minister John Saffery, Jane led a women’s Bible study in the 1820s. During one meeting, she expounded Matthew 20, in which the mother of James and John requested that Jesus grant them seats of power in his coming kingdom. Jesus replied: ‘Ye know not what ye ask. Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of, and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?’<sup>3</sup> Jane Saffery interpreted Jesus’s response as a lesson in pain. James and John would only become worthy of such an elevated position in the kingdom if they endured extensive pain and suffering on earth. She asserted: ‘No one is fit to sit on thrones judging others

<sup>1</sup> ‘A Spiritual Barometer; or, a Scale of the Progress of Sin and of Grace’, *The Christian’s Penny Magazine and Friend of the People* 6 (1851), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Fry, *Memoir of the Life of Elizabeth Fry with Extracts from her Journal and Letters*, ed. Katharine Fry and Rachel Elizabeth Cresswell, 2 vols (London, 1847–8), 1: 147–8.

<sup>3</sup> Matt. 20: 21–2 (KJV).

till he has served & suffered. I shall only reach My throne by the way of the Cross. Are your sons ready to go the same way?"<sup>4</sup> Jane's lesson inculcated an important perspective on the Christian life: for her, pain was not only inevitable; it was also necessary.

Jane's words are an example of a 'pain narrative'. Such 'pain narratives' attempted to build a framework to understand pain; as patients articulated their pain, they found meaning.<sup>5</sup> Affliction was therefore 'crucial in shaping the self.'<sup>6</sup> 'Pain narratives', therefore, offer historians useful insights into the identity of individuals, denominations and wider culture. For sufferers, pain was a part of daily life. It was also beset with a tension: pain was anxiously avoided as well as submissively welcomed. Pain was processed by Dissenters not only as an endemic aspect of life, but also as a necessary one, which led to growth and sanctification. Undeniably, pain and its interpretation as redemptive has been a significant aspect of the Christian faith throughout much of Christian history. What is characteristic in these narratives, however, is the relationship of pain to divine love and its connection to the atonement.

These experiences of pain will be explored through an examination of six evangelical Dissenters, four women and two men: David Everard Ford (Congregationalist), Sarah Pearce (Baptist), Elizabeth Saffery (Baptist), James Backhouse (Quaker), Hannah Backhouse (Quaker) and Elizabeth Fry (Quaker). These pain narratives are found in personal papers of both men and women, but no crucial differences are noted between their experiences. Harvey notes that gender was not the main factor in her research on forms of embodied pain using middle-class letters from 1726 to 1827. Rather than gender, religion was the most important factor shaping their experience.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, religion takes centre stage in this research into the process of pain. The six Dissenting evangelicals examined here all reached adulthood during what has been described by interpreters such as Boyd Hilton as the 'Age of Atonement', lasting from c.1785 to 1865. Their writings

<sup>4</sup> Oxford, Bodl., Reeves Collection, Box 2/C, 'Pocket Diaries of Jane Saffery Whitaker'.

<sup>5</sup> Lisa Wynne Smith, "'An Account of an Unaccountable Distemper': The Experience of Pain in Early Eighteenth-Century England and France", *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 41 (2008), 459–80.

<sup>6</sup> Dorothy Porter and Roy Porter, *In Sickness and in Health: The British Experience, 1650–1850* (London, 1988), 3–13.

<sup>7</sup> Karen Harvey, 'Epochs of Embodiment: Men, Women and the Material Body', *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 42 (2019), 455–69.

illustrate how they understood pain as an aspect of God's loving work in their lives. Perhaps drawing from Bentham's utilitarianism,<sup>8</sup> these Dissenters came to understand the short-term earthly pains they suffered as acceptable losses which would result in eternal spiritual gains.

This analysis will first consider the nature of pain recounted in these papers before, secondly, assessing how pain was interpreted through reference to the providential will of God. As the atoning work of Christ was a pain-filled example of God's providence, so too was day-to-day pain in the Christian life. Thirdly, it will examine the extent to which pain was viewed as part of God's loving sanctification. Understood as a display of God's love, pain was an essential element of the authors' spiritual growth and sanctification, although they struggled to accept this interpretation. Analysing the personal papers of this selection of Dissenters reveals nuances of interpretation when comparing the Quakers to the Congregationalists and Baptists. Whilst all of these evangelicals emphasized the atonement-centred view of pain, the Quakers understood pain in terms of an identification with Christ's sacrifice, while the Baptists and Congregationalists focused on the need for repentance.

#### METHODOLOGY

The intersection of religion and pain is a growing focus of research. Religion offers an important lens through which to interpret and process pain, serving as a form of spiritual 'record-keeping', or a guide for religious conduct.<sup>9</sup> Thus experience of pain was often viewed as a central trait of religious identity; early modern Quakers, for instance, saw suffering as a part of their public testimony.<sup>10</sup> Conversely, pain has also been given an important role for those identified as non-believers. Eternal suffering was perceived as the ultimate purpose of hell, the destination for non-believers, according to many evangelical Dissenting groups. Research on pain is also a burgeoning field within

<sup>8</sup> Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1785–1865* (Oxford, 1988), 31–2.

<sup>9</sup> Harvey, 'Epochs of Embodiment'; Alan H. Cadwallader, 'Pedalling the Death of a Life: A Late Victorian Variation on dealing with Grief', *JRH* 38 (2014), 35–52; Joanna Bourke, *The Story of Pain: From Prayer to Painkillers* (Oxford, 2017), 90–109.

<sup>10</sup> Amanda E. Herbert, 'Companions in Preaching and Suffering: Itinerant Female Quakers in the Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century British Atlantic World', *Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 9 (2011), 100–40.

the wider framework of the history of emotions. Emotions, including pain, were constituted in both social and individual terms. Pain was constituted by the interplay of the community framework (in which cultural and communal mores developed) and personal characteristics. This combination inspired individual experiences of pain which were articulated by sufferers-in-pain through sharing pain narratives. By recording these experiences, individuals found a space to process their pain and grow in self-understanding.<sup>11</sup> This article examines the social and cultural interpretations of pain, particularly focusing on the ‘numinous’ character of pain. Pain, while importantly affecting the body and the mind, also has a spiritual dimension.

Scholarship on the emotions more generally also proves helpful in this research. Rosenwein’s approach to viewing feelings through ‘emotional communities’ offers a helpful approach, enabling the analysis of shared language and contexts, to understand how pain was conceived. This article will make use of this method, as it articulates how pain in religious communities was broadly conceived and differentially experienced. Glucklich identifies pain as operating in a space ‘in between’ the body and the mind.<sup>12</sup> Boddice argues in favour of a ‘biocultural’ view of emotions in which the body and mind are not separate from and the cultural influences, nor are these mutually exclusive.<sup>13</sup> I want to extend Boddice’s corpus of experience to include the spiritual dynamic of identity. Echoing Glucklich, I suggest that pain is found somewhere ‘in between’, but that this is within the corpus of individuals’ biocultural experience. Using personal papers in conjunction with didactic literature, this article employs a ‘discursive analysis’,<sup>14</sup> which draws out how pain is described and conceived in authors’ letters, diaries, memoirs and sermons. The article expands on the growing field which analyses intersections between religion and the emotions by looking at how pain was conceived both similarly and distinctly by a small sample of evangelicals from three Dissenting denominations: Baptists, Congregationalists and Quakers.

<sup>11</sup> Smith, ‘Account of an Unaccountable Distemper’; Joanna Bourke, ‘Pain Sensitivity: An Unnatural History from 1800 to 1965’, *Journal of Medical Humanities* 35 (2014), 301–19.

<sup>12</sup> Ariel Glucklich, *Sacred Pain: Hurting the Body for the Sake of the Soul* (New York, 2001), 11–39.

<sup>13</sup> Rob Boddice, *The History of Emotions* (Manchester, 2018), 107–29.

<sup>14</sup> ‘Discursive analysis’ is helpfully clarified further by Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain* (London, 2009), 1–15.

This is a very small set of Dissenters, and the findings presented here will not apply to every Baptist, Congregationalist or Quaker identified in this period. However, this study does suggest potential distinctions between the denominations in the understanding of pain, which may offer a framework for further comparative research.

#### THE NATURE OF PAIN

The definition of pain has been a subject of much debate. Pain can be viewed as a sensory phenomenon as it relates to the physiological response of neurons which deploy signals to the brain. Beyond this, there are also important psychological and emotional attributes of pain which cannot be severed from this discourse. Pain is a multi-faceted experience in which the physiological, emotional and mental aspects are inextricably linked. Sense and emotions thus coalesce in experience and ought to be considered in concert.<sup>15</sup> This article will explore pain by focusing particularly on spiritual manifestations of this experience.

The personal papers of these Dissenters evince many types of pain. Sometimes identified as affliction, suffering, sickness or grief, pain presented in many forms: physical, emotional, mental and spiritual. What seems to run throughout these narratives is the synonymy of pain with loss. Pain was often conceived in terms of loss, whether it was the loss of energy and vigour which permitted an individual to engage actively in ministerial activity, or the loss of motor skills which permitted individuals to eat, drink and dress themselves. Pain was also felt in the grief of losing a loved one.

David Everard Ford (1797–1875) was a Congregationalist minister, hymn writer, author and speaker for the British Mission (the Congregationalist Home Missionary Society). In April 1836 his father died as the result of a botched eye surgery to remedy cataracts. When Ford developed eyesight issues of his own in 1846, he avoided a surgical remedy for fear of repeating his father's fate. Indeed, anxiety marked much of Ford's experience with pain, as his ministerial work did not bring in sufficient income for his family.<sup>16</sup> James Backhouse (1794–1869) was a botanist and Quaker minister. As a teenager, James had desired to become a chemist, but was stymied by poor health. He developed a keen interest in natural history and botany

<sup>15</sup> Boddice, *History*, 107–29.

<sup>16</sup> Cambridge, King's College Library, Box FB/2/5, 'Diaries of David Everard Ford'.

and in 1816 purchased a botanical nursery with his brother. In 1822 he married Deborah Lowe, another Quaker minister, but she died in December 1827. Thereafter, James dedicated himself vigorously to Quaker ministry. He travelled to Australia in 1832, where he explored his botanical interests and advocated for evangelical prison reform.<sup>17</sup> Hannah Backhouse (1787–1850) was a Quaker minister and the wife of minister Jonathan Backhouse. The excerpts from her journal as recorded in her memoirs are replete with pain, especially grief, caused by the death of close relatives and friends. The first such bereavement was recorded in 1804, when Hannah lost her sister Mary. Her journal is full of further episodes of grief and associated anxiety occasioned by the loss of other family members, including her son Jonathan.<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth Fry (1780–1845) is one of the best-known evangelical Quakers of the nineteenth century. Her letters, diaries and memoirs recount multiple episodes of grief at the loss of family members and friends. The first significant loss she recalled was that of her mother in 1792. Her diaries are full of further accounts of grief, including the loss of her daughter, also named Elizabeth. Struggle with personal illness was also recorded, as she declined in health during the last few years of her life.<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Saffery (1762–98) was a Particular Baptist, married to minister John Saffery. During the final months of her life, she recorded her struggles in her journal. Her last entry was in April 1798; she died the following month. Throughout this discourse, she lamented the loss of her mobility as sickness repeatedly prevented her from attending church.<sup>20</sup> Sarah Pearce (c.1760–1804) was a Particular Baptist whose husband Samuel was a well-known minister. Sarah's pain is recorded in her short memoirs, detailing her grief after her husband died unexpectedly in 1799, followed by the death of her youngest son, also named Samuel, in 1800.<sup>21</sup>

By focusing on these six evangelical Dissenters, this article elucidates how pain was constituted and experienced. Whilst 'Dissenter'

<sup>17</sup> Sarah Backhouse, *Memoir*.

<sup>18</sup> Hannah Backhouse, *Extracts from the Journal and Letters of Hannah Chapman Backhouse* ([London], 1858).

<sup>19</sup> Fry, *Memoir*, 2: 532–6.

<sup>20</sup> Timothy Whelan, *Nonconformist Women Writers, 1720–1840* (London, 2011).

<sup>21</sup> Sarah Pearce, 'Memoirs of Mrs. Pearce, Widow of the Late Rev. Samuel Pearce of Birmingham', in Thomas Gibbons, ed., *Memoirs of Eminent Pious Women*, new edn, rev. Samuel Burder (London, 1827), 3: 198–207.

can be understood easily to refer to those Protestants who were not part of the Church of England, 'evangelical' is a slightly more nebulous term. Definitions tend to have vague boundaries, and a rigid approach might be accused of being overly exclusive or too porous. The evangelical Dissenters considered in this article may be denoted as such in terms of Bebbington's evangelical 'quadrilateral': crucicentrism, activism, conversionism and biblicism,<sup>22</sup> with some variety in emphasis. This evangelical label might most nebulously be attributed to Quakers of this group, whose views on the Bible differed from those of other evangelicals, not least because of their understanding of how the Holy Spirit (or 'inner light') related to Scripture. However, some Quakers took approaches which differed little from other evangelicals: Timothy Larsen suggests that, for Elizabeth Fry, the 'inner light' was essentially a 'text prompter' drawing from the Bible.<sup>23</sup> James Backhouse, on the other hand, asserted that the Bible should not take precedence over the leadings of the Spirit. In a letter included in his memoirs, Backhouse happily described reading the Bible to prisoners in Australia but expressed bemusement that anyone should 'regard the bible ... above the teachings of the Holy Spirit'.<sup>24</sup> Thus, whilst these individuals could fairly be called 'evangelical', distinctions in their views must be acknowledged. Their similarities, however, are most significantly manifested through their shared prioritization of the atonement. As noted above, this era has been characterized as an 'Age of Atonement' owing to the centrality of the atonement of Christ in evangelical life.<sup>25</sup> The atonement was crucial to understanding the cause of pain. Individual pain in Christian lives was viewed as a corollary to this atoning work. This crucicentrism drives the understanding of pain expressed by these Dissenters, which was viewed in connection with God's love for them. Through this lens, they understood the cause and purpose of pain in their lives.

<sup>22</sup> David Bebbington, *The Dominance of Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove, IL, 2005).

<sup>23</sup> Timothy Larsen, *A People of One Book: The Bible and the Victorians* (Oxford, 2011), 177–80.

<sup>24</sup> Sarah Backhouse, *Memoir*, 75.

<sup>25</sup> Apart from Hilton, see Jan-Melissa Schramm, *Atonement and Self-Sacrifice in Nineteenth-Century Narrative* (Cambridge, 2015); Timothy Gorringer, *God's Just Vengeance: Crime, Violence, and the Rhetoric of Salvation*, Cambridge Studies in Ideology and Religion 9 (Cambridge, 1996), 193–222.



## THE CAUSE OF PAIN: LOVING PROVIDENCE

Most important to the experience of pain was the search for meaning. How did the experience of sickness fit into the cosmic agenda for their lives? Why was pain a prevalent aspect of life? Such questions demanded answers. The providence of God has long been a popular explanation for the cause of painful situations. Pullin, in her research on early modern Quakers, suggests that providential punishment was a lens through which Quakers viewed the suffering of their oppressors. Viewing their persecutors receiving what they saw as ‘providential punishment’ gave them collective reassurance that they found favour with God.<sup>26</sup> In research on the abolition of the slave trade, Coffey asserts that ‘judicial providentialism’ was levied against nations who supported slavery. British abolitionists feared that divine wrath would be released on sinful nations because of slavery. It was a sin which rivalled those committed by Sodom and Gomorrah.<sup>27</sup>

However, pain was not only seen in terms of providential punishment. The providential lens through which the Dissenters in this article interpreted their particular experience of pain was the love of God as exemplified in the atonement. Joseph John Gurney suggested that the atonement, whilst accomplished by suffering (of Christ), was unequivocally a demonstration of love. ‘The Christian doctrine of atonement, has often been misrepresented ... the gift and sacrifice of [God’s] only begotten Son, is the glorious result, not of wrath, but of LOVE.’<sup>28</sup> David Everard Ford echoed this idea in his sermon expounding God’s love, entitled *The Greatness of the Love of Christ*. Firstly, he suggested that suffering through sacrifice was evident throughout Bible history, reaching its climax in the work of Christ: ‘the institution of sacrifices was designed to prepare the way for a suffering and atoning Saviour’. Ford then linked this suffering narrative to God’s love: ‘In tracing the history of redemption ... every step of its explanation was a fresh display of *the greatness of the love of Christ*.’<sup>29</sup> By

<sup>26</sup> Naomi Pullin, ‘Providence, Punishment and Identity Formation in the Late Stuart Quaker Community, c.1650–1700’, *SC* 31 (2016), 471–94.

<sup>27</sup> John Coffey, ‘“Tremble, Britannia!”: Fear, Providence and the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1758–1807’, *EHR* 127 (2012), 844–81.

<sup>28</sup> Joseph John Gurney, *A Letter to the Followers of Elias Hicks, in the City of Baltimore and its Vicinity* (Baltimore, MD, 1840), 11.

<sup>29</sup> David Everard Ford, *The Greatness of the Love of Christ: A Sermon* [on John 11: 36] (London, 1826), 10.

interpreting the cause of pain through this lens of the atonement, these evangelicals understood that pain was an act of love, albeit only effective for believers. In contrast, for unbelievers the atonement remained a reminder of the eternal wrath to come.

God's atoning love provided a framework to understand providential pain for these evangelical Dissenters. The Porters note that sufferers-in-pain would attribute their pain to God; they often thanked God for their affliction. They suggest that this removed the 'sinister unknown aura' of pain. Knowing that God would never bestow sickness without a purpose (even if unknown), sufferers clung to this hope.<sup>30</sup> Suffering was viewed as an integral part of God's plan. As the atonement was part of God's divine plan, so was the suffering of Christians. However, pain was not always welcomed, and this produced a tension. On one hand, pain was anxiously avoided. Indeed, anxiety about anticipated pain could be as all-consuming as the reality. On the other hand, pain was also accepted and submitted to as part of God's providential dealings. Such a tension is prevalent in these Dissenting documents. Dissenters who felt their submission to pain to be inadequate would often plead (either with God or by scolding themselves) that they should trust God's loving providence by accepting this period of pain. Perhaps this might be viewed as a version of 'speech act theory' as discussed by William Reddy. Whilst the submissive emotions (fuelled by love to God) might be lacking, through speech and prayers they might become activated and, in some cases, actualized.<sup>31</sup> It was in the context of this tension between the desire to submit lovingly to God and the desire to avoid pain that considerable anxiety was expressed.

Missives exchanged between loved ones were often replete with details about the health and well-being of physically distant family members. Diaries recounted thoughts and feelings of illness, sometimes on a daily basis. Affliction was often reported in conjunction with anxiety, as individuals struggled to reconcile their feelings with their sense that they should submit to God's will. Whilst Elizabeth Saffery was documenting her final month of decline, her pain was severe enough for her to wish for an imminent death. However,

<sup>30</sup> Porter and Porter, *In Sickness*, 170–1.

<sup>31</sup> William Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling* (Cambridge, 2001), 64–111. Reddy suggests that emotions might be latent and 'activated' by speech, or they might not exist before speech and 'actualized' (generated into existence) by speech.

despite considerable suffering, her journal is defined by the desire to submit to God's will through her pain. While she wishes explicitly that the pain would leave her, she also tries to persuade herself to 'cheerfully bear it'. On 19 October 1797 she wrote: 'The will of the Lord be done when contrary to our own but I trust I desire if affliction & disappointment is my lot to cheerfully bear it. I know it best yet murmur at it still.'<sup>32</sup> She echoed this on 12 November: 'Submission to the will of God in all things ... I shall never want anything contrary to his will.'<sup>33</sup> Saffery seemed to hope that loving submission would be activated through her desire for its actualization. Her diary entries up to her death show her negotiating the tension between her resistance to pain and her will to submit to God's providence. Elizabeth Fry's experience of submission was similar. Her daughters, Katharine and Rachel, suggested that their mother's 'health suffered from all her sorrows' in 1844 with the 'threatenings of the return of some of her most painful symptoms'.<sup>34</sup> In July 1845, Fry commented on her illness in a letter to Katharine: 'I have felt very poorly ... I have felt unusually low', yet Fry still concluded: 'I desire in my heart to say, "not as I will, but as Thou wilt"'.<sup>35</sup> Enduring the death of her youngest son Samuel in 1800, Sarah Pearce wrote a letter to a friend, passionately mourning her loss. She concluded that this must be part of God's plan, even if she was not privy to the reasons for it: 'Be still, then, ever tumultuous passion, and know, that he who hath inflicted these repeated strokes, is God; that God whom I desire to reverence under every painful dispensation, being persuaded that what I know not now, I shall know hereafter.'<sup>36</sup> In December 1836 Ford was consumed with anxiety owing to the afflictions suffered by his son Everard. 'In the dead of the night ... my dear wife woke me, exclaiming that he was dying in her arms.' In the following months, Ford's diary demonstrates that he was possessed by anxiety about his son, as he simultaneously sought to submit to God's will. On 28 January he asserted a reconciliation of these feelings: 'I think that I have surrendered him into the hands of God. It has been a painful struggle, but I trust that divine grace will bear me through.'<sup>37</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Whelan, *Nonconformist Women*, 410.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* 415.

<sup>34</sup> Fry, *Memoir*, 2: 504.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* 2: 520.

<sup>36</sup> Pearce, 'Memoirs', 201.

<sup>37</sup> 'Diaries of David Everard Ford'.

When Hannah Backhouse lost her eight-year-old son Jonathan in 1820, the grief and its indelible memory permeated her parenting. 'On this period I do not know how to dwell ... our dear eldest child became very ill'; after the best medical treatment 'he expired in a convulsion fit in my arms. I seemed at the time hardly sensible of the depth of the sorrow.'<sup>38</sup> When illness affected her other children, Hannah found herself sick with anxiety. A few weeks after Jonathan's death, her son Henry became ill, and her sister aided with his care: 'inexpressibly kind and tender was my dear sister in this my deeply-tried state of mind; for the illness of my beloved child made me tremblingly alive to every touch'.<sup>39</sup> Nonetheless, Hannah submitted to these experiences of pain as being part of God's will for her life. Indeed, when her second son, Gurney, died in November 1824, she concluded: 'It is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in my eyes!'<sup>40</sup>

Elizabeth Saffery, Fry, Pearce and Ford all hoped that their desire for submissive feelings, catalysed by their love to God, would activate their sense of submission to God's will. Pain was a source of much anxiety for these Dissenters, both in its hypothetical and its actual forms. This anxiety created a tension between their submission to God and their desire to avoid pain. Whilst pain was to be avoided, it was also seen as having significant benefits in terms of spiritual health. Pain was interpreted primarily in spiritual terms, by which Dissenters sought to understand how pain could be a loving part of God's providential plan. The key question of theodicy, which often arises in religious communities with regard to pain, asks how a loving God can permit so much pain, especially amongst those who love him. Still a difficult issue today, it was no less so for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Dissenters. Rather than viewing pain as antithetical to divine love, these Dissenters identified it as an extension of divine love. God's providential inclusion of pain was for the purpose of sanctification: a provision of spiritual health.

#### THE PURPOSE OF PAIN: LOVING SANCTIFICATION

Determining the purpose of pain was the most crucial aspect of these pain narratives. Scholars such as Gorringer and Bending have suggested that a debate arose in the nineteenth century regarding the

<sup>38</sup> Hannah Backhouse, *Extracts*, 41.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* 42.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* 54.

constitution of pain. Some considered it an extension of the redemptive process, whilst others saw it as a retributive manifestation of God's wrath. Gorringe suggests a link between nineteenth-century penal reform and atonement theology. Debates regarding the purpose of imprisonment (whether it was rehabilitative or punitive) were widespread.<sup>41</sup> Bending contrasts literature by prominent religious figures of the day, suggesting that a tension existed between theologies of pain as a redemptive process and those identifying it as retributive. However, for these Dissenters at least, these two purposes would not have been mutually exclusive. Pain could be both retributive and redemptive; it could be a punishment but it could also be an experience which was rooted in Christ's atoning work.

That pain could be retributive was noted by J. J. Gurney, who suggested that pain was a direct consequence of sin: 'pain and misery are the ultimate and inevitable consequences of vice'. He asserted that pain was part of the 'retributive system constituted by the moral government of God'.<sup>42</sup> Such experience in isolation, however, was confined to unbelievers, whose retributive punishment would culminate in an eternal hell. Conversely, for believers, pain could be a retributive punishment, but it was also an agent for curative sanctification. This was also affirmed by Gurney: 'pains and afflictions ... are so overruled for good, that they are often the means of curing that very evil out of which they originate'.<sup>43</sup> Thus it was through the atoning work of Christ that believers avoided eternal pain while simultaneously enduring earthly pain for their sanctification. It is important to clarify here that in theological terms pain functioned differently in the lives of believers and those of unbelievers, as already noted. The redemptive love-saturated aspects of pain would only be available to the former. Bending evinces this distinction when she discusses the retributive theory, as emphasized by the Anglican J. C. Ryle. In the era of the cholera pandemic, Ryle believed that this disease was a part of God's chastising judgment: "'the Hand of the Lord!" working on earth'. He viewed the situation of unbelievers as especially poignant since the disease was so painful that deathbed conversions were not

<sup>41</sup> Gorringe, *God's Just Vengeance*, 193–222.

<sup>42</sup> Joseph John Gurney, *Essays on the Evidences, Doctrines, and Practical Operation, of Christianity*, 5th edn (London, 1833), 131.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* 137.

physically possible. Only those who were already redeemed before contracting it could expect the pain to draw them closer to God.<sup>44</sup>

In the early nineteenth century, then, these personal documents demonstrate how pain could be considered a redemptive gift from God, which was intended to sanctify. Indeed, pain was often viewed as a ‘therapeutic progress’: pain indicated that one was improving in health. This view applied to physical as well as spiritual sickness.<sup>45</sup> In 1823, Hannah Backhouse ruminated upon the nature of suffering in her journal a few years after losing her son: ‘I believe there is never high attainment without much suffering.’ She interpreted her suffering as preparation for her subsequent ministry.<sup>46</sup> James Backhouse expressed similar sentiments when he first felt an impression to speak in a meeting in 1816: ‘my heart overflowing with gratitude to God, who, after permitting me to feel my own weakness, had strengthened me thus openly to avow myself in His service’.<sup>47</sup> Elizabeth Fry suggested in July 1803 that suffering was a crucial aspect of spiritual progress: ‘No cross, no crown, has been rather a stimulus to me’, she wrote in her journal.<sup>48</sup> In October 1797, Elizabeth Saffery noted in her journal her conviction that suffering was a preparation: ‘shall I cheerfully leave this Lump of Clay that engages so much of my attention at present, to be food for worms for a season[?] blessed be God[,] its only to be refined, while my spirit shall fly beyond the Grave’.<sup>49</sup>

In this era, pain was often viewed as a form of divine chastisement. That is, pain was viewed as part of God’s loving sanctification manifested through fatherly discipline. Ford’s *Laodicea* (1844) indicates this connection. Focusing on Revelation 3: 19, ‘As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten’, Ford argued that God applied chastising love to believers who were ‘backsliding’ in their faith. Moreover, ‘the design of Christian discipline is the correction rather than the

<sup>44</sup> Lucy Bending, *The Representation of Bodily Pain in Late Nineteenth-Century English Culture* (Oxford, 2004), 19–20.

<sup>45</sup> Porter and Porter, *In Sickness*, 98–112; Heather D. Curtis, *Faith in the Great Physician: Suffering and Divine Healing in American Culture, 1860–1900* (Baltimore, MD, 2007), 26–50.

<sup>46</sup> Hannah Backhouse, *Extracts*, 49.

<sup>47</sup> Sarah Backhouse, *Memoir*, 9.

<sup>48</sup> Fry, *Memoir*, 1: 119.

<sup>49</sup> Whelan, *Nonconformist Women*, 435.

punishment of the offender'.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, after Pearce had endured the death of her husband and her firstborn son, she concluded that this pain was much-deserved chastisement which would be perpetuated until she learned her lesson. In a letter to a 'Mrs F.', she wrote in December 1800: 'Oh, my rebellious passions! ... though he smote me ... in wrath, yet hath [he] remembered mercy ... He is a God full of compassion, who does not afflict willingly; and I believe I shall see in the end, that all that hath befallen me is for my profit.'<sup>51</sup>

Elizabeth Fry echoed this in November 1811 when she lamented the loss of her daughter. She considered this pain to be a loving example of God's chastening: 'although it pleases my Heavenly Father thus to chastise me yet I am permitted to feel that He doth love those whom He chasteneth. I feel His love very near, and like a tender parent that may see right to inflict the rod, rather, perhaps than spoil the child.'<sup>52</sup> Fry believed that suffering was indicative of God's love; a view she clearly expresses in an annotation to her Bible at 1 Thessalonians 1: 4–5: 'Which is a manifest token of the righteous judgment of God, that ye may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which ye also suffer.'<sup>53</sup> Her note reads: 'Their tribulations a token of his love.' Similar sentiments were expressed by her husband Joseph Fry. During their courtship in 1800, he wrote her a letter trusting that their future marriage might be marked by a mutual duty and 'resignation to suffer into Blessing'.<sup>54</sup>

Importantly, however, suffering was not always viewed as positive or redeeming, as shown by the case studies in this article. The Unitarian Harriet Martineau, for example, experienced serious sickness in the 1840s. During this period, she expressed the sentiments that pain was God's fatherly chastisement, 'an instrument for good', although she also acknowledged that some were 'soured by suffering'. This 'souring' was a condition, she suggested, in which the residual 'ideas' of pain remain long after the painful episode has passed.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, Harriet's own attitude to pain soured as she abandoned her Unitarian faith. This was clear by the time her memoirs were

<sup>50</sup> David Everard Ford, *Laodicea; or, Religious Declension: Its Nature, Indications, Causes, Consequences, and Remedies* (London, 1844), 102.

<sup>51</sup> Pearce, 'Memoirs', 201.

<sup>52</sup> Fry, *Memoir*, 103.

<sup>53</sup> London, BL, Add. MS 73528, Elizabeth Fry's annotated Bible.

<sup>54</sup> BL, Add. MSS 3672–3675, Letters between Elizabeth Gurney and Joseph Fry.

<sup>55</sup> Harriet Martineau, *Life in the Sick-Room* (London, 1844), 8–9.

published in 1855, by which point she had turned to natural (scientific) explanations for lived experiences.<sup>56</sup> Experiences of pain may have led to questioning one's assurance of God's love, rather than securing it.<sup>57</sup>

In general, however, suffering reminded these Dissenters of their need for redemption and caused them to be refined, as though in a 'fiery furnace'.<sup>58</sup> That is, pain was used as a spiritual corrective for believers. Poor habits were gradually changed through pain. Pain influenced moral actions and catalysed spiritual growth. It strengthened individuals and developed character. Pain of various types reminded individuals of their need for redemption. Pain was central to God's chastising fatherhood. The connection between God's loving fatherhood and pain would become weaker in the latter half of the nineteenth century as the chastising motif was supplanted by an image of God as a tender or sentimental father, for whom pain was increasingly unwelcome.

#### DENOMINATIONAL DISTINCTIVES

For the evangelical Dissenters considered here, pain was a manifestation of God's love, viewed through the lens of the atonement. However, there were some nuanced experiential differences in their pain narratives. I do not wish to suggest that these differences represented distinct boundaries in experience, but it is clear that the extant Dissenting accounts demonstrate some divergent emphases. The two Baptists and one Congregationalist considered here focused more on repentance from sin and God's chastising love through pain. Their participation in God's atoning love was fundamentally a matter of realizing how unworthy they were and how necessary was Christ's sacrifice. Moreover, they often suggested that the cause of this discipline was their over-focus upon 'earthly objects'. In 1797 the Baptist Elizabeth Saffery was concerned that her decline might be attributable

<sup>56</sup> Odile Boucher-Rivalain, 'Harriet Martineau (1802–1876), from Unitarianism to Agnosticism', *Cahiers Victoriens et Édouardiens* [online journal] 76 (Autumn 2012), 27–43, at: <<https://doi.org/10.4000/cve.520>>, last accessed 25 January 2022.

<sup>57</sup> Recent scholarship has noted a gap in both Protestant and Catholic provision for those contending with suffering in the twenty-first century, demonstrating how the link between pain and religious life remains an important issue in discussion: see, for instance, Armand Leon Van Ommen, *Suffering in Worship: Anglican Liturgy in relation to Stories of Suffering People* (London, 2019).

<sup>58</sup> Bourke, *Story of Pain*, 90–109.



to an over-attachment to 'earthly objects' in contrast to her love for God: 'Now much Sin dwells in my heart[.] when shall I love the Creature as I ought[?] Can Christ be altogether lovely while I feel those attachments to earthly Objects[?] Lord thou knowest my heart altogether[.] I Desire to Love thee supremely.'<sup>59</sup> She later suggested that her suffering was intended to wean her from earthly pleasures: 'These 2 past days been very ill in body but blessed be God not uncomfortable in my soul, it is the Lord & I know he does all things well. I need these trials to wean from ye world & live more on a Covenant keeping God.'<sup>60</sup>

In 1801 Sarah Pearce, also a Baptist, wrote to 'Mrs H.' asserting that her recent pain, following the loss of her son and husband, had been caused by an over-affection for earthly things. It ought to continue, she suggested, until she had remedied this over-attachment. Her response was not marked by anger towards God, who, she believed, had removed her loved ones in his providence. Instead, she directed ill-feelings towards herself, castigating herself for her inadequate faith:

When shall I feel my will absorbed in the will of God, and have none but his? I want to live above this fading dying world, and wonder I should be so attached to it, when it has so frequently disappointed me. Oh how I envy those who have learnt that useful lesson, deadness to the creature, and life in God!<sup>61</sup>

This theme is repeated by other Baptists and Congregationalists. Pain, while a manifestation of God's providence, is blamed on the self. When the family income of the Congregationalist Ford was insufficient to support his family in July 1838, he suggested it was a consequence of his earthly focus: 'Perhaps I have been getting too fond of the world, & this chastisement is sent to humble me; or perhaps it is to prepare me for a greater trial.'<sup>62</sup>

It does not appear that the 'earthly objects' to which these three authors referred were objects of material culture. Rather, they chastised themselves for being inordinately interested in earthly relationships, and especially for their fondness for children and partners. Their concern was that these relationships had disrupted their

<sup>59</sup> Whelan, *Nonconformist Women*, 407.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* 417–18.

<sup>61</sup> Pearce, 'Memoirs', 201–2.

<sup>62</sup> 'Diaries of David Everard Ford'.

affection for God. This is clearly indicated in *The Baptist Manual* (1838). An article on holy living cautioned readers: 'We are to beware lest we should love even a wife, husband, or a child to such a degree as to forget that God requires the chief place in our affections.'<sup>63</sup> In a sermon on Colossians, the Baptist preacher Octavius Winslow (1808–78) presented the imminent danger of loving a family member too much: it would result in a transfer of affections from God to that family member: 'her affections have been inordinately set upon an *earthly object*, – her love to Jesus has, in consequence, waned. Her zeal for his glory has cooled; her walk with God has been less close.'<sup>64</sup> In this particular section of his sermon, Winslow was referring to a mother loving her nursing child more than God. Indeed, pain could serve as a disciplinary reminder of their need for atonement, and one which would continue until they had repented of the 'earthly object' sins which had ensnared them. For these Baptists and Congregationalists, pain appears to be a side effect of the sin which necessitated the atoning work of Christ.

By contrast, for the three Quakers considered here, the sanctifying nature of pain was seen more often in terms of an identification with Christ's afflictions. This is not to suggest that Quakers were not concerned that earthly pleasures or sin might divert their attention from God. This was certainly the case for Elizabeth J. J. Robson, who agonized over such feelings in July 1844: 'I have not thought enough of Jesus; my mind has not been fixed on heavenly things as it used to be[.] ... my mind has been filled with the things of this world so much as to leave no room for better things.'<sup>65</sup> However, when it came to the practical experience of pain, whether mental or physical, Quakers often drew analogies with the suffering of Christ. On 13 December 1842, Hannah Backhouse wrote a letter to Maria Fox lamenting the death of her beloved husband, Joseph. She reflected upon how these afflictions were shared with Christ: 'Oh, the sufferings that have been passed through from generation to generation! We hear

<sup>63</sup> Baptist General Tract Society, 'No. 10. The Grace of God, and a Holy Life', in *The Baptist Manual: A Selection from the Series of Publications of the Baptist General Tract Society designed for the Use of Families: And as an Exposition of the Distinguishing Sentiments of the Denomination* (Philadelphia, PA, 1838), 7.

<sup>64</sup> Octavius Winslow, *The Glory of the Redeemer in his Person and Work* (London, 1844), 286.

<sup>65</sup> Elizabeth J. J. Robson, *A Memoir of Elizabeth J. J. Robson, late of Saffron Walden, who died 15th of 10th Month, 1859* (London, 1860), 5.

of them in part, but the fulness of them is only known by Him who tasted death for every man, and who, in all our afflictions, is afflicted.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, as Fry was reaching the end of her life, she repeatedly identified her suffering with that of Christ. In a letter to a friend on 31 December 1844, she wrote: ‘May our afflictions be sanctified to us, not leading us to the world for consolation, but more fully to cast ourselves on Him who died for us, and hath loved us with an everlasting love.’<sup>67</sup> This was reiterated in her journal on 29 January 1845: ‘I have passed through deep baptisms of spirit in this illness. I may say, unworthy as I am to say it, that I have had to drink in my small measure of the Saviour’s cup, when he said, “My God! My God! Why hast Thou forsaken me!”’<sup>68</sup> One of Fry’s adult daughters recalled a conversation with her mother near the end of her life. Fry opened the Bible in her daughter’s company and read the text: ‘Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you’ (1 Peter 4: 12). She then discussed enthusiastically how, through her sickness, she was participating as a ‘disciple in the suffering of [the] Lord’.<sup>69</sup>

These views show considerable continuity with medieval practice, wherein pain was often marked by a concentration on the passion of Christ. Christ’s suffering body was a ‘site of imitation’ in late medieval sermons, enabling listeners to identify with Christ through their own pain.<sup>70</sup> Such suffering has been identified as crucial to female Quaker experience. Amanda Herbert, in her research on eighteenth-century female Quaker itinerants, suggests that, for Quaker women, suffering was a ‘testimony of their gender’: suffering was viewed as part of their public testimony as missionaries. Analysing William Sewell’s *History*, Herbert suggests that bodily pain was connected to female virtue. However, the identification with Christ’s suffering was not exclusive to Quaker females. Indeed, among eighteenth-century Quakers, Herbert asserts that men emphasized resilience and suffering with Christ, whilst women described their pain in terms of embodiment and victimhood.<sup>71</sup> Whilst these themes

<sup>66</sup> Hannah Backhouse, *Extracts*, 254–5.

<sup>67</sup> Fry, *Memoir*, 2: 507.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* 508.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.* 528.

<sup>70</sup> Shannon Gayk, ‘The Form of Christ’s Passion: Preaching the *Imitatio Passionis* in Late Medieval England’, *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 31 (2017), 231–56, at 246.

<sup>71</sup> Herbert, ‘Companions’, 87–8.

are not absent in this selection of Quaker women, the interpretive emphasis has shifted to atonement and suffering with Christ, a theme expressed by both women and men.

In final years of his life (1868–9), as James Backhouse suffered from a serious chest illness, he compared his experience to that of the suffering Christ. As his sister notes, Backhouse ‘recounted his mercies, saying, how different was his condition to that of his dear Saviour; He when nailed to the cross for our sins, could not in His sufferings obtain relief by a change of posture, whilst to himself there was every alleviation that affection could suggest.’<sup>72</sup> As Backhouse continued to deteriorate, he felt encouragement from the suffering Christ had endured. Through this solidarity, he found comfort in his pain: ‘Surely it was permitted in great mercy that He, who was perfect in holiness, should thus be tried, for the encouragement of His poor feeble followers.’<sup>73</sup>

Quaker suffering has received much attention from scholars of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Suffering has been linked historically with Quaker experience; accounts of their suffering were regularly published into the nineteenth century after a weekly ‘Meeting for Sufferings’ was first established in 1676. Whilst a steady stream of research has been published on their early modern sufferings, research on nineteenth-century Quaker suffering is sorely lacking. Research on early modern Quaker suffering notes its endemic nature in Quaker experience. Although their pain was perceived as virtuous, they identified their persecutors’ suffering as a result of God’s judgment.<sup>74</sup> A century and a half later, these authors reveal, suffering was still regarded as a form of virtue, through the lens of the atonement.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Sarah Backhouse, *Memoir*, 229.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.* 239.

<sup>74</sup> John Miller, ‘“A Suffering People”: English Quakers and their Neighbours c.1650–1700’, *P&P* 188 (2005), 71–103; John R. Knott, ‘Joseph Besse and the Quaker Culture of Suffering’, *Prose Studies* 17 (1994), 126–41.

<sup>75</sup> Importantly, this narrative of suffering with Christ has been studied in other denominations. In her research on pain and religiosity amongst Catholic convents in the nineteenth century, Mangion notes the connection between bodily pain and salvation: pain was part of the ‘quest for spiritual perfection’. Pain was something which connected individuals to Christ through their sanctification, as they ‘imitated’ Christ in their pain: Carmen Mangion, ‘“Why, would you have me live upon a gridiron?”: Pain, Identity, and Emotional Communities in Nineteenth-Century English Convent Culture’,

## CONCLUSION

The study of these six Dissenters has revealed that narratives of pain, and indeed the experience of pain itself, were linked to the theme of divine love, viewed through the lens of the atonement. In this 'Age of Atonement', the cross was central to manifestations of God's love; conceptions of pain were no exception. Pain was connected to the atonement through the great suffering of Christ, which was, according to these Dissenters, a result of 'love not of wrath'. Importantly, the loving application of the atonement was only available to those who were believers: God's wrath was still reserved for unbelievers. The cause of pain for these believers was, ultimately, divine love. As the atoning work of Christ was a loving manifestation of God's providence, so too was quotidian Christian pain a loving manifestation of God's providence. This resulted in a tension between anxious avoidance of pain and submission to providence.

Whilst pain has been identified as psychological and physiological in its constitution, it must also be understood through the spiritual experience of these religious Dissenters. Key to understanding pain was the meaning which was constructed within this experience. To this end, pain was often constructed as part of God's sanctifying work, initiated by the atonement. This painful sanctification was seen as part of God's loving fatherhood. Denominational distinctives were noted as sufferers identified pain with the atonement, either through expressing their sense of need for it, or through their identification with Christ's suffering. The Baptists and Congregationalist considered here seemed to place greater emphasis on their sin as a cause for their pain, whilst the Quakers emphasized their pain as virtuous through solidarity with Christ's suffering. This is a common theme in Quaker theology, but more work needs to be done to explore whether these distinctions were characteristic of denominational approaches. Experiences of pain cut across gendered boundaries, as men and women both curated narratives of their pain interpreted through the lens of the atonement. For these Dissenting evangelicals, pain was expected, avoided and ultimately embraced as part of spiritual growth and health.

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*Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* [online journal] 15 (2012), at: <<https://doi.org/10.16995/ntn.652>>, last accessed 24 January 2022.