# Arguing Peace

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# Arguing Peace

## COLLECTED PACIFIST WRITINGS

*VOLUME THREE: BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL ESSAYS*

TED GRIMSRUD

PEACE THEOLOGY BOOKS

Harrisonburg, Virginia

ARGUING PEACE: Collected Pacifist Writings, Volume Three: Biblical and Theological Essays

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*To the memory of John Howard Yoder and Gordon D. Kaufman*

*Faithful teachers and willing mentors*

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# PREFACE

My desire to study with John Howard Yoder, acted on in 1980, changed my life. I first read his books, *The Original Revolution* and *The Politics of Jesus*, in the winter of 1976-7. He gave me a theological rationale for the conviction that had seized my heart—that the way of Jesus is the way of peace.

After several years of reading everything by Yoder I could get my hands on and learning to know Mennonites in my hometown of Eugene, Oregon, I was ready for a chance to study with the man himself. My wife, Kathleen Temple, and I moved east to Elkhart, Indiana, and spent one of the best years of our lives at the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries.

While at AMBS, I also learned about the other great 20th century Mennonite theologian, Gordon Kaufman, when I read some of his writings for a paper I wrote for Yoder. At that point, I was pretty negative about Kaufman's thought—I sensed he was not serious enough about pacifism.

It was only at the time of my second sojourn at AMBS, a sabbatical semester, Spring 1992, that I began to understand that Kaufman could be read as a complement to Yoder.

I still would identify myself a Yoderian more than a Kaufmanian. The essays in this collection bear that out. Partly, this identification reflects my decision to do my work within the parameters of the church (both congregational ministry and teaching at a church-owned college) rather in the broader academic world. I have found Yoder's work more directly helpful for my vocation of constructing a thoroughgoing peace theology. Kaufman's thought remains important to me, though, as well.

Unfortunately, Kaufman and Yoder, almost exact contemporaries, did not develop much of a relationship with each other on a personal or intellectual level. I don't know why, precisely, though partly it would have been because their paths rarely crossed. They grew up in different Mennonite traditions and as academics worked at different schools and in different fields. I think, though, that they must both be read and each offers important correctives to the other's thought.

Yoder challenged Kaufman's tendency to diminish the biblical witness (though Kaufman certainly valued the Bible and his major work, *In Face of Mystery*, gives biblical teachings a more important role than I expected). Kaufman challenged Yoder's tendency toward an authoritarian view of the Bible and some Christian doctrines (though I would argue that ultimately Yoder's theology is *anti*-authoritarian and that those who seek to accommodate Yoder with the creeds and Augustine are mistaken).

What unites Yoder and Kaufman, in my view, is that both were anti-authoritarian. Theology is something we must work at together, through conversation, and in resistance to all the efforts in the Christian tradition to shut down the conversation through authoritarian appeals to "settled" dogma. The priority is on the life and teaching of Jesus, not the later *human*-generated creeds and dogmas.

One major consequence of this priority is that authentic theology is ethical, a unity of belief and practice. Both Kaufman and Yoder had their focus as theologians shaped by World War II. Both believed that that war showed the need more than ever before for peace-oriented theological reflection. The emphasis on theology being linked with peacemaking is the genius of the Anabaptist/Mennonite tradition. At this most important point, Kaufman and Yoder remain two of our most useful guides.

I offer this collection of some of my reflections on the Bible, theology, and peacemaking in tribute to the work of these two great witnesses to God's ways of peace embodied in Jesus and applied to our broken world.

I am grateful for their work and for the privilege of having the opportunity to know both of them. I have learned so much both from their writings and their personal engagement.

Ted Grimsrud
Harrisonburg, Virginia
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# SECTION ONE: Biblical Essays

## 1. Christian pacifism in brief

*[This essay was originally published in Christian Early and Ted Grimsrud, eds.,* A Pacifist Way of Knowing: John Howard Yoder's Nonviolent Epistemology *(Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 1-21.]*

What is "pacifism"? It depends on who you ask, when, and in what context. Let's start, though, with a simple definition with the hope to arrive at a fuller, more adequate understanding. For now, we may say: "pacifism" is the in-principled unwillingness to engage in lethal violence, including most obviously the unwillingness to participate in warfare.

"Pacifism" has the connotation of a complete rejection of involvement in warfare, and usually other forms of violence. However, beyond that simple assumption, the term pacifism is used in many different kinds of ways. John Howard Yoder's classic analysis, *Nevertheless: Varieties of Religious Pacifism*, describes twenty-nine different types of religious pacifism.[1] Given this variety, no one is in a position to make claims for all pacifists because "pacifism" is a contested concept. In this essay I will argue in favor of one particular understanding of pacifism. It will be helpful to begin with some examples of what I consider to be misunderstandings of pacifism, and then go on to a give a short case for what I will call Christian pacifism.

### Pacifism according to its critics

***Pacifism is evil.*** Some non-pacifists are strongly anti-pacifist. Pacifism for them is seen as a refusal to take responsibility for the necessary use of violence to stop evil people in our rough-and-tumble world. Popes Paul VI and John Paul II expressed views equating pacifism with "a cowardly and lazy conception of life" and "peace at any cost," respectively.[2]

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[1] John Howard Yoder, *Nevertheless: Varieties of Religious Pacifism,* second edition (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1992).

[2] Cited in Yoder, *Nevertheless*, 161, endnote 3.

The right-wing American pundit, Michael Kelly, wrote a widely circulated op-ed essay for the *Washington Post* shortly after the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon. In that essay, he asserted that, in relation to the war on terror, "American pacifists…are on the side of future mass murderers of Americans. They are objectively pro-terrorist." Pacifists do not want the U.S. to fight back and neither do the terrorists. Therefore they are on the same side. And since terrorism is evil, he concluded flatly that the "pacifists' position…is evil."[3] Kelly did not give examples or specify who he had in mind in his characterization of pacifism. It would appear that he defined pacifism primarily as principled opposition to the use of American military might, including opposition to war that resists the evils of "global terrorism."

So, according to these two Popes and to Michael Kelly, pacifism seems largely to be understood as the refusal to fight back (or even to support fighting back) in the face of evil. As such, it is directly complicit in the furtherance of said evil.

***Pacifism is irrelevant.*** The great American theological ethicist, Reinhold Niebuhr in many ways shared elements of the "pacifism as evil" perspective. In 1940, in the interim period between the beginning of World War II in 1939 and the United States' entry into that war in 1941, Niebuhr wrote his most direct critique of pacifism, "Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist." In that essay, Niebuhr differentiated between "heretical" and "non-heretical" pacifism.

According to Niebuhr, the "heretical" version, characteristic of many liberal Protestants in the years between World War I and World War II, naively assumed human goodness, rejected the Christian doctrine of original sin, reinterpreted the Cross so that it stands for the idea that perfect love is guaranteed a simple victory in the world, and rejected all other profound elements of the Christian gospel as hopelessly "Pauline."[4]

While viewing this "heretical" pacifism with contempt, Niebuhr respected what he termed "the pacifism that is not a heresy." This pacifism, characteristic of the early Anabaptist leader Menno Simons, does not present the effort to achieve a standard of perfect love in individual life as a political alternative. This approach disavows "the political problem and task." For non-heretical pacifists, setting up "the most perfect and unselfish individual life as a symbol of the kingdom of God" can "only be done by disavowing the political task and by freeing the individual of all responsibility for social justice."[5]

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[3] *Washington Post*, September 26, 2001.

[4] Reinhold Niebuhr, "Why the Christian Church is Not Pacifist," in *Christianity and Power Politics* (New York: Scribners, 1940), 5.

[5] Niebuhr, "Why," 4-5.

This "non-heretical" pacifism reminds the Christian community that "the relative norms of social justice, which justify both coercion and resistance to coercion, are not final norms, and that Christians are in constant peril of forgetting their relative and tentative character and of making them too completely normative."[6]

***Pacifism is worldly.*** Guy Hershberger, a Mennonite contemporary of Niebuhr's, believed that Jesus forbade all of his followers from using violence, especially in warfare. However, he echoed many of Niebuhr's analyses concerning what Niebuhr called "heretical pacifism," the pacifism characteristic of many mainline Protestants that was influenced by the Social Gospel and that sought for political influence in moving the world in a peaceful direction. Hershberger, though, rejected the use of the term "pacifism" for the faithful Christian rejection of violence. He preferred the term "nonresistance." When he referred to pacifism, he had in mind Niebuhr's "heretical pacifism."

Like Niebuhr, Hershberger charged "liberal Protestant pacifism" with an unduly optimistic view of human nature and human possibilities in the social realm. For Social Gospel pacifism, he asserted, there is no sinful world to be renounced. Human beings are inherently good, hence they are not in need of personal salvation. Sin is not a personal, but rather a social evil, for these pacifists. Their only salvation is a social salvation. According to this view, Christ is not the redeemer of humankind, but rather our example.[7]

Along with this unwarranted optimism about the character of social life in the real world, Hershberger also believed that pacifists are way too sanguine about the use of force in trying to implement their social ideals. He characterized pacifism as fully accepting of "nonviolent coercion" wherein the one who is wronged places the emphasis on a demand for justice.[8] However, in contrast to Jesus' message of turn the other cheek and to not resist evil with coercion, nonviolent resistance is still resistance. It is a form of coercion or compulsion. Its purpose is to compel the enemy to give up.[9]

Hershberger, then, rejected pacifism because it is too conformist to a violent world. In its optimism about human possibilities, it minimizes the depth of sin and violence that inevitably characterizes this fallen world. And, it ends up being too comfortable with accepting worldly tactics of coercing others—these tactics ultimately contradict the message of Jesus.

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[6] Niebuhr, "Why," 5.

[7] Guy F. Hershberger, *War, Peace, and Nonresistance* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1944), 209-10.

[8] Hershberger, *War*, 217.

[9] Hershberger, *War*, 221.

***Pacifism is passive.*** Theologian and activist Walter Wink did not reject pacifism because it is anti-war or anti-patriotic. Nor, in contrast to Niebuhr and Hershberger, did he believe that social justice compatible with the message of Jesus is impossible in the real world. He did not accept their characterization of the message of Jesus as being the basis for separation from social justice concerns or incompatible with the use of nonviolent resistance. So he did not reject pacifism because it is too optimistic or too interventionist.

To the contrary, Wink rejected pacifism because he defined it as more or less the same phenomenon as what Hershberger would have called "nonresistance." He wrote" "Pacifism must go. It is endlessly confused with passivity. In the nations in which Christianity has predominated, Jesus' teaching on nonviolence has been perverted into injunctions to passive nonresistance, which is the very opposite of active nonviolence."[10]

For Wink, pacifism is passive; but nonviolence is active. Pacifism is harmless and therefore easier to accept than nonviolence, which is dangerous. Gandhi had utter contempt for non-active pacifism. He regarded such a passive stance as cowardly, calling inaction "rank cowardice and unmanly," and said he would rather see someone incapable of nonviolence resist violently than resist not at all.

However, the term "nonviolence," preferred by Wink and others of like mind, has its own problems. Nonviolence advocate Mark Kurlansky, who shares Wink's critique, nonetheless admits that "nonviolence" is not a proactive word. It is not an authentic concept but simply the abnegation of something else.[11] Kurlansky's recognition opens the door to a reconsideration of the term pacifism. Is it possible that this despised term might actually be able to do the work needed so we can convey in a positive sense our commitment to making peace in our broken world?

## Defining pacifism

***Pacifism: A brief history.*** The word "pacifism" has the virtue of being a positive term, connoting the affirmation of peace more than simply the opposition to violence. However, as we have seen from our survey of people who do not like the term, and as we would see were we to survey various ways the term is used by those who do like it,[12] there are many "pacifisms." I will not argue for one definitive or normative

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[10] Walter Wink, "Can Love Save the World?" *Yes Magazine* #20 (Winter 2002). For a similar dismissal of pacifism see Mark Kurlansky, *Nonviolence: Twenty-Five Lessons from the History of a Dangerous Idea* (New York: Modern Library, 2006), 6-7.

[11] Kurlansky, *Nonviolence*, 5.

[12] See Yoder, *Nevertheless*.

understanding of pacifism here. Rather, I simply want to articulate one proposal for understanding pacifism as a positive and attractive perspective over against the negative associations summarized above.

The word "pacifism" is quite recent in English, dating back perhaps only about a hundred years. It was not listed in the 1904 Complete Oxford Dictionary. According to the Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary in 1982, the first occurrence came in 1902 at an international peace conference as an English version of the French word *pacifisme*, used to express opposition to war.[13] However, the French term originally had the meaning of "making peace," not simply "opposing war."

The root word is "*paci*," "peace." If we take the word "pacifism" literally we could define it as love of peace, or devotion to peace. We might best think of "pacifism" as the conviction that no other value or necessity takes priority over the commitment to peace. Hence, "pacifism" is more than simply approving of peace, which everyone in some sense would do; it is the conviction that the commitment to peace stands higher than any commitment that would justify the use of violence.

I am conscious that some may be uncomfortable with this conception of peace. It may seem that I place peace higher even than God, effectively making peace into a God. I confess to being puzzled by this concern. To say that God is peace (or God is love or just about any other appropriate adjective) is obviously not the same as to say that peace is God (or that love is God and so on). When one reverses the nominative case, one loses narrative specificity, storied concreteness.

In saying "God is peace," I mean to say that Jesus of Nazareth reveals to us that God is peace. By contrast, saying "peace is God" is unspecified and vague, so much so that we are not sure what is being said or what examples could show us what that would look like. I will need to flesh much more what I mean by "peace," of course, but I believe that the Bible supplies us with a strong portrayal of genuine peace, and that as Christians we must begin our thinking about God and peace with thinking about Jesus of Nazareth.

***Starting with Jesus of Nazareth.*** Christian pacifists—who believe that Jesus' life and teaching are at the center of the Bible, the lens through which we read the rest—see in Jesus sharp clarity about the supremacy of love, peacableness, compassion. Jesus embodies a broad and deep vision of life that is thoroughly pacifist, even if he did not explicitly address participation in warfare.[14]

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[13] Jenny Teichman, *Pacifism and the Just War: A Study in Applied Philosophy* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 1.

[14] In what follows, my approach to Jesus is shaped above all by John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, second edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994).

I will mention four basic biblical themes that find clarity in Jesus, but in numerous ways emerge throughout the biblical story. These provide the foundational theological rationale for Christian pacifism. They include first and most basic, the love command that Jesus gave as a summary of the biblical message. The second theme is Jesus' vision for love-oriented politics in contrast to the tyranny of the world's empires. The third theme is Jesus' optimism about the human potential for living in love. And the fourth theme is the model of Jesus' cross that embodies self-suffering love and exposes the nature of the structures of human culture as God's rivals for the trust of human beings.

(1) *Jesus' love command.* When asked what is the greatest of the commandments, Jesus, according to Matthew's gospel, responds: "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (22:34-40).

Mark and Luke also report this assertion (though Luke puts the actual words in the mouth of Jesus' questioner)—as does Paul, in a slightly modified form (Romans 13:8-10). Note that Paul summarizes the law simply as loving neighbor, effectively refuting any attempt to lessen the thrust of the second part of Jesus' command. John in his first letter (1 John 4:18-21) also makes this affirmation.

We see three points being made here that are crucial for our concerns. First, love is at the heart of everything for the believer in God. Second, love of God and love of neighbor are tied inextricably together. In Jesus' own life and teaching, we clearly see that he understood the "neighbor" to be the person in need, the person one is able to show love to in concrete ways (rather than being an insider over against non-neighbors who are "other" and who we are not expected to love). The third point is that Jesus understood his words to be a summary of the Bible—that is, what Christians now call the Old Testament. The law and prophets were the entirety of Jesus' Bible. In his view, their message may be summarized by this double love command. He quotes Deuteronomy and Leviticus directly in making his statement.

In his call to love, Jesus directly links love even for enemies with God loving all people. "I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven: for he makes his son rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (Mt 5:44-45).

These words of Jesus are part of his lengthy manifesto on faithful living known as the Sermon on the Mount. Near the beginning of this manifesto, he makes it clear again that his message of peace follows

directly from the Bible (what Christians call the Old Testament). "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill" (Mt 5:17).

Just as the double love command comes directly from the law and prophets, so too the call to imitate God's love for all people (with its implication, as Jesus makes clear, of loving even enemies) comes from the law and prophets. Of course, the Old Testament gives a wide variety of impressions of God's attitude toward the Hebrews enemies. However, Jesus' message has deep grounding in the biblical story throughout, and he provides a hermeneutic for understanding the peace message (shalom) as the core message of the Bible.

From the start, the Bible presents God as willing peace for human beings—for all human beings. And, crucially, God's means for this love for "all the families of the earth" to be channeled through a community formed through God's election of them as a people of the promise.[15] The story makes it clear that this election is pure mercy. God's persevering love for God's elect is itself an expression of God's love for enemies.

The basic guidance that Jesus draws from the story of God with God's people that he understood himself to stand within, may be summarized in his words as reported by Luke: "Love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:35-6).

Following after Jesus, we find in later New Testament writers a parallel portrayal of the centrality of love, even for enemies, as a reflection of the way God loves. I will only mention Paul's letter to the Romans. Paul writes of God's immense love for us that reaches out to us in Jesus' life and death, "while we were still sinners," "while we were enemies" (Rom 5:8,10). A little later, Paul (who also understood himself as, like Jesus, capturing the core message of the Bible [i.e., the Old Testament]) echoes Jesus' summary of the core message of Torah: "The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery; you shall not murder; you shall not steal; you shall not covet;' and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law" (Rom 13:9-10).

So, the first and most basic biblical theme grounding Christian pacifism, finding clarity in Jesus but reflecting the biblical story as a

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[15] See Ted Grimsrud, *God's Healing Strategy: An Introduction to the Bible's Main Themes*, revised edition (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2011), for a discussion of the Genesis 12:1-3 calling of Abraham and Sarah as the interpretive key for reading the entire Bible.

whole, is the centrality of the call to love. The call to love provides the central building block for Christian pacifism—both in the positive sense as it establishes love as the highest ethical standard that can never be secondary to a violence-justifying ethical commitment and in the negative sense as it provides the basis for rejecting participation in war.

(2) *An alternative politics.* Our second biblical theme complements the love command. Jesus sharply critiqued power politics and created a counter-cultural community independent of nation states' dependence upon the sword.[16] Jesus indeed was political—he was confessed to be a king (which is what Messiah, or Christ, meant). He was executed by the Empire as a political criminal. However, his politics were upside-down.[17] Jesus expressed his political philosophy in a nutshell when he responded to his disciples' angling for status: "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant" (Mk 10:42-43).

In making this contrast between the politics of the "Gentile nations" (such as Rome) and the politics of the followers of God, Jesus did not compare apples and oranges. He did not say these represent two totally different realms of life. To the contrary, he said these are competing visions for the ordering of social life among human beings.

When Jesus accepted the title "Messiah," when Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of God as present and normative for his followers, when Jesus organized his followers around twelve disciples (thus echoing the way the ancient nation of Israel was organized), he established a social movement centered around the love command, a movement focused on supporting people living transformed lives in the here and now, a movement that witnessed to the entire world the ways of God, the ways meant to be the norm for all human beings.

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[16] Three biblical theologies that center on the motif of "community" and, at least to some extent, highlight the motif of the biblical community as counter-culture include: Paul D. Hanson, *The People Called: The Growth of Community in the Bible* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986); Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978); and Gerhard Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church? Toward a Theology of the People of God* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999).

[17] For Jesus and politics, see along with Yoder, *Politics*, Marcus Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988); N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Fortress Press, 1996); William Herzog, *Jesus, Justice, and the Reign of God: A Ministry of Liberation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000); and Alan Storkey, *Jesus and Politics: Confronting the Powers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005).

Jesus, however, directly rejected the notion that the new movement he initiated would seek to imitate, even replace, Rome as the dominating Kingdom (Empire) based on military might. He rejected Satan's offer at the beginning of his ministry to spearhead such a dominating kingdom.

Rather, Jesus spearheaded a movement meant to operate within the nations and empires of the world as an alternative society living according to the word of God rather than the rule of the sword. The community Jesus founded actually modeled itself after the pattern established as long ago as during the ministry of the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah's words may have served to help the ancient Israelites survive as a distinct people. He encouraged people of the covenant to seek the wellbeing of whatever society they were part of while at the same time maintaining their distinct identity as people of Torah (Jer 29:7).[18]

In light of Jesus' message, and how that message echoes Jeremiah's prophetic word, the entire Old Testament may be read as a cautionary tale. This tale concerns the failure of state-centered, sword-oriented politics to be a viable vehicle for sustaining the people of God as people who will bless all the families of the earth. The call to be a blessing, first given to Abraham, was later reiterated when both the prophet Micah and the prophet Isaiah foresaw a time when the nations of the world would come to Zion to learn the ways of peace, turning their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks (Isa 2:2-4; Mic 4:1-4).

In light of Jeremiah and Jesus, we may see this prophecy carried out not through the violence of the standard nation state, but through the peaceable witness of counter-cultures scattered throughout the world in various nation states—counter-cultures that center their lives on the consistent embodiment of the double command to love God and neighbor.

So, Jesus actually followed in close continuity with the Old Testament story with his message calling upon his hearers to embrace once again their vocation to spread the message of God's love, making "disciples of all nations" (Matt 28:19), a vocation most decidedly not dependent upon the centralized, coercive political power of a nation-state. The power of the sword-wielding state proved not only to be unnecessary for the carrying out of this promise, it actually corrupted the promise almost beyond recognition.

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[18] John Howard Yoder first argued for the significance of Jeremiah for thinking of how counter-cultural, pacifist communities might live faithfully in his essay, "See How They Go with Their Face to the Sun," in *For the Nations: Essays Public and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 51-78. This argument is greatly expanded in his posthumously published book, *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

Later, another prophet, John of Patmos, also juxtaposed and contrasted the ways of empires and nations with the ways of God's politics. The book of Revelation poses Babylon and the New Jerusalem as competing alternatives for followers of Jesus. Thus, Revelation echoes the choice Jesus presented his followers: Join uncritically in the social order where rulers lord over their subjects, or join in an alternative social order where greatness is manifested in servanthood.

From start to finish Revelation presents the pattern of Jesus (the king of kings, a political leader) as suffering love followed by martyrdom followed by God's vindication.[19] The final section of Revelation directly contrasts the two cities (or empires or kingdoms). First the angel shows John's vision of Babylon, then of the New Jerusalem. One is the way of power politics (and death); the other is the way of suffering servanthood (and life). These two alternatives are about life in the here and now.

(3) *Optimism about the potential for human faithfulness.* The third theme from Jesus' life and teaching that undergirds Christian pacifism may be seen in his approach to ethical exhortation. Jesus displayed a profound optimism about the potential his listeners had to follow his directives for life. When he said "follow me," he clearly expected people to do so—here and now, effectively, consistently, fruitfully.

Perhaps Jesus' most famous extended teaching, what we have come to call the Sermon on the Mount, begins with a series of straightforward affirmations—you are genuinely humble, you genuinely seek justice, you genuinely make peace, you genuinely walk the path of faithfulness even to the point of suffering severe persecution as a consequence.

So, when Jesus calls upon his followers to love their neighbors, to reject the tyrannical patterns of leadership among the kings of the earth, to share generously with those in need, to offer forgiveness seventy times seven times, he actually expected that this could be done.[20]

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[19] See two recent scholarly books that, in parallel ways, argue for Revelation's core commitment of a Jesus-centered nonviolence: Mark Bredin, *Jesus, Revolutionary of Peace: A Nonviolent Christology in the Book of Revelation* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2003) and Loren L. Johns, *The Lamb Christology of the Apocalypse of John* (Tübingen, Ger.: Mohr Siebeck, 2003). For a more popular-level discussion, see Ted Grimsrud, *Triumph of the Lamb: A Guide to the Book of Revelation* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1987).

[20] Glen Stassen and David Gushee, in *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Society* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), develop their lengthy portrayal of Christian ethics as centered at its core on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, which they see as a *practical* manifesto for present-day life. See also, Glen H. Stassen, *Living the Sermon on the Mount: A Practical Hope for Grace and Deliverance* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006).

Jesus' optimism about human possibilities reflects a central theme throughout the Bible—a theme sometimes not noticed amidst the continual litany of human failures and disappointments in relation to living out of Torah. At the heart of Torah and at the heart of the prophets' exhortations we see the assumption that indeed human beings *are* capable of walking in the paths of justice and shalom.

The biblical problem is not so much that human beings are incapable of following God's will for their lives. The biblical problem is that in spite of their capabilities for faithfulness, human beings nonetheless all too often turn away. And in turning away, in worshiping idols, human beings find themselves in bondage to social dynamics of oppression, greed, and violence. However, from the start, the remedy is always at hand—simply turn back, repent and trust in God. Faithfulness may then follow.

So, again, Jesus offers no radical innovation when he begins his ministry with these words: "Repent and believe in the good news. The kingdom of God is at hand" (Mark 1:15). Everything that he said in the months that followed presupposed that repentance (that is, simply turning back to God) is all that it takes for people to enter into fellowship with God and live as people of humility who hunger and thirst for justice and who persevere even in the face of persecution and suffering.

When Jesus called his followers to make kindness and love, even for enemies, the kind of priority that can never be overridden by some other value (that is, when Jesus established the basis for pacifism), he expected that this indeed would be possible.

(4) *The model of the cross.* The fourth theme from Jesus' life and teaching that undergirds Christian pacifism may be seen in his willingness to persevere in the path of love even when that brought him suffering and death. Jesus' cross serves as a model for his followers. At the heart of his teaching stands the often repeated saying, "Take up your cross and follow me." He insisted that just as he was persecuted for his way of life, so will his followers be as well.

The powers that be, the religious and political institutions, the spiritual and human authorities, responded to Jesus' inclusive, confrontive, barrier-shattering compassion and generosity with violence. Jesus' cross may be seen as embodied pacifism, a refusal to turn from the ways of peace even when they are costly. So his call to his followers to share in his cross is also a call to his followers to embody pacifism.

Jesus' cross certainly puts the lie to the idea that consistent, lived-out pacifism is passive, safe, and withdrawn. Jesus' way of peace led to conflict—not conflict stemming from his own belligerence, but conflict stemming from deeply entrenched characteristics in the structures of human society that resist freedom and compassion. Jesus' cross besides

pointing to pacifism in terms of his style of life, also points away from trusting in the swords and spears of empires and institutional religion. These are the very structures of human social life that killed Jesus.

Again, we see Jesus' path foreshadowed in the Old Testament story. The first empire we learn about there, Pharaoh's Egypt, embodies structural violence in its enslavement of the Hebrew people. Pharaoh's Egypt shows empire's pattern of violent responses when people resist imperial structural violence. This violent response led to stubborn hostility toward Moses and toward the fruit of Moses' work of empowering the Hebrews.

Tragically, the nation-state ultimately formed by the descendants of Moses imitated Egypt both in its injustices and its violent hostility toward those prophets who dared to speak out against the state's structural injustices. The prophets' message endured, though, even though they did not have coercive force to use to protect it or to impose it on their society.

After Jesus, we see his suffering servanthood lifted up as the basic pattern for faithfulness in the Revelation—the basic pattern of Jesus is stated at the beginning of the book: "The faithful witness (or 'martyr,' the Greek word is *martys*), the first born of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth" (Rev 1:5). Jesus is portrayed as simultaneously the one who suffers violence without retaliation, the one whom God honors and exalts, and the one who serves as the true ruler of the world.

Jesus' pattern is held up as the model for his followers. The ones who are healed by God are the ones who "follow the Lamb wherever he goes" (Rev 14:4)," the ones who refuse to kill with the sword (Rev 13:10). Those who "conquer" in God's way in Revelation conquer with suffering love. Those who "conquer" in the Beast's way conquer with violence.

The Bible, thus, provides a fourfold basis for pacifism: the love command, the calling to give loyalty to the counter-cultural community of God's people over loyalty to the Empire, the belief that faithful human beings can be empowered to follow Jesus in the here and now, and the model of the pattern of Jesus—suffering love even to the point of death with the promise of God's vindication.

## Core theological affirmations

If we understand "pacifism" as a foundational conviction, one that shapes all our other convictions, and if we affirm that our pacifism follows from our Christian faith commitments, then we must recognize that pacifism links with our core theological convictions. When we view Christian theology through pacifist lenses, we will see that several key theological motifs naturally take a distinctly pacifist slant.

(1) *Trinitarian cues—Jesus as God*. One key distinctively Christian theological affirmation is a Trinitarian understanding of God. God is a unity of three distinct "persons," Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Insofar as Christians retain a commitment to understand God monotheistically, they recognize that these three "persons" are not independent in will, but are three ways the one God is manifested in relation to human beings.

John Howard Yoder spoke for Christian pacifists when he asserted that as they operate within a Trinitarian framework, Christians recognize that Jesus of Nazareth, when he makes God's nonviolent, persevering love concrete, reflects the very character of God. Christians confess Jesus as "God Incarnate," the second person of the Trinity.

As Yoder wrote, "incarnation" originally meant,

> God broke through the borders of our standard definition of what is human, and gave a new, formative definition of Jesus. "Trinity" did not originally mean that there are three kinds of revelation, the Father speaking through creation, the Spirit through experience, by which the words and example of the Son must be corrected; it meant rather that language must be found and definitions created so that Christians, who believe in only one God, can affirm that that God is most adequately and bindingly known in Jesus.[21]

Yoder argued that a thoroughly pacifist Jesus is the norm for all Christians. If Jesus is Lord, if Jesus is God Incarnate, if Jesus is Messiah, if Jesus is the Second Person of the Trinity, "fully human and fully divine," his way of life embodies God's will for all humanity. "I ask…that the implications of what the church has always said about Jesus as Word of the Father, as true God and true Man, be taken more seriously, as relevant to our social problems, than ever before."[22] That is, pacifism as a core Christian conviction, as a commitment that shapes every other conviction we have as Christians, follows from a "high" christology that recognizes Jesus as part of the very being of God.

(2) *God is nonviolent.* The Bible gives us mixed signals concerning the relationship between God and violence. However, our above recognition of the relevance to Trinitarian affirmations for how we understand the centrality of pacifism to Christianity, challenges us to read the Bible christologically. Insofar as the Bible presents Jesus as the normative revelation of God and tells the story leading up to Jesus' incarnation and following Jesus' ascension as being in ultimate harmony with the story of Jesus' life and teaching, we are charged to pay close attention to themes in the Bible that illumine the message of Jesus.

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[21] Yoder, *Politics,* 99.

[22] Yoder, *Politics*, 102.

The challenge of making sense of various Old Testament and later apocalyptic portrayals of God being linked with violence certainly deserves our serious reflection and analysis. However, if we do take Jesus as normative, we need not wait to resolve every point of tension before we lift up biblical themes that do make clear that the deepest, most profound, most coherent view of God leads directly to the conclusion that the Christian God is best understood in terms of nonviolence.[23]

The beginning of the Bible, Genesis one, makes clear that creation itself reflects the peace that is at the heart of God (especially when we contrast the story of origins told here with other contemporary stories such as the Babylonian account that posits profound violence at the very heart of creation[24]). Throughout the Old Testament, though indeed often violence is linked with God, the basic story line presents God more in terms of persevering love, an emphasis surfaced early on when, following the retributive judgment of the great flood in Noah's time, we see the rainbow, a weapon of war unstrung, and read of God's promise to respond to human willfulness in a different way.

Jesus, most obviously, presents his Father as characterized by mercy in response to wrong-doing (see, for example, the story of the Prodigal Son, Luke 15:11-32). Jesus turns to God as "Abba," a God worthy of trust and affection. He asserts that we best imitate the character of God, who showers life on the just and unjust alike, when we exercise God-like mercy, even to the point of loving our enemies (Matt 5:43-48).

Paul reiterates this last point in Romans five, when he emphasizes how God loves all of us while we are yet God's enemies. This, remember, comes from the former zealot who himself had violently persecuted Jesus' followers in service of the God he worshiped. Only after his life-shattering meeting with Jesus on the Damascus Road did Paul realize that the God he thought served with his violence actually was most definitively revealed in the thoroughly pacifist Jesus of Nazareth, in whose service Paul spent the rest of his days.

## Pacifism as vision

The language of pacifism, then, is best understood as the basic language of our human vocation, our way of understanding creation and our place in it. The foundational saving event of the New Testament,

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[23] On God as nonviolent, see Ted Grimsrud, "Is God Nonviolent?" in *Embodying the Way of Jesus: Anabaptist Convictions for the Twenty-First Century* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2007), 47-53; reprinted below as chapter 13.

[24] Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 13-6.

God raising Jesus from the dead, both vindicates Jesus' own pacifist way of life and reflects in the most profound way possible God's own pacifist way of responding to the worst imaginable human rebellion and violence.

Jesus embodies the pacifist vocation, directly engaging the Powers of evil (offering forgiveness to outcasts, healing to the Powers' victims, establishing countercultural communities of resistance to the domination system). Jesus' engagement, while clearly confrontive enough to elicit an enormously violent response from the Powers, provides a paradigm both for perceiving the human situation (e.g., his critique of how the so-called "Benefactors" of the nations actually exercise their power in tyranny) and responding to this situation with creative and transforming pacifism (e.g., his "transforming initiatives" in his Sermon on the Mount[25]).

As we turn back to the critiques of pacifism summarized above, we may see that in each case, the criticism does not reflect an adequate understanding of authentic pacifism founded on the message of Jesus.

Michael Kelly may be correct in seeing pacifism as opposing American imperialism, but for precisely the opposite reason he cites. He claims pacifism is "objectively evil" because he assumes the interests of the American empire represent "objective good." Pacifism does not oppose American imperialism because it is American, but because it is imperialism. Indeed we do have a responsibility to resist "evil people." However, we are called to offer such resistance in ways that do not simply add to the spiral of evil. Pacifists argue that in fact our way of resisting evil offers the best long-term hope for actually healing the problems created by evil actions, breaking the spiral.

Pacifism, in contrast to Kelly's caricature, does stand for objective good in opposition to evil doers. This is why pacifists oppose all mass murder, be it the acts of those who flew the planes into the World Trade Center and Pentagon on September 11, 2001 or the killings of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis following the United States invasion of Iraq in March 2003. Pacifism respects the "power of sin" in our world today. We take human sin so seriously that we respect the likelihood that military and political leaders themselves are corrupted by sin so much that they can no be trusted to operate on behalf of genuine justice and fairness.

The only ultimately redemptive response to sin and how it profoundly distorts human social life is, as Jesus asserted, to seek to overcome evil with good. The only way successfully to resist violence without simply adding to violence in the world is overtly non-violent resistance.

The pacifism being advocated for in this paper would recognize itself in neither of Reinhold Niebuhr's caricatures of "orthodox" or "heretical"

[25] Stassen, *Living the Sermon on the Mount* and Stassen and Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics*.

pacifisms. We should affirm the possibility of living faithfully in response to God's transforming love (which is central to biblical anthropology as reflected both in Torah and the Sermon on the Mount) without positing a naïve and superficial humanistic optimism. For pacifism, our hope rests on God's promises, not inherent human goodness.

It is also possible to be pacifist and affirm that Christian faith does lead us to political engagement that enters into human history in the "nitty gritty" of real life. However, following Yoder, we affirm that the "politics of Jesus," while directly involved in human social life, must not be reduced to a balance of power between competing egoisms that requires the use of the sword to be genuinely "political." Such a politics based on violence not only contradicts Jesus' expectations for human beings living in the present world, it also misses the importance of cooperation, community, and mutuality in all healthy social dynamics.

The message of Jesus is directly relevant for life in the political realm. Pacifism after Jesus helps the believer see that it is not the following of Jesus' way that causes damage due to its neglect of Niebuhrian "rough justice." Rather, damage is much more likely to be caused by those who fail to see that violence and militarism do not create a valuable if imperfect form of relative justice but instead only foster injustice and heighten the spiral of violence.

In contrast to Hershberger's dismissal of pacifism as unbiblical and based on unbelieving humanism, pacifism as understood in this book bases itself on biblical teaching. From the Bible, we learn of a pacifism that does seek to transform the world and that resists evil and evildoers (albeit nonviolently and in hopes of lovingly transforming the evildoer).

Justice is indeed to be insisted on—though not the retributive, abstract, and coercive justice of thinkers such as Niebuhr. Biblical justice does challenge evil, not with the threat of punishment but with the possibility of genuine healing and the restoration of broken relationships. Pacifism helps us keep in mind that true justice requires healing both for victim and offender, seeing past the lure of eye-for-an-eye vengeance.[26]

There is a place for nonviolent coercion in pacifism, though following Gandhi's careful thought about coercion, it is used only in ways that do not violate the humanity of the opponent.[27] Jesus himself expressed

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[26] For an argument of how "justice" and "pacifism" are complementary concepts, see Ted Grimsrud, "Violence as a 'Theological' Problem," *Justice Refelctions* Issue #10 (December 2005), 1-25 (chapter 14 below) and Ted Grimsrud and Howard Zehr, "Rethinking Violence and the Treatment of Offenders," *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation* 35 (2002), 253-79.

[27] Joan V. Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence: Gandhi's Philosophy of Conflict* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1958), 9-11.

coercive tendencies, for instance in his sharp critique of the Pharisees in Matthew 23 and driving the moneychangers from the temple.

Walter Wink presumably would affirm much of what I have been saying about pacifism, except he does not like the term. Like Wink, I affirm that the follower of Jesus is called to seek social justice and to live as if social transformation is possible in history. Pacifism is decidedly not "passive;" it has nothing to do with passivity.

The focus of pacifism is positive, constructive, active, and engaged. It is on making peace. Hence, the term "nonviolence" simply is not adequate. "Pacifism" encompasses precisely the vision Wink articulates of God's domination free reign that Jesus inaugurated.

## Pacifism and knowing

At its heart, the vision for pacifism I seek to articulate and embody emphasizes that pacifist convictions shape the way we see the world and our place in it. Throughout the New Testament, right vision stands in contrast with blindness, idolatrous misperception, and willful distortions of reality and of God's will.

To better understand pacifism in its fullest sense, we need self-consciously to reflect on epistemology, to reflect on how we know what we know and what difference pacifism makes in how and what we know. Pacifists have not spent a lot of time in such reflection. However, from what we have been saying above about the all-encompassing nature of pacifism, and about its link with the very character of God and God's creation, we have a need to be more intentional in thinking through the implications of pacifist convictions for how we think.

We all see the world through some sort of perspective. We cannot help but operate with some kind of epistemology, some set of values and convictions (even if unstated) that greatly affect what we see around us and how we see it. Such a fundamental conviction as pacifism cannot help but play a major role in how we order our values and convictions.

All too often, pacifism can be seen as kind of an "add on" to more fundamental convictions (hence, some of the critiques listed above that emerge because of the superificiality of a great deal of thinking about pacifism). However, we may argue philosophically and theologically for the centrality of pacifism as one of the most fundamental of our convictions. Pacifism, if it is truly to be pacifism, must stand at the center of our awareness as we reflect on how and what we know.

# 2. Old Testament peace theology

*[This previously unpublished paper was presented to the Contextual Ethics section of the American Academy of Religion annual meeting, Atlanta, November 2010.]*

This essay points in two mutually reinforcing directions: it challenges Christians in our understanding of the bases for our peace theology and it works at finding common ground between Christian peace theology and other traditions (most obviously Judaism, but potentially beyond).

### The Old Testament as a problem

Christian peace theology tends to be New Testament centered, especially drawing on the gospels. Most Christians seem to assume that the Old Testament has little to offer for the work of overcoming war and violence. The comment of a friend of mine many years ago may be representative. We were in a Bible study group together and when someone suggested we study something from the Old Testament, my friend snorted and stated flatly, "I don't want anything to do with that bloody book!" And many Christians who have wanted something to do with the Old Testament, going back to Augustine, have mainly used it as a justification for the acceptability of warfare.

So it's no surprise that when Christian peace theologian Jack Nelson-Pallmyer writes a polemical critique of Christian acceptance of violent theology, he would portray the Old Testament mainly as a problem.[1]

Every Fall semester I teach a class called "Biblical Theology of Peace and Justice" to students who by and large are Christian pacifists of a theologically fairly conservative stripe (mostly Mennonites). Rare is the student who doesn't see the Old Testament as a major problem.

Even peace theologians who don't share Nelson-Pallmyer's antipathy toward the Old Testament (such as John Howard Yoder, Glen Stassen, and Walter Wink) nonetheless do little to develop a positive Old

[1] Jack Nelson-Pallmyer, *Jesus Against Christianity: Reclaiming the Missing Jesus* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001).

Testament centered peace theology.[2]

Happily, numerous Old Testament scholars have helped us make progress in understanding the Hebrew scriptures as conveying a message of peace, not only giving us problems to overcome in constructing a biblically-based peace theology.[3] But as yet, these scholars have mainly produced careful historical and textual studies more than constructive biblically based peace theologies.

I approach these themes as a constructive theologian drawing on the work of biblical scholars. I am trying to develop a present-day peace theology that will be usable both within Christian communities and as we relate to fellow peacemakers outside our faith tradition. Probably my distinctive contribution in relation to other peace church writers who deal with the Old Testament to push more strenuously the value of reading the Bible as a whole.

I believe we find in the Bible a coherent story, with plot development, that provides a powerful basis for our constructive peace theology. This story is what we could call "God's healing strategy," a story that from its beginning in Genesis one has peace at its heart.[4] In this story, the Old Testament plays a crucial role—not as a preliminary to the essential part (as if its main point is to show us humanity's unresolved problems that

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[2] For example, in his powerful book, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), Wink briefly mentions several ways the Old Testament contributes to a peace ethic—but sees the ethics of violence more dominant (43-5).

[3] The pioneering Mennonite scholar Millard Lind deserves the first mention. See especially *Yahweh is a Warrior: The Theology of Warfare in Ancient Israel* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980) and *Monotheism, Power, Justice: Collected Old Testament Essays* (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1990). Other examples from peace church writers include Perry Yoder, *Shalom: The Bible's Word for Salvation, Justice, and Peace* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1987); Waldemar Janzen, *Old Testament Ethics: A Paradigmatic Approach* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994); Daniel Smith-Christopher, *Jesus, Jonah, and Other Good Coyotes: Speaking Peace to Power in the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007); David A. Leiter, *Neglected Voices: Peace in the Old Testament* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2007); and Eric A. Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009).

Seibert's book is especially helpful in *directly* facing many problem texts from the point of view of an Old Testament scholar who is also a pacifist. Another recent book that confirms many of Siebert's points is Douglas S. Earl, *The Joshua Delusion? Rethinking Genocide in the Bible* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), with a critical response from Christopher J.H. Wright.

[4] See Ted Grimsrud, *God's Healing Strategy: An Introduction to the Bible's Main Themes*, second edition (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2011).

require Jesus to correct and give us for the first time the true message of salvation), but as providing the core enduring message of peace and salvation that Jesus and the New Testament confirm and vindicate.

I don't deny that the Old Testament contains numerous challenging elements for peacemakers. And we legitimately devote much creative energy to understanding and responding to those problems. Millard Lind's, Eric Seibert's, and Douglas Earl's books, mentioned in footnote 3, are invaluable in helping us to grapple with the genuine "problems." However, it is a misreading of the Old Testament and an impoverishing of Christian peace theology to let the problems overshadow the positive message of peace that the Old Testament gives us. In what follows, I will outline that positive message. I will speak to three points: the Old Testament peace vision, the Old Testament justice vision, and the Old Testament critique of state-centered power politics.

## The Old Testament peace vision

The psalmist writes that "peace and justice shall embrace" (Ps 85:10), indicating that "peace" and "justice" are not in tension with one another but rather are complementary. So, as I write first of the "peace vision" and then of the "justice vision," I mean to present these two concepts as mutually reinforcing, not standing over against one another.

From the start, the Old Testament gives a vision for peace—both in the sense of the immense value of peace but also a sense of how peace is achieved and the form it takes.[5] The creation story tells of God bringing order and harmony out of chaos. This harmony is a gift, though, not order imposed by coercive force. The consequence of the harmony is to empower humanity to share in God's work of cultivation in this new world God brought into being (not the subservience of impotent human persons to an all-powerful king-like God). The creation story presents harmony between humanity and God and among human beings as our default human circumstance. We start as peaceable creatures in harmony with (even in the image of) a peaceable God.[6]

After disharmony enters the story, we read of the retributive response by God that ends with God's decision to continue with humanity and a commitment not to respond with such violence in the future. We come in

[5] See Walter Brueggemann, *Peace* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001).

[6] Terence Fretheim shows the powerful link between biblical creation theology and an ethics of shalom: *God and the World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005). Also ethically and theologically helpful is J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Word: The Imagio Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005).

Genesis 12 to the main story line of God's chosen people as agents of God's blessing of all the families of the earth. In a nutshell, we find here the basic message of the rest of the Bible (Old and New Testaments). God has purposed to bring healing to broken creation through the establishment of a people who will know God's peace, live in light of that peace, and be a conduit of peace to all the families of the earth.

In light of the call Abraham receives to bless all families of the earth, we read how he embodies his call in his exemplary practice of hospitality in contrast with Sodom's inhospitality and his exemplary petition to God on behalf of the sinful Sodomites. Abraham is scarcely perfect, but he does put into practice his sense of calling to be a peacemaker.[7]

The rest of Genesis is dominated by stories of Abraham's direct descendents. Two of the core stories emphasize, in somewhat roundabout ways, the call to brotherly reconciliation—Esau and Jacob reconciled, Joseph's mercy toward his unjust brothers. Both of these stories provide a peaceable message in response to the "original sin" of Cain murdering his brother in Genesis 4.[8]

The central act of salvation that defines Old Testament faith also has at its core God's peacemaking commitments. After Joseph saves his family from starvation, they settle in Egypt. Many generations later, the Egyptians have enslaved Joseph's descendents, the Hebrews. They cried out in their trauma. God hears and acts to liberate them from slavery, in remembrance of God's promise to make Abraham's descendents a great nation who will bless all the families of the earth. The work God does to bring this liberation (the "exodus") has troubled many because of its violent elements. However, a more careful look shows crucial elements that point away from inter-human, state-centered violence.[9]

The God of the exodus is a God who responds to the sufferings of slaves, not a God of the rich and powerful, certainly not a God of kings, emperors, or Pharaohs. The exodus events are triggered by a human prophet, Moses, who clearly does not have the status of king nor of military leader. The Hebrews do not win their freedom through wielding the sword. The only stereotypical weapons of war in the story (the Egyptians' "horses and chariots") are destroyed. The violence in the story stems from the structural violence of Egypt's slave culture and the refusal of Pharaoh to relent in his insistence on the continuance of oppression. Breaking from that violence is what the exodus events are for.

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[7] My understanding of the Abraham story is shaped by Walter Brueggemann's commentary: *Genesis* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1982).

[8] See Patricia McDonald, *God and Violence: Resources for Living in a Small World* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2004), 35-72.

[9] I draw here especially on Lind, *Yahweh*.

As the liberated Hebrews move through the wilderness and learn from painful experiences, God give them a written framework for their future society, Torah. While we cannot speak of Torah as pacifist in our modern sense of the notion, the heart of the commandments surely may be accurately characterized as a concern for shalom, wide-ranging social wholeness—that is, "peace." Torah called for a society centered around the well-being of all people in the community.[10]

## The Old Testament justice vision

In reflecting on justice in the Old Testament, the key point to note is that justice is not a stand-alone concept. It is often linked with other related concepts such as peace (*shalom*) and mercy (*chesed*). Peace and justice shall embrace (Ps 85). What does the Lord require, the do justice and love mercy (Mic 6). And justice is most of all about faithfulness in the context of relationships—the covenant relationship between the people of Israel and their God and the peoples' relationships with each other.[11]

Justice provides the standard for the quality of life in the community of God's people. They have been delivered from the injustice of enslaved life in Egypt for the purpose of their knowing the wholeness of genuinely just relationships within their own community and for the purpose of witnessing to the nations of this justice in ways that, at least in some versions of the description of Israel's vocation, will lead to blessing all the families of the earth (Gen 12:1-3: Isa 2:2-4).

At its heart, biblical justice is a life-giving force, not an impersonal principle of fairness. The book of Amos contains the most thoroughgoing meditation on the meaning of justice in the Bible. Amos's uses the vivid metaphor in relation to justice of water, an ever-flowing stream. Justice brings life for the community—and sustains that life. In a desert environment, a stream that does not dry up brings life like nothing else.

The overall argument of Amos underscores that the following of the ways of justice leads to wholeness; the lack of justice leads to brokenness. As much as any Old Testament writing, Amos speaks of judgment. Israel has left the core justice-enhancing elements of Torah behind. The inheritance system, meant to sustain full participation in the community

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[10] Two appreciative studies of Torah and its present-day relevance by Christian biblical scholars that support my points here are Johanna W. H. van Wijk-Bos, *Making Wise the Simple: The Torah in Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005) and Patrick D. Miller, *The Ten Commandments* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009).

[11] On justice, see Enrique Nardoni, *Rise Up, O Judge: A Study of Justice in the Biblical World* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004).

over generations lay in shambles and an alarming number of Israelites were now landless and destitute. The concern for widows and other vulnerable people expressed in Torah has been forgotten and the vulnerable are people to exploit, not empower. The system of "justice at the gate," the main recourse to counter exploitation, became corrupt.

Maybe worse of all, these injustices found expression in the midst of an active religious life. Well-off Israelites flocked to the worship services; while worshiping their sins went unconfronted and they returned to the same oppressive practices. So, Amos speaks of inevitable judgment.

However, the judgment itself is not characterized as an expression of justice. Judgment is what happens when justice is missing. Justice is the alternative to judgment. Do justice and the judgment will not come. And in the end, Amos somewhat incongruously presents the final word as being one of healing, not punishment. This switch of focus from condemnation to mercy has led many interpreters to conclude that this ending of Amos (9:11-15) was tacked on later to soften the harshness of the judgment oracles. However, if we take the ending seriously, we can see a different kind of message being intended by the book as a whole.

The background to Amos is Israel's departure from the main elements of Torah's vision for a just society. The various expressions of this departure are described and the consequences of the departure are spelled out in vivid terms as a means to call Israel back. Again, the meaning of justice here (as embodied in the message of Torah) is that justice is about life (not judgment or condemnation). The vision of healing at the end of the book is both a reminder that it is never too late to repent, to turn back, to return to the way of life—and a promise that Israel's unfaithfulness will not in the end be more powerful than God's faithfulness. Many may miss out; the consequences for turning from Torah are genuine. But healing will come. Justice will be served.[12]

So, the Old Testament justice vision brings together reconciliation, mercy, and social wholeness. The portrayal of life lived according to Torah involves freedom from the oppression of Egypt's slavery, prosperity and a sense of security across the generations and inclusive especially of the vulnerable members of the community, the reality of consequences should the people turn toward injustice, and finally the promise of restoration and healing for those who turn back to God.

The driving force in the justice vision is hope for healing. Justice leads to reconciliation. It makes whole what had been broken. Amos's final

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[12] See Ted Grimsrud, "Healing Justice: The Prophet Amos and a 'New' Theology of Justice," in Ted Grimsrud and Loren Johns, eds., *Peace and Justice Shall Embrace: Power and Theopolitics in the Bible* (Telford, PA: Cascade Publishing House, 2000), 64-85—and chapter 4 below in this book.

vision of restoration following judgment echoes other major prophetic books. Isaiah, Micah, Hosea, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah each are structured in similar ways. They tell of brokenness and trauma due to injustice and of the threat of judgment (retributive justice) due to the community's departure from Torah. But each one, in distinctive ways, concludes with visions of healing. The prophetic message portrays justice ultimately as restorative justice. The driving force for the threats of judgment is justice-as-life-giving, not justice-as-punishment. Recognize the costly fruits of your turn away from Torah and turn back so that you may live.

So, the meaning of justice in the Old Testament links with the other key parts of the biblical political economy—shalom and covenant love. In response to the human predicament as portrayed in Genesis 4–11 (as addressed by the calling of Abraham and Sarah) and as portrayed in Exodus 1–15 (as addressed by the exodus and gift of Torah), this justice-oriented political economy sought for a social transformation that would, when implemented, overcome the problems of injustice and warfare.

## The Old Testament critique of state-centered power politics

Of the three main elements of the Old Testament message that provide bases for Christian peace theology, the two I have just summarized are positive: the Old Testament peace vision and the Old Testament justice vision, two complementary themes.

The third element is negative—the critique the Old Testament provides of state-centered power politics.[13] The surrounding empires that continually threatened the Promise provided models that Torah sought to provide an alternative to. However, many within Israel also saw these empires as a positive model. As Israel patterns itself more and more after "the nations" (see 1 Sam 8), Israel itself also becomes a counter-example for the visions of peace and justice. In the end, the failure of the Israelite nation-state to embody Torah's shalom leads to a new kind of political vision. This new vision understands the transformative message of biblical shalom to be channeled not through nation-states so much as through decentralized trans-national faith communities.[14]

The beginning vision that established the identity of the people of God in the Old Testament came when God promised Abraham and

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[13] Important influences on my thinking here come from Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, second edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001) and Lind, *Monotheism.* See also Norman K. Gottwald, *The Politics of Ancient Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

[14] My first awareness of this point came from John Howard Yoder. See *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

Sarah offspring in spite of Sarah's seeming inability to bear children. God promised that they would become the forebears of a great nation that, ultimately, would bless all the families of the earth (Gen 12:1-3). This initial calling defines the meaning and purpose of the election of Abraham's descendents: their vocation would be to reverse the brokenness portrayed in Genesis 4–11.

A second point of origins for the people emerges early in the book of Exodus. The direct descendents of Abraham found themselves enslaved in Egypt, at risk of losing their identity altogether. In their suffering they simply cry out (Ex 2). God hears their cries, "remembers the promise to Abraham and Sarah," and intervenes to sustain the life and vocation of these people. God's work of liberation here establishes both God's identity as a God who takes the side of slaves over against their oppressors and the community's identity as formed in order to provide an alternative to the way of empire that defined Egypt's political economy.

A human leader, Moses, shapes the community as a prophet who does not gather to himself horses and chariots or wealth or other kingly elements of human domination. Rather, Moses puts this liberating God, Yahweh, at the center of the community's political consciousness.[15] And Yahweh stands over against human kings and empires. The political dynamics of the Hebrew community emphasize decentralized human power dynamics and trust in God rather than weapons of war.

After the escape from Egypt, God takes the people into the wilderness for a time of preparation before giving them a geographical home where they might establish their Yahweh-centered permanent human community. The key element of the preparation came in the form of Torah, the blueprint for this community's common life. Torah throughout presents itself as based on a political philosophy grounded on values opposed empire. In contrast to Egypt, Torah requires the community to show care and support for the most vulnerable people in their midst—the widows, orphans, and resident aliens. These would be precisely the weak people Egypt exploited.

Yahweh's direct intervention, independent from centralized human power blocks (no human king, no permanent military, no large collection of horses and chariots) gains the Hebrews their new home in Canaan. The Hebrews establish a new kind of political organization, centered on trust in God rather than in the power of the sword. This community is called to be a "priestly nation" (Ex 19), echoing the calling of Abraham and Sarah to parent a people that will bless all the families of the earth.

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[15] Millard C. Lind, "The Concept of Political Power in Ancient Israel," in *Monotheism*, 135-52.

However, the story tells of profound struggles in this community, dating back to the immediate aftermath of the liberating exodus and continuing throughout their movement into the promised land. One particularly painful moment is recounted in the book of Judges, where irresponsibility by a priestly leader and violent inhospitality by one the Israelite communities pushes the entire community into a terrible civil war. The people pull back before complete self-destruction, partly (it would appear) due to a rising threat from outside the community in the form of the Philistines, the paradigmatic enemies of the Hebrews in their early generations in the land.

However, after a short period of wise leadership from Samuel, the leaders of the Hebrews see themselves still at risk and make the fateful move of demanding that God allow them to choose a human king, "like the nations." Samuel himself strongly opposed this request and outlines the consequences of such a move. Essentially, the people will return to "Egypt" should they take this path, with a human king who (like Pharaoh) will take and take. God relents though, and Israel embarks on a path that ultimately does lead to the destruction of their nation-state.[16]

The book of Deuteronomy, presented as Moses' final word to the people just before his death and their entry into the promised land, contained a brief vision of what a Torah-respecting human king would be like. As it turns out, this vision mainly serves as the basis for indicting the actual kings of Israel, beginning with their third king, Solomon.

As portrayed in Deuteronomy 17, the faithful king will be different from the kings of the nations and refuse to gather great wealth or marry many foreign wives or collect many horses and chariots. As well, the king will model awareness of and adherence to the core elements of Torah.

In fact, Solomon directly violates each of these commands. Perhaps most egregiously, Solomon worships the gods of some of his foreign wives and ends up in disgrace (at least in terms of the perspective of the historian who presents his moves away from Torah as setting the stage for Israel's long descent into unfaithfulness and ultimate destruction).

A couple of key markers along the way reveal the dynamics within Israel of disregard of Torah and the evolution into an Egypt-imitating society that departed from the vision of Torah for Israel as an alternative to the ways of empire. Solomon's son and successor as king, Rehoboam, continued Solomon's practices of oppressive forced labor leading to a rebellion and splitting the Israel into two kingdoms, Israel and Judah, both of which claimed to be the true heirs of the promise.

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[16] See Walter Brueggemann's commentary, *First and Second Samuel* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990).

Ultimately, both kingdoms conformed to the ways of the nations, not Torah, in ordering their social life. Several accounts focus especially on the departure from Torah in the northern kingdom, Israel. I Kings 21 tells of King Ahab rejecting the core command concerning inheritance, a command intended to keep people on the land by requiring their holdings to stay in the family, assuring descendents of landedness. Ahab frames and murders a faithful follower of Torah who refused to give up his land due to his commitment to the inheritance laws.

A number of generations later, by the time of the prophet Amos, the kingdom of Israel evolved into exactly the kind of society the inheritance legislation meant to prevent. The largest part of the community had become landless, with few resources and little power, and vulnerable to the exploitation of the wealthy and powerful minority. The legal system, intended to protect the welfare of the vulnerable, had been corrupted and the religious practices, rather than remind the people of Yahweh's will for justice embodied in Torah, had become exercises in reinforcing the present unjust status quo.

Not long after Amos's prophetic ministry, the Assyrian empire destroyed Israel. In a rare moment of listening to a prophet, Judah's King Hezekiah paid heed to Isaiah's directives and God saved the Judean kingdom from Assyrian conquest. The reprieve turned out to be temporary. Hezekiah's descendents proved to be as corrupt as the northern kingdom's leaders. King Manasseh, Hezekiah's grandson became the worst, actually implementing the practice of child sacrifice.

Manasseh's son was assassinated, leading to young Josiah becoming king. Josiah, with Hezekiah, was one of only two Hebrew kings affirmed by the biblical historian as faithful to Torah. In his reign, the scrolls of Torah were rediscovered in the bowels of the Temple and important reforms instituted. In the end, though, Josiah's reforms came too late to save the Hebrew nation-state. Manasseh's sins were simply too big to be overcome (2 Kings 23:26). Josiah rode forth the join the battle between Egypt and Babylon and was killed by Pharaoh Neco. His successors returned to the ways of the failed kings, and Babylon destroyed the temple and king's palace and exiled Judah's ruling class.

However, Josiah's most important accomplishment, the recovering of Torah, was enough to keep the promise alive. The prophet Jeremiah, who emerged in Josiah's time, provided an analysis of the theological meaning of Judah's fall that allowed people of faith to see in that fall not the defeat of God but actually a vindication of Torah. From the start in Joshua's time, Israel's place in the land was contingent on the people's faithfulness. When they departed from Torah, their destruction actually proves to be evidence of God's presence not God's absence.

Jeremiah also provides a template for the sustenance of the promise apart from the nation-state. "Seek the peace of the city where you find yourselves" (29:7). From now on, the promise to bless all the families of the earth will be carried out through faith communities in the Diaspora and in geographical Israel (but without political power) who rely on their own lived witness and word of testimony, not horses and chariots and geographical boundary lines.[17]

The concluding lesson from the Old Testament story of the chosen people in the land was the failure of the conventional power politics-oriented nation state. However, the original promise of blessing given to Abraham and Sarah remained alive. It has found expression ever since through Jewish communities and Christian communities that have remained free from state domination.

The original promise in Genesis 12 was not linked to horses and chariots and to any particular nation state. As it turned out, the move to tie the people of the promise with a particular geographical locale was a failure, reinforcing the problematic dynamics of power politics and clarifying once and for all that the way of the promise was as an alternative to power politics. This clarification then stood at the center of the message of Jesus, a message flowing directly from the story of Israel.

## The Old Testament in continuity with Jesus

The New Testament goes to great lengths to make it clear that Jesus' life and teaching are grounded in Old Testament faith and practice. Jesus self-conscientiously presents himself as anchored in the story of Israel. He intended to fulfill Torah, not abolish it. His summary of the path to eternal life—love God and neighbor—is presented as the core message of the Law and Prophets (i.e., the entire Old Testament).[18]

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[17] See John Howard Yoder, "See How They Go with Their Face to the Sun," in *Jewish-Christian*, 183-202.

[18] Much of the plenteous scholarly writing on Jesus these days reflects a much more profound appreciation of his Jewish context than used to be the case—and hence, of his linkage with Old Testaments themes of justice, peace, and political radicalism. Just a couple of the works I have found most helpful include: N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996); William R. Herzog, *Jesus, Justice, and the Reign of God: A Ministry of Liberation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000).

An especially thorough historical treatment emphasizing Jesus' Judaism is the multi-volume work by John P. Meier, the most recent volume being *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus: Volume IV: Law and Love* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009). A couple of example of Jewish scholars engaging Jesus

Jesus, though, provides a particular angle for reading the Old Testament. He emphasizes the elements of the story that I have just highlighted—the call to bless all the families of the earth, the critique of power politics both among the outside empires and within the community of faith, the special concern for including vulnerable people, highlighting mercy over sacrifice. There are many elements of the Old Testament that Jesus either ignores or implicitly rejects. The parts that seem exclusivist and chauvinistic. The parts that glorify wealth and power. The parts the portray God primarily as judgmental and coercive.

Jesus provides a model as we read the Old Testament and apply it to our concerns for peace on earth. He does so in a way both that accepts without qualification the truthfulness and authority of this collection of writings as a whole and that follows a particular reading strategy in emphasizing the parts from the collection that best serve Jesus' own shalom-oriented priorities.

An element of Jesus' practice that has not often been highlighted by interpreters is how he furthers Jeremiah's insight about diasporic politics vis-à-vis nation-state politics. Jesus lived and ministered within the borders of ancient Israel. However, his message of the kingdom of God in his time and vision for its future followed Jeremiah's vision, not the vision of the old geographically focused nation state.[19]

Jesus made his critique of nation-state politics explicit when he challenged his followers not to imitate the rulers of the Gentiles who lord it over their subjects but rather to follow the path of the Servant (evoking Isaiah 53). The community Jesus created was suited for existence throughout the world as leavening within whichever nation state they might find themselves—leavening that would be a form of seeking the peace of these various cities.[20]

When Luke continues the story following Jesus' resurrection early in the book of Acts, he portrays Jesus making a direct command to pursue a

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scholarship include Tikva Frymer-Kensky, David Novack, Peter Ochs, and Michael A. Siger, eds., *Christianity in Jewish Terms* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000) and Paula Fredrickson, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews: A Jewish Life and the Emergence of Christianity* (New York: Knopf, 1999).

Two books by Christian theologians have also helped me: Paul M. Van Buren, *A Theology of the Jewish-Christian Reality, Part 3: Christ is Context* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988) and Clark M. Williamson, *A Guest in the House of Israel: Post-Holocaust Church Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993).

[19] N.T. Wright, in his massive and influential *Jesus and the Victory of God*, makes a similar point in his lengthy discussion of expectations for Israel's "restoration." However, he does not draw out the implications in the same way I do.

[20] Again, see Yoder, *Jewish-Christian*.

Jeremaic strategy: take the gospel to Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth—not as an imperialistic nation-state spreading its "good news" in imitation of Rome's way of spreading "good news" through the sword. Take the "good news" as a message of peace, meant to embody its transforming power through defenseless communities of witness and service. This is how all the families of the earth will be blessed.

So, Jesus' meaning in relation to the Old Testament is best seen not as "promise and fulfillment" where the partial revelation of God through Israel finally gained its full expression in something new and (in key ways) different from what has come before. Rather, Jesus' meaning may better be seen as "revelation and embodiment." The original revelations in the creation story, the calling of Abraham and Sarah, and the liberating acts of God in the Exodus and giving of Torah was complete. They revealed everything that humanity needed to know about God and God's will for peace. The further revelation in the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus is simply a further embodiment of the original revelation. The Old Testament reveals, fully, God's ways of peace in the world—Jesus embodies that way, not something different.

The key New Testament symbol for God's work in the world is Jesus' resurrection. When God raised Jesus from the dead, God vindicated the Old Testament message. Jesus embodied that message and as a consequence, in continuity with Old Testament prophets, met with resistance from the powers that be. God vindicates just this embodiment of God's will. In doing so, God underscores the Old Testament visions of peace and justice and the Old Testament critique of power politics that Jesus made present and concrete in first century Palestine.

### The Old Testament and interfaith peace theology

Reading the Old Testament (and the story of Jesus) in the way I propose speaks most immediately to Christian belief and practice. Taking the Old Testament more seriously in the way I propose (in continuity with Jesus' representation of the Old Testament) challenges Christian tradition insofar as this tradition has comfortably embraced violence and empire as a way of life.

However, such an appropriation of the Old Testament also has major interfaith significance. Most obvious would be points of contacts with Judaism. My direct sense of common ground comes from my reading of two major 20th century Jewish thinkers whose work has greatly influenced my own: Martin Buber and Abraham Joshua Heschel. Buber's *Two Kinds*

*of Faith* and, even more so, Heschel's *The Prophets*,[21] seem to me to capture the heart of the biblical message as embodied by the Old Testament prophets and Jesus as well (or better) than just about any Christian writings I know of. Heschel's work, especially, emphasizes that the message of shalom, mercy, and justice as complementary elements of a transformative faith that we Christians see in Jesus is equally present in the Old Testament prophets.

If we Christians understand our commitment to peacemaking to be most of all based on the message of the entire Bible as I have sketched it, we should be well-suited to make common cause with all others of good will who also articulate a complementary peace vision and a complementary justice vision and a complementary critique of power politics.

[21] Martin Buber, *Two Kinds of Faith* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961) and Abraham Joshua Heschel. *The Prophets* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962).

# 3. Christian pacifism encounters the Old Testament

*[This previously unpublished paper is drawn from a 1983 lecture that was revised in 1991.]*

The Old Testament has been enormously influential in Christian thinking about war, especially for its use to justify involvement in war. Sociologist Ray Abrams, in his study of American Christian support for World War I makes the strong statement: "It may be safely predicted that as long as Christian ministers and Sunday School teachers continue, as the majority of them now do, to defend the crude ethics in parts of the Old Testament, the Bible will continue to be used as the greatest defense of war in history."[1] Unfortunately, many pacifists react to such uses of the Old Testament by dismissing it and neglecting the positive resources it offers for Christian peacemaking and social thought in general.

We do not have to explain away the Old Testament's wars in order to remain pacifists and at the same time accept all of the Old Testament as scripture. Looked at on its own terms, and seen as a record of the historical movement of God's people in history, the Old Testament can provide us with a great deal of insight. For one thing, it can help us to see that we are pacifists primarily not for negative reasons (it is wrong to kill) but for positive reasons. We are called to be agents of God's redemptive working in human history and that working moves in the way of the suffering servant, not in the way of power politics and violence.

Certainly, problems remain. But all areas of Christian theology leave us with problems. The Bible is a human book, presenting human history. Just as human history is neither unambivalent nor unambiguous, neither is the Bible. And the Bible, with its ambivalence and ambiguity, addresses us in our ambivalent and ambiguous contexts with words and images which nonetheless mediate the word of God for us.

The Old Testament texts should be seen first within their original contexts. In the age of Joshua, for example, the question of whether the

[1]Ray Abrams, *Preachers Present Arms* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1969), 252.

taking of human life is morally permissible would never have been asked. The key concept during the holy wars for the participants was not bloodshed, but rather the question of whether Israel would trust in God or not. If it would trust and follow God's will, then the occupants of the land would be driven out in ways which would make it clear that it was God and not military might or large numbers which won the victory.[2]

When we look at the historical development rather than directly comparing Jesus with Joshua, we see evolution. First we see novel aspects of holy war itself (e.g., dependence on God for one's existence) and in legislation (e.g., rejection of indirect retaliation and greater dignity given women and slaves). Progressively the prophetic line represented by writers such as Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah underlines these same emphases. Progression continues through incorporation of persons of non-Israelite blood into the tribe, expansion of world vision to include other nations, prophets' criticism of and history's destruction of kingship and territorial sovereignty as definitions of peoplehood.[3]

So while we see evidence of a great deal of movement from Joshua to Jesus, nonetheless, Jesus' emphases are in large part in continuity with those found in the Old Testament. To these we will now turn. I will focus on two different levels: first the immediate, first-glance, superficial reading—what happened? When? Who did it? Then the second, deeper, level of the theological interpretation given these events by the Old Testament writers and thinkers—what do these events say about the God of Israel? Why did they happen? What were their meanings?

## Level of events

The wars clearly happened and they did involve people of faith. Ancient Israel most certainly accepted the legitimacy of warfare as an institution. So, "pacifism" (understood as the in-principle rejection of all war) finds no overt articulation in the Old Testament. The Old Testament writers in fact tell us that God on occasion sanctions, even commands, wars to the point of God actually fighting.

The positive theological attitude toward Israel's particular wars is primarily limited to the first part of Israel's history from the crossing of the Red Sea in the 13th century to King David's victories in the 11th century. From David's time down to the final military defeat of the Jewish nation in the 6th century, the prophets and biblical writers almost

[2]John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 81-2.

[3]John Howard Yoder, *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1971), 103.

always spoke of the military engagements of the Jewish nation in very negative terms. However, it was not warfare as an institution that they explicitly condemned. Very possibly, prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah would not have opposed a true holy war like those fought under Joshua hundreds of years earlier.

So, Old Testament writers reflect a basic acceptance of the institution of warfare as compatible with God's will. Yet, ancient Israel—in contrast with most of the rest of the ancient Near East—did not glorify warfare. The Israelites did not hold up human warriors as the epitome of manhood. They made heroes of few true military figures. Some, such as Moses, Joshua, and Gideon, are heroes primarily because of their willingness not to fight, but to let God fight for them. Even David, Israel's greatest warrior and one that following generations look favorably upon, did not receive reverence primarily for his military exploits. Rather, Israelites held him up for two other reasons, his willingness to obey God and his being the recipient of God's promise. In fact, an indication that the Israelites did not see war as an intrinsically good thing can be seen in David not being allowed to build the Temple himself because his fighting had so bloodied his hands.

It is important here to make a distinction between the popular sentiment of ancient Israel and the point of view reflected in the biblical writings. We do not know nearly as much what the point of view of the rank and file Israelite was as we do of the writers of the Old Testament. The writers were certainly not the determiners of public opinion. It is possible that the rank and file were much more positive about warfare. We just know that the writings present war as peripheral. When it is clear that God wants Israel to fight, then fighting is a good thing. However, even then it is not the fighting that is crucial but obedience to God's will.

Ancient Israel, then, did accept warfare, but with a sense of detachment from it. They kept warfare at the periphery of their religion and their socio-political ideals.

## Level of theology

In what follows, my perspective has been very strongly shaped by my teacher Millard Lind.[4] In discussing the "theology of warfare" in ancient Israel, I want first to discuss some elements of the picture which the Old Testament presents of Israel's God. Then I will touch on several key

[4]Millard C. Lind, *Yahweh is a Warrior: The Theology of Warfare in the Old Testament* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980) and *Monotheism, Power, and Justice: Collected Old Testament Essays* (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1990).

events in the history of ancient Israel—the exodus, the conquest of Canaan, the rise of the kingship, and the fall of the kingship.

***God's character.*** Israel's God differed radically from other ancient Near Eastern gods. Israelites did not identify their God primarily with nature (e.g., the much needed rain) but with the events leading up to their emergence as a people, in particular the exodus that freed them from slavery in Egypt.[5] Most ancient Near Eastern people identified their gods with the status quo, with the existing power structure, including especially the military power structure. Israelites saw their God as the one who challenged this power structure in Egypt, who "broke the bow of the mighty and lifted up the poor." The religion worshiping this God centered on the liberation of people from oppression, oppression which had been reinforced by worship of fertility gods.[6]

From the beginning, Israelite religion focused on human beings in voluntary submission to the will of God defined in ethical terms binding beyond any social or territorial boundary.[7] Commitment to God served as the core, not commitment to a specific nation or king. The people owed their ultimate loyalty to God, not to a temporal political entity. If the values of God and the values of the nation conflicted, people owed God a higher allegiance. God is the ultimate king or ruler.

I want to emphasize this point about the voluntary submission to the will of God. At its heart, Israelites' religion rejects the control of human beings by force and violence. They based their religion on a covenant of love with God; love cannot be enforced by violence.

God's kingdom was not based on military power, manipulation of power through diplomacy, a concentration of wealth, or human wisdom that enables one to make decisions in relation to all these things for one's national advantage. God's kingdom was based on something different: God's promise and miraculous acts, and upon the framework provided by the Ten Commandments, the rest of the Law, and the words of the prophets. The future of ancient Israel depended not upon its military might or its political manipulations, but on its faith and obedience to the God mediated through the Law and prophets.[8]

The key value for ancient Israel with regards to its view of God and God's will was that of *shalom* (peace). Shalom characterized the community when the people did justice. People experienced wholeness, good

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[5]Paul D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1975), 13-4.

[6]George E. Mendenhall, *The Tenth Generation: The Origins of the Biblical Tradition* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 24.

[7]Mendenhall, *Tenth*, 25.

[8]Lind, *Yahweh*, 167-8.

health, prosperity, calm, equality, etc. In the context of the nation, shalom depends on the nation remaining faithful to God's laws.[9]

According to the Old Testament writings, the values of shalom and justice led to the holy war. God acts against oppression and injustice, and acts on behalf of the oppressed people of Israel.[10]

The Old Testament gives the impression that the holy war would not have been necessary had the human community kept the sinlessness of the Garden of Eden. The problem of war and peace inherently followed from the decline that began with Adam's sin and continued with the gradual corruption of the human race.[11] God—the one who had been the Lord of peace at creation—had to become, temporarily, a God of war. This happened when God concentrated on a single group of people, the ancient Israelites. God's ultimate purpose had to do with restoring peace and harmony for the whole earth.

So, the purpose of the holy war was ultimately to benefit all peoples. First Kings 8:41-3 expressed the hope that all the peoples of the earth might know God's name and fear God, even as does Israel. The role of warfare is only temporary. The ultimate cause of universal peace is the free response of people when they hear of God's "great name" and "mighty hand" and "outstretched arm."[12]

Thus the overall picture of God's character that emerges from the Old Testament is that the ultimate intentions of God are redemptive; they are oriented toward the salvation of all the nations.

***The exodus.*** The central event in the early history of Israel was the exodus. The Hebrews were slaves in Egypt and headed for extinction as a people. But led by the prophet Moses they escaped Egypt—thanks to the miraculous intervention of their God.

According to the story, God miraculously causes plagues in order to get Pharaoh—the god-king of Egypt—to let the Jews leave. Pharaoh continually refuses, but relents after the plague of death to the oldest Egyptian children. The Hebrews leave, then Pharaoh changes his mind and sends his army after them. Just as the army catches up, God causes the waters of the Red Sea to part, allowing the Hebrews to go through. Then, when Pharaoh's soldiers attempt to follow, the waters crash down on them, and thus the people are finally liberated from Egypt.

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[9]L. John Topel, *The Way to Peace: Liberation Through the Bible* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 22.

[10]Jose Porfirio Miranda, *Marx and the Bible: A Critique of the Philosophy of Oppression* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1974), 126.

[11]Gerardo Zampaglioni, *The Idea of Peace in Antiquity* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973), 200.

[12]Lind, *Yahweh*, 159.

The Old Testament sees this event as the central event in the history of Israel. We can see at least four reasons for this: (1) It is a sign of God's steadfast love; (2) it is the basis for confidence in Yahweh's future saving acts when Israel encountered political difficulties; (3) it is the basis for Yahweh's demand for faithfulness to Yahweh and the law; (4) it is the basis for the Hebrews to affirm that they were Yahweh's chosen.[13]

One way to look at the background of the exodus is to see that the Hebrews, who went to Egypt a couple of hundred years earlier during Joseph's time, grew in numbers and thus became a threat to the Egyptian social order. So Egypt's powers-that-be determined to tighten the bonds of slavery. Then Moses arose. God was identified to Moses only as "I am who I will be"—which can be seen to mean "the one leading you out, the one you will discover in the liberating events of your history."[14]

For Moses, who was well connected in the Egyptian social order, there was a clear choice to be made—between Pharaoh and God. Moses decisively chose God and aligned himself with God's social values.

God's social values (i.e., political system) were an alternative to Pharaoh's. An obvious difference was that Moses, the human leader, was not a warrior and had no army. Israel's identity centered on God's word spoken through the prophet Moses, not the violent power of a warrior king. Moses's political authority centered on God's call. This was quite different from the standard ancient Near Eastern state, where the person with political authority was the one who was the leader of the army.[15]

So, in bringing about the exodus, God did more than liberate slaves. God created a whole new, alternative political structure, a whole new way for a nation to operate. The structure of this new people was not built around the sword, not around power politics. So it is not surprising that their crucial, foundational, initial liberation was not caused by the sword. Israel did not come into existence as a state because of its military might. Military might would invariably serve primarily the rich and powerful. The liberation came about via miracles that God did through nature—the various plagues and especially the parting of the Red Sea.

The Old Testament pictures the parting of the Sea as the first "holy war." In fact, the parting of the Sea should probably be seen as the holy war *par excellence*, the paradigm for Old Testament holy wars.[16] Israel's first and foundational reference to God as a warrior comes in Exodus 15, the song of Moses celebrating the crossing of the Sea. "The Lord is a warrior, the Lord is his name" (Ex 15:3). It is important that this

[13]Lind, *Yahweh*, 46.
[14]Topel, *Way*, 4.
[15]Lind, *Monotheism*, 124-5.
[16]Lind, *Yahweh*, 49-50.

reference is to a nature miracle and not to warfare per se. In this, the foundational event in Israel's history, God as warrior acts through nature and not through human warriors.

The central motifs in this first holy war also recur in the later ones. It is God that acts, and the victory is due to those acts, not human actions. Faith here (and, if one looks closely, also in the later holy war accounts) means that the warrior is to have courage not to fight, to stand still and wait for God's miracle.[17] The recurrence of these motifs later on shows that they are the key elements in holy war that make it holy.

In the exodus we see with the most clarity that which defines holy war —faith in God to fight for the people, giving God sole credit for the victory, the war liberating the oppressed and facilitating justice and punishing the oppressors. Israel remembered the exodus for all time to come as the basic event that called her into being as a people. It stood at the center of her confession of faith from the beginning.[18]

***The Conquest.*** The people liberated by the exodus were promised a land. In their journey from Egypt to Palestine, they were given the Law on Mt. Sinai as their blueprint for a just society that would serve as a light to the nations displaying God's shalom. Before they could set up this just society, they had to defeat the Canaanites, the people in the land. Joshua tells about this invasion of Palestine and the resultant "conquest" by the Hebrews. It appears to have been quite a bloody affair.

Old Testament scholars have varied in their understanding of what happened at the conquest. There are three main models: (1) conquest, (2) peaceful infiltration, and (3) peasant revolt.[19]

(1) The conquest model, which at first glance is strongly supported by the biblical data and archaeological evidence, takes the story in Joshua at face value. According to this view, the twelve united tribes of Israel invaded Canaan from the east, totally displacing the population. Israel, after annihilating the previous residents, filled the vacuum with its own distinctive culture and religion. It took place over a span of only a few years, and the conquest ended with Israel dividing the conquered into tribal homelands that were immediately occupied.[20]

Many scholars question whether this model actually can hold up under close scrutiny, at least in its entirety.[21] They see a difference between the editorial framework of the book of Joshua, which reflects the

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[17]Lind, *Monotheism*, 188.

[18]John Bright, *A History of Israel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), 120.

[19]Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250-1050 B.C.E.* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 191-233.

[20]Gottwald, *Tribes*, 192.

[21]Gottwald, *Tribes*, 197, 203.

acceptance of this model, and the actual traditions cited to tell the story, which only refer to three out of twelve possible tribal areas. This is interpreted to show that the story of the conquest is in some ways a theological statement rather than totally historically accurate. Also, the books that follow Joshua make it clear that the Canaanites were not exterminated to the degree indicated in Joshua. There are a number of later references to Canaanites remaining in the area.

However, even if these challenges to the conquest model have some validity, that does not mean that the basic message of the stories is not still accurate—that God fought for Israel and gave the Jewish people essential political control over the land, all in a brief period of time.

(2) The main basis of support for the peaceful infiltration model is the idea that only if the Canaanites had not been wiped out totally would they have remained as a threat to Israel that had to be countered as vehemently as it was in later times.[22] Therefore something else must have happened. This model sees the Israelite settlement of Canaan happening over time, extending from Abraham down to David. There is little direct evidence—biblically or archaeologically—to support it.

(3) The third view, the peasant revolt model, sees a small number of Jewish people invading from the desert and gaining the support of a large number of Canaanites who saw this as an opportunity successfully to overthrow their oppressive rulers.[23]

The revolt model links with the conquest model: the catalyst to Israel's rise derives from a group of outsiders who entered Canaan with enthusiastic commitment to their deliverer God. They supplied a militant catalyst to revolution among the Canaanite underclass. But this view does not make a sharp distinction between the Israelites and all Canaanites, and it does not see Israel wiping out all the people in the land.

The peasant revolt model is consistent with an emphasis on Yahweh's fundamental concern for justice and opposition to oppression. The revolt model does not need to be set in opposition to a modified acceptance of the conquest model. The Israelites, or rather their God, conquer the Canaanite ruling class. Because of what God stood for, the Israelites were naturally joined by those enslaved by the upper-class idol worshippers. However, there is admittedly little direct evidence to support this model.

The stories in Joshua and Judges show that Israel shared much of the holy war framework with other ancient Near Eastern cultures. What is unique to Israel is the role of the god. Their God fights instead of Israel; God is the decisive leader.

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[22]Gottwald, *Tribes*, 204.
[23]Gottwald, *Tribes*, 210.

With the other nations, the gods—in effect—supported what the warrior-kings themselves did and thus reinforced the centrality of militarism in the very fabric of the nation. Whatever people were the strongest were the ones with divine sanction. For Israel, on the contrary, God did not legitimize the powerful, but rather God overthrew the powerful on behalf of the slaves, the poor, and oppressed. And God instituted a new socio-political order based on the values of peace and justice as expressed in the Law.[24]

***Kingship***. It was not long after Israel became settled in the land that a major change in its political structure occurred. Kingship was instituted. This was a very significant event in the history of Israel. For the first 150 or so years of its existence it was led by a decentralized, ad hoc, charismatic group of judges and prophets. With the coming of kingship this all changed.

Scholars debate as to whether kingship as an institution was desirable for Israel or not.[25] But clearly its advent dramatically changed the structure of Israelite society, and Israel also clearly suffered a great deal due to its kings being like the kings of the other nations—i.e., power hungry, greedy, exploitive, militaristic. The final destruction of the Jewish state is linked to the unfaithfulness of the kings (cf. Hos 13:9-11).

While there is much in the Old Testament that condemns the actions of individual kings and the motivations of the Jews in wanting a king, it is not clearly stated that kingship in and of itself, as an institution, is condemned. What is condemned is kingship that results in social stratification, oppression within the nation, political wars fought for self-aggrandizement, and the like.

Deuteronomy 17 refers to Israel asking for a king. The request will be granted as long as the king fulfills certain criteria. The king must be an Israelite, a person of the covenant and subordinated to God. He must not build and rely on a large standing army. He must not multiply wives—especially foreign wives who might turn him from Israel's God. He must not make himself wealthy at the expense of his fellow Jews.[26]

Underlying these criteria, and any others for a faithful king, is the over-arching assumption that God is the true king, the true leader of Israel and any human king is at most God's servant. And, the king was to be working in conjunction God's prophets. In the early history of Israel,

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[24]Lind, *Yahweh*, 81-2.

[25]Two negative views are, John McKenzie, *The Old Testament Without Illusions* (Chicago: Thomas More, 1979) and Walter Brueggemann, *The Land* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1977). For a more ambivalent view see Gerald Gerbrandt, *Kingship According to the Deuteronomistic History* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986).

[26]Gerbrandt, *Kingship*, 108-13.

God is clearly seen as king, as Israel's ruler, who guided Israel through prophets such as Moses.

A debate takes place in 1 Samuel 8–12 over the institution of kingship. Yet both the pro-kingship and the anti-kingship streams were inspired by the same concept of theocracy. Israel is God's people and has no other master but God. Therefore Israel must not borrow its political structure from the nations. Israel's radical faith in the immediacy of God's political leadership was more than mere belief. It was based on an experience to which Israel witnessed, an experience from which Israel continually fell away, an experience to which Israel was called back again and again by the great prophets.[27]

Even King David, and especially those kings who followed, failed to live up to the ideals expressed in Deuteronomy 17. David's use of a private army and the establishment of his own capital city of Jerusalem, which was never integrated into Israel's tribal structure, provided a new power base in Israel. This new concentration of power was certain to clash with the older tradition of authority represented by the prophets, and if unchecked, would result in selfish misuses of power and personal aggrandizement through conquest.[28] That such indeed did happen we see in what follows in 1 and 2 Kings.[29]

And the prophets witness to a transformation of the concept of holy war to something that comes to be used by God against the nation of Israel rather than for it. When Israel becomes an oppressor, God spoke through the prophets, such as Ezekiel and Isaiah, telling Israel that God would wage a holy war against Israel to punish her. The prophets applied this perspective to the military defeats Israel suffered.

Yet David is held up as a model king in many ways. The bases for the positive view of David in the later history, though, are not his military conquests and concentration of power, but primarily are focused on two things: David's willingness to obey God's commands and the fact that David was the recipient of the divine promise.[30]

The Old Testament does not in principle reject the idea of kingship.[31] Rather, it rejects kingship like the nations. Israelite kingship had to be a new kind of kingship. This can be seen by looking at the examples of Josiah and Hezekiah in the book of 2 Kings. They epitomized the characteristics of faithful kings. That they are so positively commended

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[27]Lind, *Monotheism*, 143.

[28]Lind, *Yahweh*, 116-7.

[29]Cf. Jacques Ellul, *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972).

[30]Gerbrandt, *Kingship*, 173.

[31]Gerbrandt, *Kingship*, 96-102.

shows that it was possible for there to be kings who were faithful to God. The king's role was to make sure the covenant was observed in Israel. Practically, he could be called the covenant administrator.

The positive evaluation of Josiah stems not only from Josiah turning to the Lord in obeying the law of Moses, but also his taking concrete actions as king to establish the law of Moses in the land.[32] The basis for the positive evaluation of Hezekiah was the Assyrian crisis and his response to it.[33] He trusted in God. In the very important area of defense, the primary responsibility of the king was to trust in God. It was God's responsibility to protect Israel.

According to Gerald Gerbrandt:

> In ancient Israel, the political success or failure of a king was entirely dependent upon the degree to which Israel obeyed the covenant. Political success could thus only be achieved by a king through fulfilling his responsibility as covenant administrator. Given this view, it is also clear that military success was not a major accomplishment of a king, but national defense was the responsibility of God in God's role as protector of the people. The king's role in this was to trust God to deliver, and then to be obedient to God's word.[34]

So, kingship would seem to be legitimate in ancient Israel and not *per se* against God's will. But it is kingship redefined, not kingship according to the nations. It is kingship that mediates God's justice, which does not build standing armies in order to protect itself or gain more power or wealth, which does not redefine worship of God to insure its own self-interest. It leaves the exercise of military power to God.

***The Fall of kingship.*** Whether or not it was conceivable that kingship in Israel could have been faithful to God's redemptive purposes, the facts are clear that in practice it was not. The prophets preached against the oppression and unfaithfulness of Israelites, promising that God's judgment would come. Their predictions were fulfilled and Israel's religion had to be redefined.

The concern of the prophets for "social justice" stems from the fact that Israel's change from pre-kingship religious community to a political power structure had eroded away the old religious ethics centered on shalom in favor of "being like all the rest of the nations"—obsessed with power, concentration of wealth, and competition in the insane world of

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[32]Gerbrandt, *Kingship*, 67.
[33]Gerbrandt, *Kingship*, 74-5.
[34]Gerbrandt, *Kingship*, 194.

power politics.[35] The prophets asserted that the rejection of those older values that were identified with the rule of God constituted the actual rejection of God. Since that was the case, the political structure originally formed by God could no longer be legitimized by appeal to God.[36]

The prophetic message focused on two themes: the coming of the kingdom and the salvation of society. The Messiah, when he came, would implement a principle of justice among peoples, breaking the chain of vengeance and counter-vengeance and the domination of race by race. War would become impossible because its premises—dependent on injustice—would cease to exist (cf. Isaiah 2:4; 9:5). Enemies, however ancient their enmity, would be reconciled (Isa. 11:6).[37]

This vision of the coming of God's kingdom arose from a recognition that the current situation was intolerable. For example, when Jeremiah discovered that the rich (who were presumably rich due to observing the Law) were actually lawbreakers, this shattered not only his human expectations and the idea that covenant obedience leads to prosperity, but also shattered a theology based on the prosperity in the land (Jer 5).[38]

So, for Jeremiah, the new theology had to be a theology of pure commitment to God in social justice without reliance on institutions that froze the relationship into complacency. What became crucial was the spirit of the laws. God was seen as coming, not only as past.

Both Isaiah and Jeremiah write of the conditions under which a final, enduring peace may come to the people. For both, this insight arose out of their observation of the failure of the old Sinai covenant established with Moses. Jeremiah saw its inadequacy during the last spasm of reform before the destruction of Israel as a state as he watched the people conform their lives outwardly to the law of Moses but remain unaffected in the deeper recesses of their hearts. Isaiah experienced the catastrophe of the exile, which happened when Babylon defeated the Jews and forced many of them to leave Palestine for exile in Babylonia.[39]

The fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians shortly after 600 BCE precipitated a crisis of faith for the Israelites. Isaiah sought to provide a solution. The exiles' crushing defeat confirmed the integrity of God's word through the prophets.[40] The defeat verified that God's words through the prophets that an unjust Israel could not stand were true.

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[35]Mendenhall, *Tenth*, 28.

[36]Mendenhall, *Tenth*, 30.

[37]Zampaglioni, *Idea*, 202.

[38]Topel, *Way*, 67-8.

[39]Hugh C. White, *Shalom in the Old Testament* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1973), 23-4.

[40]Lind, *Monotheism*, 155.

That God did not forsake Israel after that defeat but was with the exiles even when they were not in line shows that God remains faithful. Religion based on trust in this God is not tied to a specific nation-state.

Kingship, which in the thought of the ancient Near East was the office of ultimate political power, for Isaiah was subservient to God who sustained and directed the community not by power politics but by the creative power of the word, speaking through the law and prophets. At this stage in Israel's history this power of God is seen in the fulfillment of God's threats of destruction if Israel continued in its unfaithfulness.[41]

We see continuity between exodus and exile in the repeated assertion that it is God, not human power politics, who holds the key to history. The message of the Old Testament, amidst much ambiguity in many areas, comes through clearly here.

## Conclusions

The key ideas in the Old Testament theology of warfare are the emphasis placed on God's ethical values instead of national self-interest and the relativizing of the significance of military power. The Old Testament is not a "pacifist" book, at least in the sense of totally rejecting warfare. But the roots of Christian pacifism are there: trust in God, not in the warring way of the nations; seek peace, not coercive power. The consistent thread, which runs from the exodus through the exile in the Old Testament story, is that it is God, not human power politics, not the warrior-king, who holds the key to history.

The central elements of the Old Testament theology of warfare are these:

1) Human military power is in no way glorified, in fact it is greatly downplayed in the authentic holy wars.

2) Thus, there is a decided movement away from militarism, though the Old Testament is definitely not a "pacifist" book.

3) The key values for people of faith are commitment to God and God's transcendent ethics, not national self-interest. The ideal political leader was the prophet, not the warrior-king.

4) The people of Israel are to trust in God for their national security, not in weapons of war and not in standing armies.

5) When Israel insists on going the way of the other nations of the ancient Near East, her doom is sealed. God wages war on Israel through the agency of Babylon and Assyria.

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[41]Lind, *Monotheism*, 157-160.

# 4. Healing justice: The prophet Amos and a "new" theology of justice

*[This essay was previously published in Ted Grimsrud and Loren L. Johns,* Justice and Peace Shall Embrace: Power and Theo-Politics in the Bible: Essays in Honor of Millard Lind *(Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 1999), 64-85]*

When I was a doctoral student in the mid-1980s, I had the privilege of taking a year-long seminar on justice from Karen Lebacqz of Pacific School of Religion. At the time, Lebacqz was in the process of writing a two-volume theological study on justice.[1] As we read and discussed works such as John Rawls's classic, *A Theory of Justice*[2], and Robert Nozick's critique and alternative, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*[3], I found myself increasingly disenchanted with these modern philosophical theories.

I was uneasy with both points of view, and I saw them having many problems in common—things that were particularly troubling to me in light of my own faith commitments. They both share certain assumptions (or faith commitments) that are problematic. I will mention a few, in general terms, not so much in an attempt to criticize them significantly, but more as a means of expressing part of my immediate motivation in seeing if an alternative might be constructed.

Briefly, these assumptions (sometimes more true of one than the other, but largely applicable to both) include:

(1) A fundamental rationalism, an assumption that we can come up with a notion of justice which all "reasonable" people can accept;

(2) An emphasis on self-interest, a kind of faith that a balance of self-interest can lead to the common good for society;

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[1]Karen Lebacqz, *Six Theories of Justice: Perspectives from Philosophical and Theological Ethics* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986) and *Justice in an Unjust World: Foundations for a Christian Approach to Justice* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1987).

[2]Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971.

[3]New York: Basic Books, 1974.

(3) Individualism, a locating of the basic unit of moral discernment with the autonomous individual;

(4) An emphasis on what seem to be quite abstract principles such as "equality," "fairness," "liberty," "entitlement," etc.;

(5) A utopianism (in the sense of utopia = "nowhere") that is ahistorical and not closely tied to historical developments concerning genuine injustices and genuine practices of justice;

(6) A bracketing of any discussion of religious and faith and rejection of any notion of "particularlism;"

(7) A focus on western consumptive goods and notions of liberty as if these are the ultimate human values.

Out of my unease with this approach to justice, I decided to look at the Bible to see if it might contain something that might provide help in formulating an alternative approach. I wrote a letter to my seminary Old Testament professor, Millard Lind of the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, asking if he had any help to offer. Professor Lind kindly sent me several papers, including a most helpful unpublished (at that time) essay, "Transformation of Justice: From Moses to Jesus."[4]

Lind was one of the first pacifist theologians or biblical scholars who accepted the challenge to attempt to rethink justice. A pacifist theory of justice that would serve as an alternative to the problematic approaches mentioned above continues to be an urgent need.[5]

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[4]"Transformation of Justice" was first published in 1986 as part of the Mennonite Central Committee's series of Occasional Papers of the MCC Canada Offender Ministries Program and the MCC U.S. Office of Criminal Justice. It was also included in Lind's book, *Monotheism, Power, Justice: Collected Old Testament Essays* (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1990), 82-97. My references will be to the latter version. Millard's graciousness in responding to my inquiry was typical of his approach to his students. I offer this essay in gratitude to his scholarship and his personal kindness.

[5]These are some of the other beginning attempts to address this need: C. Norman Kraus, "Toward a Biblical Perspective on Justice" (unpublished paper presented to Mennonite Central Committee Peace Theology Colloquium, Elkhart, IN, November 1978); Ted Grimsrud, "Peace Theology and the Justice of God in the Book of Revelation," in Willard M. Swartley, ed., *Essays in Peace Theology and Witness* (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1988), 135-153; Harry Huebner, "Justice and the Biblical Imagination," in Harry Huebner and David Schroder, *Church as Parable: Whatever Happened to Ethics?* (Winnipeg, Man.: CMBC Publications, 1993), 120-46; Glen H. Stassen, "Narrative Justice as Reiteration," in Stanley Hauerwas, Nancey Murphy, and Mark Nation, eds., *Theology Without Foundations: Religious Practice and the Future of Theological Truth* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 201-25. An insightful study by a non-theologian was written by Howard Zehr, one of the founders of the restorative

This essay is only a fragmentary attempt to point toward a thoroughgoing Christian pacifist approach to justice. One of my main arguments, following Lind, is that the Old Testament is a crucial resource for such a resource. In fact, if we can get beyond what Canadian social theorist George Grant called "English-speaking justice"[6] (or, in other words, beyond the western philosophical tradition represented in recent years by Rawls and Nozick) and look at the biblical materials concerning justice (including the Old Testament) on their own terms, we will find that they are a tremendous resource for a pacifist approach to justice.

In this paper, I focus on one particular Old Testament text that speaks of justice, the book of Amos. My assumption (which I cannot do more than assert here) is that Amos is a representative text. What we find in Amos concerning justice we also find elsewhere in the Bible.

## Historical setting

The oracles contained in the book of Amos, were addressed to the ruling elite of the ancient Jewish kingdom of Israel, the so-called "northern kingdom" that had split off from Judea; especially those in Samaria, which was the capital and primary center of urban power of mid-eighth century BCE Israel.[7]

This was a time of peace and prosperity for Israel. The main power of the day, Assyria, was not much of a factor internationally (at least temporarily, it turned out) due to its internal problems, nor was anyone else. Given this lack of outside interference, Israel reached its largest geographical size during the reign of King Jeroboam II—786-746 BCE.

The book of Amos gives glimpses of the people's enthusiastic self-confidence (6:1; 8:3) and their popular religiosity that saw the nation's prosperity as the inevitable result of its faithfulness to God.

However, all was not well—which is why Amos came from Tekoa in the south to prophesy. Israel was at the end of a social transformation. Israel had originally been a fairly egalitarian society. Some scholars attribute this to the "conquest" of Canaan following the Hebrews' liberation from Egypt being, in part, a peasant revolt followed by wide-

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justice movement in the criminal justice field: *Changing Lenses: A New Focus for Crime and Justice* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1990). Karen Lebacqz's two books mentioned above are also important resources, but were not written from an explicitly pacifist point of view.

[6]George P. Grant, *English-Speaking Justice* (Sackville, NB: Mount Allison University Press, 1974).

[7]Robert C. Coote, *Amos Among the Prophets: Composition and Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 16.

ranging land reform.[8] The concern for marginalized, vulnerable people (such as widows and orphans) and the commitment to minimizing the social stratification characteristic of much the ancient Near East between a few wealthy and powerful elite and a mass of poor, even landless, peasants were institutionalized in the law and social practices of Israel.

A key aspect of this land reform was the inheritance system. This served as a means to keep control from the hands of a rich elite but instead to allow the peasantry themselves to control their own resources. Foundational to this system was the belief that ultimately Yahweh was the lord of the land and holder of eminent domain.[9] The land was for the sake of the good of everyone, not for the sake of the profit of a few.

Closely connected with the inheritance system was a decentralized legal system: the court in the gates of the villages (the area that was essentially the village's town square). This system had as one of its main concerns to help weaker members of the society who otherwise were without power and influence. Without the justice of the court they would not be able to maintain themselves in the social order.[10]

The "ideological" basis for this social ordering was the Israelites' covenant with God. God had established their nation in gracious love and desired the people to live in harmony with one another. The covenant community was accountable to God. If it did not maintain its faithfulness, it was liable to be judged (cf. Exodus 19:5-6).

Amos came onto the scene to announce that this threat of judgment was indeed to be carried out. Israel's social transformation decisively moved away from covenant faithfulness. Poverty was widespread among people at the bottom of the social ladder. One key aspect of that reality was the shift from the situation where control of the land was inherited to one where the control was in the hands of a few centralized owners. These owners were exploiting the peasants for their own gain. This shift apparently resulted from the efforts of the powerful in the society.[11]

Fueling this transformation dated back at least to Solomon's reign. Walter Brueggemann summarizes Solomon's main "accomplishments" as: (1) an economics of affluence; (2) a politics of oppression; and (3) the establishment of a controlled, static religion.[12] By the time of Amos, apparently these "accomplishments" were bearing their fruit.

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[8]Coote, *Amos*, 28.

[9]Coote, *Amos*, 28.

[10]James Luther Mays, *Amos: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 92.

[11]Coote, *Amos*, 26-7.

[12]Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 31.

This process cut to the heart of the covenant-community concept, which paid special attention to those on the bottom of society and saw itself linked with their liberator-God. This God cared for the Israelites when they were impoverished and enslaved in Egypt (and, perhaps, in Canaan) and saved them so that they might take responsibility to show the nations what a community based on God's justice looks life.

## Amos's general message

Amos begins by prophesying against Israel's neighboring nations. This sets his listeners up for the punch line that begins in 2:6. In speaking against the nations, Amos would gain the sympathy of his listeners—who all agreed that, of course, the nations are terrible and unjust.

However, then Amos charges Israel with decisively-judged crimes. In particular in these verses, he focuses on transgressions against the harmonious ordering of Israelite communal life: (1) the sale into debt slavery of the innocent and needy; (2) the oppression of the poor; (3) the abuse of poor women; and (4) the exploitation of debtors.[13]

In 3:2, Amos turns Israel's complacent view of its place as God's chosen people on its head. He insists that privilege entails responsibility and that the unfaithful Israelites have been irresponsible. Therefore, they are even worse than the despised pagans who never knew God.[14] Hence, their salvation history will soon become judgment history. Amos preaches a transcendent ethic—God is not identified with Israel *per se* but with justice and righteousness. When Israel itself is unjust, it also is judged.[15]

Because of its past history as the recipient of God's gracious acts, Israel was in a unique position to know that the cause of the needy is the cause of God.[16] As this history is forgotten by the powers-that-be in Israel, the society will be destroyed. The whole book contains impressive imagery driving this world-shattering thought home.

The problem in Israel was not that the people did not know intellectually the precepts of the law and their concern for the needy. The problem was the unwillingness on the part of the leaders and judges to administer the law fairly. This is what led to the disregard for justice. And, what was worse, all this happened in the midst of thriving religiosity.[17] People flocked to the shrines but totally disregarded God's

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[13]Hans-Walter Wolff, *Joel and Amos* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 165-7.

[14]John Barton, *Amos's Oracles Against the Nations: A Study of Amos 1:3-2:5* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 36.

[15]Mays, *Amos*, 8.

[16]Wolff, *Joel*, 173.

[17]Ronald E. Clements, *Prophecy and Covenant* (London: SCM Press, 1965), 76-7.

call for his people to do justice to the needy. Amos's message essentially asserts that religion made things worse for Israel. Their ritualistic faithfulness masked ethical unfaithfulness.

Because of Israel's unfaithfulness, Amos proclaims, judgment will come. The context for this judgment is Israel as God's covenant people—delivered from Egypt, given law to order their common life, given the land in which to live out God's will. However, Israel was rejecting God's ways of justice and goodness and by doing so broke its side of the covenant bargain. Destruction (in reality, self-destruction) was inevitable.

In Israel, a veneer of peace and prosperity covered a corrupt reality. Rather than a sign of God's favor, this reality (even with its apparent peace and prosperity) and the process that created it will be judged by God. The reality is more than that many people are poor while a few are rich and insensitive. Even worse, the rich contribute to the problems of the poor. Even the one refuge of the poor, the court-system, has been corrupted and turned on its head to serve the rich instead of the poor.

Amos gives an example in 2:6. For rich creditors money has more value than the people. Worse, the people who are needy are victims for insignificant reasons. Amos here says the needy are sold "because they can not pay back the small sum they owe for a pair of sandals."[18]

This covenant disloyalty will result in judgment. In 4:6-11 Amos's narrative of disasters apparently is a rather free synthesis of traditional curses and depends on the general tradition that God acts in typical ways to judge those who are disloyal to the covenant.[19]

The majority of the book elaborates on this theme. In 7:8 there is the image of the plumb line—showing that the Israelites are like a wall that is out of line. This is what characterizes injustice. It is things distorted and at variance with what they are intended to be. Israel, despite its election, is judged due to its injustice—especially injustice with regard to people at the bottom of the social scale, people deprived—systematically and purposefully—of their status as full members of the covenant community.

Amos, unlike previous social critics, does not say that with some relatively minor adjustments things will be okay. He says, more or less, that it is all over for Israel. Nevertheless, there are a few calls to turn back. This implies that it is not completely too late, at least not for a remnant. The book closes with a somewhat incongruous vision in 9:11-15 of redemption for a remnant. This new exodus brings liberation from servitude to and exploitation from the ruling elite.[20]

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[18]Jan DeWaard and William Smalley, *A Translator's Handbook on the Book of Amos* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1979), 47.

[19]Mays, *Amos,* 80.

[20]Coote, *Amos*, 123.

These verses add a sense of God's ultimately redemptive purpose in his judgments. The book as a whole, it seems, makes the point that God's people need to live according to God's justice. Those who do not will be judged (and self-destruct), those who do are given hope for the future. If there were no judgment, the poor would have no hope since their oppressors would never be called to account. Two other prophets (Isaiah and Hosea) speak of God's chastisement for the sake of God's people (Isaiah 19:22; Hosea 6:1—"come, let us return to the Lord; for he has torn us, that he may heal us").

## Amos's view of justice

Four texts in Amos specifically speak of "justice" (*mishpat*):

> Seek the Lord and live, lest he break out like fire in the house of Joseph, and it devour, with none to quench it for Bethel, O you who turn justice to wormwood, and cast down righteousness to the earth (5:6-7).

Justice and righteousness are associated here with the presence of God as the life-bestowing force.

By calling the evil good (i.e., the so-called "justice" at the gate that had become injustice, and the people's wealth, that was gained at the expense of the poor and weak) and the good evil (abhorring the one who speaks the truth, 5:10), the Israelites transform what should be sweet (justice) into something bitter (wormwood).

> Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, as you have said. Hate evil and love good and establish justice at the gate; it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph (5:14-15).

When Amos 5:10 speaks of hating the advocate of the right and abhorring those who speak "the whole truth," it apparently refers to personal opposition to the essence of the court-justice system. To do so, in God's eyes, is to embrace death.[21] Life in Israel can only flourish when God's concern for the weak is expressed in its social life. One key way this happens is when the justice at the gate is truly justice, when it is truly corrective of wrongs done.

Concern for such corrective justice goes back to the legal code itself: Exodus 23:6-8 teaches, "you shall not pervert the justice due to your poor in his suit. Keep far from a false charge and do not slay the innocent and

[21]Mays, *Amos,* 93.

righteous, for I will not acquit the wicked. And you shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the officials and subverts the cause of those who are in the right."

The key to experiencing the presence of God, according to Amos, is inter-human justice. It is not religiosity. This is emphasized in the next passage we will look at.

> I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings, I will not accept them, and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an overflowing stream (5:21-24).

Again, justice is connected with life. Water is the key to life existing in the desert. By doing justice is how the community exists. The worship of the cultic community is unacceptable because Israel does not live as the community of God. Thus it is without life.

For there to be life, justice and righteousness must roll down like floods after the winter rains and persist like those few streams who do not fail in the summer draught.

> Do horses run upon rocks? Does one plow the sea with oxen? But you have turned justice into poison and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood (6:12).

The first part of this verse asks if the impossible could happen and the second part says that indeed in can, that it is, and (implicitly) that the leaders of Israel are doing it.[22]

It is incredible to Amos that the rich could be content in their luxury and grieve not over the ruin of "Joseph"—that is, the destruction of the covenant community (6:6), and that a place of justice (the court at the gate) could become unjust, poison. This staggers the mind and he can only compare it with some incredible perversion of the natural order of things.[23]

### Key points regarding justice in Amos

(1) The most foundational point is that justice is tied up inextricably with life. Do justice and live, Amos asserts; do injustice and die. Justice is

[22]DeWaard and Smalley, *Handbook*, 137.
[23]Mays, *Amos*, 121.

not an abstract principle but rather it is a life-force. An unjust society will die, it will collapse of its own weight. The goal of justice is life.

(2) More particularly, justice seeks life for everyone in the community. Because life is for everyone, justice pays particular attention to the people who are being denied life. Justice provides for access by all to the communal "good life." None can justly prosper at the expense of others, or even in the light of the poverty and need of others.

(3) Amos sees justice as part of the created order. It is unnatural to be unjust, like a crooked wall or an ox plowing the sea. To be unjust is thus inherently self-destructive. It is the poison that poisons its practitioners.

(4) Amos one and two portray God's justice as intended for everyone, including the nations. The covenant people have a special responsibility due to their direct awareness of God's justice. They are not punished more than the other nations. Those too were destroyed and Israel is the only one with a remnant. But Israel's failure to practice justice, in Amos's eyes, destroys the hope of the nations. Israel's faithfulness is for the sake of the nations, that they might thus see the light of God's justice and love. When Israel is unfaithful, there is no light to be seen.

(5) Amos sees justice as something to be done: relationships established, needs met, wrongs corrected. Justice, in Amos, has nothing to do with a meaningless cult. In its essence, justice in Amos is historical. It is tied to specific acts and people. It is not abstract nor ahistorical.

(6) The ultimate goal of God's justice, seen in 9:11-15, is redemption. The judgment of Israel comes with the hope that Israel's self-destructive injustice might thereby be corrected. Threats and warnings are not for the sake of punishment, to repay rebellious Israel an eye for an eye. They are given in hopes of salvation, of transformation—with the recognition that should Israel not respond, God's respect for her freewill will result God allowing the collapse of her as a nation-state (which, as we well know, is precisely what happened—Israel playing power-politics to the end and succumbing to the much superior power of Assyria).

## Thoughts on biblical justice in general

(1) The first general conclusion we might draw from Amos's teaching—and that we find elsewhere in the Bible—is that *justice is for the sake of life*. God's justice in the Old Testament is not primarily retribution but salvation, not primarily punitive but corrective. The justice of God is saving power, God's fidelity to the role as the Lord of the covenant. The Bible pictures God as the one who created the earth and its inhabitants for harmonious relationships and who continually acts, even in the midst of human rebellion, to effect those relationships.

That justice is for the sake of life is reinforced by the fact that in the Old Testament it is not primarily a legal concept, but it rather tends to merge with concepts such as "steadfast love," "compassion," "kindness," and "salvation."[24] Justice has ultimately to do with how a loving creator has made the world. To be just is to live according to the creator's will, to be in harmony with God, with fellow human beings, and with the rest of creation—and not to rest until everyone else lives in harmony, too.

(2) Secondly, *justice is part of the created order*. The Old Testament connection between justice and life follows from some of the ideas regarding creation contained there. A foundational emphasis in the biblical teaching is to confess creation as an act of the covenant-making God of Israel. Hence, the basic character of creation is to be in harmony with the values of the covenant—love, justice, peace, compassion. There is no disjunction between the creator God and the covenant-making God. In fact creation was God's first covenant-making act. Thus these values ultimately are part of the very fabric of creation.

Thus, human life has meaning, purpose, and destiny because it originated as an expression of God's covenant-love. So all human action that is in harmony with that love has meaning and is part of the basic meaning of creation—and is thereby "just".

The creation of humankind in the image of this God means that all people need relationships—with each other and with God. The purpose of human activity is to facilitate these relationships. Since all people, simply by virtue of being people, are in the "image of God" and thus have dignity and value, there is no justification for discrimination and disregard of any human life. Injustice is the severing of relationships; justice is their establishment and/or restoration.

The cosmos are created good. Evil is an aberration that can and must be resisted. No evil is such an intrinsic part of reality that it cannot be overcome by the creator's power. To overcome evil's power—power especially manifested in the severing of relationships—is to do justice.

God's will has to do with all parts of creation. There is nothing that is autonomous from that will or that is ethically neutral. The challenge of the Old Testament for people of faith was that the creator's will be carried out in all spheres of human existence. Ultimately, the Old Testament makes no distinction between the order of creation and the order of redemption. The creator-God and the redeemer-God are one and the same. They would never have recognized the former without their historical experience of the latter.

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[24]Eliezer Berkovits, *Man and God: Studies in Biblical Theology* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1969), 331.

The central theological reality in creation is love. So, faithfulness to the "creation mandate" equals living lives of love. It is thus seen to be incumbent upon people of faith to shape their lives and their social order according to the values of love. Love is the motivating and determining factor for doing justice. The heart of God's character is steadfast love, which for God means desiring the good of all people. This includes God's enemies and especially social outcasts. God's love provides the model for God's followers.

(3) A third general point is that *justice is not soft on evil but rather seeks to destroy evil*. God's love for enemies means that God hates what evil does to humankind and works to heal its effects. Evil is only ended when the cycle of evil fighting evil is broken. The Old Testament model for this is the suffering servant in Isaiah, for Christians the precursor to Jesus, who did not retaliate but accepted all that the powers of evil could do and conquered them. This is the ultimate model for biblical justice.

Love applies to all areas of life according to the biblical teaching. It is the element that is to shape decisively the means and ends of all activity of God's people. The only way to become loving is to be loving at all times. Love gives those who shape their lives by it hopefulness that provides the energy that moves people to believe that God's justice and God's love can be a reality in the world—and thus to act to make it so.

To do biblical justice is to conform with the will of the loving, covenant-making creator God. It is part of love, not in tension with love. God's justice is seen in that God's intervenes for the sake of the salvation of God's people and thereby restore covenant relationships.

One characteristic of God's love is that it works to set right that which has been corrupted. This is justice. One way to characterize justice, therefore, is to say that justice is how love is expressed in the face of evil. Love expressed in the face of evil acts to stop evil and to heal its effects.

God's justice is seen in the creation of life and in every act that God has done to sustain and restore life. Human justice, in the biblical sense, would only truly be justice when it also acts to sustain and restore life.

(4) A fourth general point is that *part of the reason Israel existed as a people was to be a light to the nations*, to show them the loving and just ways of their God. The goal of this witness is to transform the nations.

The Bible implies that God's justice was normative for the nations as well as for Israel. Amos condemns the nations for their injustices; likely, no one would have questioned whether it was legitimate for him to do so. God's will was for all people, and all people were to be held accountable to how they responded to that will. This is true because God is seen to be the creator of all that is. Justice is imbedded into creation (hence injustice is as unnatural as an ox plowing the sea or a wall being crooked).

The Bible does not question if its concept of creation (linked with a particular experience with the covenant-making, liberating God) was an adequate basis for a universally accessible system of justice. Creation theology came not from reason but from the people's experience of God as their redeemer. The implications of their creation theology would have led them to see all people as part of God's creation, all people created in God's image, and all people accountable to God.

These beliefs primarily led to negative conclusions (like Amos's) regarding the actual practice of justice on the part of the nations. The accountability generally was used to support the fact that the nations too will be judged by God for being unjust. But there are scattered examples of just people outside Israel (e.g., Rahab the harlot; the repentant people of Nineveh in Jonah; even, to some extent, Cyrus, the Persian leader). These perhaps indicate that God's justice was seen to be knowable and do-able by anyone—by virtue of their humanness.

Israelites likely would have said that all people should and could follow God's prescriptions for doing justice (care for widows and orphans, love of neighbors, etc.). So in a sense they would have had a natural theology. But it would be a natural theology derived from the creation-based values of the covenant-making God. Hence, it would be seen as totally consistent with their revealed theology. The nations could also perceive and act according to God's loving will.

Of course, even more, in reality the nations were not in fact living in harmony with this will—even if theoretically they could have understood it and even followed it. Thus God's revelation to Israel was intended to show God's justice even more clearly than that seen in (now fallen) creation—and to provide a better means of empowerment for living it via the covenant-community. Thus, Amos (and other prophets) self-consciously spoke words from God that more sharply and specifically addressed the injustices of Israel than the injustices of the other nations.

In Amos one and two, the prophet speaks in general terms of blatant injustices. From 2:6 on he speaks more specifically to Israel. This is not primarily because the nations were in principle incapable of perceiving the need to be just in the ways Israelites were. Rather it reflects the idea that Israel's calling entailed a closer relationship with God. More was expected of Israel—for the sake of the nations. They would perceive true justice when they indeed saw it in Israel (without the aid of "special revelation") and, according to Isaiah's vision, flock to Mt. Zion to share in it (Isa 2:1-4). But the point of Amos, and the rest of the Old Testament, is to facilitate Israel manifesting this justice. God's justice is part of God's covenant love. Where there is justice there is life, there is a relationship with the Giver of life.

Justice is more a relational concept than an abstract principle. The goal of justice is human beings in relationships with each other and God —more than "fairness," "equality," "liberty," "holiness," etc. Israelite law served this communal goal—given not as something eternal and immutable but as law that comes from a merciful and forgiving God.[25]

For example, the purpose of a Hebrew trial was to settle a dispute between members of the community so that harmonious coexistence would be possible.[26] The goal was correction of the wrong. Something is just if it contributes to the on-going well-being of the community.

(5) A fifth general point is that *the biblical teaching ends up emphasizing the poor and needy so much because they, in their oppression, were excluded from community life and from the shalom God wills for everyone*. Such exclusion destroys community and ends up lessening the well-being of each person in the community. This communal justice was not to be for the Israelites' own sake alone. The ultimate purpose for justice in Israel was for it to be a lead to world-wide justice. Even in the story of Israel's initial election in Genesis 18, a major reason given for it is to bring about "justice and right" for all humankind.

The New Testament carries on this connection between justice and salvation—one example being in Romans where Paul talks about God's justice as being expressed in Christ's work of salvation (Rom 3:21-26).

## Implications

The Bible can help us to understand justice. In fact, it should lead us to redefine what we mean by justice. If we did so, we might be somewhat better oriented to do justice in a still largely unjust world.

A key point is that the Bible ultimately identifies love and justice with each other. Such linkage protects us from a situation where in the name of justice we treat some people as objects instead of as human beings. Then "justice" becomes a dehumanizing power-struggle with winners and losers—but the losers are never content with being losers and so the battle never ends.

Also, holding love and justice together protects us from making justice an abstraction, separate from its real meaning as a relationship-building, life-sustaining force. Justice cares about *people* much more than "fairness," "liberty," or "entitlements." It is primarily "corrective justice" with the goal of reconciliation. Injustice must be opposed and resisted—but only in ways that hold open the possibility of reconciliation. What happens to

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[25]Hans Jochen Boecker, *Law and the Administration of Justice in the Old Testament and Ancient East* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1980), 136.

[26]Boecker, *Law*, 37.

oppressors matters, too, if justice is the goal. Corrective justice rules out death-dealing acts such as war and capital punishment as tools of justice.

Biblical justice actually has many parallels with other indigenous viewpoints on justice. We see this illustrated in a discussion reported in Tony Hillerman's mystery novel, *Sacred Clowns*, set among the Navajo in Arizona and New Mexico. The main character in the novel is Jim Chee, a traditional Navajo who is an officer with the Navajo tribal police. Chee articulates a Navajo understanding of justice in a discussion with his friend, Janet Pete, a lawyer who is part Navajo but who grew up and was educated in white society.

They discussed a case of a hit-and-run driver. Chee sets up the problem: "For convenience, let's call our hit-and-run driver Gorman. Let's say he's a widower. Doesn't drink much usually.…He's a hard worker. All the good things. Something comes along to be celebrated. His birthday, maybe. His friends take him out to a bar off the reservation. Driving home he hits this pedestrian.…He hears something and backs up. But he's drunk. He doesn't see anybody. So he drives away. Now I'm a member of the Navajo Tribal Police, also deputized by a couple of the counties in Arizona and New Mexico, sworn to uphold the law. My boss wants me to catch this guy. So one day I catch him. What do I do?"

Pete responds from the perspective of English-speaking justice: "Well, it's not pleasant, but it's not too hard either. You just think about why you have laws. Society puts a penalty on driving drunk because it kills people. It puts a penalty for leaving the scene of an injury accident for pretty much the same reason. So what you do is arrest this guy who broke those laws and present the evidence in court, and the court finds he was guilty. And then the judge weighs the circumstances. First offense, solid citizen, special circumstances. It seems unlikely that the crime will be repeated. And so forth. So the judge sentences him to maybe a year, maybe two years, and then probation for another eight years of so."

Chee makes the case more complicated. "We'll give this guy some social value. Let's say he is taking care of a disabled kid. Maybe a grandchild whose parents have dropped him on our Gorman while they do their thing."

Pete insists this doesn't change anything. "Society passes laws to ensure justice. The guy broke the society's laws. Justice is required."

In response, Chee focuses on the concept of "justice." "We're dealing with justice. Just retribution. That's a religious concept, really. We'll say the tribal cop is sort of religious. He honors his people's traditional ways. he has been taught another notion of justice. He was a big boy before he heard about 'make the punishment fit the crime' or 'an eye for an eye, a

tooth for a tooth.' Instead of that he was hearing of retribution in another way. If you damage somebody, you sit down with their family and figure out how much damage and make good. That way you restore…harmony again between two families. Not too much difference from the standard American justice. But now it gets different. If somebody harms you out of meanness—say you get in a bar fight and he cuts you, or he keeps cutting your fences, or stealing your sheep—then he's the one who's out of [harmony]. You aren't taught he should be punished. He should be cured. Gotten back in a balance with what's around him. Made beautiful again.…

"Beautiful on the inside, of course. Back in harmony. So this hypothetical cop, that's the way he's been raised. Not to put any value on punishment, but to put a lot of value on curing. So now what are going to do if you're this cop?"

Chee's solution in the actual situation was not to arrest the hit-and-run driver, but to take some steps that helped facilitate the man's healing.[27]

There are many questions left—e.g., What are the legitimate means for doing justice that are consistent with the ends of peace and love? How can the needs of those at the socio-economic bottom of the heap be met without coercively forcing those at the top to give things up? What if those at the top do not choose to be reconciled with those at the bottom? What about the incredible forces of selfishness and pride in the real world? And the "moral man and immoral society" phenomena? How can a viewpoint based on a particular religious tradition be applied to a pluralist society? However, an approach to justice that takes seriously biblical teaching is not ruled out by these questions and may in fact be well suited to answer them in helpful ways—to the degree than any approach can answer them.

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[27]Tony Hillerman, *Sacred Clowns* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 269-73.

# 5. Pacifism and the story of Jesus

*[This previously unpublished paper was written in July 2008]*

This book proposes that pacifism stems directly from the biblical story of God's revelation to humanity of the normative pattern for human life. We see this revelation most clearly in the life and teaching of Jesus. One of our most sophisticated interpreters of this story has been John Howard Yoder. This chapter presents a summary of Yoder's argument in his classic book, *The Politics of Jesus*.[1]

The New Testament presents a political philosophy. This philosophy has at its core a commitment to pacifism, a commitment based on the normativity of Jesus Christ as the definitive revelation of God and of God's intention for human social life. Christians have tended to miss the social implications of the New Testament story because of assumptions both about politics and about Jesus.

Christian ethicists and theologians have generally posited that Jesus' thought as expressed in his teaching and practice could not have intended to speak in a concrete way to social ethics. Jesus, it has been said, spoke only to the personal sphere or (more recently) he articulated his ethical expectations in the extreme forms he did because he (mistakenly) expected history to end very soon.

Because Jesus allegedly does not speak directly to our social ethics, Christian theology has concluded, we must derive our ethical guidance for life in the real world from other sources: common sense, calculation of what will work in a fallen world, non-Christian philosophical sources.

We must ask, though, whether, given Christian belief in Jesus as God Incarnate, should we not rather begin with an assumption that God's revelation in Jesus' life and teaching might well offer clear guidance for our social ethics? We at least should look at the story itself and discern whether it indeed might have social ethical relevance.

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[1] John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, second edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994). The first edition was published in 1972.

## Jesus' identity

We will look first at how the gospels present Jesus, focusing on the Gospel of Luke primarily for simplicity's sake. At the beginning, the song of Mary in 1:46-55 upon her learning of the child she will bear, we learn that this child will address social reality. He will challenge the power elite of his world and lift up those at the bottom of the social ladder.

This child, we are told, will bring succor to those who desire the "consolation of Israel." Those who seek freedom from the cultural domination of one great empire after another that had been imposed upon Jesus' people for six centuries will find comfort. From the beginning, this child is perceived in social and political terms.

At the moment of Jesus' baptism, the voice speaks words of affirmation, "Thou art my Son" (Luke 3:22). These words should be understood to name a vocation more than to bestow some metaphysical status on Jesus. "Son of God" was a term for kings (Psalm 2:7). It has messianic connotations, being used of one who is now being called forth to work in history to bring about a kind of social transformation that will reflect God's will for God's people.

That Jesus' baptism was a commissioning may be seen in the events that soon follow. Jesus retreats deeper into the wilderness and there encounters the tempter. The specific temptations Jesus faced all had at their core seductive appeals to his sense of messianic (kingly) calling. He could rule the nations, he could gain a following as a distributor of bread to the hungry masses, he could leap from the top of the Temple and gain the support of the religious powers-that-be through his miraculous survival that would confirm his messianic status. That is, Jesus faced temptations concerning how he would be king. He did not deny his calling as "Son of God;" he did reject these temptations to fulfill this calling through what he knew would be ungodly means.

Luke then tells of Jesus' return to the world to which he was called to minister. In his home synagogue, Jesus spoke words from Isaiah that directly addressed social transformation. Isaiah's prophecy referred to the installation among God's people of the provisions of the year of Jubilee that would restore in Israel the socially radical tenets of Torah: social equality and the enfranchisement of the oppressed, prisoners, and poor.

When Jesus affirmed, "these words are fulfilled in your hearing," he made clear that the fulfillment he had in mind was not an ending of history but rather the transformation of social life within history. Jesus brought into the present of his time and place the hope for renewal that Isaiah prophesied. This renewal would find expression in a concrete transformation of social relationships in the community of God's people.

Jesus' identity at the Anointed One, the Messiah, the Son of God, the Christ, is linked from the beginning of his ministry with the powerful presence of the Spirit of God (4:14-21). This outpouring of the Spirit linked with Israel's hopes for the healing of the world in history, in social and political concreteness.

Jesus' verbal proclamation was accompanied with works of healing. He drew great crowds and acclamation. However, from the beginning he attracted opposition. His townspeople sought to kill him when they realized that his message of the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy meant to be inclusive of Israel's enemies. As his ministry gained traction, Jesus began to run up against opposition from defenders of the status quo who angrily schemed against him (6:11).

## Creating a counterculture

In face of this hostility to his message, Jesus created a more formal community of resistance. He realized that his teachings and actions alone would not bring genuine transformation. He knew that if he himself were removed from the scene, his message would end with him unless he had created social structures that would continue and that would provide a critical mass to embody the message of Jubilee that he proclaimed.

Jesus' proclamation, at its heart (e.g., in Luke, the opening proclamation in his hometown, the Lord's Prayer, and his "sermon on the plain" in 6:17-49), focused on debt as the core expression of structural evil in his world. In response to this evil, Jesus articulated a message of God's boundless love that canceled debts in true Jubilee fashion, replacing debt bondage with forgiveness.

Jesus spelled out this message to the community he called into being, both to core group of his disciples (the "sermon on the plain") and to the broader listening crowd (see 7:1). He structured his social ethic around the call to imitate God's expansive love (Luke 6:35-36) and to break free from the conventional "commonsense" ethics of mainstream society ("what credit is that to you? Even sinners…," Luke 6:32-34).

This transformative ethic flowed from a conviction that the promised age of the Spirit indeed had been inaugurated in this community. This community founded on voluntary commitment would provide the resources needed to stand strong in face of the inevitable opposition of the powers that be in the broader society.

Jesus' message met with more hostility; the likelihood of opposition loomed larger. So he began to prepare his followers for such consequences. He sought to form them into a community that would embody a way of life that would, on the one hand, embody Jubilee and

overcome bondage to the debt-centered culture of which it was a part, and on the other hand, cultivate the inner and outer resources that would empower them to face the likelihood of the cross.

In his teaching about a willingness to "take up the cross" as a prerequisite for sharing in the Messianic Spirit-endowed community of healing, Jesus conveyed a clear message. To follow Jesus meant, without qualification, a willingness to share his fate—the fate of one labeled an enemy of the Empire and an enemy of the Temple hierarchy. To follow Jesus meant to accept the (accurate) designation of a social radical.

Jesus established a community intending to transform the world. This community organized itself with a clear mission. Those who joined understood and accepted the expectations and likely consequences of their participation. They accepted expectations for a defined set of practices that set them apart from their wider society. These distinct practices did not stem from a simple desire to be different for the sake of being different, but rather from the profoundly humane characteristics of their social ethics. These distinctives overtly set the community of Jesus' followers over against the values and practices of the powers that be, creating an alternative consciousness and social context for political life.

## Taking up the cross

As his counter-cultural community gained increased clarity about his messianic agenda, Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem and entered the final phase of his ministry. Luke tells of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem at the beginning of the final week of Jesus' life. He met with adulation, then headed to the Temple where he successfully challenged the standard operating procedures. By driving the money changers out he heightened the sense of conflict with the guardians of the social order.

For those around Jesus who had retained a hope that this social change agent would violently overthrow the present political and religious order, things seemed to be coming to a head. Jesus clearly did have a political agenda. He had organized a vanguard movement, calling his followers to clarity about their willingness to make the effort and bear the consequences of revolution. Of course, Jesus had not overtly been preparing his community for a violent takeover, but with his own power and close connection with God, he would not require overwhelming human firepower to overturn Rome.

This final step of pulling together the crowds and wielding the Lord's sword in a *coup d'etat* is precisely the step Jesus refused. Only later did his followers understand that his agenda was never a violent revolution but rather a different kind of revolution, no less social and political.

In 19:47–22:2, Jesus' initiates conflict with the existing social system. The obvious example is when Jesus is challenged over the payment of taxes to Rome (20:20-25). He poses two alternatives, give unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's. He does not propose a two-kingdom theory where life is compartmentalized between the sacred and the secular. Rather, he emphasizes that in real life these two "kings" demand loyalty in ways that demand a choice, one or the other.

When Jesus' authority is challenged (20:1-8), when he tells the parable of the unfaithful vineyard-keepers (20:9-18), when Luke alludes to the Messiah as David's son (19:41-44), when Jesus speaks of rich scribes in contrast with poor widows (20:45–21:4), and when Jesus alludes to tribulation and triumph (21:5-36), the heightening conflict between these two mutually exclusive social orders is in mind.

The night after Jesus drove the money-changers out and warned that the religious leaders planned to do him in, he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane that God would "take this cup" from him. Such a prayer, in this context, only makes sense in terms of one final temptation on Jesus' part to think again of violent overthrow.

Satan tempted him thus in the wilderness at the beginning. Peter tempted Jesus thus after confessing Jesus as Messiah. The crowds tempted him thus after he miraculously fed them. The crowds again tempted him thus when he entered Jerusalem to their acclaim. Such a temptation had been fundamental throughout Jesus' ministry because, indeed, it was close to his calling. He did have the vocation to head a political revolution, to bring about a transformation in relation to Roman hegemony and the Temple hierarchy.

In the Garden, as the forces aligned against Jesus close in, he faces once more the option of channeling his divine power toward violence, to use the sword of "justice" forcibly to overthrow the oppressors of his people and set the prisoners free. In the power of the Spirit, Jesus resists that temptation. He resists even when Peter draws his sword in an act that could have set the conflagration off. Matthew's version imagines that at this point God could indeed have set upon the Temple police and perhaps also the Romans the angelic hosts and the crowds. These legions of angels could have cleansed the land and restored the Davidic kingdom. Jesus says no, not because he was apolitical and only interested in escaping from history into heaven but because the true enemy of the kingdom of God, of the social order God called Jesus to inaugurate, is the sword itself, not the national identity of the sword-wielder.

So, Jesus accepts his arrest. He goes first before the religious leaders then to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. The story makes clear that it was indeed thinkable that Jesus would be seen as a genuine threat to the

Roman Empire. Throughout the story of Jesus' final hours, the charge that he set himself up as "king" rings clearly. The story the gospels tell of Jesus public ministry makes apparent the bases for such a charge. Jesus did pose a political threat.

Rome does execute Jesus. He dies a revolutionary's death. Rome makes an example of him. He meets his end labeled "king of the Jews," following the affirmation of the religious leaders (mentioned in John) that they recognize no king but Caesar. Such a public, painful, and decisive death awaits all who set themselves over against Rome.

Jesus' followers had been prepared for this. However, when the events unfolded they proved not quite ready. They continued to hope for a David redux who would bring in the kingdom with force. Hence, a few days after Jesus' death, several of his followers recount the tragic events to a stranger they met on the road to Emmaus. "We had hoped that he was the one who would redeem Israel" (Luke 24:21). That is, they expected a violent revolution to drive out the foreign empire and its collaborators.

To their shock, these disciples discover that their companion turns out to be Jesus himself. Jesus confronts them, not because they had hoped Jesus would "redeem Israel" (create a new kingdom). Rather, it was that they had not recognized that in Jesus' life, including his rejection of violent revolution even while directly challenging the status quo, this new kingdom was fully present in the self-suffering of the Messiah.

Because Jesus' cross was a direct consequence of his confrontation with the social status quo, it actually reflects the presence of the kingdom of God. Jesus loved his enemies, embodied a justice greater than the scribes and Pharisees, identified directly with the poor and oppressed, and forgave even his killers. In doing so, Jesus displays the core commitments of this new social and political order he had been commissioned to bring into being.

Yoder summarizes Jesus' ministry:

> Jesus was, in his divinely mandated (i.e., promised, anointed, messianic) prophethood, priesthood, and kingship, the bearer of a new possibility of human, social, and therefore political relationships. His baptism is the inauguration and his cross is the culmination of that new regime in which his disciples are called to share.[2]

## Jesus as model

The social ethics of the New Testament have at their heart a call to follow the way of Jesus. This motif of imitation focuses on specific aspects

[2] Yoder, *Politics*, 52.

of Jesus' life and teaching, not a general sense of seeing him as a model in all areas of life. The specific point of imitation has to do with the aspects of Jesus' ministry that led him into conflict with the powers that be.

The New Testament presents Jesus' cross as the norm for his followers. This cross is understood as the consequence of standing against the status quo of power politics and social hierarchicalism. Jesus' cross represents his social nonconformity, his counter-cultural sensibility, his renouncing of noninvolvement in the needed social transformation, and his refusal to take up the sword even for seemingly legitimate purposes.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus was not tempted to withdraw and stay in the wilderness—he understood from the start that he had been called to engage his culture directly and confrontationally. He was not tempted to side with the religious powers, the Sadducean establishment and its sense of conservative social responsibility. This path was too strongly implicated in the social injustice Jesus opposed. Jesus faced only one genuine social-political temptation—the lure of transformative social responsibility exercised through the sword, through the use of the means of "justifiable" violence for the sake a valuable ends.

As the metaphor "kingdom" makes clear, Jesus' concern centered on political and not purely religious or spiritual elements. When Jesus disavowed Peter's attempt to defend him with the sword at the time of his arrest, he did so not because Peter got in the way of Jesus' non-ethical vocation to be a perfect sacrifice for sin. Rather, Jesus rejected Peter's efforts because he understood his calling as the Son of God to include turning from the use of the sword to further "legitimate" ends.

Following Jesus' resurrection and the reinstitution of his community as the vanguard of the coming kingdom of God, his followers looked back at the whole of his ministry, death, and resurrection, and confessed him to be the unique manifestation of God in history. Confessing Jesus as God Incarnate speaks to God entering history and defining authentic humanness in terms of this exemplary, Spirit-filled life. Confessing Jesus as the "second person" of the Trinity speaks to the unity of all manifestations of God as harmonious with the life and teaching of this person confessed as God among us.

Jesus did not (mistakenly) proclaim the end of historical existence. His message of the jubilee made present centered on an actual embodiment in time of structured communal life that would shape historical existence. Jesus' message was not that history was soon to end; he spoke to why history continues. He proclaimed and embodied a way of embracing real life and transforming how it is lived.

The kingdom of God, for Jesus, had to do with visible social life, not invisible "spirituality." Shaped by Jubilee, confronting injustice, bondage,

and oppression, empowered by the presence of God's Spirit, the actual Kingdom of God Jesus proclaimed as present shows those who become its citizens why life in time matters,

Jesus insisted that people in power do not represent the divinely endorsed definition of what it means to be "political." The actual Jesus of the gospel story contradicts the assumptions of mainstream ethics that relegate his concerns to the non-political realm of otherworldly religion. Jesus' message about politics is clear. Those in power misunderstand the true meaning of politics. If we understand "politics" to have to do, most fundamentally, with how human beings order their social lives, Jesus presented a clear alternative to politics as domination. The politics of domination is a perversion of the intention of God for how we are called to be human beings socially.

## Paul as disciple of Jesus

Christian tradition has posited a significant gap between the teaching of Jesus and the teaching of Paul. For the mainstream tradition, this alleged gap has reinforced the inclination to look elsewhere than Jesus' life for ethical guidance. However, a careful look at Paul's theology actually provides bases to see that Paul echoes Jesus' core concerns.

In contrast to the stereotype concerning Paul's "quest for a gracious God" as seen through Augustinian and Lutheran eyes, Paul actually was not focused on assuaging his personal guilt. Rather, reflecting Jesus' own emphasis on the present accessibility of God's mercy for all who trust in it, Paul presents God being accepting towards people at all times. For Paul, like Jesus, the Law first of all expresses God's grace. Certainly, the Law clarifies the presence of sin; however, the focus on sin is not the Law's main purpose. Paul quotes Jesus in summarizing what the main content of the law is: Love of neighbor (Romans 13:8-10).

Paul did not believe his message of God judging justly and forgiving mercifully provided something different from Judaism. The point of contrast between Paul's gospel and mainstream Judaism had mainly to do with the identity of Jesus. Paul understood Jesus as the fulfillment of the promises to Israel, not as the founder of a new religion.

Paul's sense of his own sinfulness stemmed not out of a deep sense of guilt and inability to measure up to God's commands. Rather, Paul's own sinfulness found its expression in his initial inability to recognize in Jesus the revelation of God and, even more pointedly, his sharp hostility toward Jesus' followers. Emerging from Paul's own experience as a persecutor of the followers of Jesus, he presented the work of Christ in terms of the creation of a new community made up of former enemies.

The center of Jesus' gospel is to be seen in the breaking down of the wall of hostility that had heretofore separated Jew and Gentile. Just as Jesus placed the formation of a counter-cultural community of Jubilee generosity and mercy at the center of his proclamation of the presence of God's Kingdom, so too did Paul present the presence of God's Spirit in this reconciled community of former enemies.

In using justification language to describe what happens in the creation of this new community, Paul has social realities in mind more than individualized legal/spiritual realities. "Justification" has to do with "making right," or "making just." We see in Paul's thought concerning "justification" the clear sense that God's "making things right" centers primarily on establishing faith communities where former enemies are reconciled, where genuine shalom finds expression.

Paul wrote of these social manifestations of God's right-making love decades after Jesus' proclaimed Jubilee and founded a community to embody Jubilee. That he did so provides evidence that Jesus' message was heeded and embodied. Paul confirms the thrust of Jesus' words that God is a God who loves God's enemies—and emphasizes the concrete application of these words in the joining together of Jew and Gentile in these Jubilee communities. The gospel of Jesus has no clearer or more powerful expression than that insider and outsider are united in one fellowship, thereby tearing down walls of enmity.

Paul extends Jesus' message in his discussion of power and social structures. For Paul, human social structures (the "principalities and powers") are seen both as part of God's good creation and as fallen, thereby often failing to serve their created purpose of ordering social life for the sake of human flourishing. Paul understands that Jesus entered directly into the world of power with its fallen social structures. Jesus' distinctiveness may be seen in his freedom from bondage to any of the powers. He lived freely in relation to laws, customs, communities, institutions, values, or ideologies. He remained free even to the point allowing the powers to put him to death rather than give them his loyalty.

Jesus' confrontation with the powers and their efforts to destroy him bring to the surface their true nature. As the agents of death to the very Son of God, they show their claims to be agents of God for the good of humanity as profoundly misleading. When the true God enters directly into history, these "servants of God" (the state, the religious institutions, the cultural mores, et al) actually rebel against God. Jesus' life of freedom from the powers, his willingness to remain committed to the way of peace even when they committed acts of horrific violence and injustice against him, and God's vindication of Jesus through resurrection make clear that loyalty to the fallen powers contradicts loyalty to the true God.

Paul's analysis of the powers emphasizes that Jesus' social ethics do address the "real world." Jesus models a social ethics of freedom, courage, and trust in the One who made those powers and desires that they too be transformed. Jesus' confrontation with the powers reflects that he meant it when he spoke of the presence of God's kingdom (kingdom = political order). God's kingdom is present when servanthood replaces domination, even when the cost of such witness leads to conflict.

The main weapon the powers wield in seeking to dominate human existence is deception. They seek, all too often successfully, to convince people that they are God's agents for order and justice in the world. They persuade people to give them loyalty and trust, thereby enhancing their dominance. To those who truly perceive the significance of the life and teaching of Jesus, this demand the powers make for loyalty is recognized as an effort to usurp the true God.

Paul sees the spread of Jesus' community in the Mediterranean area as being in directly continuity with the counter-cultural community Jesus himself established. The existence of these fellowships (called "church" = *ekklesia*, an assembly of citizens) proclaims to all that the unchallenged reign of the powers in human culture is coming to an end. When he portrays the church this way, Paul follows Jesus and conveys an ethic of social engagement, not an ethic of withdrawal. Paul means for the church to be a community of free citizens who each bring gifts and abilities to serve the collective—and ultimately to serve the entire world. Paul's *ekklesia* is the farthest thing from a "parenthesis" awaiting later opportunities to seize power through the sword (be it in history in the fashion of post-Constantinian Christendom or beyond history in the dispensational "millennium").

Paul had in mind, as did Jesus, the *ekklesia* as an expression of God's kingdom transforming social life in the present world. Here we find the "new humanity" that expresses power through service rather than domination and that resolves conflicts through forgiveness and reconciliation rather than the sword.

Paul presents the victory that Jesus won over the powers through his death and resurrection as something concrete and historical. Jesus' victory was not a cosmic transaction outside of history or the fulfillment of a mechanistic requirement for a blood sacrifice. Jesus' victory over the powers came through the actual life he lived free from their dominance, his faithfulness to the ways of persevering love even to the point of death, and God's vindication of this life as the embodiment of the Kingdom come. The victory of Jesus then becomes a model for the *ekklesia* in its common life and its own witness to the powers. In Jesus and his life, God's sovereignty finds expression. When the *ekklesia* imitates Jesus' style

of politics, it embodies the transforming work of God making the kingdoms of the nations into the kingdom of the Creator.

Paul's thinking about the relevance of Jesus' way for the political life of his followers finds expression in his notorious statements in Romans 13, but not in the ways the mainstream Christian tradition has assumed.

The first step to understand Paul's political thought is to see Romans 13 as part of a larger framework. For early Christians, the state is one of the fallen powers, often seen as under Satan's dominion. The gospel writers make this clear in their accounts of Jesus' temptations at the beginning of his ministry, when Satan offers him political leadership. We may assume that Paul has this context in mind when he wrote Romans.

In Romans, we see other elements of Jesus' own basic stance toward power and social ethics. Romans 12:1 makes a transition from Paul's reflections on the promises to Israel to his discussion of concrete ethical practices in the churches of Rome that takes up the rest of the book. The first word that Paul offers in this new section is a call to nonconformity. Echoing Exodus 20, Paul begins with a confession of God's transforming mercy. He follows that with a call to the community to reject the ways of empire and to practice the kind of persevering love and concern for social justice that will reveal the character of their liberating God. In chapter 12, Paul elaborates on the nonconformed way of life Jesus modeled for his followers. Paul concludes his summary of Jesus' message in chapter 12 with a call for non-retaliation toward enemies. Then, in 13:8-10, Paul emphasizes (quoting Jesus) that the law itself is summarized in the call to love one's neighbor. The only debt that matters is the call to love.

In between the call to non-retaliation that concludes Romans 12 and the affirmation of the true (and binding) meaning of God's law in 13:8-10, Paul elaborates his thoughts on how the Roman Christians ought to relate to governmental authority. He surely could not have had in mind in 13:1-7 a validation of a blank check attitude toward government that authorizes Christian participation in violence.

Paul's broader thinking about the powers helps us understand what he means early chapter 13. Paul calls not for "obedience" in 13:1, but for "subordination." Key here is how Paul understands God to order the powers. This ordering reflects both the sense that the powers retain some sense of independence over against God and the sense that nonetheless God uses the powers even in their rebellion to serve God's ultimate purposes. Paul's language in 13:1-7 includes several words that have the connotation of this kind of ordering. He does not mean literally "obey the state." He is not implying that one is obligated to tasks the state calls one to that violate the Jesus' expectations (including those named elsewhere in Romans 12–13 such as non-retaliation and love of neighbor).

Paul understands Roman Christians to be in a crucial position with responsibility to witness in the heart of the Empire to Jesus' new political order. This witness would include respect for the realities of fallen governmental power. The authentic subordination of Christians to such a government would include respect for the ordering function of government (when it ministers for people's "good," government provides for social services and social stability) even as Christians also refuse to give their ultimate loyalty to such governments.

When Paul asserts in 13:7 that readers should "render to each his due," he echoes Jesus' call for discernment (render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's). This "rendering" includes respect and taxes to Caesar; however, loyalty is due only to God. This loyalty leads directly to the affirmation that love is due everyone (13:8).

So, Paul's message in Romans 12–13, rather than being in tension with Jesus' call to persevering love (see Matthew 5–7), actually reiterates that call. Both these passages instruct believers to practice non-retaliatory love. Both call upon believers to renounce vengeance. And both challenge believers to respect God's ordering work through the powers in ways that include a refusal to take up the sword.

## The way of the Lamb

The New Testament concludes with one more reiteration of the political message of Jesus. The key section for understanding the book of Revelation, chapter five, portrays the slain and resurrected Lamb as the one who can open the scroll. The Lamb is worthy to receive praise and glory and power. It is the cross (and the life that led to it and the vindication of it in resurrection) that reveals the meaning of history—not the sword of power politics. God's people are called to follow the Lamb wherever he goes, and, like him, they "conquer" due to their politics of persevering love, not their politics of coercion.

Revelation echoes Jesus' approach to effectiveness, asserting that truth wins out in history not due to its superior firepower but due to its faithfulness to the One on the throne. God's people participate in transforming the kings of the earth from enemies of God to worshipers in the New Jerusalem through their willingness to join the Lamb in his style of life and his style of confronting the powers. The Jesus who is worshiped in Revelation as the one worthy to receive power is precisely the Jesus who accepted his fate as a political rebel executed by the Empire with the sign next to his cross, "King of the Jews."

Paul's affirmation of Jesus as "equal with God" (Philippians 2) follows from Jesus' renunciation of power as domination. When Jesus asserted

that only those willing to take up their cross and follow him, he pointed in precisely this direction concerning the exercise of power. God's kind of power, the power that ultimately goes with the grain of the universe, underwrites a politics of compassion and self-giving love.

The New Testament throughout portrays normative Christian social ethics in ways directly linking with the life and teaching of Jesus. This stance centers on the formation of communities characterized by the rejection of violence and the embodiment of inclusive Jubilee-shaped economics. Jesus' own cross becomes the political model, the style of life that leads to the social transformation the New Testament portrays with the descent of the New Jerusalem.

Yoder concludes *The Politics of Jesus*:

> To follow Jesus does not mean renouncing effectiveness. It does not mean sacrificing concern for liberation within the social process in favor of delayed gratification in heaven, or abandoning efficacy in favor of purity. It means that in Jesus we have a clue to which kinds of causation, which kinds of community-building, which kinds of conflict management, go with the grain of the cosmos, of which we know, as Caesar does not, that Jesus is both the Word (the inner logic of things) and the Lord ("sitting at the right hand").[3]

[3] Yoder, *Politics*, 246.

# 6. What does Jesus' death mean?

*[This essay was first published in Willard M. Swartley, ed.* Violence Renounced: René Girard, Biblical Studies, and Peacemaking *(Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2000), 49-69.]*

There is a paradox with religion. While it is a main dynamic in death-dealing violence, religious faith also often provides the main basis to reject death-dealing violence. We see religion as a main dynamic in death-dealing violence in "holy" wars—the Crusades, the Thirty Years War between Protestants and Catholics in the 17th century, conflicts between Hindus and Muslims in newly liberated India in the 1940s, conflicts between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, and the ongoing hostilities in the Middle East among Muslims and Jews.

Pre-meditated lethal violence requires a fueling ideology that justifies taking human life. Often this ideology has a religious element with a divinely sanctioned rationale for coercion, even the taking of human life. At the same time, religious faith is also one of the keys for people finding the way toward breaking this spiral of violence. Many people affirm that what is beautiful and worthwhile about the human project comes from God—the merciful and loving creator who desires human flourishing and wellbeing, and who grieves at the costly spiral of violence. For many, religious faith means passion to find a way out of this spiral of violence.

Christianity claims that we have in Jesus a model of a human way of living that breaks free from the spiral of violence. Jesus models—in life and in teaching—a way toward genuine peace. Therefore, despite the bloody hands apparent throughout the history of Christianity, many people believe one of our main sources of hope remains the story of Jesus. Christian pacifism has always held that the story of Jesus points toward the rejection of all violence.[1] However, the question of how to overcome the problems of violence confronts everyone with renewed urgency. As

[1]See Douglas Gwyn, George Hunsinger, Eugene F. Roop, and John Howard Yoder, *A Declaration on Peace: In God's People the World's Renewal Has Begun* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1991).

René Girard asserts, in the light of the modern world's weapons of mass destruction, human beings are essentially faced with a choice: total destruction or total renunciation of violence.[2]

The Christian response to violence, even among Christian pacifists, has not taken seriously enough the centrality of violence in the Bible. The biblical materials take violence seriously as something central to human reality. At least some of those materials ultimately show that at the very heart of God, the very heart of reality—violence has no place. As Walter Wink puts it:

> The violence of Scripture, embarrassing to us, [actually] became the means by which sacred violence was revealed for what it is: a lie perpetuated against victims in the name of a God who, through violence, was working to expose violence for what it is and to reveal the divine nature as nonviolent.[3]

A major aspect of the Bible as a resource for peacemaking is that part of the biblical materials we see as most problematic—its portrayal of violence. One especially important case of this is the portrayal of Jesus' death. In the death of Jesus, the two sides of the paradox of religion come into focus. On the one hand, Jesus' death reveals a great deal about religious ideology as a major dynamic in death-dealing violence. And, on the other hand, Jesus' death reveals a great deal about religious faith as a source of freedom from giving in to the cycle of violence.

The work of René Girard and biblical theologians directly influenced by him provide a helpful challenge to consider the importance of these issues. Girard has asserted that the issue of violence is central to human existence. Only by facing this, understanding it, and coming to terms with it can we hope to break free from violence's dominion.

Girard helps us see that conceptions of the sacred are based on violence that is turned on scapegoats and then attributed to God. This is sacred violence. For him, the revelation of the true God involves exposing the falsehood of sacred violence. The justification of such violence does not come from the true God. With such a revelation, it becomes increasingly clear that "the actual initiative to kill does not originate in God after all, but in human beings." Sacred violence is not from God, but simply "human beings attacking one another."[4]

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[2]René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 240.

[3]Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 147.

[4]Raymund Schwager, *Must There Be Scapegoats? Violence and Redemption in the Bible* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 66-7.

Girard also points out that mythology is generally told from the point of view of people on the top, who often are killers. Demythification, on the other hand, retells "the story from the point of view of the victim." The Bible is uniquely characterized by such demythification, by such an emphasis on the point of the view of the victims.[5] So the Bible is a unique resource to expose mythology that blinds us to how social structures that victimize the many on behalf of people on the top are themselves violent.

Seeing Jesus' death primarily as a sacrifice offered to a holy God in order to effect salvation actually reflects such mythification, and such a view buttresses structural violence. For Girardians, demythifying Jesus' death helps us to see that Jesus did not die as such a sacrifice at all. Rather, Jesus' death reveals God's love to refuse "to participate in the cycle of mimetic desire and vengeance."[6] Jesus' death is not an act of violence that God needs.

Sacrificial theology does not help us overcome the problem of violence. Rather, sacrificial theology pictures ultimate reality (the heart of God itself) as requiring violence—the death of innocent victims. Therefore, ultimately, sacrifice does not provide the means to genuine salvation and shalom, but only adds to the spiral of violence.

The central violent event in the Bible is the death of Jesus. In how it portrays this death, the Bible itself reflects the paradox characteristic of religious faith—where religious faith both adds to the spiral of violence and also provides the best means to break free from it. Jesus' death is in places interpreted in sacrificial terms, as some sort of cosmic transaction in which an act of violence is what enables God to effect human salvation. However, such an interpretation reflects a perspective on God different from that revealed by Jesus himself. Jesus portrayed God not in terms of vengeance and wrath, but in terms of unconditional love and forgiveness, not at all in need of blood sacrifice. The church, though, came to portray God differently. Jesus' infinitely merciful God came to be seen as one whose wrath required blood atonement. This leads to God requiring Jesus to die on behalf of us all. In Wink's words:

> The nonviolent God of Jesus comes to be depicted as a God of unequaled violence, since God not only allegedly demands the blood of the victim who is closest and most precious to him, but also holds the whole of humanity accountable for a death that God both anticipated and required.[7]

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[5]Robert Hamerton-Kelly, *Sacred Violence: Paul's Hermeneutic of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 38.

[6]James G. Williams, "The Innocent Victim: René Girard on Violence, Sacrifice, and the Sacred," *Religious Studies Review* 14.4 (October 1988), 325.

[7]Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 149.

Sacrificial theology stands in tension with thoroughgoing pacifism because it posits a violence deep in the heart of God. Such violence ultimately underwrites inter-human violence. Such violence is attributed to God but in actuality is only a projection of human violence.[8]

However, the Bible contains other understandings of the death of Jesus that take us beyond sacrificial thinking. My interest here is not primarily to argue against sacrifice. More so, I present an alternative way of thinking of Jesus' death that I believe has more relevance for Christian pacifism and is more in line with how Jesus himself portrayed God. The New Testament does contain sacrificial theology.[9] However, I want to focus on materials that provide a basis for an interpretation of the meaning of Jesus' death that is not determined by sacred violence.

Stimulated by Girardian thinking, I will consider Jesus' death in relation to several issues—namely, Jesus' relationship with religious institutionalism as portrayed in Mark's Gospel, especially in relation to the Jerusalem Temple; Jesus relationship with cultural exclusivism as portrayed in some of Paul's letters, especially in relation to the law; and Jesus relationship with political authoritarianism as portrayed in the Book of Revelation, especially in relation to the Roman empire.

The significance of Jesus' cross lays in its content, not as a basis for an ideology of sacrifice. This content is the shameful death of a good person through an act of violence on the part of the established order. Jesus' death does not destroy these social structures. But, though leaving them intact, it reveals their nature and thus provides a basis for withdrawal of credibility and allegiance. In this way, their effective power is overcome.[10]

When we focus on the content of Jesus' death, we find two main themes. They are, first, the exposure of the violence of major social structures. This exposure undercuts the authority given to these institutions and in this way makes freedom to break the spiral of violence more of a possibility. Second, the life of Jesus, including, especially, the way he faced the violence of these institutions that he brought to surface, points to freedom from violence.

## Jesus exposes institutionalism (The Gospel of Mark)

The stories in the latter part of Mark leading up to Jesus' crucifixion highlight Jesus' conflict with the religious institution of the Temple.

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[8]Schwager, *Must There Be Scapegoats?*, 66-7.

[9]Williams, "The Innocent Victim," 325; Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 153; James G. Williams, *The Bible, Violence, and the Sacred: Liberation from the Myth of Sanctioned Violence* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), 188.

[10]Hamerton-Kelly, *Sacred Violence*, 60.

The Temple was essential to established life in Jerusalem and Judea. It was the economic center of Jerusalem. An estimated eighty percent of Jerusalem's employment was dependent on the Temple.[11] The Temple was the political center. Since Israel was a religious state, its religious code was also its state and civil code. The leadership organ of the Temple, the Sanhedrin, also carried legislative and executive power. This power was heightened due to the Sanhedrin's cooperation with Roman rule. However, most of all, the Temple was the religious center. The Temple was where God was present on earth. It was "a religious center and theological symbol of tremendous emotive power."[12]

As Mark's drama approaches its climax, he has Jesus entering Jerusalem (11:1). This begins the final stage, the last week of Jesus' life.

Right away (in 11:11), Jesus visits the Temple. The sense of conflict is established: Jesus versus the religious leaders, the Temple authorities. The conflict escalates when Jesus returns to the Temple a second time and proceeds to "drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the Temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves; and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the Temple" (11:15). With these actions, Jesus expresses his hostility toward the Temple ritual.

Mark brackets this confrontation in the Temple with Jesus cursing a fig tree and causing it to wither (11:12-4; 11:20-1). The fig tree symbolizes Israel and its fate reflects the fate of the Temple. Jesus, with his challenge to the Temple, actually acts out God's judgment on the Temple. The problem with the Temple is that it has failed to be "a house of prayer for all the nations". Instead, the Temple had become a center for religious exclusivism and economic exploitation.[13]

Jesus quotes two prophets here: Isaiah 56:7 ("My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations") and Jeremiah 7:11 ("You have made it a den of robbers"). Isaiah portrays an eschatological hope where foreigners flock to Jerusalem. Jeremiah condemns the people of Judea for presuming that God would continue to sustain the Temple even in the face of their sinful living.[14] Jesus uses Israel's prophets to challenge

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[11]Robert Hamerton-Kelly, *The Gospel and the Sacred: Poetics of Violence in Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 15; James D. G. Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways: Between Christianity and Judaism and Their Significance for the Character of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991), 32.

[12]Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways*, 33.

[13]Willard M. Swartley, *Israel's Scripture Traditions and the Synoptic Gospels: Story Shaping Story* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 159-60; Hamerton-Kelly, *The Gospel and the Sacred*, 17-8.

[14]Swartley, *Israel's*, 161; Hamerton-Kelly, *The Gospel and the Sacred*, 19.

Israel's present Temple practices, which he asserts are corrupt and counter to God's intentions.

We are told that in response to this so-called cleansing of the Temple, "the chief priests and scribes…kept looking for a way to kill [Jesus]" (11:18). These religious leaders, were, for a time, restrained by Jesus' popularity with the crowds. But they intended to do away with Jesus. He was a major threat to their purity-based system of religious control. He not only showed himself to be cavalier towards the purity regulations, but he also was widely known and popular. These factors alone were cause for alarm. Added to these was his direct confrontation with the Temple.

In the parable of the vineyard that immediately follows (12:1-12), Jesus likens the vineyard to the people of Israel, the watchtower to the Temple, and the tenants to the religious leaders. God intended the Temple from of old to be a center for justice among Israel, but it instead became a center for injustice. God sent messengers, "slaves," to restore the vineyard to its intended purposes. But the tenants murdered those messengers—analogous to the fate of prophets throughout history. Finally, the master sends his "beloved son," who is also murdered. This is the last straw for the owner, and he promises to come to "destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others."

These tenants (the religious leaders) showed that they are in actuality rivals to the owner (God). The practices of the Temple are hence seen to be not faithful responses to God's wishes but rather efforts to usurp God's place as Israel's object of worship.[15] This is indeed a harsh critique. The parable is patterned after Isaiah's Song of the Vineyard (Isa 5:1-7) which was itself a strong critique of unfaithful eighth-century Israel. The parable ends with a quote from Psalm 118:22-3, a Temple Psalm. Temple imagery pervades the parable. That the parable was meant as a critique of current Temple practices and the religious leaders is seen in their response. "When they realized that [Jesus] had told this parable against them, they wanted to arrest him" (12:12).[16]

Jesus speaks in Mark 13 of the Temple's destruction. One disciple exclaims regarding the greatness of the Temple: "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" This exclamation likely reflects just the sense of security about the great Temple as guarantor of God's ongoing protection for the chosen people that Jeremiah critiqued. These wonderful buildings were seen to symbolize God's presence with Israel.[17]

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[15]Raymund Schwager, "Christ's Death and the Prophetic Critique of Sacrifice," *Semeia* 33 (1985), 114.

[16]Swartley, *Israel's*, 162.

[17]Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 304.

Jesus, however, was not impressed. "Do you see those great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another. All will be thrown down" (13:2). This alludes to the impending destruction of the great edifice. Perhaps, too, it reflects that the spiritual authority of this institution was collapsing. Immediately after the discourse of chapter 13, we are told again that "the chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him" (14:1).

Finally, they do arrest him and bring him to trial. One of the main charges against Jesus is that he said he would destroy the Temple (14:58). This charge is false on the surface. Jesus did not say that. Yet, ironically, it is true in the sense that Jesus' actions and words render the Temple's functions meaningless.[18] Mark does not picture Jesus as threatening to destroy the Temple. However, the centrality of the accusation that he did (15:29 indicates that the accusation stayed with Jesus) reflects the reality that Jesus' enemies did understand him to be a threat to the Temple.[19]

Mark's treatment of the Temple concludes in 15:38. When Jesus died, "the curtain of the Temple was torn in two, from top to bottom." The significance of this final event links with what immediately follows, the Roman centurion confesses that "Truly this man was God's Son" (15:39). The torn "curtain of the Temple" juxtaposes Jesus and the Temple as alternative places of divine presence. The death of the Servant opens the way to God for all the world by exposing sacred violence and depriving the Temple of its mystique.[20]

Mark's gospel shows a clear connection between Jesus being put to death and Jesus' conflict with the Temple, Jerusalem's center of religious institutionalism.[21] In several cases—the cleansing of the Temple, the parable of the vineyard, the apocalyptic vision, and the accusation before the tribunal—we see a connection between Jesus being perceived as a threat to the institution and the promise that he will be killed for this.

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[18]Swartley, *Israel's*, 165.

[19]Hamerton-Kelly, *Gospel,* 52.

[20]Hamerton-Kelly, *Gospel*, 57; Swartley, *Israel's*, 168.

[21]I do not argue that Jesus himself was necessarily hostile toward the Temple. Some scholars in fact see him as essentially positive [Bruce Chilton, *The Temple of Jesus: His Sacrificial Program Within a Cultural History of Sacrifice* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State Press, 1992)]. The Gospel of Luke pictures Jesus as much more positive toward the Temple than does Mark [Swartley, *Israel's,* 185-92]. My point is that *Mark* pictures a major conflict. Certainly all the synoptics picture Jesus as concerned with abuses in the Temple. I find Mark's picture of Jesus being put to death because he was perceived as a direct *threat* by religious institutionalism eminently believable—a similar dynamic to the response of Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor to Jesus.

Jesus' death, though, does not signal that the religious authorities are victorious over him. It actually signifies the opposite. The Temple curtain is torn. Jesus, even on the cross, fulfills what the Temple was meant to and did not—engendering worship of God by Gentiles as well as Jews. The centurion confesses that "surely this was God's Son" (15:39).

Jesus, as interpreted by Mark, challenged the dynamics of institutionalism head on. He denies the legitimacy of his culture's central religious institutions. He does not answer the religious leaders when they have him on trial (14:61). This refusal to answer, in effect, is a statement that he rejects their legitimacy as representatives of God.

Mark contains several references to Jesus' mission to the nations in the context of the conflicts in the Temple. The Temple in Jerusalem, in its cold institutionalism, had lost touch with God's will that the word of mercy be expressed to all peoples. Jesus came to express that word and met with hostility from the religious leaders. So, in effect, the old Temple must be torn down, and a new, open and inclusive Temple based on Jesus himself must take its place (as Revelation 21:22 states a few decades later: "I saw no Temple in the city, for its Temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb").

Mark's Jesus critiqued the Temple system. It originally had a mission, to facilitate creative, communally faithful ways of life for all in the society. But, in ultimately placing its priority on survival and supporting a static, unjust status quo, the Temple left its original mission far behind.

Institutionalism stifles creativity. When the priority is on institutional survival then order, security, peace at all costs take precedence. Few risks can be taken. Few new thoughts can be followed up on. The people who thrive are not visionaries or prophets, but bureaucrats and yes-men. A prophet such as Jesus is not welcomed as a messenger from God. He is not seen as one sent to provide much-needed light into new ways of responding faithfully to the many and great crises faced by first-century Judaism. Rather, he is seen as a threat who upsets the applecart, a voice to be stilled rather than a voice to be responded to.

Jesus' conflict with the Temple was costly. Many forces in his world benefited from people being subservient to institutions. Seeking to break free from that subservience provoked resistance. However, Jesus points to the need to seek such freedom, and witnesses that, at least in part, such freedom is attainable.

As Mark tells the story, Jesus' witness led to his death. However, in facing death as he did—fully committed to the life of the Spirit—free from dominance by spirit-denying hierarchies and religious ideologies—Jesus' life of freedom amidst the struggle points to an alternative to life lived in obeisance to the sacred violence of religious institutionalism.

## Jesus' death and the law of the Spirit (Paul's letters)

Paul focuses much of his attention on how he saw the implementation of Jewish law by his opponents within the church to lead to sacred violence. Especially in his letters to the Galatians and the Romans, Paul argues that the central issue is trust. He contrasts trust in "works of the law" as an approach to salvation with trust simply in God's mercy apart from rituals, boundary markers, and other forms of cultural exclusivism.

My understanding of Paul and the law is influenced by James D. G. Dunn. In Dunn's view, "'Works of the law' are not understood, either by his Jewish interlocutors or by Paul himself, as works which earn God's favor, as merit-amassing observances." "Works of the law", rather, play the role of indicators that show that the Jews are God's people. They are done in order to demonstrate covenant status. "They are the proper response to God's covenant grace, the minimal commitment for members of God's people." Paul, though, sees adherence to "works of the law" as too exclusive. He denies that God's justification extends only to those who wear the badge of the covenant.[22]

Throughout its history, Israel had placed a high priority on the law as a key element distinguishing her from the nations. Two centuries before Paul's time, the Maccabean crisis had pushed a few key elements of law-observance to the forefront as key boundary-markers crucial for Jewish self-identity. Two of the most important were circumcision and food laws, and they remained central in Paul's time for the same reason. Hence, when Paul speaks of "works of the law" he in particular has circumcision and food laws in mind. "Not because they are the only 'works' which the law requires, but because they had become the crucial test cases for covenant loyalty." They were crucial for maintaining Jewish identity as God's special chosen people. They marked the boundary between who was in and who was out.[23]

For Paul, to require "works of the law" for faith was unacceptable. Because they put so much emphasis on cultural exclusivity, these "works of the law" are no different than "works of the flesh" (Gal 5:19). "These works of the law in effect imprison God's righteousness within a [cultural, a] racial and national, that is, [a] fleshly, framework."[24]

For Paul, placing one's trust in "works of the law" leads to a misunderstanding of God's mercy. It distorts the meaning of salvation by

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[22]James D. G. Dunn, "The New Perspective on Paul," in *Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 194.

[23]Dunn, "New Perspective," 210.

[24]Dunn, "New Perspective," 199-200.

tying it to cultural exclusivity. And this can lead to violence. This trust in "works of the law" focused on particular boundary markers—circumcision, food purity regulations, and Sabbath observance. Such a focus inevitably led to an emphasis on clearly demarking who is in and who is out. Resistance to such demarking, which was a hallmark of Jesus and, to some degree at least, of the early church, met with great hostility from those zealous for "works of the law".

Paul identifies himself as having been one such zealot. In his zeal, he "violently persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it" (Gal 1:13). In fact, he was one of the most zealous of the zealous, and, as he wrote, "advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age" (Gal 1:14). Paul's sought zealously to defend Israel's covenant distinctiveness by the sword. He intended to enforce his conviction that salvation is only for Israel—and no one else. He wanted to draw a tighter, stricter line round the "righteous," to mark them off clearly from the Gentile "sinner." This was why he was so violent. The early Hellenist Christians opened the door to Gentiles. Paul persecuted Christians out of his "zeal for the law as a boundary marking off righteousness with God as a special privilege to be promoted and defended."[25] The Hellenist Christians threatened Paul's own identity as a covenant member with their inclusiveness. For Paul, this was a threat to the covenant itself.

Paul constructed his system of life around exclusivist works of the law out a heartfelt desire to do good, to serve God, to remain faithful to "the traditions of [his] ancestors" (Gal 1:14). However, while on his way to Damascus, he had his system turned upside down. Paul was so shattered by this confrontation with the risen Jesus that he could not see nor speak for days (Acts 9:1-9). A major aspect of Paul's shattering experience was to realize that in service to God's law, he was actually a murderer. The way to faithfulness to God was not via trust in "works of the law" but through unadorned trust in God's unconditional mercy—especially as expressed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

Paul came to see that trusting in "works of the law", even when done out of zeal for living faithfully to God, actually led one into slavery to sin. Even while delighting in the law of God, when one focuses on "works of the law" more than all-inclusive mercy, one's practices actually reflect one's captivity to the law of sin (Rom 7:21-5). Such captivity in actuality is captivity to sacred violence, where in the name of purity and holiness, one excludes, boasts, and even literally persecutes and kills.

Paul believed that the law is indeed of God but has always been meant to be secondary to the promise. The point of the law was (and is)

[25]Dunn, *Partings*, 121-2.

to order life in the community for those who have received God's promise and trusted in God's mercy. Appropriation of the law becomes problematic when it becomes a basis to restrict mercy only to people who follow certain rituals and observances. Such an appropriation is contrary to the God-given purpose of the law. It reflects trusting in "works of the law" for one's standing before God—not trusting in God's unconditional mercy. Such an appropriation of the law leads to cultural exclusivism based on boundary markers that have become rigid, absolute, weapons to be used against outsiders, and means to buttress boasting and pride.

Paul affirms that Jesus Christ points to a different way—trust in God's mercy, not works of law. Life in the Spirit replaces life focused on the flesh. And, in fact, such a life leads to fulfillment of the genuine purpose of the law—living in love (Rom 8:4). The law itself could not effect freedom from the way of sin and violence. When people live as if it could—trusting in "works of the law" and adherence to a way of life placing priority on boundary markers as the basis of identity—then the law becomes another of the "elemental spirits" that binds people and actually separates them from God's mercy (Gal 4:3).

The law itself is of God. The law is good and useful to human wellbeing when understood properly. However, it all too often is appropriated as "works of law" that are trusted in as the foundation of people's identity as God's chosen people. When it is thus appropriated, it becomes "weakened by the flesh" (Rom 8:3). As such, the law not only cannot set people free from bondage to sin and violence, it actually only tightens those chains, itself becoming cause of more sin and violence. Paul knew this from bitter personal experience, both as a chief persecutor himself and, later on, as the recipient of such sacred violence by those defending the Truth (violently).

For Paul, when the law is appropriated in ways that become forms of nationalism, bases for cultural exclusivism, driving forces in setting up and enforcing rigid boundary markers, then it has entered the world of idolatry. Paul claims that law observance actually can become idolatry. He himself knew that such a strong claim was required to uncover the powerful hold that this idolatry had on people.

When Jesus asserted that the Sabbath was made for human beings, not human beings for the Sabbath (Mk 2:27), he exposed this idolatry. An institution that justifies violence against human beings in the name of principles, rules, and regulations reflects worship of those rules and regulations more than the merciful God, who desires works of mercy much more than rituals and sacrifices.

The alternative to trusting in works of the law is simple trust in God's mercy, in God's promise. Paul develops this contrast in Romans 4 by

discussing Abraham, who he asserts was "reckoned righteous" before the beginning of the rite of circumcision. It was not Abraham's obedience to this regulation that justified him, but his simple trust in God's unconditional mercy. Circumcision was secondary, temporal, relative.

Now, in Paul's day, through the work of Jesus and the outpouring of the Spirit, uncircumcised Gentiles made apparent the truthfulness of God's order of salvation with Abraham. Trust first. Trust as the basis for salvation. Then the law follows, to guide and direct life in the Spirit.

The gospels show that Jesus' life reflected these same dynamics. Jesus healed on the Sabbath, emphasizing the relativity of Sabbath regulations in relation to human well-being—the former is meant to serve the latter, not vice versa, as he accused the scribes and Pharisees of advocating. Jesus welcomed unclean people, people on the margins (lepers, tax collectors, women, children, various other "sinners"[26]), unconditionally. He announced that the Kingdom of God was at hand, available, requiring only trust in God's mercy as a basis for entrance.

Jesus argued that fulfillment of the law had to do with loving God and other people. He said that he did not mean to abolish the law. However, he did mean to call people to a different approach to the law—seeing it as a means to encourage love and forgiveness, even towards enemies and outsiders. He rejected the law as a basis for setting boundaries, for facilitating exclusiveness and pride. As a result, he was seen by Pharisees as breaking, even abandoning Israel's covenant with God—a covenant witnessed to by faithful adherence to works of the law.[27]

Paul knew from his own life that such an approach to the law would lead to a violent response. The perspective Jesus opposed, that turns "works of the law" into cultural exclusivism, as Paul himself had done, is based on deep-seated, often hidden, violence. Paul refers to Deuteronomy 21:23: "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree" (Gal 3:13). By applying this verse to Jesus' crucifixion, Paul implies that Jesus was regarded as a covenant breaker. Jesus was seen to violate the

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[26]It is probable that the term "sinners" often is used in a kind of technical sense in the gospels. It likely reflects the Pharisees' characterization of those with whom they disagreed and who they considered unclean. Jesus welcoming "sinners", then, is not simply a blanket acceptance of everyone no matter what kind of bad things they had done. It was a matter of him purposely denying the cultural exclusiveness of the Pharisaic emphasis on "works of the law". Jesus is emphasizing that God's mercy welcomes *all* who genuinely trust in it, regardless of their ritual purity [Dunn, *Jesus*, 79-80; Michael J. Wilkins, "Sinner," in J. B. Green and S. McKnight, eds. *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 759-60].

[27]Dunn, *Partings*, 110-1.

boundaries set by the law, and he suffered justifiably violent consequences. What Paul came to believe, though, after his Damascus road experience, was that, in fact, God affirms the one the so-called law cursed.[28] What Jesus brought to the surface was sacred violence, thereby revealing that the law as Paul had understood it was not God's actual law. Paul had focused on "works of the law", and this led him to commit acts of violence. He had failed to see the law as serving God's mercy, making it serve cultural exclusivism instead.

Paul himself had joined with the forces who put Jesus to death. By challenging exclusiveness and boasting, Jesus had laid bare the reality that a system so characterized was based on violence. And when such a system is challenged, the underlying violence becomes explicit and overt. In Jesus' case, this violence contributed to his death.

The sacred violence inherent in the law understood primarily in terms of cultural exclusivism is revealed in the murder of Jesus, the one who Paul came to see as actually a genuine upholder of God's true law—the law of love. After Paul came to know Jesus and his way as, in fact, the revelation of the true God, he came to see that the death of Jesus uncovers the violence of the way of trusting in works of the law, the violence of cultural exclusivism. For Paul, Jesus' death also points toward life. Jesus' death, followed by his resurrection, ultimately effects salvation by making God's mercy more apparent and the Spirit more accessible.

In light of the life Jesus witnesses to, Paul asserts that the genuine law is the love of love, living freely in light of God's mercy and showing that mercy toward others (Rom 13:8-10). This love is modeled after the very heart of God. For Paul, then, Jesus' death both reveals the sacred violence of trust in "works of the law" and cultural exclusivism, and it points the way to life free from that violence in which the God-given blessings of appropriate law-observance may be experienced.[29]

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[28]Dunn, *Partings*, 123.

[29]Paul's harsh criticism of trust in "works of the law" and the violence that he sees to follow from such trust must not be interpreted as a blanket rejection of the law or of Judaism. One of history's greatest tragedies is how Paul's words were interpreted in ways that supported the evils he was trying to counter—sacred violence in the name of cultural exclusivity (in this case, Christians doing violence to Jews—the mirror of what he had done as a "zealot"). A legitimate Christian appropriation of Paul's critique of trust in "works of the law" would lead to a critique of *Christian* versions of such idolatrous trust, not to a Christian critique of Judaism and certainly not to sacred violence against Jews.

Krister Stendahl [*Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977)] and E. P. Sanders [*Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977) and *Paul, the Law and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984)], followed now by many others, have persuasively made the case that Paul

## Jesus' death and the powers that be (Revelation)

Jesus' way as a critique of the Empire is one of the central themes in the Book of Revelation. Revelation, especially in chapter thirteen, presents an image of the Roman empire as a demonic Beast.[30] John, the author of Revelation, expressed such antipathy because of the Roman demand that people render to Caesar and to the state that which belongs to God alone. Such demands compelled the early church to resist the empire, even to the point of death.

Another image John uses of Rome is "Babylon." John's Babylon also represents political authoritarianism. First-century Jews and Christians used Babylon as a prophetic name for Rome. Both Babylon and Rome had destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple.[31]

John seeks to encourage Christians to faithfulness in face of political authoritarianism. He argues that the Lamb that was slain is the one who genuinely is powerful and reveals God's ways with the world. Jesus' death is crucial for John's case, crucial for John's critique of the empire, crucial for John's words of encouragement, in several ways.

(1) Jesus' death brings to the surface the actual nature of the Beast. John's revelation strips off the mask of benevolence and reveals, beneath it, the true spirit of Rome. He sees a grotesque and monstrous deformity bent on supplanting God (Rev 13). He sees a harlot seated on Rome's seven hills who seduces kings of the earth (17:1-18).[32]

The empire, ultimately, is violent. The empire is the force that nailed Jesus to the Cross (16:4-7; 18:24). John presents evil, not as the threat of anarchy, but as the system of order. This system of order institutionalizes violence as the foundation of its way of being. Jesus was a threat to order, so he was eliminated. The new insight here is that order is not the

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was *not* a "Lutheran" posing a mutually exclusive contrast between law and grace. I have tried in the above discussion to be precise in focusing on "works of the law" as Paul's concern and not Judaism as a religion. Paul always saw himself as a Jew, and he affirmed his Jewish tradition. So, I agree with Jewish scholars such as Daniel Boyarin ["Was Paul an 'Anti-Semite'? A Reading of Galatians 3–4" *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 47 (1993): 47-80] and Alan Segal [*Paul, The Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990] who argue that Paul was not anti-Judaism, even if a few times he makes intemperate remarks which could be so construed.

[30]Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 83-7; M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989), 155-7; G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 160-77.

[31]Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation*, 89.

[32]Wink, *Engaging*, 89-90.

opposite of chaos. Instead, the empire's order is the means by which a system of chaos among the nations is maintained. Empire is not, then, the bulwark against disorder. Empire actually is disorder epitomized.[33]

(2) Jesus' death also serves John's purposes by pointing to a way to break free from the spiral of violence. In response to the Beast's violence in chapter 13, John calls upon the "relentless persistence and fidelity of the saints" (13:10).[34] The only way to opt out of the dynamic of an eye taking an eye taking an eye is to refuse to retaliate. What this relentless persistence means for John is non-retaliation, even in the face of death. Retaliation inevitably adds to the spiral of violence and ultimately adds to the power of the demonic.

The point is to be convinced that one's identity as a child of God has to do with living with relentless persistence in the ways of love. For Jesus, and his followers, living consistently with this identity provides power to accept even the utmost suffering. Such living breaks the spiral of violence.

(3) Jesus' death also engenders encouragement because, with it, God's loving involvement with human beings was not destroyed. In Revelation, John uses various images to symbolize that the Lamb who was slain lives. God in Christ conquered death through resurrection. Death lost its sting; the relentless persistence of Jesus in the ways of peace was vindicated. To support this understanding of John's argument, I want to look at two texts: 5:1-12 and 19:11-20.[35]

Chapter five is the key to the entire book. We hear of a scroll, perhaps a legal document relating to the destiny of humankind. The content of the scroll reveals God's redemptive intentions for the creation.[36] However, at first, the scroll cannot be opened. "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" (5:2). No one. So John "wept much" (5:4). Presumably, without the scroll being broken, the promised healing will remain ineffectual. The spiral of violence will remain intact.[37]

One of the elders present, however, tells John not to weep. Someone has been found. "The Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered" (5:5). What John hears—the traditional Old Testament expectation of military deliverance—is reinterpreted in 5:6 by what he sees—Jesus' death. He sees a "Lamb" who bears the marks of slaughter,

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[33]Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 90-1.

[34]Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 92.

[35]For a fuller discussion see, on 5:1-12: Ted Grimsrud, *Triumph of the Lamb: A Self-Study Guide to the Book of Revelation* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1987), 49-59; on 19:11-20: Grimsrud, *Triumph*, 149-50; and Grimsrud, "Peace Theology and the Justice of God in the Book of Revelation," in the present book, 181-4.

[36]Caird, *Revelation*, 72.

[37]Gerhard A. Krodel, *Revelation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1989), 162-3.

explained by the heavenly choir later: With his lifeblood he has set free "for God people from every tribe." The Lamb symbolizes suffering and redemptive love.[38] And the Lamb is "standing," an image of resurrection.

The lamb's death is not weakness and defeat, but power and victory. God's power and victory lay in suffering love (in contrast with Satan, whose Beast looks like a lamb but speaks like a dragon, 13:11). The Lamb, through his death, is called "conqueror." The Lamb conquers (3:21; 5:5; 17:14), as do faithful Christians (2:7,11,17,26; 3:5,12,21; 12:11; 15:2; 21:7), through relentless persistence to the point of death. "Conquering" happens through suffering love, not destruction of enemies. John sees Jesus' death as powerful even over against the empire.

Many of the visions of Revelation picture the fall of the great Powers, of the Beast, of Babylon the great, due to the effects of the death of Jesus. One vision, 19:11-20, begins with Jesus riding a white horse (19:11), that symbolizes victory. He comes to this apparent battle scene as the one who has already conquered sin, death, and evil through his death and resurrection. As the following verses make clear, he comes to this apparent battle with the forces of the Beast already the victor.

The rider is called "Faithful and True," like "the faithful and true witness" of earlier in the book (1:5; 3:14). He remained faithful and true even when it meant death. That is how he gained the white horse.[39] We see a key image in 19:13. The rider approaches this battle "clad in a robe dipped in blood" shed before the battle begins. This alludes to Jesus' blood in his death, and is why no battle takes place here. Jesus can already ride the white horse. The actual battle is over. Jesus won it through his death. He faced the violence of political authoritarianism and refused to retaliate, remaining faithful to the God who loves enemies.[40]

The Beast and the kings and armies are all ready for battle (19:19). They genuinely are deceived to think that one will occur. However, the battle is past. Jesus simply captures the Beast and false prophet and throws them into the fiery lake (19:20). There is no battle.

The judgment of the Beast, of Babylon, has a great deal to do simply with the revelation of their true nature. They are not servants of God, worthy of reverence and blind obedience. In his portrayal of this judgment, John helps his readers to see political authoritarianism for what it is. This picture reveals that the "order" of our seemingly all-powerful political structures may well have about it a strong element of the demonic. The "order" of Babylon is actually chaos. It is the power of chaos, not authentic peace, that puts to death one such as Jesus. This

[38]Caird, *Revelation*, 74.
[39]Caird, *Revelation*, 240.
[40]Boring, *Revelation*, 196.

revelation can help those with eyes to see to discern that Caesar does not have the sovereignty he claims. John points out the Beast's role in Jesus' death. He pictures this type of violent response to God's messengers of peace as endemic in the ways of the Beast, a reminder to remain wary of all claims that the Beast might be changing its spots.

John's visions also encourage his readers not to accept the Beast's definition of reality. Revelation thirteen talks about a second Beast, the first Beast's false prophet, an ancient allusion to what we today call propaganda.[41] The basic idea is that the legitimacy of the Beast depends upon the masses believing in it. If we see what happened to Jesus as typical of the ways of Beast, we will grow a great deal in our skepticism toward the propaganda we are fed. As Walter Wink writes:

> When anyone steps out of the system and tells the truth, lives the truth, that person enables everyone else to peer behind the curtain too. That person has shown everyone that it is possible to live within the truth, despite the repercussions. Living within the lie can constitute the system only if it is universal. Anyone who steps out of line therefore denies it in principle and threatens it in its entirety.[42]

John's visions challenge his readers to be aware of where they are getting the material that shapes their view of reality, and to open their imaginations to the way of the Lamb—and to let the Lamb's way help them find freedom from accepting too easily and non-critically the ways of the powers-that-be.[43]

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[41]Wink, *Engaging*, 93.

[42]Wink, *Engaging*, 98.

[43]Tina Pippin, *Death and Desire: The Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse* (Louisville: Westminster/ John Knox Press, 1992), utilizing Girardian categories, recognizes Revelation's critique of Roman power politics. However, she argues, Revelation retains a scapegoat mechanism, transferring if "from the Lamb to the symbols of oppression (beasts and the dragon) and to the women who have seductive power (Jezebel, the Woman Clothed with the Sun, and the Whore—and the unnamed women who are excluded from the New Jerusalem)," (84).

While I am sympathetic with Pippins political commitments, I do not agree with her interpretation of Revelation. I believe John's enemies in the text are not literal people so much as the spiritual forces of evil. John is opposed to the ways these powers enslave even the kings of the earth. The war he envisions does not result in the obliteration of the kings of the earth, but results in their conversion (Rev 21:24). Pippin dismisses Revelation as hopelessly misogynist (91-2).

On the other hand, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza recognizes that it is possible to interpret Revelation in a way that, while recognizing its embeddedness in a

The death of Jesus, as understood by John, engenders resistance to the Beast when it surfaces the Beast's violence. Hence, this violence becomes visible for those with eyes to see. Such sight undercuts the Beast's claim to be the people's "benefactor." Jesus' way of facing death also provides encouragement by pointing to the power of relentless persistence. Trust in that kind of power is the key to breaking the spiral of violence.

## Conclusion

All three areas of concern that I have discussed—the Temple, the law, and the empire—point to two different aspects of understanding Jesus' death that have relevance to our questions regarding the spiral of violence in the world.

The first is that Jesus' death exposes the tendencies of these three powers (religious institutions, cultural ordering systems, and political structures) toward fueling the spiral of violence. The Temple (or church or mosque or synagogue) asks at times for loyalty that values the survival of the institution above the well-being of human beings. The law (or churchly mores or the middle-class American way) asks at times for loyalty that excludes outsiders; even blames or scapegoats outsiders as the cause of the culture's problems and as legitimate recipients of "sacred violence." The empire (or all other states, including democratic ones) asks at times for loyalty that buttresses power politics and treats with violence any who threaten the status quo's peace and tranquility.

Jesus bumped up against all three areas of social life. He brought to the surface their wrath, their intolerance of people who resist their demand for highest loyalty. In other words, Jesus—by acting deeply in harmony with God's will for peace and compassion for all people—brought out deep-seated violence in the major structures of his society.

Jesus' fate helps those with eyes to see perceive how these structures work. His fate reveals that the emperor has no clothes. So much of the power of these structures is primarily the power of belief, of trust. If people trust in the supremacy of religious institutions, of cultural systems, or of empires, they provide the bases of much of the power these structures have. But Jesus' fate—for those who believe he embodies God's will for human beings—reveals these structures to be unworthy of such trust. These structures did violence to Jesus, the Son of God. When people no longer give supreme trust to these structures, one of the main elements of the spiral of violence will be broken.

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first-century patriarchal worldview, also allows the modern-day interpreter to benefit from Revelation's underlying liberationist perspective (*Revelation*, 12-5).

The thinking might go like this: The Roman state nailed Jesus to the cross. I realize now that most states do that kind of thing, so maybe I'll no longer let my state tell me to kill for its sake. Or: The strictest defenders of the religious institutions sought for ways to kill Jesus because he was, to them, a heretic—I realize now that most religious institutions are capable of focusing on ideology and survival at all costs, and willing to scapegoat and sacrifice so-called heretics. So maybe I'll no longer let a religious institution define my enemies, or assert heresy.

As well as exposing violence, Jesus' death also points toward life. Jesus modeled a life lived in the power of the Spirit right up to the bitter end. The powers of death did not conquer him because he chose not to respond with an eye for an eye, he chose to live (and die) free from the spiral of violence.

In Matthew's account, when Peter fought back and cut off a soldier's ear in Gethsemane, Jesus ordered him to sheathe his sword. "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?" (Mt 26:52-53).

In effect, this was the temptation Satan gave Jesus in the wilderness back at the beginning. Exert your force and make things work out right. But that would only add more violence to the spiral. Jesus' life in the Spirit throughout, witnesses to the possibilities of not adding to the spiral. That life was vindicated when God raised Jesus from the dead. Jesus shows that the power of the Spirit of life remains vital despite the all-out assault of the powers of death.

# 7. Atonement and discipleship in the synoptic gospels

*[This previously unpublished paper was written in May 1981]*

The inter-relationship between the atonement of Jesus and our discipleship is a subject much in need of exploration. Some work has been done in the area, but little has trickled down to the consciousness of the average conservative Protestant in the United States. A major reason for that is the stranglehold that the substitutionary view of the atonement has on most of these people. In some ways, it's kind of a "chicken and egg" question to ask which came first, the substitutionary atonement view that is unable to make sense of discipleship language used in connection with Jesus' death or the subtle need Christians have to avoid allowing Jesus' cross-life to be normative for our lives. Regardless, it seems that we have been blind to a major aspect of the biblical witness.

As I have studied the Bible more without the old blinders that kept me from asking hard questions about what Jesus' life and death mean for mine, I have reason to question the views of conservative Protestantism on the relationship (or better, lack of relationship) between the atonement and discipleship. One particularly enlightening study I did was of Paul's "principality and powers" language. I came to see that Jesus' death had more to do with conquering sin and the powers of evil than it did with changing God's anger to love.

With that awareness, I decided to test another strata of New Testament literature, the synoptic gospels, to see what they tell us. In my research, I discovered that the atonement in the synoptics is a complex topic, and that little has been done in addressing the issues I was concerned with. But I did get some help and was able to piece together enough evidence to get an idea that the atonement and discipleship are closely inter-related in the synoptics.

What I present is not a summary of everything that can be discerned regarding the atonement in the synoptics. Rather, I simply want to discuss some of the ways in which the atonement and discipleship seem to be inter-related. I am trying to look at the synoptics on their own terms

without reading what Paul might have thought back into them. Certainly, to gain a balanced picture of what a Christian understanding for today should be, we would also have to consider Hebrews, John, and the rest of the New Testament. But to build a foundation from the New Testament, we need to start with each stone separately. And that means first looking at them on their own terms.

## Old Testament background

Before we specifically deal with the synoptics, we need to spend a little time looking at the Old Testament background to what happens in the death of Jesus, specifically the concepts of atonement and Passover (I will also discuss the idea of the "suffering servant" a little later).

Markus Barth sees a three-fold development in the meaning of the Passover celebration. First, it became for Israel the occasion of a solemn "recital" of Israel's history of redemption from Egypt, that is, Israel's privilege as God's redeemed first-born (Ex 12:1–13:16). The next step in development seems to be reached when the Passover serves as a symbol of true religion and observance of the law. Finally, the festival receives a democratized and spiritualized value as promise, token, and celebration of universal liberty to be enjoyed by all humankind.[1]

God wills that this ceremony take place as a reminder and revelation of Israel's election, protection, liberation (Ex 12:13,17,23). This sacrifice, according to Barth, does not change or influence God's decision. Rather, it is how God reminds Israel of God's grace.[2] The Passover teaches that sacrifice was not an end in itself but a means to an end. The exodus of Israel as God's first-born child is proclaimed and celebrated by this sacrifice. The festival meal, held in the community of the whole "holy assembly" or of the houses of families, was not only inseparable, but became the main feature of the great day. The purpose of the sacrifice is the life, freedom, joy, and peace of God's people—of a people that serves God by remembering God's great deeds (Ex 12–15; Pss 105–107).[3]

So the focus of the Passover ceremony was remembrance of Yahweh's acts to redeem Israel from slavery and oppression. The intention of the sacrifice is not to earn God's favor or sate God's anger. It is rather a means of remembering God's grace and submitting to it.

The Passover also developed eschatological connotations. Even in the Old Testament, the Passover and the salvation it brought were seen as a

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[1] Markus Barth, *Was Christ's Death a Sacrifice?* (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1961), 19.

[2] Barth, *Was?*, 19.

[3] Barth, *Was?*, 20-1.

prefiguration on the last things and final salvation. The future salvific event came to be looked on more and more definitively as eschatological and was described as a new Passover. It was to be the new intervention of God to protect and save (Isa 31:5; cf. 30:29) and above all a new exodus (e.g., Isa 35:1-10; 43:16-21; cf. Hos 2:16f), at which Yahweh's struggle with the mythic powers of chaos was to be finally decided (cf. Isa 21:1; 51:9f.; Pss 74:12ff.; 89:10f.).[4]

According to Robert Daly, the concept of atonement that is central to the Old Testament can be described as the process whereby the creature-Creator relationship, after having been disturbed (by the creature), is restored by the Creator to its proper harmony.[5] "The ultimate goal of the atonement sacrifices was that of rendering both objects and persons eligible to take part in Israel's public life of worship."[6] Daly sees the process of atonement as having a two-fold function:

> The positive function of making persons or objects "acceptable" to Yahweh, of preserving them in this condition, of making them eligible to participate in Israel's religious life and sacrificial cult; and the negative, apotrophic function of interpreting or averting the course of evil set in motion by sin or transgression, whether knowing or unknowing (cf. Lev 10:6; Num 1:53; 17:11; 18:5).[7]

In Leviticus 16, Barth points out, God himself creates and provides expiation of sins. The multiplicity of those ritual acts that belong to the Day of Atonement should be explained as meaningful details of one great judicial act by which God himself declares, grants, and shows "release," i.e., atonement or forgiveness.[8] God's "free grace" is the source and means of atonement. God stands behind the priests' making of the atonement. Initiative and effective will, power, and result lie only and entirely with God. The high-priest makes all his careful preparations to enter behind the veil not in order that God appear over the mercy seat, but because God has promised to appear there (Lev 16:2).[9]

According to Barth, Leviticus 16 teaches us to think of sacrifice in such a way that its mystery is the atonement that God himself makes, that its form is the intercession of a faithful servant and the contrition of the

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[4] Notker Fuglister, "Passover," in *Sacramentum Mundi*, vol. 4 (London: Herder and Herder, 1969), 356 [352-357].

[5] Robert Daly, *The Origins of the Christian Doctrine of Sacrifice* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1978), 25.

[6] Daly, *Origins*, 31.

[7] Daly, *Origins*, 27.

[8] Barth, *Was?*, 21.

[9] Barth, *Was?*, 21.

people, and that its time and place are only that Day and sanctuary that God has chosen for granting mercy to all.[10]

The main images in the Old Testament concepts of Passover and atonement, it appears, are those of God being the agent effecting reconciliation rather than God being the object. The picture seems to be one of God reaching out toward humanity and being the one that provides the means of reconciliation to take place. The main goals are a reestablishment of a right relationship and deliverance from slavery.

## Judaism at the time of Jesus

At the time of Jesus, according to Joachim Jeremias, the Jewish Passover celebration was both a looking back to remember the merciful immunity granted to the houses marked with the blood of the paschal lamb and the deliverance from the Egyptian bondage, as well as being a looking forward to the coming deliverance of which the deliverance from Egypt is the prototype.[11] So the Passover also had political overtones, and was in fact the occasion for numerous short-lived Jewish revolts against Roman rule through the years.

Jews of Jesus' time affirmed four means of atonement: (1) repentance (which atones for sins of omission); (2) the sacrifice of the Day of Atonement (repentance and sacrifice atone for the transgression of a prohibition); (3) suffering (repentance and sacrifice and suffering atone for a transgression which merits destruction at God's hand); and (4) death (repentance and sacrifice and suffering are together necessary for atonement when a man has profaned the name of God).[12]

Others benefited from the death of a righteous person. The death of innocent children atoned for the sins of their parents. The death of a high priest meant that those who had killed might leave the cities of refuge; their guilt had been atoned for. Yet greater atoning power was attributed to the death of a witness to the faith. Hellenistic Judaism praises martyrdom, as it brings God's wrath upon Israel to a standstill and is a substitute, a means of cleansing, a means of atonement for Israel.[13]

It would be wrong simply to equate the New Testament's view of Jesus' death with other contemporary Jewish beliefs. However, it is helpful to see what ideas were prevalent at the time. The tying together

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[10] Barth, *Was?*, 25.

[11] Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1966), 206.

[12] Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*, volume 1 (London: SCM Press, 1971), 287.

[13] Jeremias, *New*, 287-8.

of the Passover and its eschatological implications of final deliverance with Jesus' passion indicates that the gospel writers saw a connection. One connection would be the emphasis placed upon the redemptive nature of Jesus' death in freeing his followers from slavery to sin.

We may read too much into the evidence to make a connection between the expectation of political revolution that Jeremias sees being tied in with the Passover celebration on the part of at least some Jews and the possibility that Jesus represented a new political strategy. But this should be noted as something worth looking into more.

That his followers, being good Jews, would see Jesus' death as having atoning significance seems obvious. He was innocent and righteous, and surely in their eyes, a martyr. An interesting implication that could be drawn from Jeremias's reconstruction of the Jewish concept of atonement is that others besides Jesus could make atonement for people besides themselves. If that is the case, then Jesus' death loses some of its uniqueness and becomes something that can, to a large degree, be imitated by his followers. More about that later.

## Jesus' life as the suffering servant

One of the central motifs that applies to the life of Jesus is that of the *ebed Yahweh*, the servant of God, the suffering servant. Oscar Cullmann sees the meaning of salvation history tied up with this concept.

> The main thought behind *ebed Yahweh*, vicarious representation, is the principle by which the New Testament understands the whole course of *Heilsgeschichte*. We cannot understand the New Testament's view of history beginning with creation itself without the thought of the representation of the many by a minority, progressing to the representation by the One. The figure of the suffering servant of God is the exemplary embodiment of this idea or representation. The "Servant of God" is one of the oldest titles used by the first Christians to define their faith in the person and work of Jesus.[14]

The suffering servant is described in 2 Isaiah. The most important characteristic of the suffering servant is that his vicarious representation is accomplished in suffering. The servant is the suffering servant of God. Through suffering he takes the place of the many who should suffer instead of him. Another characteristic is that the servant's representative work reestablishes the covenant that God made with his people.[15]

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[14] Oscar Cullmann, *Christology in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), 51.

[15] Cullmann, *Christology*, 55.

That Jesus' whole ministry is seen in this framework is clear in each synoptic gospel. All three start their accounts of Jesus' ministry with the description of his baptism by John and the words from God: "This is my beloved son; with him am I well pleased" (Mk 1; Mt 3; Lk 3). This saying is a quotation from Isaiah 42:1. There these words are addressed to the *ebed Yahweh*; indeed they are the introduction to the *ebed Yahweh* hymns. According to Cullmann, "the voice from heaven so understood thus comes to Jesus as a summons to accept the task of the one who is addressed in the same way at the beginning of the *ebed Yahweh* hymns in Isaiah 42:1. Jesus therefore became conscious at the moment of his baptism that he had to take upon himself the *ebed Yahweh* role."[16]

Another example of a direct connection is seen in Matthew's quoting of Isaiah 53 in connection with Jesus' healing of Peter's mother-in-law: "He took our infirmities and bore our diseases" (Mt 8:17). This quote is not intended in an anticipatory sense but already, by virtue of his origin and the spiritual service of sacrifice he carries out—love and deeds of mercy—Jesus has the authority to forgive sins.[17]

The idea of the servant of God is also present in Mark 10:45. That he would give up his life, die "for many," echoes Isaiah 53:10-12: "He makes himself an offering for sin;…he shall bear their iniquities;…he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors."

Robert Daly points out that Jesus repeatedly emphasized the free and voluntary character of his death as an act of self-giving, not himself as the victim. That Jesus did this is shown when "body" is seen in the sense of concrete living person as in Romans 12:1. In Jesus' case, him being seen as the Servant of God in vicarious martyrdom links him with Isaiah 53.[18]

But it was more than Jesus' death that characterized his obedience to his call as the servant of God, it was his whole life and ministry. "Christ was exactly what God meant man to be; man in free communion with God, obeying God, and loving humankind with God's love."[19] Jesus' life and his death were inseparably tied together. As Jeremias points out regarding how he would have been perceived by committed Jews:

> The external course of his ministry must have compelled Jesus to reckon with the possibility of a violent death. The charge against him that he cast out

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[16] Cullmann, *Christology*, 66.

[17] Birger Gerhardsson, "Sacrificial service and atonement in the Gospel of Matthew," in Robert J. Banks, ed., *Reconciliation and Hope* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 31 [25-35].

[18] Daly, *Origins*, 57.

[19] John Howard Yoder, "A study in the work of Christ" (unpublished paper, 1954), 9.

> demons with the help of Beelzebub (Mt 12:24) meant that he was thought to practice magic and merit stoning. The accusations that he blasphemed God (Mk 2:7), was a false prophet (Mk 14:65), was a rebellious son (Mt 11:19; cf. Dt 21:20f.), and that he deliberately broke the Sabbath, all cite misdemeanors that were punishable by death [by stoning].[20]

Mark 8:31 makes it clear that the rejection of the Son of Man is no accident, but a conscious, deliberate "No" to him. God's holiness is such a contrast to the way of the world that his suffering becomes inevitable.[21] Jesus lived his life of servanthood in such a way that it was inevitable that he be done away with, given the contrast and threat that his righteous life was to the established order. He saw himself in continuity with the prophets who were martyred because of their messages and lives. Jesus regarded martyrdom in Jerusalem as part of the prophetic office (Lk 13:33).[22] It was because of his obedience to this calling that Jesus was able to conquer sin and death with his death on behalf of the many.

## Jesus as model

The motif in the synoptics that is most important to my topic is that Jesus clearly and repeatedly calls upon his followers to follow his path of suffering, even death. This element does not seem to be emphasized enough in most discussions of the atonement considering how central it is in the Gospel witnesses. This is perhaps seen most clearly in Matthew's gospel. Eduard Schweizer points out that in Matthew,

> The passion is depicted as the way of the righteous sufferer; not only does it direct the way Jesus' disciples are to go, it also makes it possible for them to follow him (cf. 26:42, 52-54; 27:43). The passion narrative, and with it the Gospel, concludes with the enthronement of Jesus as Lord of the universe and his commission to his disciples to call all peoples to obedience to the commandments of Jesus (28:18-20).[23]

The commission of the disciples by Jesus at the end of Matthew must be connected with passages such as 16:21-8 and 20:20-8. In both instances Jesus explicitly connects his way of suffering and even death with discipleship.

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[20] Jeremias, *New*, 278.

[21] Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Mark* (Lousiville, KY: John Knox Press, 1970), 174.

[22] Jeremias, *New*, 280.

[23] Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Matthew* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1975), 39.

The Jesus in Matthew stresses forcefully that every true follower must be prepared to make even the utmost sacrifice, which is giving one's life for Jesus' sake. The spiritual service of sacrifice must continue, even in its most extreme form. The predictions of the Son of Man's suffering, death, and resurrection especially bring this out. As Gerhardsson emphasizes,

> Throughout the synoptic tradition, predictions of the Son of Man's rejection and violent death are connected with instructions to his followers to humble themselves and serve. The bearing of the cross in imitation of Christ is part of the lot the disciples have to take upon themselves.[24]

In Matthew 16, Peter confesses that Jesus is the Christ, after which Jesus speaks of his death. When Peter rebukes him, Jesus responds by saying that it is not only Jesus who must suffer. "If any person would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Mt 16:24-25).

In 20:20-28 Jesus responds to the request of the mother of the sons of Zebedee that her sons sit at Jesus' side in the Kingdom by telling his disciples that they care called to be servants of others, in the same way as the Son of Man, who "came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." As Schweizer writes, regarding Mark's parallel account, these verses explain Jesus' suffering,

> But not in a way which makes it possible to take note of it or preach it in a purely intellectual manner. The explanation makes it possible to believe only if one pursues the life of a disciple in the kind of discipleship described in Mark 10:42-44.[25]

Jesus' messianic suffering was in some ways unique to him. But, as Vincent Taylor points out, "he nonetheless regarded it as a redemptive activity which, in their own measure, people were to reproduce in their own lives."[26] Jesus' obedience is rendered, not instead of ours, but rather so that we, in turn, might obey. In that sense, it is in continuity with what we've already seen about the Old Testament idea of atonement.

In Schweizer's view, Matthew pictures Jesus' life and death more in terms of him as a "pioneer" than as an "atoning sacrifice." One motif that he uses to support that idea is that "Matthew looks upon the death of

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[24] Gerhardsson, "Sacrificial," 39.

[25] Schweizer, *Mark*, 223.

[26] Vincent Taylor, *The Atonement in New Testament Teaching* (London: Epworth, 1945), 15.

Jesus as the basis for forgiveness of sins, albeit in such a way that the forgiveness is exercised by the community (18:8 as well as 9:8) and that only the man who forgives others can receive forgiveness (cf. 6:14-15 and 18:35)."[27] The point would not be that Jesus is more pioneer than atonement, but rather that in him the two are united. Jesus shows us the way, and by his death and resurrection conquers sin so that we are enabled to follow that way.

## The meaning of crucifixion

The kind of death Jesus died seems to have significance for the shape of his followers' discipleship, though this is not emphasized much. But if believers are called upon to take on the cross, then it would help us to look briefly at what the literal cross that Jesus took up might have meant.

Crucifixion was viewed with repulsion in the ancient world. Evidence of this is the lack of reference to it in the mythical tradition despite its common use throughout the Greek and Hebrew world.[28] Martin Hengel points out that "because of its harshness, crucifixion was almost always inflicted only on the lower classes; the upper class could reckon with more 'humane' punishment. Here we have a real case of 'class justice'."[29]

In Rome, as in surrounding countries, crucifixion was the punishment for serious crimes against the state. It was religious-political punishment, with the emphasis on the political—though of course the two cannot be separated. Crucifixion was also used as part of waging war, as a means of wearing down rebellious besieged cities, of breaking the will of conquered peoples, and of bringing unruly provinces under control.[30]

Given the general reasons for crucifixion, it seems likely in Jesus' case it was used because he was considered to be a part of the Jewish general restlessness under Roman control, perhaps even a violent revolutionary. So, it would seem that his life was "political" enough so that he was considered a threat. Perhaps we can draw the conclusion that one aspect of the cross that believers are called to follow is that of being perceived as a threat to the established order.

Also, significantly, in Rome perhaps more so than in other nations, crucifixion was seen as typical punishment for slaves.[31] It was either slaves, who on the whole had no rights, or dangerous criminals, who had been outlawed by society (this would include revolutionaries), who were

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[27] Schweizer, *Matthew*, 491.
[28] Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1977), 14.
[29] Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 34-5.
[30] Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 46.
[31] Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 51.

crucified. That is, it was people whose development had to be suppressed by all possible means in order to safeguard law and order in the state.[32]

Hengel points out that relatively few attempts at criticism or even at a philosophical development of the theme of the boundless suffering of countless victims of crucifixion can be found. "In this context, the earliest Christian message of the crucified Messiah demonstrated the 'solidarity' of the love of God with the unspeakable suffering of those who were tortured and put to death by human cruelty."[33]

In the person and fate of the one man Jesus of Nazareth this saving "solidarity" of God with us is given its historical and physical form. In him, the "Son of God," God himself took up the existence of a slave and died the "slave's" death on the tree of martyrdom (Phil 2:8), given up to public shame (Heb 12:2) and the "curse of the law" (Gal 3:13), so that in the "death of God" life might win victory over death.[34] So Jesus died the way he lived, in solidarity with, in identification with those whose existence seems most to deny the existence of a loving God—the outcasts, the sick, the poor, the slaves, the crucified ones. To follow him as he calls his followers to do can only mean to share that same life and death.

## The resurrection

The resurrection is in some ways outside the concern of this paper, but my discussion would not be complete without at least a brief mention of it. In many ways resurrection is not directly connected with the life of Jesus as presented in the synoptics, though he is recorded as anticipating it. Jesus' death was the result of his life, not merely something that had to happen so he could be resurrected. But at the same time, his resurrection vindicates his life and death.

As John Howard Yoder writes:

> The resurrection proves that, even when man does his worst, turns the farthest from God's communion, so far as to kill God, he cannot destroy God's love. Man has done his worst, and the love of God is still stronger; it withstands the assault of sin without canceling the sinner's freedom, and still comes out on top. This triumph of communion-sacrifice-obedience-agape, over man's rebellion at its worst now stands before man as an object of faith (faith-union, not faith assent). He can identify himself with that obedience which has swallowed up his rebellion in victory.[35]

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[32] Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 88.
[33] Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 88.
[34] Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 88-9.
[35] Yoder, "Study," 10.

Jesus conquered sin by submitting to it even to the point of dying on the cross, but then defeating it with the resurrection from the dead. The resurrection, then, is what directly connects Jesus' death with our lives. Because of it, we can follow with assurance of victory the path that Jesus walked; we can, as he commands us, take up the cross.

## Conclusion

Given the Old Testament context and Jewish ideas of the Passover ceremony being primarily a time to celebrate and anticipate God's redemptive work for Israel, it seems justifiable to see the concept of redemption rather than substitutionary sacrifice to lie behind the placing of Jesus' passion during the Passover celebration. And one of the central ideas in redemption is that of being freed from bondage in order freely to serve God. The liberation and service themes are inextricably united in biblical thought. Therefore, atonement (i.e., reconciliation through redemption) is tied closely up with discipleship (i.e., service).

Christ's life of suffering servanthood is as central to the picture of his work as is his death, resurrection, incarnation, or ascension. It was essential that he live a life of obedience to the Father's will. This is true for the follower of Jesus also. Our lives of discipleship are an essential part of our salvation.

That the idea of our serving God is to be seen as being closely related to Christ's death is especially born out in the close connection in the synoptics between Jesus calling for obedience and imitation and his discussion of his death and suffering. Jesus pictures that suffering and death as being the model that his followers are to imitate. Clearly then, appreciation of that command is part of the atonement process—it is not simply objective and outside-of-us.

The type of death that Jesus died—crucifixion—is in continuity with the type of life that he lived. It shows his solidarity with the despised, outcast, "godless" ones in the same way that his life of service to the "lost sheep" did. This "solidarity" is part of the definition of the cross that Jesus took up and that he calls upon his followers to take up.

Jesus' resurrection vindicates the kind of life that he lived as being what God willed and as being part of the process of effecting redemption. The resurrection establishes that sin indeed is conquered by Jesus' nonresistant, overpowering love. The resurrection also assures disciples that their cross-life is not in vain but is also part of the destruction of sin and death.

# 8. Jesus' confrontation with empire

*[This essay was first published in Nathan E. Yoder and Carol A. Scheppard, eds.,* Exiles in the Empire: Believers Church Perspectives on Politics *(Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora Press, 2006), 27-41.]*

At the core of the believers church ideal, as I understand it, lies an unequivocal commitment to follow Jesus Christ. What might we learn from Jesus' own confrontation with empire that might speak to ours? James McClendon, in his discussion of the believers church ideal—what he called the (small-b) baptist vision—identifies a key element as the sense of close connection between the present-day believer and the biblical narrative. We are part of the same story; what happened then is still going on now; "this is that."[1]

I will reflect on the story of Jesus as part of the broader biblical story with the assumption that our story is part of the same story. What the Bible tells us about people of faith and the great powers has great relevance for our lives. Though I will, except for a few points at the end, focus on the biblical story, I want to be clear that I consider Jesus' confrontation with empire as directly relevant for North American residents of our world's one great empire.

This is a big issue for U.S. Christians. We have much to appreciate in this country—religious freedom not least. However, many of our nation's practices resemble all too closely the imperialism of the biblical empires. It is as if we have two Americas, America the pioneer democracy and America the dominant empire.[2] I believe that attention to the Bible's empires can help us as we discern how we respond to the latter America.

First, I will make the point, obvious once we notice it but rarely part of how we actually read the Bible, that the entire Bible, including most

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[1] James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Systematic Theology, Volume Two: Doctrine* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 44-5.

[2] For more reflections from a believers church perspective on this idea of the "two Americas" see Ted Grimsrud, "Anabaptist Faith and American Democracy," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 78.3 (July 2004), 341-62.

definitely the four gospels but actually ranging all the way from the Genesis creation story (written, at least according to some, to counter Babylonian influences during the sixth century BCE) to the final vision of God's saving work in the Book of Revelation (written, most scholars agree, to counter Roman influences in the late first century CE), reflects the setting of God's people amidst the various empires, or great powers, of the biblical world—from Egypt and Babylon down to Rome.

Jesus' confrontation with the empire of his day must be seen in the broader context of the biblical community's confrontation with various empires. Some of the elements of our present believers church ideal echo key elements of the biblical story: (1) a commitment to sustain a faith community that seeks to maintain a free space over against the domination of empire; (2) a conviction that this faith community has the vocation to witness to the surrounding world of God's healing love and against the violence and oppression of empires; and (3) a hope that this vocation of showing love actually will have a transforming impact on the entire world, including the great powers themselves. When Jesus bumps up against Rome, he continues in the prophetic tradition of his people, a tradition going back to Israel's earliest days.

## Contra Egypt

The first mention of Egypt, one of the great powers of the ancient world, occurs in a story that presents one of the Hebrew patriarchs, Joseph, as playing a key role in expanding the empire's power (Gen 37–50), serving as a brilliant adviser to the Pharaoh during a time of famine.

The Bible's portrayal of Egypt takes a turn toward the negative with the beginning of the Book of Exodus. "Now a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph" (Exod 1:8). Out of fear of the proliferating Hebrew people, recognizing that in some sense they had resisted fully assimilating into Egyptian society (thereby maintaining a measure of freedom from empire state-ideology), the Pharaoh acts against them. He orders "his people" to "set taskmasters over [the Hebrews] to oppress them with forced labor" (Exod 1:10-11). However, "the more [the Israelites] were oppressed, the more the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them" (Exod 1:13–14). Thus, the Hebrews learn early on the ways of empire—ruthless, oppressive, and harshly punitive.

The foundational event in the establishing of Hebrew peoplehood, the heart of the tradition's self-identity, occurs in this context of slavery in

Egypt. "The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them" (Exod 2:23–25). The Hebrews' experience of empire fed into a radically counter-cultural religious and political vision. In contrast to the gods of the empire, who serve the king, the Hebrews worshiped Yahweh, whom they understood to be free, the critic of kings, and the advocate of vulnerable, oppressed people. Yahweh acted with unilateral mercy.

In contrast to the social structure of the empire, with its great disparities of wealth between the elite and the masses, the Hebrews followed a law code (Torah) that emphasized decentralized political power and economic self-sufficiency for all in the community.[3] Hebrew community following the exodus had two particularly distinct elements: (1) It ordered its life by a law code meant to sustain in human existence the vision the people had of God's will for their wholeness, and (2) it self-consciously understood itself to be utterly discontinuous with Egypt.[4]

Israel defined itself over against the Egyptian Empire. As Walter Brueggemann writes, the exodus testimony, "this most radical of all of Israel's testimony about Yahweh, verifies that the God of Israel is a relentless opponent of human oppression, even when oppression is undertaken and sponsored by what appear to be legitimated powers."[5] The Egyptian empire, nevertheless, cast a long shadow over Israel's subsequent history. A number of generations later, the Hebrews faced a major crossroads concerning how they would order their community. Their elders desired a king, like the nations (the great powers).

The old judge, Samuel, told the elders they should continue with God as their only king, and continue with their decentralized structures. In his challenge to the elders, Samuel evokes Israel's experience in Egypt (1 Sam 8:10–18). Kings take and take; you should know that. Samuel warned the people that making the wrong turn at this crossroads would return them to their status in the Egyptian empire, but he added that this time, unlike before, Yahweh would not respond to their cries amidst their oppression (1 Sam 8:18; cf. Exod 2:23). Samuel argued in vain. "The people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, 'No! but we are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other

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[3] See Millard C. Lind, "Law in the Old Testament," in *Monotheism, Power, and Justice: Collected Essays* (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1990), 61-81.

[4] Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1978), 16-7.

[5] Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 180.

nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles'" (1 Sam 8:19–20). Yahweh acquiesces to the people's desires and instructs Samuel to relent and "set a king over them" (8:22).

As Samuel warned, these kings do figuratively, at least, return the people to Egypt. By the time of Israel's third king, David's son Solomon, the die is cast. When Solomon gained power, he reorganized society toward much greater centralized control. He instituted rigorous taxation to expand his treasury. He began to draft soldiers, to expand the collection of horses and chariots into a large, permanent army with career military leaders. And he also decreed a policy of forced labor for his twenty-year building project of constructing first his palace and then the temple. Samuel had warned that the kings would build standing armies, take the best of the produce of the people, and make them slaves. This is precisely what Solomon did. With him, Israel took a large step toward political authoritarianism, moving back in the direction of Egypt.

Solomon also cultivated ties with other countries. He had hundreds of wives—women from many nations, one of the great harems of all time. Ironically, we are told that one of these foreign wives was the daughter of Pharaoh himself (I Kings 3:1). The irony of Solomon—the king who established the permanent military and who instituted forced labor—marrying into the Egyptian empire's leadership class rings loudly when we remember Samuel's warning about the people, under their desired king, returning to slavery. This connection was also made in Deuteronomy 28:68. The final threatened curse, should Israel not remain faithful to the covenant, reads as follows: "The Lord will bring you back in ships to Egypt, by a route that I promised you would never see again; and there you shall offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves, but there will be no buyer."

Egypt surfaces several times in later writings as representative of the nations in rebellion versus God (e.g., Ezek 29–32; Isa 19; Jer 46; Ps 87). Egypt is responsible for the death of King Josiah, one of the few kings in Judah who is portrayed as seeking to let Torah govern the kingdom (2 Kings 23:28–29). Poignantly, the prophet Jeremiah, when Babylon conquered the Hebrew nation-state, writes of accompanying Jewish exiles into Egypt. It is as if the entire history following the exodus has been for naught, as people of the covenant return to trusting in power politics and turning from Torah and toward empire faith.

## The other empires

A second great power in the Old Testament, the Assyrian Empire, enters and leaves the scene much quicker than Egypt. Ruthless Assyria,

as recounted in 2 Kings 17:5-23, destroyed the northern Jewish kingdom Israel and moved on to attack the southern kingdom Judah. Isaiah 36–39 and 2 Kings 18–20 tell how Jerusalem was besieged but ultimately staved off Assyrian conquest. This event, wherein Assyria withdraws from the attempt to conquer Judah along with Israel, was portrayed by Isaiah as evidence of Yahweh's power over against the brutal superpower.

The antipathy many in Israel felt toward Assyria received voice in the prophecy of Nahum, who joyfully proclaims the impending doom of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, due to its injustice and brutality. Nahum portrays this doom as the work of Yahweh. "Your shepherds are asleep, O king of Assyria; your nobles slumber. Your people are scattered on the mountains with no one to gather them. There is no assuaging your hurt, your wound is mortal. All who hear the news about you clap their hands over you. For who has ever escaped your endless cruelty?" (Nah 3:18-9).

Israel's antipathy toward Assyria and Nineveh is used to different effect when the book of Jonah critiques Israel's insular perspective in post-exilic Palestine. To do so, the writer draws on hostility toward Nineveh and Assyria that would have remained alive in the people's memories. That is, Nineveh plays a rhetorical role here, standing as the last place the Hebrews would ever want God's mercy to be expressed. This symbolic use of Nineveh indicates how terrible the actual Assyrian empire had been in the eyes of Israel. During the seventh century BCE, Assyria met its match in the resurgent Babylonian Empire. Babylon, ultimately, succeeded where earlier Assyria had failed—conquering Judah and destroying the temple and much of the rest of Jerusalem, and taking the Jewish ruling class who survived into exile.

The role of Babylon in Israel's consciousness as the paradigmatic example of political authoritarianism is reflected in the use of "Babylon" in symbolic ways down through the writings of the New Testament—most famously the Book of Revelation, where "Babylon" symbolizes the brutalities and blasphemies of the Roman Empire.

The Persian Empire that emerged in the mid-sixth century BCE under the leadership of Cyrus, is one great empire presented in a more positive light in the Bible. Persia defeated the Babylonians, the destroyers of Judah and the temple. Israel's joy at this action is reflected in Isaiah's identifying Cyrus as God's "shepherd" (44:28) and even God's "anointed one" (45:1). Persia's victory serve Israel's purposes. It is hard to imagine the covenant community surviving otherwise. Whatever Cyrus's own motivations may have been, from the Israelites' perspective his actions surely did look for everything like a saving act of God. The seemingly enlightened Persian policies that had allowed exiled Israelite leaders to return from Babylon and had supported the rebuilding of the Jerusalem

temple provide a bit of a counter-weight to the otherwise quite critical spirit of the Old Testament concerning the great empires.

Nonetheless, the general portrayal of the great powers in the Old Testament opposes the ways of empire with the ways of God's chosen people. The faith community, at its origins and in its most faithful mode, understands itself as a contrast society in relation to empire. Through a long and tumultuous journey, the foundational ideals expressed in the Mosaic revolution survived—waiting for a new embodiment amidst the greatest empire of them all.

## Roman domination

Jesus lived in the early heyday of a power mightier than any described in the Old Testament, the Roman Empire. Rome's transition from an expansionist republic to an empire is usually dated around 27 BCE when Octavian, renamed Caesar Augustus, became emperor. He reigned for 41 years, succeeded by another long-reigning emperor, Tacitus, emperor from 14 to 37 CE. Rome's initial stability of two emperors covering 64 years helped foster the Empire's expansion and consolidation of its dominance. The Roman general Pompey had captured Jerusalem in 66–63 BCE. The Romans established a relationship with the various provinces in Palestine, which were consolidated under the client king, Herod, who ruled from 37 BCE until his death in 4 BCE.

Herod sought to retain Jewish support by greatly expanding the Jerusalem Temple. His spending practices—the building he oversaw, indulging his own court, and sending wealth Rome's way—placed great stress on his people.[6] Herod sustained his power through ruthless force. The story in Matthew 2 of the killing of newborns accurately reflects his style. After Herod's death, his kingdom was divided into thirds among his sons. Herod Antipas ruled as Rome's client over Galilee for over 40 years and Philip ruled the northern areas for nearly 40 years. The third unit, Judea, though, soon came under the direct control of the Romans due to the failure of Herod's third son, Archelaus, to maintain his authority.

The Roman governor of Judea exercised firm control, having—for example—the power to appoint or dismiss the high priest of the temple. "In classic colonial fashion, Rome maintained exclusive authority over matters of foreign policy and serious domestic dissent (such as capital punishment)."[7] Pontius Pilate became governor of Judea twenty-some

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[6] Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 33.

[7] Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 56-7.

years into the Roman era of direct control of Judea. His contemporaries, Jewish writers Josephus and Philo, portrayed his rule as bloody and violent. Luke 13:1 seems to allude to Pilate's responsibility for the deaths of a group of Galileans. Later on, after the slaughter of a large number of Samaritans, Pilate was recalled to Rome. Church historian Eusebius wrote that Pilate eventually committed suicide.

The gospels give evidence of the empire's harsh response to perceived opposition.

> King Herod resorts to murderous violence to kill the newborn baby who is known as "king of the Jews" (Mt 2). Herod Antipas beheads John the Baptist who has been critical of his personal morality and political alliances (Mt 14:1-12). Pilate, with whom the "religious leaders" are allied, readily executes Jesus, king of the Jews, a perceived leader of the resistance (Matt 27:11).[8]

## Jesus and empire

Jesus sought renewal among his people, in part by expanding the scope of who would be included among people of the covenant. Thus, he came into conflict with the religious leaders who were more restrictive, the guardians of the law and of the temple. A significant part of Jesus' message, though, also included a critique of the dominant forces from outside of Israel's religious structures that oppressed and exploited—that is, the political rulers, the Roman Empire. From the start, language about Jesus (e.g., lord, savior, messiah/king, kingdom) signaled a collision of claims. For his followers, Jesus, in contrast to Caesar, is lord and savior (these were terms used of Caesar Augustus).[9] It is no accident that the gospels present Jesus as born to carry on the tradition of Moses, down to the parallel between Pharaoh's violence and the violence of King Herod, the client king of the great empire of Jesus' day.

When Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God, he at least implicitly questioned the Pax Romana (the dominance of Rome). He juxtaposed the true peace of God's kingdom with the "imperial good tidings of a pacified world and human happiness in it."[10] To say God's kingdom is at hand implies that Caesar's kingdom is not ultimate.

The stories of Jesus' exorcisms evoke the sensibility of Moses and Elijah—crossing the sea, healing, feeding the multitudes in the

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[8] Warren Carter, *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), 62.

[9] Carter, *Matthew*, 59.

[10] Klaus Wengst, *Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1987), 55.

wilderness, preaching the law—and Moses's resistance to Pharaoh and Elijah's resistance to King Ahab. As this kind of prophet, the renewal Jesus sought had both a positive component of empowering those under the yoke of oppression and a negative component of facilitating the rejection of empire. Jesus' power over demons (linked on occasion with Roman legions—Mark 5:9; Luke 8:30) symbolized his rejection of Roman power. Remember Jesus' encounter with Satan in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry. Satan offers Jesus political power as if it belongs to Satan. Jesus later on displays his continued rejection of Satan's presence in and among the people when he casts demons out.

When Jesus rejected authoritarian types of leadership, he rejected Rome's power politics: "You know that among the Gentiles (that is, the Romans) those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It must not be so among you" (Mark 10:42). With this statement, "Jesus clearly stated that the existing 'order of peace' is based on the oppressive rule of force. That is the way in which Jesus and...his disciples experience the reality of the Pax Romana.... The alternative which Jesus puts forward shows that he is not resigned.... Peace based on oppressive force is not what Jesus wants."[11]

Jesus' words concerning the payment of taxes present his listeners with a choice between two competing claimants for their loyalties. God or Caesar; it has to be one or the other. Those who trust in the true God will deny Caesar's claims for their loyalty. "If God is the exclusive lord and Master, if the people of Israel live under the exclusive kingship of God, then all things belong to God, the implications for Caesar being fairly obvious. Jesus is clearly and simply reasserting the Israelite principle that Caesar, or any other imperial ruler, has no claim on the Israelite people, since God is their actual king and master."[12]

When given the opportunity in the wilderness prior to the beginning of his public ministry to overthrow the Romans with force, Jesus turned Satan down. And, at the end, when face to face with Pilate, Jesus asserted that "my kingdom is not of this world." However, neither of these points should be understood as portraying Jesus as apolitical or indifferent to the Roman Empire. Rather, when seen in conjunction with his ministry as a whole, Jesus in both cases presents his politics as an alternative to Roman political authoritarianism.[13] Jesus spearheaded a revolutionary movement—revolutionary not only in its rejection of the present political

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[11] Wengst, *Pax Romana*, 55-6.

[12] Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 99. See also Wength, *Pax Romana*, 59-60.

[13] John Howard Yoder argues persuasively for Jesus self-consciously understanding his message to be about creating such as alternative politics. See *The Politics of Jesus*, second edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994).

status quo but in presenting an alternative vision for social order. The language of "kingdom" indicates that Jesus understood himself to be posing a contrast between his community and Rome.[14]

Jesus' vision was in full continuity with the heart of Torah. That such a Torah-oriented vision was revolutionary in first-century Jewish Palestine only underscores that the spirit of empire embodied in ancient Egypt remained alive and well in the time of the Romans. Just as Torah originally countered the empire-consciousness of Egypt, so its renewal in Jesus' ministry countered the empire-consciousness of Rome.

## The death of a political criminal

Jesus presented a challenge to empire—and the empire struck back. In the end, even with his conflicts with the religious leaders, we must remember that Jesus was crucified by Rome as a political offender. And he was crucified with the title "King of the Jews" attached to his cross—certainly a political term. As N.T. Wright explains:

> Crucifixion was a powerful symbol throughout the Roman world. It was not just a means of liquidating undesirables; it did so with the maximum degradation and humiliation. It said, loud and clear: we are in charge here; you are our property; we can do what we like with you. It insisted, coldly and brutally, on the absolute sovereignty of Rome, and of Caesar. It told an implicit story, of the uselessness of rebel recalcitrance and the ruthlessness of imperial power. It said, in particular, this is what happens to rebel leaders.[15]

That Jesus' crucifixion, and the events leading up to it, are best understood under the rubric of confrontation with empire may be seen by looking carefully at the story of Jesus' arrest and death. John's gospel highlights political issues the most directly, so I will follow it here.[16] Jesus was arrested by temple police, taken before the Sanhedrin, and then taken before Pontius Pilate. The main accusation voiced in this context had to do with his allegedly calling himself the "king of the Jews"—which could be a conclusion drawn from the use of messianic language of Jesus (messiah = "anointed one" = "king"). Raymond Brown points out, "in first-century Palestine the charge that Jesus was claiming the 'king of the

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[14] Carter, *Matthew*, 62.

[15] N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 543.

[16] I am especially indebted to the provocative analysis by David Rensberger, *Johannine Faith and Liberating Community* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988), 87-106.

Jews' title might well be understood by the Romans as an attempt to re-establish the kingship over Judea and Jerusalem exercised by the Hasmoneans and Herod the Great."[17]

The allegations of Jesus claiming to be king stand at the center of Pilate's concern when he faces Jesus. His first question focuses the issue: "Are you king of the Jews?" Significantly, Jesus does not answer with a simple denial, even as he also makes it clear that he is not seeking to be the kind of "King" who rules the Roman Empire by brute force. "My kingdom is not of this world," Jesus replied to Pilate. What might Jesus' words here have meant? Traditionally, many have read this as a statement that Jesus is not concerned with the politics of the material world but is advocating a purely spiritual, "otherworldly" kingdom. However, the evidence would seem to indicate otherwise.

Jesus was perceived as having this-worldly political significance when he miraculously fed the multitudes. They sought him afterwards, desiring to make him king (John 6). Jesus, of course, disappeared from the scene because he did not trust their motives. However, he was acting in a way that made people think he could be a political leader. The religious leaders feared that Jesus' activities had enough this-worldly political significance that the Romans might intervene with the full force of the Empire and impose a military solution to the problem (John 11:45–53).

The form of death Jesus faced as he went before Pilate—crucifixion—shows that the government itself saw him in this-worldly, political terms. Crucifixion served that Pax Romana.

> This execution, like many others, was virtually an act to secure the peace. Extant reports of the implementation of Roman punishment of crucifixion at Palestine at the time of Jesus mention only rebels as criminals.... In the eyes of the Roman provincial administration Jesus was a rebel who endangered the existing peace. A disturber of the peace was done away with, by legal means, by the power responsible for peace.[18]

Jesus was apolitical only if politics is understood as power politics, the politics of the sword. However, if we understand politics more generally as meaning the way human beings order their social world, Jesus was political. In fact, in this sense just about everything he taught (e.g., turn the other cheek, reject lording it over others, share with those in need) was political. So, when Jesus says "my kingdom is not of this world" we may best understand him to mean, "my way of ordering human social

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[17] Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave*, vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 731.

[18] Wengst, *Pax Romana*, 1-2.

life in real life is not of the order of political authoritarianism." Jesus still leads a kingdom, a social order in history, but it is about a different way of living, a different way of structuring social life.

David Rensberger makes this same point.

> Jesus' words about his kingship do not deny that it is a kingship, with definite social characteristics. Instead they specify what those characteristics are. It is not a question of whether Jesus' kingship exists in this world but of how it exists; not a certification that the characteristics of Jesus' kingdom are "otherworldly" and so do not impinge on this world's affairs but a declaration that his kingship has its source outside this world and so is established by methods other than those of this world.[19]

Jesus is a different kind of king, rejecting the brute force and hoarding of wealth that characterized emperors. He denies the validity of militarism. "The empire ('kingdom') that his words and actions have attested differs significantly from Rome's." Jesus advocates inclusiveness, humility, and mercy—all in contrast to how the Gentiles' leaders lord it over them.[20]

In this sense, then, Jesus did offer a direct challenge to the hegemony of the Roman Empire. According to the values of the empire, its agents were justified in deciding to punish this so-called "king." "For Pilate, to call Jesus 'the one called Christ' (Matthew 27:17,22) expresses Jesus' political threat of sedition, of claiming power without Rome's approval. And Pilate is right. He correctly understands that the term denotes opposition to Rome's rule and so Jesus must be resisted."[21] Pilate, especially as presented in John's Gospel, may be interpreted as a cynical, manipulative politician. He does not genuinely care about the fate of Jesus. He certainly shows no sensitivity concerning Jesus' life and message. Pilate's basic concern stems from his hatred of the Jewish people he is charged with governing. He mostly wants to heap scorn on their nationalistic aspirations and thereby to solidify the standing of the Romans in their occupation of Palestine. "Pilate's intention is not to placate 'the Jews' but to humiliate them."[22]

Pilate thus serves these purposes by whipping the crowd to a frenzy about killing Jesus, focusing most directly on the religious leaders who are central throughout this part of the story. Pilate several times tells the crowd that Jesus has done no wrong, only riling them up the more. Finally, he says, "here is your king!" The crowd cries out, "Away with

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[19] Rensberger, *Johannine*, 97.
[20] Carter, *Matthew*, 161.
[21] Carter, *Matthew*, 163.
[22] Rensberger, *Johannine, 94.*

him! Away with him! Crucify him!" Pilate asked them, "Shall I crucify your king?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but Caesar!" This was what Pilate had been waiting for. With their assertion that they have no king but Caesar, he got what he wanted.[23] Immediately, he hands Jesus over to be crucified. Pilate simply wanted an admission from the Jewish leaders of the supremacy of Caesar. Jesus was essentially a pawn in Pilate's game. Pilate seems to assume that he knows the only truth that matters: "There is no king but Caesar."

Pilate, in his direct encounter with Jesus prior to turning him over to be executed, made clear his utter lack of interest in learning from Jesus. Pilate's agenda was buttressing his coercive power, not discerning truth. Pilate begins the encounter by asking Jesus if he is "the king of the Jews." As Jesus tries to explain how he understands his "kingship," and the role of seeking the truth as being at the heart of the genuine kingdom of God, Pilate simply quips, "What is truth?" and then leaves, not interested at all in listening to Jesus. He has Jesus tortured, then uses him as a pawn for manipulating the religious leaders and the crowd, and in the end sends him to the most terrible of executions.

In the end, Jesus' death offers a profound alternative to imperial power politics. Jesus exposes Rome's style of politics as actually a kind of anti-politics, a dis-order that gains people's trust as an idol that actually separates them from God. "The scene exposes Roman justice to be administered by the elite for the elite's benefit. There is no doubt that by Rome's rules Jesus deserves to die. But this scene, in the context of the Gospel story, raises profound questions about the nature of those rules."[24]

At the heart of Jesus' teaching in the final months of his life was his instruction to his followers, "take up your cross and follow me." This is a call to live free from power politics , to recognize that following Jesus puts them directly in opposition to the powers of empire. That the authorities (human and spiritual) would put Jesus to death is absolute proof of their idolatrous nature—and of the need for people of faith to distrust them.

## Conclusion

How might we think of the connection between the "then" of Jesus' confrontation and the "now" of the twenty-first century? I will conclude by briefly mentioning four points of connection.

(1) Jesus' experience with Pilate reflects what we now might call the Machiavellian tendencies of great powers. Pilate's actions expose the fact

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[23] Rensberger, *Johannine*, 95.

[24] Carter, *Matthew,*167.

that empire's agents care about coercive power much more than about truth. Pilate asks "what is truth?" a cynical response to Jesus' statement that "everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice" (John 18:37). As if to emphasize that he is not listening to Jesus' voice, Pilate walks away from Jesus right after his obviously rhetorical question. The revelation of the great powers' true colors in relation to Jesus' truth should, for those who would follow Jesus, have the effect of fostering great suspicion toward those powers. As Jesus himself said, though they call themselves "benefactors," don't believe it. Followers of Jesus, of all people, should be unremitting critics of imperial pretensions and coercive policies whenever they arise.

(2) More than simply exposing empire's privileging coercive power over truth, Jesus' confrontation with empire also exposes the actual violence of empire toward any and all perceived threats. The Soviet gulags in the past century make clear that this kind of violence has continued; we may also, perhaps closer to home, see parallels in the history of Australia as the nineteenth-century dumping ground for many who expressed dissent in relation to the policies of the all-powerful British empire and, into the twenty-first century, in the story of U.S. treatment of prisoners from the "war on terror" at Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib. Christianity has sanitized and depoliticized the cross in the years since Jesus' execution. However, the fundamental historical meaning of the cross is that it represents the worst imaginable punishment that empire can visit upon dissenters. Resist imperial hegemony and you bring to the surface what is inevitably always part of empire: domination based on violence. As it was in Jesus' day, so it remains today.

(3) When Jesus made the metaphor of the "kingdom of God" the centerpiece of his life and teaching, he sought to create a social order that would be an alternative to the kingdom of Caesar. Rome (and Rome's agents among Judea's religious leaders) made no mistake when they arrested and killed Jesus—he did threaten their domination. Jesus' contrast between the leadership style of the great powers (lording it over) and that of his counter-culture (compassionate service) was not meant to be a statement of the two distinct realms where people of faith dwell, i.e., expect service to predominate in the church and power politics to predominate in the world. Jesus intended the "opposite" of the idea that you do not need to threaten business-as-usual in the broader culture when you seek to follow Jesus. Rather, Jesus meant to say, the servant-oriented approach should govern your lives in all settings, and is normative for life everywhere. When you insist on this truth, though, expect to find yourselves in conflict with the powers-that-be. Jesus made this clear when he told followers to prepare to take up their crosses.

(4) The gospels' story of Jesus, of course, does not end with his execution. When God raised Jesus from the dead, God made the ultimate counter-empire statement. This man who, in his confrontation with empire, died as a political dissenter whom Rome executed even though he embodied precisely what God wants from human beings, received the ultimate endorsement from the creator of the universe. In thus endorsing Jesus and the life he lived, God provides the strongest possible message that those who judged Jesus guilty of threatening the peace actually in the end prove themselves to be the threats to genuine peace. The resurrection of Jesus Christ witnesses to the truth of his life—a life committed to a politics of service and compassion—and to the falsity of the politics of empire. And, the resurrection of Jesus Christ provides his followers (then and still today) with the strongest possible statement that the politics of Jesus conform with the very creator of the universe.

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# 9. Justice apart from the law (and empire): Paul's deconstruction of idolatry

*[This previously unpublished paper was presented to the Bible, Theology, and Postmodernity group, American Academy of Religion annual meeting, Chicago, November 10, 2008]*

The biblical story often portrays violence and injustice having roots in idolatry. Trusting in things other than the creator God who made all human beings in the divine image leads to a diminishment of the value of some human beings—a prerequisite for injustice and violence. Torah, the prophets, and Jesus all emphasize the centrality of loving the neighbor as part of what it means to love God above all else.

The struggle against idols characterizes the biblical story from the concern with "graven images" in the Ten Commandments down to the blasphemies of the Beast in Revelation. Certainly at times the battle against idols itself crosses the line into violence and injustice. However, for my purposes here I will assume that those accounts stand in tension with the overall biblical story. When anti-idolatry takes the form of violence, a new idolatry has taken its place. In Walter Wink's terms, our challenge is to seek to overcome evil without becoming evil ourselves.[1]

I would like to suggest that we find in the biblical critique of idolatry perspectives that are important, even essential, for responding to the problems of violence in our world today. If we use violence as our criterion, we could say that whenever human beings justify violence against other human beings they give ultimate loyalty to some entity (or, "idol") other than the God of Jesus Christ.

It could well be that forces that underwrite violence today—loyalty to warring nations, labeling those outside our religious or ethnic circle as less than fully human, placing a higher priority on gathering wealth than on social justice—are contemporary versions of the idolatrous dynamics that biblical prophets condemn.

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[1] Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Resistance and Discernment in an Age of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 1.

In Romans 1–3, Paul offers an analysis and critique of idolatry that I believe remains useful today. Paul takes on two types of idolatry. First, he criticizes what I will call the idol of lust in the Roman Empire that underwrites violence and injustice. And, second, he critiques the claims of those (like Paul himself before he met Jesus) who believed that loyalty to the Law requires violence in defense of the covenant community.

Our present-day analogs of the forces Paul critiques—nationalism, imperialism, religious fundamentalism—all gained power with the rise of modernity in the Western world.[2] The much-heralded turn toward post-modernity may offer a sense of awareness to help us break free from such totalisms that foster so much violence in our world. These various 'isms all have been thrown into question in popular consciousness.

The task to resist demands for ultimate loyalty unites biblical prophets (including Paul) with present-day Christians seeking to further life in the face of death-dealing violence. Modernity did not create death-dealing idolatries so much as give them new impetus. To break bondage to the idols of injustice that Paul engaged in remains ours responsibility today.

John Caputo couches this task in the "postmodern" language of "deconstruction," arguing that the work of deconstruction is the same kind of work people of faith have always engaged in when they have resisted life-denying idols:

> The deconstruction of Christianity is not an attack on the church but a critique of the idols to which it is vulnerable—the literalism and authoritarianism, the sexism and racism, the militarism and imperialism, and the love of unrestrained capitalism with which the church in its various forms has today and for too long been entangled, any one of which is toxic to the kingdom of God. The deconstruction of Christianity is nothing new. It is the ageless task imposed on the church and its way to the future, the way to be faithful to its once and future task, to express the uncontainable event from which the church is forged. To engage the gears of deconstructive thought and practice is not to reduce our beliefs and practices to ruins, which is the popular distortion, but to entrust oneself to the uncontainable event they contain, breaking down their resistance to their own inner tendencies and aspirations, exposing them to the call by which they have been called into being, which here, in the case of the church, is the kingdom that we call for, the kingdom that calls us.[3]

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[2] See Ted Grimsrud, "A Pacifist Critique of the Modern Worldview," in Ray Gingerich and Ted Grimsrud, eds., *Transforming the Powers: Peace, Justice, and the Domination System* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 53-64.

[3] John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct? The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 137-8.

With his analysis and critique of idolatry in Romans 1–3, Paul helps us in this deconstructive work. To support this assertion, I will read this text closely, and draw a few conclusions for our appropriation of Paul's argument. I read the text straightforwardly, and intend to show how what Paul writes challenges the idolatries of his day—and in doing so, help us come to terms with the idolatries of our day.

I believe Paul's argument furthers the dynamics of the embodiment of God's kingdom here on earth. I share Caputo's perspective:

> What is the kingdom of God? Where is it found? It is found every time an offense is forgiven, every time a stranger is made welcome, every time an enemy is embraced, every time the least among us is lifted up, every time the is made to serve justice, every time a prophetic voice is raised against injustice, every time the law and the prophets are summed up by love.[4]

## Paul's program

Paul begins his argument with a programmatic statement in 1:16: "I am not ashamed of the gospel; for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile." When Paul asserts that the "gospel" has to do with God's power bringing about "salvation" he appropriates common imperial terms.[5] "Gospel" and "salvation" point to what the emperor takes responsibility for. For Paul, the true gospel and genuine salvation come from God, not from Caesar.

"Salvation" is based on faith—or, we could say, faithfulness. The point is neither "belief alone" as in intellectual assent or the accumulation of good deeds that gain salvation. Rather Paul has in mind an integration of belief and practice. "Faithfulness" includes intellectual affirmation of the reality of God and Jesus as the core truths of reality (the "renewed mind" of Romans 12:1-2) and trusting commitment to God as the center of the universe and practices of love and justice, mercy and compassion, generosity and care.

When he writes salvation comes "to the Jew first and also to the Gentile," Paul endorses the covenant God made with Abraham and his descendents (Israel). As with the promise to Abraham, Paul here points to the purpose of the calling of Israel—to bless all the families of the earth—first Jews, then Gentiles.[6]

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[4] Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 138.

[5] Neil Elliott, *The Arrogance of Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 14.

[6] The "postmodern" Swiss Jewish philosopher Jacob Taubes interpreted Paul as a *Jewish* thinker. He presented Paul as "an apostle *from the Jews* to the

Paul continues with his programmatic statement in 1:17: "In the gospel the justice of God is revealed through faith for faith." The term translated "justice" is also often translated "righteousness." However, the connotation of "righteousness" had tended toward the personal and has hidden the obvious social ramifications of Paul thought. With *dikaiosyne tou theou* Paul has in mind a cosmic transformation that brings together the personal and social in a unified transformative intervention by God to bring healing to all aspects of creation—a transformation better captured by "justice" than "righteousness."[7]

Paul here links "justice" very closely with "salvation." In the Bible, God's "justice" describes God works to bring healing in the face of brokenness—"restorative justice."[8] Certainly Paul understood God's "justice" to be the characteristic of God that leads to salvation (not punishment) for God's enemies (see Romans 5:1-11 for the affirmation that the justice-making work of God affirmed in 1:17 and 3:21 specifically includes God's enemies).

Paul announces that God's "justice" has now been "revealed." The term translated "revealed" (*apokalypsis*—the word from which "apocalypse" comes) in many cases in the Bible indicates an epoch-defining, transforming message from God. For Paul, God "reveals" that in Jesus the kingdom of God has been made present. Those who receive this revelation will never see the world the same again. As Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:17, "when anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see everything has become new!"

The "revelation" of "salvation" and "justice" in Jesus Christ reemphasizes that for Paul, trust in Christ is a direct alternative to trust in Caesar. These are two "kings" contesting the same terrain—the ultimate

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Gentiles" (Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul* [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004], 48 [italics in original]). For a perceptive reading of Taubes in relation to other recent European philosophers who have written on Paul and seen Paul in sharp tension with Judaism, see Mark Lilla, "A New, Political Saint Paul?" *New York Review of Books* 55.16 (October 23, 2008), 69-73.

[7] Here I follow Neil Elliott (*Arrogance*, 75-6) and Michael Gorman (*Reading Paul* [Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008], 119-21). Another reason for preferring "justice" (and "injustice" instead of wickedness) is that we can better trace the unity of Paul's discussion in Romans 1–3 when he contrasts "justice" with "injustice" and proposes that "justification" is the fruit of God's healing work.

[8] See Howard Zehr, *Changing Lenses: A New Focus for Crime and Justice*, third edition (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2005); Christopher Marshall, *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001); and Ted Grimsrud and Howard Zehr, "Rethinking God, Justice, and the Treatment of Offenders," *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation* 35.3-4 (2002), 253-79.

loyalty of human beings. Paul claims that for those with eyes to see, the transforming work God does in creating a peoplehood out of Jews and Gentiles has been made visible and is worth their deepest commitment.

Paul asserts in 1:17, the "just shall live by faithfulness." He believes that trust in God leads to blessing all the families of the earth as promised of old. As the letter to the Christians in Rome will reiterate throughout, this faithfulness most powerfully should be characterized by the coming together of Jew with Gentile, united by a common commitment to the way of Jesus.[9] Paul strongly desires that such a new community be clear in its witness in the heart of the Empire.

## Idolatry I: The nations (Rome)

After this introduction, Paul turns to the big problem. He analyzes dynamics that move people from the rejection of truth to lack of gratitude to trust in created things to out of control lust to injustice and violence. This dynamic itself expresses "wrath" that has to do not with direct intervention by God but with God "giving them up" to a self-selected spiral of death.

As Paul will make clear in 5:1-11 and 11:32, God's intentions toward humanity are completely salvific—even when human beings position themselves as God's enemies. Hence, we make a mistake if we interpret "wrath" as God's punitive anger aimed at people God has rejected. We should understand "wrath" to be redefined by the gospel. "Wrath" characterizes how God works in indirect ways to hold human beings accountable, "giving them up" to the consequences of their giving their loyalty to realities other than life and the giver of life.[10]

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[9] On the social nature of justification, see John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, second edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), chapter 11, "Justification by Grace Through Faith." See also James D.G. Dunn, "Paul and Justification by Faith," in Richard N. Longenecker, ed., *The Road from Damascus: The Impact of Paul's Conversion on His Life, Thought, and Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 85-101.

[10] James D. G. Dunn: "For Paul 'the wrath of God' denotes the inescapable, divinely ordered moral constitution of human society, God's reaction to evil and sin. God's righteousness as creator, the obligation appropriate to him as creator, has determined that human actions have moral consequences. Thus the consequence of disowning the dependence of the creature on the creator has been a futility of thought and a darkening of experience (1:21). Focusing reverence on the creature rather than the creator has resulted in idolatry, debased sexuality, and the daily nastiness of disordered society (1:22-31). God's wrath, we might say, is his handing over of his human creation to themselves" (*The Theology of Paul the Apostle* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998], 42).

In 1:17 we have the salvific "revelation" of God's justice. In the next verse, we have the suppression of truth that leads to the "revelation" of God's wrath. With "justice," people see created things for what they are (pointers to the creator), not false gods worthy of ultimate loyalty. Such sight leads to life. With "wrath," the act of giving loyalty to created things results in truth being suppressed and a spiral of lifelessness.

Paul alludes to two different ways to see created things. They can be seen as pointers to God, who is the one authentic object of worship—not least because of God's creative work. Or, they can be seen as themselves objects of worship or ultimate loyalty.

God has built within creation itself directives that should lead to "justice" (linking "justice" here with a basic stance of gratitude towards life that encourages kindness, generosity, and wholeness in relationships). Many people have not lived in gratitude (1:22) and as a consequence brokenness characterizes much of human life.

The "revelation" of God's wrath (1:18) concerns God giving those who trust in idols up (1:24) to descent into self-destructive behavior. The revelation of this wrath, thus, is not so much about direct punitive action by God as about the dynamics when people trust in lifeless things and thereby lose a connection with life.

People make an "exchange." They trade their humanity as God's children for "images" that resemble created things. This trade leads to an exchange of justice for wrath leading to an exchange of justice for injustice, of life for death. This exchange, Paul insists, is not necessary. God has shown the world what is needed. "What can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them..., seen through the things he has made" (1:19-20). However, when human beings exchange "the glory of God" for images that resemble created things they lose their ability to discern God's revelation. The dynamic identified in Psalm 115 becomes all too apparent, where people become like the lifeless images that they worship.

Paul's statement that "God gave them up" (1:24) points to how God's love implies that the only way God can relate to creation is to respect human freedom. However, when people "freely" choose idols they actually compromise their God-given freedom, voluntarily entering into bondage to the idols they elevate to divine status. Paul is not saying that God takes revenge by taking away our freedom. Rather, he tells us that by the nature of reality we become like what we trust. Our trust in lifeless things leads to lifelessness.

When created things are worshiped they no longer reveal the God who stands behind them and gives them their meaning. The paradigmatic expression of this dynamic for Paul is how inter-human

love—that indeed reveals God in profound ways—comes to be reduced to lust, and relationships become unjust, broken, contexts for alienation.

Paul writes that "for this reason" (1:26) God gave those consumed by lust (the "lusters") "up to degrading passions." When they exchange trust in God for worship of created things, the lusters are led into "unnatural" behavior. What is unnatural is when intimate human relationships become occasions for death and alienation instead of life and wholeness.

As Neil Elliott has suggested, Paul may have in mind the recent history of the Roman emperor's court and its profligate sexual behavior that had scandalized many. When the emperor Caligula went down, many understood this to be an act of cosmic vindication.[11] Paul sees lust as the problem (not homosexuality per se) because of how it diminishes humanness, reflects worship of "degrading passions" rather than God, distorts the revelation of God in the human, and fosters injustice.

In 1:28, Paul once more refers to the dynamic where "God gives them up," in this case to a "debased mind." They can't see reality as it is. The revelation of God's love becomes wrath for them rather than whole-making justice. When people trust in things other than God, their ability to think and perceive and see and discern is profoundly clouded.

Paul refers to "things that should not be done" that result from "the debased mind" when "God [gives] them up (1:28) to "exchange the glory of the immortal God [and] form images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles" (1:23). The "things that should not be done" points ahead to 1:29-31's description of injustice and violence—the injustice and violence of the Empire's leaders.

In this discussion of idolatry in Romans 1:18-32, Paul challenges his readers to see the nature of their would-be Benefactors as God's rivals. These Benefactors claim to act on behalf of the gods and for the sake of "peace" (they use terms such as Good News, Savior, and Pax Romana). They desire people's trust and loyalty and worship. These Benefactors actually are profoundly unjust and violent. The Pax Romana's "peace" is based on the violence of the sword—it's a counterfeit peace.[12]

When "created things" are worshiped, the progression moves inexorably toward injustice—suppression of truth (1:18), refusal to honor and give thanks to God (1:21), darkened minds (1:21), the exchange of God's glory for lifeless images (1:23), being "given up" to lusts that degrade their bodies (1:24), the worship of the creature rather than creator (1:25), degrading passions (1:26), shameless acts (1:27), debased minds (1:28), and profound injustice and violence (1:29-31).

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[11] Neil Elliott, *Liberating Paul: The Justice of God and the Politics of the Apostle* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 194-5; and Elliott, *Arrogance*, 78.

[12] Elliott, *Arrogance*, 78-83

The Powers that exploit this progression into idolatry replace God as the center of people's lives and as the objects of worship. In doing so, they so distort people's minds so that instead of recognizing that those who practice such injustice deserve judgment, people instead "applaud" their unjust Benefactors (1:32).

### Idolatry II: Works of the law

Paul's critique of Empire-idolatry has its own validity and importance. However, in what follows in Romans, Paul combines this with a critique of how people in the covenant community embrace idolatry in relation to the law. Following writers on the "new perspective on Paul," especially James Dunn, I use the term "works of the law" for what Paul criticizes—in distinction to the law in and of itself, that Paul embraces.

Dunn sees Paul's use of the term "works of the law" in Galatians 2:16 ("We know that a person is justified, not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ") as helpful for helping us distinguish between Paul's critique of how the law was being understood among his opponents in the churches and Paul's strong affirmation of the continuing validity of the law (Romans 13:9: "The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet;' and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'").[13]

Behind Paul's critique is his own earlier use of works of the law as boundary markers. He had protected "true faith" with extreme violence. Paul as Saul the Pharisee, before he met Jesus, had made an idol of works of the law in a way that made him just as unjust as the leaders of the Roman Empire in his harsh persecution of Jesus' followers.[14]

Paul's concerns in 1:18-32 center on idolatry and the need to be free from the bondage idolatry fosters. If one points fingers at other idolaters while denying one's own tendency to worship idols, one will never find such freedom. Hence, "the very same things" (2:1) that those who point fingers (the "judgers") are guilty of are themselves forms of idolatry. Paul

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[13] James D. G. Dunn, "The New Perspective in Paul," in *Jesus, Paul, and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 213: "Paul's objection is not to *ritual* law, but to exclusivist or particularist attitudes which came to expression in and are reinforced by certain rituals. Not the rituals as such, but the attitude behind them, expressed typically as a 'boasting' in works of the law (Rom 2:17-23; 3:27ff)."

[14] For a discussion of Paul's conversion from violence to nonviolence, see Michael Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 129-60.

experienced his own exchange—God for the boundary markers that required a violent defense. Paul's "degrading passions" were not sexual but ideological and led to the same result, violence.

The words Paul quotes in 2:2, "we know that God's judgment on those who do such things is in accord with truth," come from the judgers alluded to in 2:1, when they refer to the lusters. When they embrace God's judgment on others, the judgers actually condemn themselves because they too are idolaters guilty of injustice. They mistakenly believe that in condemning the idolatry of 1:18-32 while remaining idolaters themselves they have God on their side. In claiming that their judging accords with "truth" (2:2), the judgers actually line themselves up with the "debased minds" who worship the creation rather than the creator and in doing so actually suppress the truth (1:18).

Paul had committed his own acts of violence in the name of the "truth." However, after he met Jesus he learned that violence is always a sign of falsehood. The truth he thought he served was actually a lie. The works of the law that he defended turned out to be idolatrous. So, as a judger he was just as much of an idolater as the lusters who run the Roman Empire. The judgers' idolatry is simply another form of injustice and will be equally judged by God (2:3).

Paul makes affirmations about God in 2:4 that stand in opposition to all forms of idolatry. He writes of "the riches of God's kindness and forbearance and patience." The antidote to idolatry is recognition of God's unconditional and abundant mercy. God's kindness comes first, then comes repentance. Paul refers to the judgers' "hard and impenitent hearts" (2:5), describing those who suppress the truth. This includes both those who reduce love to lust and those who reduce the law to legalistic works of the law. The "storing up of wrath" (2:5) he mentions may be seen as the dynamics of self-delusion and cold-heartedness inevitably following from such reductions. The processes of life lead to justice for those who trust in God and to wrath for those who trust in idols. As we trust in things we become more and more thing-like ourselves (in this sense, "storing up" more "wrath").

The revelation of "the day of wrath" (2:5) may be understood in terms of the revelation of the true path to God through the witness of Jesus that illumines the death of the various idolatries and, tragically, only reinforces the fears and false worship of all the various types of idolaters.

Paul writes of "God's righteous judgment" in 2:5 using the same terms that in 1:32 are translated as "God's decree." The latter is what the lusters know but ignore in their injustice. The former is what will be revealed to the judgers "on the day of wrath." This parallel usage shows that the injustices of 1:29-31 and the judging of 2:1-2 are the same kind

of phenomena, both blind people to God's authentic justice. By denying the life-giving justice of God, both types of idolaters condemn themselves to experience God's justice as wrath.

Condemnation comes to everyone who does evil—Jew first and also Gentile (2:9). The description of the two types of idolatry encompasses all kinds of people. Crucially, though, Paul immediately follows this terrifying word with a word of hope. Salvation also comes to all kinds of people, Jew first and also Gentile (2:11), through God's chosen people and spreads to all the families of the earth. The judgers forgot that salvation for them was intended to lead to salvation for all.

Paul understands "sin," a term he introduces in 2:12, in terms of the idolatry he has described. He sets out the basic dynamic in 1:21: Sin and idolatry arise when people live without trust and gratitude, become futile in their thinking and darkened in their minds, leading to the practice of injustice and the movement toward lifelessness. "Sinning under the law" (2:12) seems basically to mean making an idol of some rule or other and using it to underwrite injustice (as with Saul the Pharisee).

Paul argues that the law itself is not the problem. He affirms in 2:14 that some Gentiles do "do the law" even while ignorant of the written Torah. They do it "naturally," the idea linking back to Paul's allusion in 1:18-32 that it is unnatural to worship the creature, to be ungrateful, to practice injustice, and to exchange the creature for the creator. The faithfulness or justness of Gentiles who do not know the written Torah shows that "what the law requires is written on their hearts" (2:15: to trust God, to live in gratitude, to do justice). This comment echoes Paul's earlier affirmation that "ever since the creation of the world God's eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things God has made" (1:20).

Paul's critique of the judgers gets intense in 2:23-24. He asserts that "boasters in the law" dishonor God. This idolatry presents such a poor witness that it leads Gentiles to blaspheme God's name instead of honoring it. For the judgers, the law had become a boundary marker. As such, the law ("works of the law") became a tool for violence. It became a basis to assert a cosmic division between circumcised and uncircumcised, rather than part of an affirmation of "the fundamental solidarity-in-difference of Jews and Gentiles as together creatures of the one God."[15]

For Saul the Pharisee, law-idolatry led to violent persecution of those who followed Jesus, the one who embodied the true whole-making intention of the law in its original expression. When those charged with

[15] Douglas Harink, "Paul and Israel: An Apocalyptic Reading," *Pro Ecclesia* 16.4 (2007), 376.

witnessing to God's justice for the benefit of all the earth's families instead witness to injustice, it is as if they are not part of God's covenant people at all; their "circumcision has become uncircumcision."

Paul asserts that some who are physically "uncircumcised" do indeed "keep the requirement of the law" (2:26), implying that "the requirements of the law" boil down to living with gratitude, generosity, and justice—or, as Paul writes later in Romans, the law boils down to loving one's neighbor. "Real circumcision is a matter of the heart," Paul writes, in the sense that one's actual circumcision is not about a physical ritual but about one's genuine commitment to God's love and justice, a commitment that finds expression in one's actions. Paul does insist that we are "all" under the power of sin (3:9), but in saying this he is not so much asserting that each individual is (he has clearly stated that some do keep the law) as arguing that the Jews and Gentiles are equally liable to be under the power of sin (equally likely to be either lusters or judgers).

Later in Romans, Paul illumines further the problems with the idolatry of works of the law in his agonizing reflections in chapter seven. As Robert Jewett suggests, we best read Paul here to be reflecting his own experience as one who committed terrible acts of violence in the name of what turned out to be an idolatrous view of the law.[16] The very act of striving to follow the letter of Torah leads to living in the "flesh," unleashing one's "sinful passions" (7:5). These sinful passions led to Paul's "zeal" when he upholds works of the law through violence against followers of Jesus (Gal 1:14; Phil 3:5-6).

When Paul writes, "the very commandment that promised life proved to be the death of me" (7:10), he has in mind how he applied the law in ways that deeply hurt others and thereby himself experienced death. No wonder he was so profoundly shattered when he met Jesus and realized that the one he had been persecuting was truly the Messiah of the God he had sought so zealously to serve.

Paul staked his life on a call zealously to enforce the "truths" of Torah—and ended up becoming a murderer who violated the actual truth of Torah about as profoundly as anyone possibly could. Paul states flatly, "sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me" (7:11). This truly happened in Paul's own life.

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[16] Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 436: "The 'sinful passions that came through the law' are to be differentiated from sensual passions or human weaknesses or human weaknesses, because the allusions to Paul's own previous experiences as a competitively zealous Pharisee and an opponent of the church seems so clear. How else is one to explain the extraordinary role of law in promoting sinful passions rather than, as traditionally believed, holding them in check?"

His embrace of the legalistic approach to Torah couples with an embrace of the need to enforce works of the law with violence opened him to be dominated by the very power of sin he thought he was opposing.

The law itself is "spiritual," Paul writes. However, when his zealotry sought to exploit the law by using it as a basis for violence, he showed himself to have been "sold into slavery under sin." Thus, Paul was bamboozled concerning the true message of Torah. "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." What he wanted to do was serve the God of Israel, faithfully practice Torah, and live a holy life. However, he actually worshiped idols instead of God. His mind was darkened. He ended up not serving God but doing the opposite ("the very thing I hate"), he served an idol.

The more "successful" Saul the Pharisee was in his persecuting work, the more "faithfully" he followed his rigorous path, the more he sinned. This path turned out to be the wrong path. It set him actively opposing God. He indeed sought to follow the true and good law of God—and was shockingly deceived. When his eyes were opened (Jesus' revelation to him of Jesus' true identity), Paul realized that the "true Torah" (as love of neighbor, 13:8-10) condemned what he was doing.

Paul dwelled in a "body of death" (7:24), both in the sense of being the cause of death to others in his zeal and of being spiritually dead himself due to his idolatry and bondage to the Powers. He needed to be "rescued." He needed outside intervention to save him when he did not even realize he needed to be saved. He was subsumed in a "body of death." However, the rescue came, which is the story of Paul's gospel.

"Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our lord," he concludes chapter seven (7:25). We know that Jesus intervened and shook Paul's world to the foundations. Through his rescue of Paul from death, Jesus made clear that he is indeed God's Messiah, the one worthy of trust who reveals the true meaning of Torah. When Paul trusted in Jesus and realized that Jesus' God was his God, Paul did find liberation from the bondage that had turned him into a murderer. As a consequence, he was transformed from an exclusivist persecutor to a person, in Miroslav Volf's terms, "enriched by otherness."[17]

## Justice apart from idolatry

When we turn back to the conclusion to Paul's argument in Romans 1–3, we see that Paul's own liberation was due to a revelation of Jesus

[17] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 51.

apart from "works of the law." This liberation provides the basis for Paul's response to idolatry. Paul speaks to how the idolatry problem is solved: "Now, apart from the law, the justice of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the justice of God through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ for all who believe" (3:21-22).

Paul has made it clear in his discussion of circumcision that salvation comes apart from works of the law. True circumcision has to do with the heart—living in gratitude and love, practicing genuine justice. Those who are physically circumcised are as if uncircumcised if they are unjust.

God's "justice" here joins the thread throughout the first three chapters that links together justice, injustice, and God's decree/just judgment—all terms with a *dik* root. Another *dik* word is usually translated "justification," pointing to how God will set things right and bring about healing and reconciliation. Contrary to Saul the Pharisee's idea that "justice" should lead to persecution of followers of Jesus, now Paul the Apostle is clear that justice involves reconciliation. It blesses all the families of the earth. God makes this justice known in an epoch-transforming disclosure. God's work is primarily a work to "make known," to transform minds, to enlighten those whose idolatry had darkened their awareness.

The "law and prophets" attest to God's disclosure of genuine justice. They had proclaimed the same message. To be just is to trust God and love God and neighbor and bless all the families of the earth and value mercy more than sacrifice. The law and prophets also attest to problems that arise when the law becomes an idol that underwrites injustice. True Torah, in Paul's view, is fully compatible with the disclosure of God's justice in Jesus. "The Torah witnesses to the purpose of human life for both the circumcised and the uncircumcised, which is to do the good that the Torah itself commands (Rom 2) and that the gospel enables."[18]

Jesus' faithfulness in his life discloses God's justice. As Jesus emphasized in his teaching and practice, the law is to serve human beings, not human beings to serve the law. Jesus' own life of freedom from the Powers and their idolatrous dynamics frees ("redeems," 3:24) all those who trust in his way as the true disclosure of God's justice. Jesus is the most clear and profound expression of God's work already seen in the liberating stories from Israel's scriptures.

Paul emphasizes the abolition of boundary markers as the basis for relationship with God when he asserts "there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (3:22-23). The lusters are idolaters, but equally so are the judgers. They all "fall short of the glory

[18] Harink, "Paul," 377.

of God"—they are all unjust; they all violate the true meaning of Torah; they all fail to live with gratitude and to respond to the truth of God revealed to everyone.

When Paul speaks of Jesus' blood as "a sacrifice of atonement" put forward by God, he refers to Jesus' self-sacrificial life ("the life is in the blood," Lev 17:14) that led to his crucifixion in witness to God's justice. Jesus' was a life of giving to others wherein he persevered embodying God's justice in face of the injustice and violence of the Powers. God "put forward Jesus" in order "to show God's justice" (3:25). Jesus' self-sacrifice was "effective" through his faithfulness (3:25). He was faithful, amidst all opposition, thereby showing God's healing justice to a broken world.

This understanding of God's justice leaves no place for ethnic or religious self-superiority. "What becomes of boasting?" Paul asks. "It is excluded" (3:27). All have equally practiced idolatry. Most importantly, all have equal access to the healing justice of God through trusting in the faithfulness of Jesus. This "boasting" is excluded by the true law ("the law of faithfulness," 3:27), which is Torah as it was intended from the start.

God's gift of Torah reinforced trust in God alone and faithfulness to the vocation of blessing all the families of the earth. It did not provide for "works of the law" (rigid boundary makers) that would underwrite boasting, a sense of superiority that is revealed to be hypocrisy in light of the judgers' own injustices (such as Saul the Pharisee's violence in the name of the works of the law).

Paul concludes, "since God is one, God will justify the circumcised on the ground of faithfulness and the uncircumcised through the same faithfulness" (3:30). Paul does not say here that Jews and Gentiles alike must accept some doctrine about Jesus as divine or as the only valid sacrifice to satisfy God's holiness or honor. Rather, Paul says that for Jew and Gentile alike whole-making (justification) follows from faithfulness to the true message of Torah (reiterated by Jesus): trust in the God of healing justice, not in idols, and live lives befitting such trust.

## Overcoming domination

A most urgent task of theology is to appropriate biblical texts that might aid in our efforts to overcome the spiral of domination, retaliation, and violence that so corrupts our world. I suggest that the text we have considered, Romans 1–3, indeed develops an argument for peaceable life. Paul discusses two kinds of idolatry that lead to violence—the idolatry of empire and the idolatry of boundary defending religion. In both cases, exchanging trust in the kindness of God for trust in created things and ideologies causes a descent into injustice and sacred violence.

To think of contemporary analogies to these expressions of idolatry is an important exercise. We see constantly in the news examples of imperial violence, sexual objectification, social injustice, exclusivist religion, and scapegoating on large and small scales.

Are there strategies for response to these kinds of destructive practices that might be gleaned from our Romans text? I will suggest three.

(1) Paul's analysis and critique challenges us to consider whether ideologies and meta-narratives concerning American exceptionalism, Christian exclusivity, and neo-liberal economics are forms of idolatry. Insofar as they lead to devaluing human beings and communities that get in the way, that are outside the circle of full humanity, or that are merely useful instruments to be used, they become rivals to the true God, love of whom leads to love for all actual human beings.[19]

(2) Paul's analysis also challenges us to use as a key criterion to discern idolatry the simple call to love neighbor.[20] Paul embraces Torah as the best expression of God's will for human beings and the basis for an alternative to idolatry, though not Torah used for boundary markers that validate violence. Rather, Torah as love for neighbor. Any religious or political belief that justifies violence or injustice reflects the presence of idolatry. When we diminish any other human being we diminish our own humanity and blaspheme our God. As Richard Hays concludes concerning Paul and nonviolence, "there is not a syllable in the Pauline letters that can be cited in support of Christians employing violence."[21]

When Paul asserts that God's justice has entered the world apart from the works of the law—through the model of Jesus' self-sacrificial life—he also asserts that this manifestation of God's justice is attested by the law and prophets. The way of Jesus is the way toward genuine justice that was witnessed to by Torah and was confirmed by the proclamation of ancient Israel's prophets.

(3) Paul's analysis and critique ultimately point to the centrality of local communities as the context for resisting idolatry. These

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[19] Walter Wink's critique of our culture's trust in the "myth of redemptive violence" from a biblical perspective remains insightful. See Wink, *Engaging*.

[20] "The notion of making peace between humans and God and between formerly alienated humans is so central to the core of Pauline doctrinal and ethical thought that it is impossible to develop a faithful construal of Pauline thought without peacemaking and/or reconciliation at the core" (Willard M. Swartley, *Covenant of Peace: The Missing Peace in New Testament Theology and Ethics* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006], 192).

[21] Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 331.

communities, such the Christian fellowship in Rome made up of reconciled Jews and Gentiles, provide critical mass and collective discernment to identify and live free from Empire idolatry.[22] They model reconciliation between former rivals and thereby reveal that the use of scripture for violent boundary maintenance is rebellion against God. For Paul in Romans, justice and justification have to do with reconciliation, wholeness in relationships. Such justice witnesses against violence and injustice for all the families of the earth.

[22] Miroslav Volf uses the term "catholic personality" for one who embraces the "new creation" in Christ in a way that leads one to be enriched rather than threatened by otherness. "A catholic personality requires a catholic community" for nurture and sustenance (Volf, *Exclusion*, 51).

# 10. Against empire: A pacifist reading of Romans

*[This essay was first published in Sharon L. Baker and Michael Hardin, eds.,* Peace Be With You: Christ's Benediction Amid Violent Empires *(Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2010), 120-37.]*

John Howard Yoder, the Mennonite theologian and advocate for Christian pacifism, as much as anybody in the last half of the 20th century popularized the Christian critique of Constantinianism.[1] "Constantinianism" refers to a way of looking at power in social life. The term evokes the Roman emperor Constantine who, in the fourth century, initiated major changes in the official policies of Rome vis-à-vis Christians, changes by and large embraced by the Christians. To illustrate the significance of the changes, at the beginning of the fourth century, few Christians performed military service due to a sense of mutual antipathy between Christians and the military. By the end of the fourth century, the Empire had instituted rules that made it illegal for anyone who was not a Christian to be in the military.

Yoder has been criticized for being overly simplistic in his use of Constantine as such a central metaphor.[2] I think the criticisms are largely unfair, but for this essay I want to concern myself with Yoder's application of this symbolic label more than whether it's fully historically

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[1] See, for example, John Howard Yoder, "The Constantinian Sources of Western Social Ethics," in *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 135-51.

[2] See essays by Gerald Schlabach, "Deuteronomic or Constantinian: What Is the Most Basic Problem of Social Ethics?" in Stanley Hauerwas, Chris Huebner, Harry Huebner, and Mark Thiessen Nation, eds., *The Wisdom of the Cross: Essays in Honor of John Howard Yoder* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999) 449-71, and J. Alexander Sider, "Constantinianism Before and After Nicea: Issues in Restitutionist Historiography" in Ben C. Ollenberger and Gayle Gerber Koontz, eds., *A Mind Patient and Untamed: Assessing John Howard Yoder's Contribution to Theology, Ethics, and Peacemaking* (Telford, Pa.: Cascadia Publishing House, 2004), 126-44.

appropriate or not. That is, what Yoder means by Constantinianism is simply this: To believe: the exercise of power is necessarily violent; the state appropriately holds a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence; God's will is funneled through the actions of the heads of state; Christians should work within the structures of their legitimately violent nation-states taking up arms when called upon to do so; and history is best read through the eyes of people in power.

Most people who have read the Gospels agree that Jesus stands in tension with Constantinianism. For most Christians in the past 2,000 years, the Apostle Paul has been seen as a key bridge who prepared the way for the Constantinian shift in the early 4th century CE. Thus, it is no accident that after Constantine, Paul's writings become central for Christian theology (much more so than the gospels)—we see this already in the great "Father of the church," Augustine in the late fourth and early fifth centuries. Augustine is still considered Christianity's greatest interpreter of Paul (along with the Augustinian monk, Martin Luther).

For Yoder, the Constantinian shift was not inevitable and not a good thing. Augustine and Luther are not definitive interpreters of Paul. In fact, Augustine's and Luther's interpretations of Paul have led to great mischief—not least in how these interpretations have leant themselves to presenting Paul (or at least Paul's theology) as a servant of empire.

My interest here is to look at Yoder's non-Constantinian reading of Paul and to suggest that Paul's theology provides a powerful resource that might help us walk with Jesus today as peace churches in a world still all too Constantinian. Yoder's book *The Politics of Jesus*[3] explains what Jesus' life and teaching (his "messianic ethics") have to say to empire. A central part of his argument has to do with a way of reading the New Testament (and, implicitly, the entire Bible) in light of Jesus' life and teaching. This way of reading includes paying close attention to the writings of Paul. One of the many ways Yoder challenges the standard account of Christian faith is to make the case (in some detail) for reading Paul's thought as resting firmly in full continuity with Jesus.

## The messianic ethic

What is the "messianic ethic" that Yoder sees embodied by Jesus? Yoder develops his portrayal of Jesus' ethical message from a reading of the Gospel of Luke.[4] We start with Mary's words in Luke that present the

[3] John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994).

[4] "The Kingdom Coming," *Politics*, 21-59. References to *Politics* in the paragraphs to follow will be in parentheses in the text.

significance of the life she carries in her womb in terms of social transformation, lifting up the lowly and throwing down the powerful.

Luke makes it clear that the hopes among the people with whom Jesus related centered on the social and political renewal of Israel. They expected the Messiah they hoped for to implement a transformation in history. Yoder believes that the key to understanding Jesus' ethical stance lay in recognizing that he embraced these hopes and presented himself as fulfilling them—but in ways different than anticipated. Political? Yes, but a new kind of politics. Jesus works to embody God's kingdom on earth, to serve as a political leader who will indeed liberate Israel and thereby provide "a light to the nations" (2:32). Jesus announces the "good news" of God, the presence of God's kingdom. These terms "gospel" and "kingdom" are both political terms. Jesus' work will have direct social and political significance.

When Jesus begins his public ministry (4:14-30), he affirms two central parts of many people's hopes. First, the time is now for a new work of the Spirit of God through God's anointed Servant ("today this scripture is fulfilled," 4:21), the promised Messiah, and, second, this new work will result in social transformation (this is now "the year of the Lord's favor," 4:19—that is, the time of Jubilee in line with the promises of Torah) (31).

What Jesus had in mind with these opening words is clear, Yoder insists. He announces "a visible, socio-political, economic restructuring of relations among the people of God" (32). As seen in Jesus' hometown, and as would be expected, based on experiences of earlier prophets in Israel, Jesus faced opposition from the start. Since he proposed concrete changes, the forces that benefited from the status quo resisted ferociously.

In face of the opposition, Jesus formally created a counter-culture, a new social entity. Simply to proclaim a subversive message, while upsetting to people in power, would not threaten their status. However, to combine that verbal message with a social group actually embodying the messianic ethics and thereby effecting genuine change—now this would definitely gain the attention of the guardians of the present order. Jesus presented "an alternative to the structures that were there before, challeng[ing] the system as no mere words ever could" (33).

With his initial program stated and his new community established, Jesus goes on (in Luke's story) to spell out in some detail the general social philosophy of this new transformative community he establishes. The messianic ethic he articulates has as its core two key elements: imitating God's love even for God's enemies (6:35-36) and practicing a style of life utterly different from the "natural law" behavior of people in the world (6:32-34)—going beyond simply loving those who love you and doing good to those who do good to you. This ethic, Yoder points out, only

makes sense if the kingdom truly is present and if the kingdom indeed has to do with real, present, social and political life (34).

Jesus' ministry of social transformation led directly to his death. His "public career had been such as to make it quite thinkable that he would pose to the Roman Empire an apparent threat serious enough to justify his execution" (50). One piece of evidence for this assertion may be seen in the comment that one of the disciples' made to the "unknown man" he and his friends walked with on the road to Emmaus after Jesus' crucifixion. "We had hope that he was the one who would redeem Israel" (Luke 24:21). This comment reflects the perception that Jesus' ministry indeed had excited hopes of direct political intervention. His was a call to social transformation where servanthood replaces domination, restorative justice replaces retribution, and inclusion of vulnerable people replaces class warfare.

Yoder makes two central arguments in *Politics*. The first, just summarized, shows that it is possible to read the story of Jesus (in fact, it is the best reading of this story) to teach that he is "of direct significance for social ethics" (11). The second argument is that what Jesus actually said and did in relation to social ethics remains truthful and applicable for our present day. In making this second argument, Yoder turns to the writings of the Apostle Paul since these writings have so often been interpreted in ways that marginalize Jesus' own message.

Rather than seeing Jesus and Paul as representing two more or less mutually exclusive approaches to ethical life, Yoder suggests that we should see Paul as a faithful and accurate interpreter of Jesus. Jesus and Paul are not stage one and stage two of the development of Christian ethics that leads inevitably to Constantinianism. Rather, what we see as be central to Jesus' message should be understood as also central for Paul.

Yoder spells out his affirmation of the close link between Jesus and Paul—and the latter's central relevance for our appropriation of the messianic ethic—in a series of chapters on four key elements of Paul's thought. These include discussions of Paul's portrayal of the social character of justification, Paul's challenge to the hegemony of the Powers, Paul's call to revolutionary subordination, and Paul's political perspective according to Romans 13.

## Justification's social character

One central way Christians have placed a tension between Jesus' life and Paul's theology is how to understand Paul's concept of "justification" (212). In the tradition, the words and deeds of Jesus end up on the margins of theological development as a result of seeing Paul to narrow

the core of the gospel to justification by faith alone. Paul, in this reading, opposed approaches to salvation that could be focused in piety, religious practices, or ethical behavior in ways that turn the believer's attention toward human good works rather than toward God's free gift. However, Yoder asks, "Does not the insistence that justification is by faith alone and through grace alone, apart from any correlation with works of any kind, undercut any radical ethical and social concern?" (213).

Even if Jesus himself taught and practiced a countercultural social ethics, according to the mainstream theological tradition, this part of his message has no long-term relevance. Paul understood that well and zeroed in on what matters most—justification by faith alone apart from "works righteousness."

Is this an accurate reading of Paul's actual teaching? Yoder says it is not. He asserts that in fact for Paul "justification" has at its heart social concerns (215). According to Yoder, Paul's central concerns were with the social character of the messianic community. Would it be one community miraculously including as equals both Jews and Gentiles? Or would it be a loose association of distinct Jewish and Gentile sects? Or would it be made up only of those who "have first to become Jews according to the conditions of pre-messianic proselytism?" (216).

In Galatians, Paul challenged the movement among the Galatians to limit Gentile Christian access to the community based on what was to him a sinfully exclusionary reading of the gospel. Paul himself had violently persecuted followers of Jesus in the name of strict and exclusionary boundary markers that would keep Gentile Christians out (Gal 2:13-14). Paul's theology of justification of faith in Galatians and Romans emerges directly from his own experience as the perpetrator of social injustice—and speaks to how important he now saw it to be that the churches embody the new social reality Jesus inaugurated.

When Paul proclaimed the "righteousness" (or justice) of God—the message of justification—he emphasized that the message goes forth "to both Jew and Gentile." That is, the message goes out to both, together, with the intent that they join in one new community devoted to embodying the way of Jesus. This reconciliation of these former human enemies reflects the reconciliation that is most central for Paul. He was not so much concerned with the end of "hostility" between God and human beings (as a good Jew, he understood God to be merciful) as the end of the hostility between Jew and Gentile.

Paul argued in Galatians (see especially 2:14-21) that Jews and Gentiles must be joined together in one fellowship. "To be 'justified' is to be set right in and for that [new social] relationship." The term "justification" in Galatians hence links with the later language in

Ephesians about "making peace" and "breaking down the wall" that previously alienated Jews and Gentiles. (220)

Paul's most detailed theological statement, his letter to the Romans, also picks up this sense of the social nature of justification. Yoder writes:

> The issue of the polarity of Jew and Gentile is present at major turning points throughout the argument of the book, as well as in the introduction and conclusion. The foreground meaning of the issue of the place of the law was not systematic theological speculation about how human beings are to made acceptable to God, but rather the very concrete Roman situation in which Jew and Greek, legalistic Christian and pagan Christian, needed to accept one another (223-4).

Paul envisions in Romans a faith community that embodies Torah but without the exclusionary emphasis on defending boundary markers that had led Paul himself to become violent. Torah would be embodied most of all, according to 13:8-10, by the Romans loving their neighbors. The place of "justification" here is bringing together Jewish and Gentile Christians in one "just" (whole) community, established "apart from the law" by God's mercy shown in Jesus Christ (Rom 3:21-26).

## Paul's social analysis: The powers that be

Another important way Jesus' messianic ethic has been marginalized is the assumption that he did not give us a social philosophy but spoke rather primarily to the personal realm. "One of the strands in the argument against the normative claims made by or for Jesus has always been that his radical personalism is not relevant to problems of power and structure" (134). Yoder suggests, however, that we have in Paul's writings insights do speak directly to social ethics. And these insights help us make sense of Jesus' message and strengthen both the link between Jesus' social ethics and Paul's and between theirs and ours.

Yoder, borrowing from insights gained from Hendrikus Berkhof,[5] teases out Paul's social thought under the rubric of "the Powers." The language of "the Powers" provides a way to speak of the structures of human life, realities beyond simply our individual persons or even

[5] See Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers*, revised edition (Scottdale, Pa., 1977). In the years since *The Politics of Jesus* was first published in 1972, the authoritative work that has broadened and deepened Yoder's insights has been Walter Wink's three books: *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984); *Unmasking the Powers* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), and *Engaging the Powers* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

beyond simply the sum of separate individuals—our institutions, traditions, social practices, belief systems, organizations, languages, and so on. The Powers language speaks metaphorically about the discrete "personalities" and even "wills" that these structures have.

(1) The Powers are part of the good creation. They were brought into being by God as a "divine gift" (140) that makes human social life possible. When God created human beings, necessarily elements of human life such as language, traditions, and ways of ordering community life all came into existence alongside the individual human beings. And like the original human beings, the Powers were also good.

This aspect of created reality is linked with Jesus himself in Colossians one: "In him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Col 1:16-7).

Today, we may want to say that this "Powers" language (not only "Powers," but also in Colossians one "thrones, dominions, rulers" and in Galatians, "the elemental spirits") metaphorically describes the necessary "regularity, system, and order" that human beings require in order to function socially. The Bible teaches that God has provided for these needs. The provision is part of the goodness of creation (141).

(2) The Powers are fallen. They are so closely linked with humanity that when human beings turned from God—spoken of traditionally as "the fall" and described in the story of Adam and Eve—so, too, did the Powers. It is as if the Powers, as part of created reality, turn against human beings when humans are alienated from God. The fallen Powers then seek to take God's place as the center of human devotion, often becoming idols.

Yoder writes:

> The Powers are no longer active only as mediators of the saving creative purpose of God; now we find them seeking to separate us from the love of God (Rom 8:38); we find them ruling over the lives of those who live far from the love of God (Eph 2:2); we find them holding us in servitude to their rules (Col 2:20); we find them holding us under their tutelage (Gal 4:3). These structures which were supposed to be our servants have become our masters and our guardians (141).

(3) The Powers remain necessary. In spite of their fallenness, the Powers retain their original function. Human beings still require the "regularity, system, and order" that only the Powers provide. Human life still requires ordering; the Powers are still used by God in the sustenance of human social life. Consequently, the Powers are both a huge part of

the problem human beings face in living in our fallen world and a necessary part of whatever solutions might be found. The human dilemma in relation to the Powers is that they simultaneously are a necessary part of our God-ordered existence and an inevitable force that seeks to corrupt this existence and separate us from God.

(4) The Powers must be redeemed. What is required for a potential resolution of the "Powers dilemma" is that the Powers be transformed (they cannot be abolished or ignored). The first step in such a transformation comes when people have their own awareness of and attitude toward the Powers transformed. Ultimately, the Powers have only the power that we give them by our allegiance and acceptance of their distorted portrayal of reality.

We must continue to understand ourselves as subject to the Powers. "Subordination to these powers is what makes us human, for if they did not exist there would be no history nor society nor humanity. If then God is going to save his creatures in their humanity, the Powers cannot simply be destroyed or set-aside or ignored. Their sovereignty must be broken" (144). That is, the Powers must be "put in their place." We need them but they should be our servants not our masters (idols that make us like themselves). Such a putting the Powers in their place can only happen when we see them as what they are—creatures, not God substitutes.

(5) Jesus does redeem the Powers. Paul asserts that Jesus in fact has done precisely what was needed. Jesus lived, Yoder writes, "a genuinely free and human existence. This life brought him, as any genuinely human existence will bring anyone, to the cross. In his death the Powers—in this case the most worthy, weighty representatives of Jewish religion and Roman politics—act in collusion" (144-5).

In responding to Jesus in this way, though, the Powers facilitated their own defeat. Jesus' cross was actually his victory. He remained free from their allure, even in face of the deadly violence. He brings to light their true character. "By the cross (which must always be seen as a unit with the resurrection) Christ abolished the slavery which, as a result of sin, lay over our existence as a menace and an accusation." As Colossians 2:15 says, on the cross he "disarmed" the Powers, "making a public example of them and thereby triumphing over them" (146).

The Powers all too often are accepted as "the gods of the world." Jesus' faithfulness to the death shows that such an exaltation of the Powers is based on deception. God's presence in Jesus reveals that the Powers that kill Jesus are rebels against God, not God's servants. The religious and political leaders serve death, not the God of life. "Obviously, 'none of the rulers of this age,' who let themselves be worshiped as divinities, understood God's wisdom, 'for had they known,

they would not have crucified the Lord of glory' (1 Cor 2:8). Now they are unmasked as false gods by their encounter with Very God; they are made a public spectacle" (146).

Christ's victory over the Powers, already present in the cross, becomes even more clear when God raises Jesus from the dead. In the resurrection, it becomes clear that Jesus' challenge to the Powers was endorsed and vindicated by God. In Jesus, God has ventured into the Powers' territory, remained true to God's loving character, and defeated them (that is, allowed them to defeat themselves by crucifying Jesus).

The Powers' main weapon—deluding people to give the Powers loyalty—was taken from them. They were disarmed by Jesus' faithfulness. Such a dis-illusioning revelation frees all who walk with Jesus to embrace life and wholeness (146-7). No Powers can separate us from God's love unless we let them.

(6) The Christian vocation is to live in freedom from Powers idolatry. Jesus' followers are called and empowered to embody his victory. We do so for the sake of witnessing to the entire world of the truthfulness of God's message of mercy and wholeness. This witness is for the sake of the nations (see Rev 21:24), indeed for all of creation (Rom 8:19).

A crucial part of faithful witness to the Powers, the nations, and all of creation is the formation of communities of liberated people whose life together manifests their freedom from idolatry to the powers. For Paul, the way messianic communities include reconciled Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus stands at the heart of the gospel—reflecting his own transformation from violent zealot to nonviolent servant of Jesus. This social reconciliation, as we saw above, reflects what Paul considered justification to be about.

> The very existence of the church in which Gentiles and Jews, who heretofore walked according to the *stoicheia* ("elemental spirits") of the world, live together in Christ's fellowship, is itself a proclamation, a sign, a token to the Powers that their unbroken dominion has come to an end (147-8).

Romans, when read in light of Paul's theology of the Powers, powerfully witnesses against bondage to the values of Empire and the of Torah-legalism. Both of these idolatries are challenged in Romans, reflecting the dynamics of both sides of the violence and alienation in Paul's own life. Romans proclaims a salvation from Empire-idolatry and from Torah-idolatry. This salvation, accomplished "apart from the law" (that is, apart from legalistic adherence to sharp boundary markers that reflected Torah-idolatry) and also, apart from Empire, must be practiced and thereby displayed to the Powers, to the nations, to all of creation.

**Revolutionary subordination: Neither fight nor flight**

Paul knew, all too well, that freedom in Christ must be lived in a broken world. So, he reflects on how Christian freedom may be lived most faithfully in an unfree world. Yoder draws on Pauline writings concerning subordination in interpersonal relationships in order to deepen his analysis of how Paul reinforces and applies Jesus' ethic. The German term *haustafeln* has commonly been used by scholars in their discussions of these themes. *Haustafeln* means a set of "household rules," expectations for interpersonal relationships.

Yoder sees in these rules, when read in the broader context of the New Testament, what he calls "revolutionary subordination." These household rules call upon Christians to walk with Jesus in our responses to our social situations. They are not regulations that simply endorse status quo power arrangements and require those in the "lower" positions to give all their power to their "superiors."

Paul's *haustafeln*, addressed to those without power, treat his addressees as responsible moral agents who have full (and equal) worth as human beings with those of higher status. These addressees, according to Paul, have indeed been liberated in Christ and welcomed into full membership in Christ's assembly. However, quite likely these addressees are not in positions to claim that liberation fully while at the same time remaining (as they must) wholly committed to Jesus' path of loving their neighbors.

Paul echoes Jesus in holding up two equally crucial convictions. We are free in Christ and we are called to love even our enemies. In this love we refrain from smashing existing social arrangements. Paul's *haustafeln* are best seen as part of his thinking on the processes of negotiating this liberation/path of love tension.

Paul makes challenges contrary to the expectations in the broader culture where submission is a one-way street. In the newness of the messianic community that Paul speaks to, we see a calling on husbands, masters, and parents also to practice mutuality, in some sense subordinating themselves to those "below" them (178).

The main term that Paul uses, *hyptoassesthai*, could best be translated something like "subordinate yourself," better than flatly "submit to." It does not connote slavish obedience. It is best defined in relation to Jesus. According to Paul in Philippians two, Jesus, being free, subordinated himself for our sake and gave himself for us. And, Paul emphasizes in Philippians 2:5, believers should "let this same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" (180).

This is how Yoder states it: "It is natural to feel Christ's liberation reaching into every kind of bondage, and to want to act in obedience

with that radical shift. But precisely because of Christ we shall not impose that shift violently upon the social order beyond the confines of the church" (185). Of course, within the church, Christians have every right to challenge fellow Christian husbands, parents, and slaveholders to relinquish their dominance (as we see in Paul's letter to Philemon).

In Romans, Paul does not directly discuss the *haustafeln*. However, taking seriously what he has in mind when he does discuss them might help us better understand his concerns in Romans. The letter has at its heart a strong concern for mutual subordination among the Christians in Rome. Paul develops his powerful theology of justification in order to emphasize, by the time we get to the end of the book, the crucial importance to the Roman Christians of loving one another (13:8-10), refraining from judging each other (14:1-12), avoiding making one another stumble (14:13-23), pleasing others and not oneself (15:1-6), and recognizing that the gospel is for Jews and Gentiles together (15:7-13).

Paul advocates a genuine revolution against the Roman Empire's hegemony. However, the revolutionary means he advocates are consistent with the healing mercy of God extended to the entire world. The certainty Paul has—and all followers of Jesus should have—in the world-transforming efficacy of God's healing mercy undergirds lives of patient love, extended even (as with God Godself) toward enemies.

## Turning interpretations of "Romans 13" on their head

All that has gone before in this chapter prepares us now to turn to Romans 13. This passage (specifically 13:1-7) often serves as a counter-testimony in the Christian tradition to the belief that Paul taught nonviolent resistance to the Roman Empire. As well, even more importantly for Yoder, Romans 13 is often seen as evidence that Paul did not understand Jesus' messianic ethic as normative for social ethics.

Our interpretation of Romans 13:1-7 should begin with reading these verses in light of their broader biblical context. From Egypt in Genesis and Exodus, then Assyria, Babylon, Persia, and down to Rome in the book of Revelation, the Bible shows empires rebelling against God and hindering the healing vocation of God's people. The entire Bible could appropriately be read as a manual on how people who follow Torah in seeking to love God and neighbor negotiate the dynamics of hostility, domination, idolatry, and violence that almost without exception characterize the world's empires.

Romans 13:1-7 stands in this general biblical context of antipathy toward empires. This context should lead us to turn to these Romans verses assuming their concern to be something like this: given Rome's

fallenness, how might we live within this empire as people committed uncompromisingly to love of neighbor? Paul has no illusions about Rome being in a positive sense a servant of God. However, we know from biblical stories that God nonetheless can and does use the corrupt nations for God's purposes. Yet these nations also remain under God's judgment.

Turning to Romans, we see that Paul discusses two major strains of idolatry in chapters 1–3: (1) the Empire and its injustices that demand the highest loyalty and (religious) devotion and (2) a legalistic approach to Torah that leads to its own kind of violence (witness Paul's own death-dealing zealotry). Paul believes these universal problems provide an opportunity for him to witness to the universality of God's healing response. Indeed, all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Nonetheless, all may find found salvation in Jesus. The sovereignty of hostility to God ultimately bows to the sovereignty of God's healing love.

In Romans 4–8 Paul further develops this message of the mercies of God—reflected in Abraham's pre-circumcision trust in God that serves as our model (chapter 4), in God's transforming love even of God's enemies (chapter 5), in Paul's own liberation from his idolatrous "sacred violence" (chapter 7), and in the promise that creation itself will be healed as God's children come to themselves (chapter 8).

Chapters 9–11 involve Paul's deeper wrestling with his own experience as a Jew who had failed to recognize God's mercy revealed in Jesus. However, Paul's failure (and the failure of many of his fellows) ultimately did not stop the revelation of God's mercy. God's electing mercy will have its merciful conclusion even with the unfaithfulness of so many of the elect people. Finally, in chapters 14–16, in response to this certainty about God's mercy, Paul sketches the practical outworking of living in light of this mercy—all for the sake of spreading the gospel to the ends of the earth (i.e., "Spain," 15:28).

Romans 12 and 13 should be read in the context of this broader flow of thought in the book. They make up a single section in the structure of Romans. "Chapter 12 begins with a call to nonconformity, motivated by the memory of the mercies of God, and finds the expression of this transformed life first in a new quality of relationships within the Christian community and, with regard to enemies, in suffering. The concept of love then recurs in 13:8-10. Therefore, any interpretation of 13:1-7 which is not also an expression of suffering and serving love must be a misunderstanding of the text in its context" (196).

Yoder helps us, finally, in looking more closely at the actual passage, 13:1-7, itself.

(1) Paul calls for a kind of revolutionary subordination in relation to government. These verses begin with a call to subordination, not literally

to obedience. The term here reflects Paul's notion of "the ordering of the Powers of God. Subordination is significantly different from unconditional obedience. For example, the Christian who refuses to worship Caesar but still permits Caesar to put him or her to death, is being subordinate even though not obeying" (209).

(2) Paul reject violent revolution. "The immediate concrete meaning of this text for the Christian Jews in Rome, in the face of official anti-Semitism and the rising arbitrariness of the Imperial regime, is to call them away from any notion of revolution or insubordination. The call is to a nonviolent attitude toward a tyrannical government" (202-3).

(3) Paul also intends to relativize the affirmation of any particular government. While opposing revolution, these verses also do nothing to imply active moral support for Rome (or any other particular state). Paul here echoes Revelation 13, a text often contrasted with Romans 13. Both advocate subordination in relation to whatever powers that be are in place (201)—even along with the implication (more clear in Revelation) that this particular government is quite idolatrous and blasphemous.

(4) God orders the Powers—a different notion than ordaining the Powers. God is not said to create or institute or ordain any particular governments, but only to order them. "What the text says is that God orders them, brings them into line, that by God's permissive government God lines them up with God's purpose" (201-2). This sense of "ordering" implies that God's participation in human life is more indirect than often understood. All states are "ordered" by God and thus in some sense serve God's purposes. However, no states are directly blessed by God as God's direct representatives—least of all the Empire that executed Jesus.

(5) Nothing here speaks to Christians as participants in the state's work. "The functions described in 13:3-4 do not include any service that the Christian is asked to render. The 'things due to the authority' listed in 13:6-7 do not include any kind of participation or service" (203). Whatever it is that the state does, Paul does not believe Christians themselves have a responsibility to perform those tasks—especially if the tasks violate the call to neighbor love.

(6) Paul calls for discrimination. "Pay to all what is due them" echoes Jesus' call for discernment: "give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's" tells us to be sure not to give Caesar the loyalty that belongs only to God. 13:7 says "render to all what is due them." 13:8 says "nothing is due to anyone except love." Is what Caesar claims is due to him part of the obligation of love? (208).

(7) Romans 13 is consistent with the Sermon on the Mount. The logic that uses Romans 13:1-7 as a basis for participation in coercive practices relies on a disjunction between Romans 13:1-7 and the Sermon on the

Mount. However, there is no disjunction. Both Romans 12–13 as a unit and Matthew 5–7 instruct Christians to be nonviolent in all their relationships, including the social. Both call on the disciples of Jesus to renounce participation in vengeance. Both call Christians "to respect and be subject to the historical process in which the sword continues to be wielded and to bring about a kind of order under fire, but not to perceive in the wielding of the sword their own reconciling ministry" (210).

Romans 13:1-7, when read in light of Paul's overall theology, states how the revolutionary subordination of Christians contributes to Christ's victory over the Powers. Christians do so by holding together their rejection of empire-idolatry with their commitment to active pacifism. Their most radical and subversive task is to live visibly as communities where the enmity that had driven Paul himself to murderous violence is overcome—Jew and Gentile joined together in one fellowship, a witness to genuine peace in a violent world.

Such communities empower a freedom from the Powers idolatry. These are some of the imperatives from Romans 12–13 for living out such freedom:

• Nonconformity to the Roman world fueled by minds that are transformed, being shaped by God's mercy shown in Jesus rather than by the culture's "elemental spirits."

• Humility and shared respect in the ministry of the faith community that recognizes and affirms all the gifts of those in the community.

• Active love for one another leading to a renunciation of vengeance and a quest to overcome evil with good rather than heightening the spiral of violence with violent responses.

• Respect for God's ordering work in human government that, fallen and rebellious as it may be, still serves God's purposes.

• A commitment to doing good (following Jesus' model that implicitly recognizes that genuinely doing good as defined by the gospel could lead to a cross) and repudiation of temptations to seek to overcome evil with evil through violent resistance.

• Work at discerning what belongs to God and what is allowable to be given to Caesar.

• An overarching commitment to authentic practice of Torah, summarized (following Jesus) as love of neighbor (here as in Jesus' Good Samaritan story, including the enemy).

## On being a peace church in a Constantinian world

I want to close with a few brief reflections on how this analysis of Paul might be applied to our present.

(1) No to empire. Yoder challenges us to apply Jesus' messianic ethic to our political life. With the awareness of Jesus message as political, we are sensitized to see the entire Bible from creation to the New Jerusalem as a critique of empire and guide to faithful resistance to empire.

Yoder seeks to hold together two uncompromisable convictions: resistance to empire and commitment to pacifism. Resistance without pacifism ends up only heightening the spiral of violence and serving the domination of the fallen Powers. Pacifism without resistance validates the stereotypes of the cultured despisers of pacifism—parasitic, withdrawal focused on purity, irresponsible.

One key lesson to learn from Paul, Jesus, John of Patmos, and the other prophets is how to recognize the self-serving propaganda of rulers, how to recognize the dynamics of "lording it over" and to insist on the norm of servanthood as our key criterion for political discernment. Such a criterion should foster a sense of profound suspicion not only toward the more obvious imperial moves of the neo-cons but also of the "soft imperialists" and their "humanitarian interventions."

(2) No to violent resistance. We must not let the Empire set our agenda or determine our means of resistance. We must not, in seeking to overcome evil, become evil ourselves.[6] We learn from our Yoderian reading of Paul that for those who would walk with Jesus, what should determine our agenda in relation to empire should not be anger and hostility. Nor should it be a desire to wrest the steering wheel from the right-wingers through force and get the U.S. Empire back on track as a benevolent superpower.

As Yoder points out, the true problem with empire is not that some empires are not benevolent enough in their domination. It is the practice of domination itself. So, ultimately whatever resistance to empire that hopes genuinely to operate in harmony with God's intentions for human social life must repudiate domination itself. Resistance that leads to more domination but with different figureheads on top ultimately is not nearly radical enough.

(3) Yes to communities of resistance. According to Paul, what God brings forth in response to human brokenness and the oppressions of the nations and their empires are communities of people who know God's peace and share that peace with all the families of the earth.

The formation and witness of these communities leads ultimately, in the biblical story, to the healing of the nations. Paul especially emphasizes

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[6] See Nicholson Baker, *Human Smoke: The Beginnings of World War II, the End of Civilization* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008). Baker raises powerful questions about the moral impact of the prosecution of the War on American and British societies.

the significance of these communities being made up of reconciled enemies. In his response to Rome's hegemony, Paul works tirelessly to create an alternative social reality, the *ekklesia*, that practices the politics of Jesus within the Pax Romana. These new communities, made up of Jesus and Gentile alike, provide a context for human flourishing.

This kind of politics remains the call for we believers today who live within the Pax Americana. The most politically responsible work followers of Jesus can engage in is the work of sustaining communities of healing. Places where enemies are reconciled, where prisoners are set free, where Jesus' triumph over the Powers is truly embodied.

# 11. Biblical apocalyptic: What is being revealed?

*[This essay was first published in Ted Grimsrud and Michael Hardin, eds.* Compassionate Eschatology: The Future as Friend *(Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 3-27.]*

Eschatology all too often means judgment, vengeance, the bad guys and gals getting their "just desserts." In part because of the titillating allure of violence, and in part because of the attraction of being in a story when our side wins and the other side loses, eschatology is pretty popular.

But is this kind of eschatology Christian? What might eschatology look like in light of Jesus? If we look at Jesus' life and teaching, we won't find a clearer statement of his hierarchy of values than his summary of the law and prophets: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, and soul—and, likewise, you shall love your neighbor as you love your self. This love of God and neighbor is why we are alive. The "end" that matters is our purpose for being here, not knowledge we think we have about future events. Our purpose is to love, the eschatological theme that is central if we do eschatology as if Jesus matters.[1]

To talk about the "end of the world" biblically points us to our purpose for living in the world. The word "end" can have two different meanings. (1) "End" means the conclusion, the finish, the last part, the final outcome. In this sense, "the end of the world" is something future and has to do with the world ceasing to exist. (2) "End" also, though, means the purpose, what is desired, the intention. "End of the world," in this sense, is, we could say, what God intends the world to be for. In this sense of "end," the "end times" have to do with why we live in time.[2]

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[1] Ted Grimsrud, *Theology as If Jesus Matters: An Introduction to Christianity's Main Convictions* (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2009), especially chapter 12: "The End Times are Now."

[2] Ted Grimsrud, "Why are We Here? Two Meditations on an Ethical Eschatology," in *Embodying the Way of Jesus: Anabaptist Convictions for the Twenty-First Century* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2007), 179-89.

The book of Revelation is usually seen as the book of the Bible most concerned with "the end times." The book of Revelation has always vexed interpreters. Rarely has it been seen as an indispensable source for Christian social ethics; often it has been seen more as an ethical problem.[3] I want to suggest, though, that Revelation has potential to speak powerfully to 21st-century Christians about our purpose in life.

The Bible generally speaks in the future tense in service of exhortation toward present faithfulness. The Bible's concern is that the people of God live in such a way that we will be at home in the New Jerusalem—not with predictions about when and how the future will arrive.

How do we relate "eschatology" with "apocalyptic"? Let me suggest that biblical apocalyptic (which I will differentiate from the genre "apocalyptic literature" that modern scholars have developed) actually is best understood similarly to eschatology. The biblical use of apocalyptic language, like the broader use of prophetic and eschatological language, serves the exhortation to faithfulness in present life.

I take up the issues of eschatology and biblical apocalyptic from the standpoint of my commitment to the gospel of peace, and more particularly in trying to construct Christian theology that serves this commitment. I believe that the three main sources for theology—the Bible, tradition, and present experience—all give us mixed signals concerning the gospel of peace and its applicability for our world (which, for example, is why so many Christians in this country support military actions). For the clarity we need, I think it's important to add a fourth source for constructive theology: hope or vision.[4] Where do we want to go? What do we hope for? And, then, how might we interpret the Bible, tradition, and present experience in ways that serve this hope? That is what I propose to do with the book of Revelation.[5]

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[3] For a full-blown critique of Revelation and its role in the history of Christianity, see Jonathan Kirsch, *A History of the End of the World: How the Most Controversial Book in the Bible Changed the Course of Western Civilization* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006).

[4] I develop this fourfold approach to theological method more fully in Grimsrud, *Embodying*, 37-53.

[5] In what follows I will be drawing on an ever-expanding school of peaceable interpretations of Revelation. The founding text for this school was G. B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine* (London: A. & C. Black, 1966). Some of the other important contributions to this approach to Revelation include: Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Brian Blount, *Revelation: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009); M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989); Mark Bredin, *Jesus, Revolutionary of Peace: A Nonviolent Christology in the Book of Revelation* (Carlisle, Great Britain: Paternoster

My essay will test the following thesis concerning biblical apocalyptic in service of a compassionate eschatology: What biblical apocalyptic reveals may be seen especially in the formation of communities of faith called to resist imperial hegemony. The power that matters most in biblical apocalyptic is the power of love that sustains these communities in the face of empire.

## The question of power

The fifth chapter of the book of Revelation begins with a poignant image. The seer, John of Patmos, writes in chapter four of an awe-inspiring vision of the throne of God. Surrounding the throne in John's vision, the entire animate creation worships the one on the throne. In chapter five, though, a shadow falls. John sees a scroll in the right hand of the one on the throne. From how John describes this scroll ("written on the inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals," 5:1) and how he regards it (begging for it to be opened), we get the impression that what he's describing should be understood as, in some sense, history fulfilled, the completion of the project initiated in Genesis one.

The poignancy enters when John sees the scroll but is overcome with grief at the thought that it may not be opened. Who can open the scroll? "No one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it" (5:3).

This account provides us with a metaphor that speaks to human history. How can history be redeemed? How can the human project be redirected from brokenness and alienation toward healing? Human beings tend to think of power in terms of the ability to control events, to force others to do one's will even if that means coercing them. Political power is often linked with the ability to use violence. We are most likely to answer the question of how to open the scroll by asserting the need to "force" it open, to open it by our firepower.

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Press, 2003); Jacques Ellul, *Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation* (New York: Seabury Press, 1977); Michael Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011); J. Nelson Kraybill, *Apocalypse and Allegiance: Worship, Politics, and Devotion in the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2010); Harry O. Maier, *Apocalypse Recalled: The Book of Revelation after Christendom* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002); Barbara Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation*, 2nd edition (New York: Basic Books, 2005); Christopher C. Rowland, "The Book of Revelation," in Leander Keck, ed., *The New Interpreters Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 12:501-743; John P. M. Sweet, *Revelation* (London: SCM Press, 1979); and John R. Yeatts, *Revelation* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003).

In Revelation five, John, like most people, seems to assume the scroll will be opened by firepower, power as domination. He weeps bitterly when he thinks no one can be found to open the scroll. However, John then hears an audacious claim. One of the elders immediately comforts John. "Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals" (5:4). These images evoke a mighty warrior king (or Messiah) who will open the scroll with the use of force.

John's vision continues, though, with a shockingly different claim. He may have heard the promise of a warrior king to open the scroll, but he actually sees something altogether different. "Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. He went and took the scroll from the right hand of the one who was seated on the throne. When he had taken the scroll, the four creatures and the twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb" (5:6-8). According to the next few verses, the creatures and elders, ultimately the rest of creation, worship this Lamb as the one who does have the power to open the scroll.

## Biblical "apocalyptic"

How does this claim for the power of the Lamb correspond with the claim that power-as-domination is the only way to address the huge problems of human history?

To answer this question, we need to reflect on the message of the biblical materials known as "apocalyptic." If we focus primarily on the biblical language of "revelation" (from the Greek *apokalypsis*) and consider this language in the context of the rest of the Christian Bible, we will find that power according to biblical apocalyptic does cohere with John's vision in Revelation five. The power biblical apocalyptic understands to be decisive in human history, the power that will "open the scroll," is the power of suffering love and communal faithfulness, not the power of weapons of war and coercive force.

The term "apocalyptic" as a label for a genre of ancient Jewish and Christian literature comes from the first several words in Revelation: "The revelation (*apokalypsis*) of Jesus Christ." The linking together of apocalypse with Jesus Christ provides our first essential clue for understanding power in biblical apocalyptic. The power of biblical apocalyptic is the power of Jesus Christ.

Most contemporary writing on biblical apocalyptic in general, and Revelation particularly, usually does not link "apocalyptic" with "Jesus

Christ." We don't allow "Jesus Christ" to shape our understanding of "apocalyptic." Approaches to apocalyptic may be divided into three general categories, each of which by and large shares with the others the same sense of what "apocalyptic" conveys.

To think apocalyptically, it is said, is to think in terms of visions of fire from the sky that judges and destroys. The "apocalypse" is a time of catastrophe, of dramatic change, the end of what is and the birth of something drastically different. Apocalyptic power, it is implied, is top-down power, the power of might and coercion, vengeance and judgment. As a consequence of God's exercise of such power, every knee is forced to bow before God – either in joyful submission or in defeated submission.

The three general responses to apocalyptic (all understanding apocalyptic in roughly the same way) include (1) avoidance, (2) historical literalism, and (3) futuristic literalism.

1. *Avoidance*. Many Christians have simply ignored apocalyptic. It has been seen as literature of extremists. Many in the early church disputed the acceptance of Revelation into the canon. Much later, John Calvin wrote commentaries on the entire Bible, except Revelation. Martin Luther taught the avoidance of Revelation.

More recently, many "mainstream" Christians continue to avoid Revelation, willingly giving over the discussion of this part of the Bible to the prophecy purveyors. They see Revelation as a book of fear and violent judgment that reinforces many of the most uncivilized tendencies of religious people—and thus is best avoided as much as possible.

2. *Historical literalism*. Beginning with the publication of Albert Schweitzer's *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*[6], the consensus view for most historical-critical scholars has been to accept the apocalypse-as-world-catastrophe-and-divine-judgment view as being what Jesus, Revelation, and the rest of earliest Christianity expected to come soon—erroneously. Since Schweitzer, the question of how thoroughly this apocalyptic view should be applied to early Christian thought has been vigorously debated. But the general sense that biblical apocalyptic concerns violent power and judgment has not been contested.[7]

Neither the avoiders nor the historical literalists themselves see biblical apocalyptic as valid for our present. The third approach shares a

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[6] Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, translated by W. Montgomery (New York: Macmillan, 1906).

[7] For two contemporary Schweitzerian interpretations, see Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) and Dale C. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth: Millennarian Prophet* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).

similar sense of what biblical apocalyptic's perspective was, but this view affirms that this perspective does remain valid for today.

3. *Future literalism.* Throughout the past 2,000 years, a few Christians have understood the visions of biblical apocalyptic writings, especially Revelation, to be predictive of actual future events in human history. This future prophetic view found powerful expression in the writings of 19th-century British reformer John Darby who formulated a thorough system of interpretation called "dispensationalism" that has shaped countless perspectives on biblical apocalyptic.[8]

In recent years, dispensational theology has gained wide currency through the phenomenally popular science fiction novels in the Left Behind series. These books articulate a theology of future judgment, of apocalypse as destruction and recreation, vengeance and reward. Though presented as fiction, in many ways the vision of these books is believed to be an articulation of the kinds of things that their writers (and many of their millions of readers) expect literally to happen.[9]

In all these three approaches, then, the assumption that biblical apocalyptic understands power in terms of force, coercion, and top-down impositions of God's will has remained unchallenged. However, turning back to Revelation chapter five, we may ask whether these assumptions about power accurately capture the sense of what John the Seer believes allows the Lamb to open the scroll. And, in light of our long history of wars and rumors of wars, we must ask whether all our "myth of redemptive violence"[10] might not be utterly counter-productive in relation to the universal human longing for the scroll to be opened, brokenness to be healed, and wrong-doing to be dealt with in ways that bring genuine redemption.

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[8] The authoritative history of this movement is Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

[9] The by now classic text of popular dispensational theology and likely still the best introduction is Hal Lindsey, *The Late, Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Books, 1970). For a sample of many volumes critiquing this popular movement see Nicholas Guyatt, *Have a Nice Doomsday: Why Millions of Americans are Looking Forward to the End of the World (*New York: Harper Perennial, 2007); Rossing, *Rapture*; Glenn W. Shuck, *Marks of the Beast: The Left Behind Novels and the Struggle for Evangelical Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2005); and Michael Standaert, *Skipping Toward Armageddon: The Politics and Propaganda of the Left Behind Novels and the LaHaye Empire* (Brooklyn, NY: Soft Skull Press, 2006).

[10] This term was coined by Walter Wink of the religious-like belief people have in the efficacy of violence—Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in an Age of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

## Apocalyptic power in Revelation

Revelation does convey a sense of crisis with possible catastrophes and a polarized view of reality. We see clearly separated forces of good and evil at war with one another and demanding absolute allegiance. Life and death themselves are at stake in relation to the choice of people's loyalties. However, we need to pay close attention to the way power is construed in the book in order to have a better sense of how John envisions the scroll to be opened and the conflicts to be resolved.

What characterizes "apocalyptic power" according to the book of Revelation? Let's look at four themes.

(1) First, the book's self-designation as a "revelation of Jesus Christ" (1:1) reminds readers of the gospel message of Jesus' persevering, self-giving, transforming love as the creative power of the universe—in direct contrast with the type of power characteristic of the Roman Empire and all other human empires (signified in Revelation as the "Beast").

This contrast reflects Revelation's agenda. The "revelation" of Jesus also reveals the nature of the empire that demanded Christians' loyalty. John's visions disillusion. To see through eyes of faith in the Lamb and his way undercuts the Beast's demands. The power to perceive the character of the true God and the contrast between that character and the true nature of the Beast stands at the heart of biblical apocalyptic.

The story of Jesus continually portrayed his message as a challenge to sight. See the world it in light of Jesus' good news of God's love. In the context of the rest of the New Testament, John's attempt to convey the message of Jesus as a "revelation" mostly underscores how "correct sight" was at the heart of the Christian message.

Revelation's urgency stems from John's concern about the perennial struggle of people to worship God aright and not trust in idols. The Hebrews faced the choice between believing in the inevitability of the domination of Pharaoh's empire or trusting in Yahweh, and later faced the choice between the Babylon and then Persia and Yahweh. Jesus challenged his followers to choose between God and Caesar. For John, a key choice his audience faced was who would be the object of their trust—the God of the Bible or almighty Rome. To respond appropriately to this challenge, his audience (he believed) needed to have clear sight. They needed a reminder—a revelation of the true message of Jesus.

The book of Revelation came into being in the late first century.[11] Though traditionally, Revelation has been seen as set in the context of

[11] For what follows, I draw on Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999).

intense persecution from the Roman Empire, more recent scholarship has tended toward understanding overt, widespread persecution not to be the likely environment. Certainly, the book indicates spots of persecution among the seven churches, though only one direct case of martyrdom is mentioned. However, among the seven churches, John fears the conformity of his fellow Christians to the surrounding culture much more than immediate persecution.

John seems mostly concerned with emphasizing this choice: follow the way of Jesus or seek to fit in comfortably with the imperial Asia Minor environment. The vehemence of John's rhetoric and the drama of his visions challenge the imaginations of his readers to recognize the deep-seated dangers of making wrong choices more than speak to obvious and extreme cases of overt persecution.

The power of the Roman Empire stemmed from its control over cultural religious practices that reinforced the popular sense of the Empire's status as blessed by the gods, inevitable, and all dominating. Dissent from these practices would lead to the threat of sanctions, including overt violence. These cultural religious practices lent legitimacy to the entire socio-historical arrangement of the first-century Roman Empire. The empire had a strong presence in each of the seven cities mentioned in Revelation two and three; several of these cities, in particular, were centers of imperial religion, hosting major temples.

The key "revelation" in John's text is not actually about particular events that literally are to come. The key "revelation" has to do with perceiving the importance of this fundamental choice of loyalties.

Why would John have been so certain that Rome's vision for human life was incompatible with Jesus'? Many of the achievements of the empire served human well-being—the cessation of the many civil wars and other violent conflicts that had plagued the Mediterranean world, the development of secure transportation routes that allowed commerce to flourish, the development of a common language that allowed people from all over the empire fruitfully to share life together.

Yet, for John, the order of the empire rested on a core of violence and injustice.[12] John feared that Christians' acceptance of the empire's construal of reality would separate them from the God of Jesus. He refers to the empire's dependence upon violence and coercion as its bases for authority. He understood the expansion of the practices of commerce to be resting on oppression, even trafficking in the exploitation of human

[12] "What John sees, for the first time, is that the primordial Dragon has come to represent the spiritual power behind empire….Now evil is represented, not as the threat of anarchy, but as the system of order that institutionalizes violence as the foundation of international relations" (Wink, *Engaging*, 90).

souls (18:13). The empire ultimately links with the spiritual reality of the powers of evil that in some sense held responsibility for all the murders of authentic prophets and saints throughout the years (18:24). So, Revelation presents "apocalyptic power" as linked with the revelation of Jesus Christ, whose way stands in direct contrast with the empire's way.

(2) The second characteristic of power according to biblical apocalyptic may be seen in the fruit of God's "apocalyptic intervention." This intervention does not turn out to lead to the catastrophic end of human history nor the massive and violent punishment of God's human enemies. Rather, God intervenes to create and sustain faith communities that stand over against Rome—in this world, not in some "after-world."

John seeks to foster a sense of crisis, presenting visions and proclamations of impending traumas and great conflicts. Chapter 12 conveys first a war in heaven. "Michael and his angels [fighting] against the dragon" (12:7). Then the dragon is thrown out of heaven and takes the war to earth, making war on the children of the woman, "those who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus" (12:17). The surrounding chapters contain many more images of conflict, trauma, intense struggle, and suffering.

From these visions, we get Revelation's stereotypical "apocalyptic" sense of unimaginable and world-ending catastrophes. However, when we read more carefully, we will see something else actually going on. These visions do not mean to predict literal events. Rather, they clarify the importance of the churches for God's purposes in the world, and they push those churches to embody a genuine social alternative to Rome.

Chapter five has already made clear that there will be no future war. The decisive battle is past. When the Lamb was slain and rose back to life, the victory was won. The pictures of crises and catastrophes serve a different purpose than predicting some future, wide-open battle. They portray the continual struggle to perceive that the Lamb's victory is genuine and worth shaping Christians' lives around. They contrast the Lamb's claims with the competing claims from Babylon concerning the nature of power and the outcome of history.

These visions' sense of crisis intend to empower the community of the followers of the Lamb to stay together and resist the powers of Babylon. God's "apocalyptic" intervention to bring salvation through the Lamb's faithfulness creates and sustains communities of resistance. God's apocalypse (revelation) empowers these communities for the long haul of following the Lamb wherever he goes and living as faithful witnesses who "conquer" through suffering love rather than violence and the sword.

The revelation of Jesus Christ that constitutes this book most of all reveals that those who worship the Lamb embody within their common

life and faithful witness the same kind of power that enables the Lamb to open the scroll. "Apocalyptic power" finds its paradigmatic expression in the formation and sustenance of these communities. In making this point, Revelation continues in the biblical apocalyptic tradition as seen in Paul's writing, Jesus' proclamation, the visions of Daniel, the prophesies we call Second Isaiah, and the exodus story: God intervenes in the midst of catastrophic events to create and sustain communities of resistance. God's apocalyptic intervention bears fruit: communities of resistance empowered to follow the Lamb wherever he goes and witness to the ultimacy of suffering love as the fundamental rule of the universe.

(3) A third characteristic of "apocalyptic power" may be seen in how it provides sustenance for those communities of resistance. John writes to encourage the actual communities he describes in chapters two and three. And his message is not simply, hang on tight for a short time, the end of history will soon come. Rather, John encourages his readers to establish ways of being that will sustain them over time.

Revelation emphasizes the sustenance of faith communities thus:

a. The book begins with the affirmation that Jesus is "the ruler of the kings of the earth" (1:5). Given what follows in the book, this affirmation instills in John's readers a sense that right now the churches' "ruler" is supreme over all other rulers. John goes on to emphasize the present fruit of Jesus' work: he "loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and makes us to be a kingdom (or, 'empire'), priests serving his God and Father" (1:6). It is through the common life of the followers of Jesus in their faith communities that they share in Jesus' rule, exist as an alternative "kingdom" to the Roman Empire, and freely serve God.

b. Later in the chapter, John relays a vision of Jesus ("one like the Son of Man," 1:12) walking among the "seven golden lampstands," that is, among the churches (1:20). This vision encourages John's readers with Jesus' presence among them as "the living one" who has come back from the dead and has "the keys of Death and Hades" (1:19).

c. The part of Revelation that most clearly underscores John's use of apocalyptic exhortation as a means to sustain the life of the communities of faith over time (rather than prepare them for an immediate end of history) may be found in chapters two and three. These seven messages anchor the book as a whole in the world of actual congregations facing actual challenges to faithfulness.

d. The vision of the slain Lamb standing victorious as a present reality based on past action in chapter five underscores that the congregations are challenged to walk faithfully with the one who already holds the outcome of history. This sense of the definitive triumph of the Lamb serves to encourage the congregations that their embodied suffering love

coheres completely with the true power of the one seated on the throne who creates, sustains and brings to fulfillment.

e. One of the more ambiguous visions in Revelation comes right after the vision of the triumphant Lamb. Chapter six begins, "I saw the Lamb open one of the seven seals…" Then follows the first of several series of catastrophic plagues. Conquering, war, famine, martyrdom, and the like erupt as the seals are broken. The vision of the Lamb opening the scrolls shows how even the terrible events of human history are not able to overcome the history-transforming work of the love of the Lamb. The portrayal of the Lamb revealing the contents of the scroll, a revelation that ultimately unveils New Jerusalem as the destination of all who allow themselves to be transformed by the Lamb's love (including "kings of the earth," 21:24), means to encourage the congregations with the sense that the traumas they experience and see in the course of human history do not mean that God's transforming work is null and void.

f. Throughout the book we read of visions of multitudes of the Lamb's followers worshiping, offering thanksgiving, reiterating their commitments to the Lamb and the one seated on the throne as the true sovereigns of human life. These worship visions model for believers the spirit of worship that should characterize their common life. They also remind believers that no matter how overwhelming the plagues may seem, the God of Jesus remains the true God and worthy of their trust.

g. Chapter thirteen gives striking visions of the Beast's immense power. Rather than intimidating the believer, these visions must be read in the context of the entire book and the triumphant Lamb. When read thus, their role is not so much to fill the reader with fear as to help the reader discern the true character of the Empire. With such discernment, John's readers will be empowered to clarify their loyalties and resist the tendency to accept the Empire's claims to be their true "benefactor."

h. The flip-side to the visions linking Rome with the Beast, the Great Harlot, and Babylon the Great, may be seen in the celebration of the marriage of the Lamb in chapter nineteen. The "bride" is none other than the community of faith John has been exhorting throughout this book. The possibility of joining this celebration follows from the bride having "made herself ready" (19:7) through her faithfulness.

i. We have one final example of how Revelation seeks to sustain the life of the community of faith over the long haul in the book's final contrast: two different communities, Babylon and New Jerusalem.

John begins chapter seventeen, the vision of Babylon's downfall, with these words: "Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, 'Come, I will show you the judgment of the great whore…." (17:1). Then, in chapter twenty-one, the vision of New

Jerusalem's emergence is introduced with the same words: "Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls …came and said to me, 'Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb" (21:9). The book reaches its conclusion with this contrast. In which of these two communities will you all find your home? The answer to this question is not simply a matter of intellectual assent; one's citizenship follows from the shape of one's entire life. So, the apocalyptic power of Revelation serves to encourage faith communities.

(4) The fourth characteristic of apocalyptic power may be seen in the contrast between the two ways of conquering portrayed in the book. These two ways of conquering characterize the difference between citizens of Babylon and citizens of the New Jerusalem. John does see a spiritual struggle defining human existence. It is either "conquer" or "be conquered." But, for those who would be conquerors, the question centers on the nature of the conquering.

The ones in the messages to the churches in chapters two and three who will receive rewards are labeled "conquerors." Most of the rewards in those messages anticipate later visions in the book, underscoring the unity between the exhortations to the actual faith communities and the visions that follow. That is, the purpose of the later visions serves the exhortations to the actual communities.

What kind of power gains one a reward as a "conqueror"? Chapters two and three provide hints. Hold fast to love as definitive of your life as God's people (2:4). Listen to Jesus (2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7,14). Remain faithful unto death in the face of persecution (2:10). Reject the teachings of those who advocate giving loyalty to the Beast (2:14; 2:20). Actively commit yourselves to following the Lamb (3:10). Chapter five makes the basis for conquering clear. It is the Lamb's persevering, suffering love, validated by God's bringing him back to life.

In contrast, the Dragon, Beast, and minions "conquer" with violence, deception, intimidation, and domination. This kind of conquering seems overwhelming, "who can stand against it?" Even as John asks that question, though, he supplies the answer. Those who follow the Lamb wherever he goes (14:4) conquer and celebrate their victory with worship of the true God even amidst their trials and tribulations.

The ultimate "battle" scene underscores the nature of the conquering of the Lamb and how that contrasts with the power of the Beast. Chapter 19 provides the denouement to the scene set up at the end of chapter sixteen. The allies of the Dragon gather "for battle on the great day of God the Almighty" (16:16). However, in chapter nineteen, when this "battle" is described, it turns out not to be a battle at all. The rider on the white horse comes forth for battle, the imagery clearly identifying this

rider as Jesus. Crucially, prior to any engagement with the enemy, we read of the rider being "clothed in a robe dipped in blood" (19:13). The rider simply captures the Beast and false prophets and dispatches them to the lake of fire without an actual battle. The "robe dipped in blood" alludes to Jesus' victory through suffering love, the only victory needed.

The two kinds of power that conquer in Revelation correspond with the two cities—objects of loyalty vying for adherents.[13] The Beast's power to conquer, characteristic of Babylon, rests on violence and domination, power that enforces its will by crushing its enemies. The Lamb's power for conquering, characteristic of New Jerusalem, rests on resistance through love and adherence to peace that seeks to heal its human enemies. According to Revelation twenty-one, the very "kings of the earth" who join the Beast in facing the white rider at the great "battle" end up bringing their glory into New Jerusalem as transformed people.

John does not intend his readers to be passive observers of God's transformative work in creation. In fact, he portrays God's expectations of them as being rigorous and demanding. Follow the Lamb wherever he goes. Live in the Lamb's empire right now; his type of power is authentic. Turn from the trust in idols and idolatrous ways of exercising power. In doing so, you will actually play a crucial role in God's work of transforming the nations.

John's visions, in their imaginative power, reveal both that the establishment of the promised transformed heaven and transformed earth will be God's work without obvious cause and effect in relation to human efforts and that human faithfulness nonetheless plays a crucial role in this transformation. That is, we can not say precisely how following the Lamb will turn the Beast's domain into the Lamb's, but we are shown that such following is important.

The fruit of faithfulness in following the Lamb is genuine "victory" that contributes both to the destruction of the personified powers of evil (the Dragon, the Beast, the False Prophet) and, correspondingly, to the healing of the nations and the transformation of the kings of the earth. The power of apocalyptic in Revelation is much, much bigger than simply the power to destroy or coerce. It is actually the power to heal.

## The Lamb's war

The controlling metaphor in Revelation is the Lamb, the one who indeed does open the scroll of meaning and ultimately moves history

[13] See Barbara Rossing, *The Choice Between Two Cities: Whore, Bride, and Empire in the Apocalypse* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999).

toward a peaceable resolution. In this resolution, even the kings of the earth find healing. Chapter five shows the Lamb's power when it evokes messianic hopes for an all-powerful savior and answers those hopes with a slain and now standing Lamb, worthy to be worshiped by all creation.[14]

In Revelation, the Lamb's love manifests God's power to bring victory and ultimate salvation. We need to hold on to the first part of Revelation five's vision, though, as we discern the relevance of its answer to John's lament about how the scroll will be opened. It is love, indeed, but it is still powerful. The Lamb is one with the "Lion of the tribe of Judah." The messianic, or kingly, element of his identity remains. The way Quakers have emphasized the Lion-ness of the Lamb is through the term, "the Lamb's war." This Lamb is a fighter who takes on the Beast and his minions and conquers, winning victories as a royal figure. Two elements must be held together—suffering love and genuine, conquering power.

In two places late in the book, Revelation holds together the images of the Lamb and of warfare—the Lamb's war—chapters seventeen and nineteen. In chapter seventeen, John sees one of the most striking of his visions of the Beast, here portrayed as a "great whore" who "is drunk with the blood of the saints" (17:6). The vision goes on to allude to ten kings who "are united in yielding their power and authority to the beast; they will make war on the Lamb." But this war will result in their defeat. "The Lamb will conquer them, for he is the Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful" (17:14).

How does the Lamb do his conquering, how does he and "those with him" win this war? We have already been given the answer back in chapter twelve: "Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah [his king], for the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before God. But they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they did not cling to life even in the face of death" (12:10-11).

We need to keep these words in mind when we see the second allusion to the war of the Lamb. In chapter nineteen, the stage is set for the final battle. Our images switch and we see here a great rider on a white horse. But this is clearly the same character as the one symbolized by the Lamb. He is "called Faithful and True" (19:11). He "judges and makes war." But what kind of war? He rides forth "clothed in a robe dipped in blood" (the "blood of the Lamb") and "from his mouth comes a sharp sword" (the "word of testimony"). This rider "wages war" with no other weapon

[14] On the Lamb as a peaceable metaphor, see Loren L. Johns, *The Lamb Christology of the Apocalypse of John: An Investigation into Its Origins and Rhetorical Force* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr/Siebeck, 2003).

than his willingness to die and the word of his testimony. But these weapons are enough. The forces arrayed against him are simply captured and judged—and in the end, the kings find healing as they are freed from the powers of evil that hold them in bondage.

This is the Lamb's War: the followers of the Lamb banding together, forming communities of resistance, following the Lamb's way of self-giving love and sharing in the Lamb's word of testimony—the gospel of God's healing mercy for all the nations, even for the kings of the earth.

## The Bible in light of the Lamb's war

This Lamb's war constitutes the central revelation of the Christian Bible's paradigmatic apocalypse. The book of Revelation shows us and tells us in wild and crazy ways something very simple: trust in Jesus and follow in his ways, do this together in communities of resistance. In doing so, you work with God in healing creation, in bringing in the eschaton.

I suggest that the revelation of the last book of the Bible is best seen in full continuity with the rest of the Bible. We don't have anything new here, just a new kind of packaging. But in this new kind of packaging, I think we may be given a special urgency and sense of inspiration that can stimulate us to look back at the rest of the Bible with some new insights. So, I suggest a reading strategy for the Bible as a whole in light of the Lamb's war. Understanding what is revealed in Revelation may help us better understand what is revealed in the rest of the Bible.

One way to read the Bible in light of the Lamb's war is to recognize how times of conflict and crisis are times of revelation. What is revealed in such times? In Revelation, we have an almost overwhelming sense of crisis. However, we too easily let this sense of crisis obscure the actual content of Revelation's revelation. The revelation is not of cataclysms, the chronological end of history, raptures, Armageddon, and future trauma. The message is simply this: band together, hold fast to the way of Jesus, cultivate communities of faith to sustain the way of the Lamb over time. God creates communities who will know God's transforming love and by their testimony to that love transform the world.

So, let's consider some other times of crisis in the Bible and reflect on what is revealed in those contexts.[15]

***The Calling of Abraham and Sarah.*** The end of Genesis 11 introduces us to the genealogy of the descendents of Noah's son. Shem.

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[15] For more detail on my reading of the Bible as a whole, see Ted Grimsrud, *God's Healing Strategy: An Introduction to the Bible's Main Themes*, 2nd edition (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2011).

At the end of the list, without fanfare we first see the name Abram, one of the three sons of Terah. We meet Abram's wife, Sarai, and we are told, "Sarai is barren, she had no child" (Gen 11:30). This short statement belies a major crisis in the lives of this couple. Without children, their footprints will fade away at the time of their deaths. The fate of Abram and Sarai seem to symbolize the dead end of the human project at the end of Genesis—creation, fall, brotherly murder, the judgment of the Flood, the scattering at the tower of Babel, then Sarai's barrenness.

Out of this time of crisis, comes a new revelation directly from God. "The Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing….In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen 12:1-3). This foundational revelation makes large claims. The childless couple will, via God's gift, bear children and become the parents of "a great nation." This nation will bless "all the families of the earth." God has not given up on the human project. Sarai's barrenness does not symbolize a dead end but the revelation of God's healing strategy.

God will enter history and bring forth a people to serve as agents of God's healing love. The old strategy of punitive judgment seen in the story of Noah and the flood will be replaced by a new strategy. This gift of a future to Abram and Sariah stands as the paradigmatic biblical revelation. This unveiling of God's transformative work in a broken world governs all the future unveilings revealed in the biblical story. We see a great deal of continuity between this revelation in Genesis 12:1-3 and the "revelation of Jesus Christ" in the final book of the Bible. God enters history in a time of crisis and provides a direct word of comfort, transformation, and hope. This new revelation results in the formation and empowerment of a community of peace—meant to transform the nations and their kings with their witness.

Might we not see this pattern as the paradigm for reading the biblical story as a whole? "Biblical apocalyptic" does not have to do with catastrophic interventions of drastic change and judgment and an end of history nearly so much as God's creation of communities of faith that will know shalom, witness to this knowledge, and help transform the world. Let's look at several other key biblical moments.

***Exodus.*** As with other events that brought forth divine revelations, in the time of exodus the community of faith found itself in crisis. The story tells of God's intervention to sustain the community. Abraham's descendents are enslaved in Egypt, with little sense of identity and certainly little sense of shalom. Pharaoh seeks to destroy the Israelites by murdering every newborn boy. Then comes the crucial moment. "The

Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked down upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them" (Ex 2:23-5).

We read of the consequences of God taking notice of the Israelites' plight—an extended dance with Pharaoh that results in the liberation of the Israelites, their escape through the Red Sea to new possibilities of life together as the newly invigorated community of God's chosen people. The basic responsibility of the Hebrews was to be still and see the victory of God. The exodus story directly repudiates the imperial coercive power of Egypt. The Hebrew community does not include militarism in any sense. The effect of the liberating work of God was to establish a counter-cultural community that witnesses against the ways of empire.

If we extend the exodus story to include the gift of Torah (beginning with the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20), we see even more clearly the counter-cultural nature of the new community intended by God to resist. God intervenes to provide for the community's long-term sustenance. Torah in Exodus through Deuteronomy self-consciously counters Egypt's politics. Torah places priority on care for the vulnerable members of the community and places God's justice as mediated through the weaponless prophet at the center, not the human emperor or general.

***Second Isaiah.*** The central catastrophe of the Old Testament story came when the Babylonian empire conquered the Hebrew kingdom of Judah, destroyed the Temple, exiled the ruling class, and brought an end to Judah as a kingdom. In the rubble of the destruction a new vision was voiced in the prophecies of Isaiah 40–55 ("Second Isaiah"). The bearer of salvific power here is the "suffering servant," a community that brings light to the world through the vocation of power as persevering love.

The fruit of God's intervention that Second Isaiah emphasizes is the emergence and sustenance of the servant community. And this community will carry on the saving work of God in the world (Isa 42:4—the servant "will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth"). The saving work of the servant community does not mimic Babylon's conquering coercive tactics but conquers through suffering love and God's vindication of that love. The vision of the suffering servant definitively delinks the revelatory community from the nation-state—a delinking crucially essential for the on-going revelation of God's shalom community, especially as seen in Jesus.

With the fall of Judah at the hands of the Babylonians, the temple, kingship, and the possession of the land all end—three pillars of the community's identity. But a fourth pillar remains, Torah. Inspired by Torah, Jeremiah calls to the scattered communities separated from Zion:

seek the peace of your new homes—while also sustaining your sense of peoplehood. As we see in Second Isaiah, Torah consciousness provides the insight that this peoplehood may still fulfill the promise to Abraham of descendants who will bless all the families of the earth. The catastrophe leads to the intervention of God with a new revelation. This new revelation sustains this community of the promise in history.

***Daniel.*** The book of Daniel emerged out of trauma and ferment faced by second-century BCE Israel. The community struggled to sustain its identity in face of the battle in Palestine among the Egyptian empire, the remnants of Alexander the Great's Hellenistic empire, and the emerging Roman empire. In this battle, all interests converged in seeking to eliminate the Jewish nation as a distinct community.

Revolutionary Jews took up arms to resist the empires, with significant short-term success. They saw the chaos as an opportunity to gain political autonomy. The book of Daniel articulates a different option for the sustenance of the faith community: not absorption into the Hellenistic culture—nor into the Roman nor Egyptian ones; and not violent revolution. Either absorption or violent revolution inevitably would lead to the loss of the core of Torah. Such a loss would negate the reason for Israel's existence as elected by God to be a light to the nations.

Israel's peoplehood has been sustained even through great trauma. This sustenance was not to be based on violence but on God's love embodied in Torah-centered faith communities. To fight the empires with violence, even if successful, would transform the Hebrew community into something just like the empires. It is impossible to fight monsters with monstrous means and not become monsters oneself.

Daniel challenges the either/or of absorption versus violent revolution by drawing on folk tales (such as Daniel in the lion's den) in the first part of the book and describing dramatic and highly symbolic visions in the second part of the book. Daniel as a whole unites on the theme of portraying God's court in conflict with human courts. "God as sovereign is an idea intended to challenge the idea of the emperor as sovereign. Daniel the visionary in chapters 7–12 is also a courtier of the true king; the tales in chapters 1–6 serve to highlight the difference in loyalties between one who lives in one court, serving one king, while actually being obedient to the other king, his God."[16]

The book of Daniel as a whole advocates cultivation of knowledge of the truth as its central strategy of resistance and sustenance. "The most revolutionary act under Antiochus IV, according to Daniel, was for one

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[16] Daniel Smith-Christopher, "The Book of Daniel," in Keck, ed., *New Interpreter's Bible*, 7:150 [17-152].

to be Jews and to teach others to be Jews." Seeking truth must be done nonviolently. "The revolution of truth must arise from education and conviction by the truth, and never by coercion. Coercion always demands empty exercises in false discipleship and obedience to idols, because both are necessary to the rule of the armed few."[17]

The ultimate weapon for followers of God (called the "wise") according to Daniel is their knowledge of the truth. The wise indeed are "warriors," not warriors using the sword to kill but warriors wielding the sword of the truth of God. They trust in God, counting on God's vindication of their faithfulness. The wise sustain their faith and peoplehood by resting in this trust. They turn from both the assimilation that giving loyalty to one of the empires would involve and from the assimilation that making violence central to their identity would involve.

Daniel shows that indeed the people do live in times of profound crisis and trauma. The revelation here sustains resistance in the here and now, trusting in God's truth in communities of resistance and in this way keeping the promise alive. The world will change, God will vindicate the wise, and healing will come. So remain strong, remain loyal to Torah.

***Jesus.*** The accounts of Jesus' life and teaching in the gospels support the account of apocalyptic power we have found in the rest of the Bible. Jesus, like the others, saw himself living in a time of crisis. However, his response to the time of crisis was not to seek to escape history but to change it—over the long haul. Jesus proclaimed, and then embodied, a message that the kingdom of God is entering history, effecting the transformation of the here and now.

I quote a summary from John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, the book that shapes my thought in significant ways:

> The Kingdom of God is a social order and not a hidden one. It is not a universal catastrophe independent of the will of human beings; it is that concrete jubilary obedience, in pardon and repentance, the possibility of which is proclaimed beginning right now, opening up the real accessibility of a new order in which grace and justice are linked, which people have only to accept. It does not assume that time will end tomorrow; it reveals why it is meaningful that history should go on at all.[18]

The community Jesus established reflected an intent to work for change in the world, over time—not an expectation that the world will end. This community included: "a visible structured fellowship, a sober

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[17] Smith-Christopher, "Book," 151-2.

[18] John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 105.

decision guaranteeing that the costs of commitment to the fellowship have been consciously accepted, and a clearly defined life-style distinct from that of the crowd."[19] Jesus' community sought to exist as a counter-cultural alternative within history to the politics of empire.

Jesus' proclamation of God's kingdom would not have been understood "as pointing 'off the map' of human experience, off the scale of time" in announcing "an end to history." Jesus would have been understood in continuity with past deliverances of Israel that happened in history and centered on sustaining the faith community.[20]

Understood in this way, Jesus' apocalyptic message reiterates the points we see elsewhere in the Bible. God's "empire" stands in contrast with domination-based empires such as Rome. Followers of Jesus must give their loyalty to one or the other. God's "empire" has revealed in new ways the nature of God's own rule—and established communities meant to live according to that rule. These communities live as "lights on a hill" witnessing to God's rule for all with eyes to see. For members of these communities, life lived in coherence with the rule of God takes the shape of suffering love, nonviolence, and restorative justice.

Matthew's gospel concludes with a clear statement of Jesus' purposes with his apocalyptic message. He meets with his disciples, the core of the new community he has formed to embody his vision for humanity. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt 28:19-20).

Jesus reveals not that history will soon end. Jesus reveals why history continues and why history is meaningful. The end of history is the fulfillment of the task given to Abraham's descendents—bless all the families of the earth, make disciples of all nations, know God's shalom and witness to that shalom to all the ends of the earth.

***Romans.*** Paul also writes in a time of crisis—addressing Christians living in the belly of the beast. At two key points in Paul's portrayal of the gospel in Romans, he writes of saving work of God being revealed ("*apokalypsed*") or "disclosed" to human beings. In introducing the book, he writes: "I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the justice of God is revealed through faith for faith" (1:16-7). Then as the culmination of the argument he develops in chapters one

[19] Yoder, *Politics*, 39.
[20] Yoder, *Politics*, 85.

through three, Paul writes, "Now, apart from law, the justice of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the justice of God through the faith of Jesus Christ for all who believe" (3:21-2).

Paul says the work of God to bring salvation has been disclosed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God's apocalyptic power is the power to bring salvation—through the "revelation of Jesus Christ."[21] The nature of the world-defining character of the gospel as revealed in Jesus requires that those who trust in him reject trusting in idols (Romans one); that is, reject the call to loyalty to Caesar instead of Jesus. At the heart of Paul's gospel, he reiterates the Bible's call to trust in God and God's mercy in contrast to trusting empires, coercive power, and human constructs that vie with the true God for our loyalty.

For Paul, a central fruit of the revelation of the justice of God is the formation of a new kind of community bringing together Jew with Gentile. God's "apocalyptic" action brings forth not an end of history but the establishment of a community of faith charged with embodying a transformed way of life, a "kingdom of priests" (or, an alternative "empire") that counters the way of life characteristic of mighty human-centered empires such as Rome.

## Conclusion

Let's conclude by turning back to Revelation. The "War of the Lamb" in that book has to do with people of faith striving against Rome's hegemony as communities of resistance, who understand their identity as God's people, who know God's transforming mercy themselves, and who witness to that mercy even in the face of hostility and rejection. This "war" is not limited to the book of Revelation. We have seen it throughout the Bible. In fact, the Lamb's war is a useful rubric for characterizing the entire plot from Genesis through Revelation.

Revelation uses language of warfare, conflict, victory, and conquering to characterize consistent, persevering love—even for enemies. Conquering happens as a consequence of a quality of life that follows the same pattern Jesus' life followed: visible, concrete acts of mercy and rejection of power politics, leading to conflict with the powers that be and suffering (even in Jesus' case death), leading to vindication through God's on-going commitment, resurrection and transformation in history.

When we understand biblical apocalyptic as the revelation of this pattern of communal life, symbolized in Revelation as celebration and

[21] For a more detailed discussion see, Ted Grimsrud, "Against Empire: A pacifist reading of Romans," 133-48 in the present book.

worship amidst the slings and arrows of historical living, then we may see that biblical apocalyptic and compassionate eschatology refer to the same kinds of things. Apocalyptic and eschatology both have most centrally to do with clarity of purpose, perceptive vision about what matters to God and in life, and trust in God's ongoing intervention through the social healing effected within faith communities (the dividing wall of hostility broken down) and the social healing the flows out to the nations as a consequence of the witness of the faithful.

So, wherein lies our hope? According to biblical apocalyptic (and compassionate eschatology), it lies in the inherent meaningfulness of life lived in the Lamb's way (not in blueprints about the future). The Lamb shows us the way into God's heart—to life that truly rests in God's hands.

# 12. The justice of God in the book of Revelation

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For the person seeking to gain a Christian theological perspective on justice, it is not self-evident that the Revelation would be a crucial source. For example, Jose Miranda's well-known study, *Marx and the Bible*,[1] only tangentially refers to Revelation, and the biblical chapter in the United States Catholic bishops' 1985 pastoral letter on the US economy does not refer even once to Revelation. We may paraphrase Tertullian's famous question: What has Patmos to do with Rome? What do these obscure and seemingly fanciful visions have to do with justice in the real world? I will attempt to show that they have a great deal of relevance.

Does Revelation picture God and God's justice in such a way as to make it illegitimate to apply Jesus' teaching about God being the model of Christians' loving their enemies to a rejection to a rejection of Christian involvement in warfare? Is the justice of God in Revelation punitive, angry, and vengeful in such a way that it becomes a warrant for acts of human "justice" such as just wars, capital punishment, a harsh and strictly punitive prison system, and a "big stick" foreign policy that seeks to punish "ungodly" and "unjust" enemies?

Is this really the view of God's justice presented in Revelation? My thesis is that it is not, that just as Jesus and Paul give us a picture of God's justice that is different from the justice of "the nations," so too does John.

### Some important themes in Revelation

The Book of Revelation is unique in the New Testament. It is the only piece of apocalyptic literature to enter the New Testament canon. As

[1]Jose Porfirio Miranda, *Marx and the Bible: A Critique of the Philosophy of Oppression* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1974).

such, it places a special emphasis on eschatology and the idea of the last judgment. God's justice here has to do with a view of the ultimate fate of humanity being integrally tied up with the direction and final resolution of human history.

A related theme often seen to have apocalyptic overtones with significance for a view of God's justice that receives special attention in Revelation is "wrath." One indication that wrath is a special theme in Revelation is that of the two Greek words translated by "wrath" in the New Testament, one (*thymos*) is used ten times in Revelation and never more than once in any other book, and the other (*orge*) is used twice as often in Revelation than in any New Testament book except Romans.

The predominance of these themes of eschatology, judgment, and wrath indicate that Revelation contains much material that has to do with a view of God and ultimate reality. There can be little doubt that one's view of God greatly impinges upon one's view of a socio-political concept such as "justice." Revelation makes the connection explicit when it refers to God and God's actions as "just."

It is also relevant to note that, more than any other book in the New Testament, Revelation alludes to the situation of the Christian vis-à-vis the Roman Empire. Revelation appears to have emerged out of a situation of perceived powerlessness toward and intense dissatisfaction with the present socio-political status quo.

The book provides a picture of how the weak in society viewed the strong; or, we could say, of how the oppressed viewed the oppressors. How those on the outside view those on the inside greatly affects what the outsiders do should they themselves somehow become insiders. Of more significance to John, the attitudes of the weak toward the strong greatly impinge upon the status of their souls. By hating those who hate us, do we not end up becoming just like them? What kind of justice do the disenfranchised seek? Is it an eye-for-an-eye justice that only maintains the cycle of violence or is it something different? Before seeking to support my thesis that Revelation gives a picture of a different kind of justice, I need to spend a little time discussing the social setting of the book and the significance of its apocalypticism.

## The social setting

Most scholars agree that Revelation was written sometime in the 90s, somewhere in Asia Minor, and by some man—otherwise unknown—named John. It is clear from the book itself that John perceived that the churches of Asia Minor were in a crisis situation and that the depth of their commitment was soon to be put to the test.

In her book, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse*,[2] Adela Yarbro Collins has reconstructed what might have contributed to John's perceptions. She points to four particular areas of conflict:

(a) *Conflict with Jews*. The split between Christians and Jews with the resultant exclusion of Christians from the synagogues and all that went with that was a relatively recent event.[3] It seems obvious that John still thought of things in Jewish terms; the split had not yet led to a full "Gentilization" of Christianity. The wounds were still fresh and tensions still alive. These tensions were particularly reflected in the letters to the seven churches, especially the letter to Smyrna (2:8-11) that seems to allude to some Jews colluding with the government in persecuting the Christians. Overall, however, Revelation is not anti-Jewish; this conflict is secondary to the others. In fact, in these other areas, the Christians were clearly reflecting traditional Jewish tensions with the non-Jewish world.

(b) *Mutual antipathy toward neighboring Gentiles.* The Gentiles did not particularly like the Christians, and vice versa as reflected in the seven letters. Greco-Roman society tended to suspect the church, not least due to the church's rejection of much of what it saw as idolatrous and/or inhumane in current social practices. This suspicion fueled antagonism and made things unsettled for most Christians. In the face of this, those whom John railed against in various of the letters (i.e., the "Nicolaitans," "Balaam," and "Jezebel") apparently called for accommodation.[4]

(c) *Conflict over wealth.* Tensions existed between the rich and the poor. During the decades prior to the writing of Revelation, brilliant economic progress had been made in Asia Minor, the scene of this book. But the rewards went totally to the wealthy. The rich got richer and the poor stayed poor. The result was widespread social unrest due to growing awareness of this maldistribution.[5] While not a revolutionary zealot, John saw total discontinuity between the present situation of great economic inequality and the promise of the kingdom of God's justice.

(d) *Precarious relations with Rome.* It does not seem likely that when John wrote Revelation Christians faced intense persecution. There is little solid evidence of persecution of Christians during the reign of the emperor Domitian late in the first century,[6] which is when Revelation was likely written. But in no way was Rome friendly toward Christians. For one thing, the cult of the emperor was growing and this was an anathema to monotheistic Christians, a reality that led to local persecutions and

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[2]Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984.
[3]Yarbro Collins, *Crisis*, 86.
[4]Yarbro Collins, *Crisis*, 88.
[5]Yarbro Collins, *Crisis*, 94.
[6]Yarbro Collins, *Crisis*, 69.

repression. Also, Roman magistrates were the "enforcers" of many grievances that non-Christian Gentiles and, to some extent, Jews, had against Christians. Thirdly, in general in the society of Asia Minor, if the poor made noises of resistance versus the wealthy, they were reminded of the high priority that Rome placed on social order.[7] John's banishment to Patmos, likely a kind of "penal colony" for political prisoners, reinforced in his mind the basic polarization between the church and Rome and the precarious legal position of Christians.[8]

The reality that stood in contrast with these various tensions and heightened them into crises was the early Christian experience of the Kingdom of God. A new set of expectations had arisen as a result of faith in Jesus as Messiah and belief that the Kingdom had been established, at least in part. It was the tension between John's vision of the kingdom and his environment that moved him to write Revelation,[9] and no doubt led him to experience and communicate it as an apocalypse, i.e., a direct revelation from God.

## Revelation as apocalyptic literature

Revelation's first word identifies it as an *apokalypsie* (="revelation"). It would be a mistake, however, to assume that John uses this word self-consciously to place his work in a specific category of literature with well-established rules of composition and a certain theology. "Apocalyptic" is a term used by later readers to categorize a fluid, diverse group of works written by Jews and Christians mostly between 200 BCE and 200 CE and united primarily by certain broad similarities in style.

The term comes from the book of Revelation itself and is then applied to earlier works. What Revelation and the other apocalypses have in common are: (1) a narrative framework, (2) a direct revelation which comes to a human recipient and discloses a transcendent reality, (3) the promise of eschatological salvation, and (4) the promise of a new or transformed world.[10] A dynamic, mythological orientation characterizes apocalyptic literature much more than strict analytic logic.[11] Apocalypses emerged out of settings of perceived crisis and had as their goal either strengthening the readers' resolve to remain faithful to the truth in the face of conflicts or moving the readers to act to change the situation.

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[7]Yarbro Collins, *Crisis*, 98.

[8]Yarbro Collins, *Crisis*, 104.

[9]Yarbro Collins, *Crisis*, 106.

[10]John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to the Jewish Matrix of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 4.

[11]Collins, *Apocalyptic*, 13.

Apocalyptic contained a challenge to view the world in a way that was radically different from conventional wisdom. Such imagination could foster dissatisfaction with people's present and to generate visions of what might be instead.[12] It could buttress the claim that Christians' true identity was to be derived not from the structures and institutions of the wider society, but from a vision of what God was doing on the cosmic level to effect deliverance and salvation.[13]

The book of Revelation emerged as the creative response to an experience of severe distress—both for John personally in his banishment to Patmos and for the churches in Asia Minor in the face of ever more powerful calls to depart from the ways of the Lord. It is in the context of his intense desire that things be set right that John wrote about these visions of God doing just that. I want to focus now on John's description of this work of God's that is envisioned in Revelation as a reflection of God's "justice." I will do this by first looking at the four texts that specifically refer to God's justice and then by looking more broadly at the book and discussing why these actions are called "just."

## God's justice and the song of the Lamb: 15:1-8

This passage serves as a preface to the series of seven bowl-plagues that make up chapter sixteen. The bowl plagues are the third and last series of seven-fold plagues. The first two are the seal plagues in chapter six and the trumpet-plagues in chapters eight and nine. Then, 15:1 refers to the bowl-plagues as the final, ultimate pouring out of God's wrath.

A careful look at these three plague series and a deciphering of the imagery suggests that they picture a vision of human reality as it always has been. Wars, famine, rebellion, disease, social upheaval and the like characterize all eras. John reported on pictures of reality, pictures of what has happened and will continue to happen. Many of these things are evil. What John saw in the Lamb opening the seals (6:1) and setting the plagues in motion, however, affirmed that God uses even these evil things to bring about God's purposes. Biblical examples of this type of phenomenon include Assyria's destruction of Israel in the Old Testament and the crucifixion of Jesus in the New Testament. It was evil that caused these things, but God used them ultimately to further God's intentions.

Jesus did not merely defeat the powers of evil, he made them agents of his own victory. That is why John asserted in 5:5 that Jesus won the right

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[12]Collins, *Apocalyptic*, 215.

[13]Paul D. Hanson, "Apocalypticism," in Keith Crim, ed., *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, supplementary volume (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976), 29.

to open the scroll, and why the scroll, once opened, let loose upon the earth a series of disasters. John was not asking us to believe that war, famine, and disease are the deliberate creation of Christ or that, except in an indirect way, they are what God wills for people. They are the result of human sin. The point is that, just where sin and its effects are most in evidence, the kingship of the crucified is to be seen, turning human wickedness to the service of God's purpose.[14]

This reality was not seen to be self-evident to all people. John wrote to Christians. He implies that it would take faith to recognize that God was at work in the plagues, things that would seem to the one who had not faith to be the ordinary course of human history. This point is supported by 9:20 and 16:9, where people are portrayed as continuing to worship idols and to curse God, failing to see the "wrath" as God's wrath and as being God's process of cleansing creation of evil.[15]

The plagues in the seal series (chapter six), the four horsemen of international war, civil war, famine, and pestilence; earthquake; blackening of the sun; etc., correspond to contemporary realities of John's time. The Roman defeat by the Parthians in 62 CE and the year of civil war following the suicide of Nero in 68 perhaps lie behind the first two riders. The eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE terrified the Roman world and was taken as a warning of imminent divine judgment. The year after, the city of Rome suffered a devastating fire and then the worst plague in its history. In 92 there was a severe grain famine in Asia.[16] In the fourth seal plague (6:7-8), the fact that death and Hades are the agents shows that these plagues are evil. They are not obedient angels of God even though they are ultimately used by God. When the wrath is spent and the New Jerusalem comes down, death and Hades are destroyed (20:14).

A key point in 15:1-8 (and, really, throughout the book) is the juxtaposition of plague language with worship language, victory language, and salvation language. John sees the plagues coming; he also sees the worship of the "conquerors" who sing the song of Moses and of the Lamb, and who affirm of God that God's deeds are great and wonderful, just (*dikaiai*) and true; and that all nations will come and worship God because God's just deeds (*dikaiomata sou*) have been revealed.

John alludes here to Exodus 15 (the crossing of the Red Sea). Those who have "conquered" the Beast are direct heirs of the children of Israel in that their faith enabled them to be liberated from the dominance of

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[14]G.B. Caird, *A Commentary of the Revelation of St. John the Divine* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 82-3.

[15]Anthony T. Hanson, *The Wrath of the Lamb* (New York: Seabury Press, 1957), 177.

[16]J.P.M. Sweet, *Revelation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1979), 136.

the contemporary powers of evil. The fact that they are singing the "song of the Lamb" indicates that their triumph was won by the "weapons" of the cross of Christ and the faithful testimony of his followers.[17]

The "song" in verses three and four contains phrases from various Old Testament passages (Deut 32:2; Pss 86:8f., 111:2; Jer 10:6f., 16:9) that taken together emphasize God's greatness as breaking through heathen blindness and "all nations" coming to God's worship. They do this because God's "just deeds have been revealed." The promised result of God's just deeds here is that "all nations shall come and worship before God" (15:4). These are the same "nations" said to be ruled by the "Beast" in 13:7 and raging at God's judgments in 11:18. The effect of God's justice is not to destroy them but to convert them.

The smoke that fills the temple in 15:5-8 both reveals and hides the glory, the awe, and the mystery that surround God (cf. Exod 19:16-8; 40:34-8: 1 Kings 8:11; Isa 6:4). Only when the seven plagues had been poured out was it possible again to enter the temple. God's judgments remain a mystery until they have been executed.[18] The implication follows that to a certain extent the ways in which the plagues serve God's ultimate salvific purposes seem to be unfathomable for human beings.

The clear implications of this passage in its context next to chapter sixteen is that the plagues and outpouring of God's wrath are somehow part of God's justice. The references to the song of Moses and the Lamb serve to tie the plagues in with the exodus and the Christ-event. What this means is that the ultimate effect and central manifestation of God's "just deeds" are salvific; i.e., the celebration of the "conquerors" and the worship of the nations. The "conquerors" celebrate because they have, by their conquering of the Beast, contributed to the nations' coming to worship God, not the nations being destroyed.

### Giving the oppressors their due: 16:4-7

This passage is the third of the seven terrible bowl-plagues. God is called "just" twice here, first by the "angel of the waters," the one pouring out the bowl which turns the rivers and springs of water into blood; and then by the "altar," which apparently is a reference back to 6:9-11, where John saw under the altar the souls of the martyrs who are crying out for God to avenge their blood.

The specific references to "justice" here have to do with God's judgment on those who "have shed the blood of God's saints and

[17]Caird, *Commentary*, 198.

[18]Harry Boer, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 106.

prophets" (16:6). This judgment takes the form of God giving the blood-shedders blood to drink through the agency of the angel who turned drinking water into blood. This seems like a clear case of simple eye-for-an-eye retributive justice. But I believe that there is more to it than that.

The plagues are stated to be instruments of God's "wrath" (cf. 16:1). We saw earlier that the plagues are John's attempt to show that God is at work in the midst of the evils and catastrophes endemic in human history. It is not that God is the direct cause of these but rather that God uses what the powers of evil cause for God's own ultimate purposes of destroying those evil powers and fully establishing the New Jerusalem.

The "wrath" in Revelation, while attributed to God, is the impersonal working out, within history, of the process of evil being allowed to destroy itself. Revelation contains numerous references and allusions to the "cup of wrath" (14:10,19-20; 15:7; 18:6). The "cup of wrath" in the Old Testament is never used of what is to happen at the end of history. It always refers to certain specific events in history, either in the past or in the near future. Most of John's references to the wrath refer to the fall of Babylon, by which he meant the fall of the Roman Empire. This, he believed, was to be an event in future history, and not the last event either; nor was it to be an event brought about by direct divine action, but rather by the action of people in history, the kings from the East in fact (cf. 17:16). To this event, he applies the language of divine wrath. In so doing he is in line with the Old Testament view of God's wrath, but he does not treat the wrath as purely eschatological. Rather, it is the working out in history of the consequences of human sin.[19]

God's wrath here means that people reap what they sow, that evil rebounds on itself and is self-destructive. This process serves God's purposes in two ways, first by hopefully moving some people, at least, to repentance due to their experience of the destructive consequences of their rejection of God, and second—according to John's visions—by ultimately culminating in the destruction of the evil powers and the establishment of the New Jerusalem on earth.

Anthony T. Hanson is the modern scholar most responsible for this argument. Later commentators who have, by-and-large, followed him include G.B. Caird[20] and J.P.M. Sweet.[21] Representative of recent writers who hold to an interpretation of "wrath" in Revelation as being more personal and retributive are Robert Mounce and Adela Yarbro Collins, though they are at opposite poles concerning the normativeness of this view for modern-day Christians.

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[19]Hanson, *Wrath*, 160.

[20]Caird, *Commentary*, 188-95.

[21]Sweet, *Revelation*, 49-51.

Mounce believes the visions in Revelation describe what will happen in the future and are normative reflections of God's character. God's wrath as reflected in the plagues is how God's holiness responds to persistent and impenitent human wickedness.[22] The image of Christ as Lamb in Revelation is an apocalyptic picture of a conquering and vengeful Messiah similar to a traditional Jewish concept much more than an image of a suffering savior.[23] What we read in chapter sixteen are God's actions of righteous retribution, literally and physically hurting the wicked.[24] The picture in 16:19 is of God's righteous anger no longer being restrained by God's goodness and forbearance and thus being freed to give the wicked what they deserve—retribution.[25]

Mounce's view differ from mine. Two of my problems with his interpretations are: (1) He fails to see the "rebirth of images" that takes place in Revelation where John redefines the conquering Messiah motif by the suffering Lamb motif (cf. 5:5-6), a redefinition that reflects what actually happens in the Christ event. Mounce instead redefines the Lamb image by the conquering Messiah image. (2) Mounce sees God as internally divided between love and righteous anger. This is contrary to the ultimate biblical message that everything about God and God's actions flow from and serve God's creative and redemptive love.

In Yarbro Collins's view, this wrathful picture of God (she would largely agree with Mounce's understanding of John's views) is most decidedly not normative for us, it is a dangerous projection stemming from the social alienation of John from Rome and his feelings of powerlessness.[26] Revelation reflects deep-seated feelings of envy toward Roman wealth[27] and pent-up aggression expressed as disguised hatred toward the Romans.

It seems to me that Yarbro Collins overstates the dualisms of Revelation. It was not "good people" (i.e., John and his churches) vs. "bad people" (the Romans and their leaders) as much as evil powers (Satan and company) vs. all people (even the "kings of the earth," who make it into the New Jerusalem after the evil powers are taken away). It is not religious faith vs. creation and human culture but the appropriate use of creation vs. its exploitive use (the "glory and honor of the nation" are part of the New Jerusalem, 21:24ff.).

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[22]Robert Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 163.

[23]Mounce, *Book*, 163.

[24]Mounce, *Book*, 295-6.

[25]Mounce, *Book*, 304.

[26]Yarbro Collins, *Crisis*, 152.

[27]Yarbro Collins, *Crisis*, 153-4.

The first four bowls show God's creation itself taking vengeance on those that do harm; the land, the sea, the fresh water, and the sun all play a part. The principle seems to be that "whereby a person sins, thereby he or she is punished."[28] For example, the "mark of the Beast" in 16:2 becomes ugly and painful sores, the symbol of its punishment. In 16:4-7, the ocean of "blood" that the worshipers of the Beast have shed contaminates their own water supply. This image is picked up in chapter seventeen, where we see the harlot Babylon staggering to her appointed doom, drunk with the "blood of the saints and prophets."[29] The images in chapter sixteen bear a striking resemblance to the plagues of the exodus. All seven judgments here repeat in varied ways the plagues of Egypt, and 15:1-4 indicates that these plagues conclude in a redemption greater even than that from Egypt.[30] This promised redemption is the subject of a full-fledged vision in chapters twenty-one and twenty-two.

In the context of the whole book, it would seem that there are four major purposes of the plague visions. One is to serve as a serious warning to Christians not to conform to the surrounding culture, not to accept the mark of the beast. A second is to promise that the evil events of history are not ultimately independent from God's purposes but in a mysterious way actually serve them. Third, in the context of the plagues, John emphasizes that God is continually hoping for and seeking repentance on the part of those who dwell on the earth. A fourth purpose is to show that God's wrath, in hating and destroying evil, serves the purpose of cleansing creation so that in the new creation things will be whole.

This passage emphasizes that the outworking of "wrath" is part of God's justice. The implication is that evil has consequences, that it is self-destructive. The reality of God's wrath is necessary for evil to be destroyed, which is the only way creation can ultimately be liberated. God's wrath serves God's redemptive purposes.

### The wedding supper of the Lamb: 19:1-10.

Following the account of the destruction of Babylon in chapter 18, John reports a vision of a scene of great celebration. God's judgments are said here to be "true and just," for God "has condemned the great harlot who corrupted the earth by her adulteries. God has avenged on her the blood of God's servants" (19:2). These "true and just judgments" lead directly to the wedding of the Lamb in 19:7, which is the real focus of the

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[28]Sweet, *Revelation*, 243.

[29]Caird, *Commentary*, 202-3.

[30]George R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 232.

celebration. This wedding marks the reign of the Lord God Almighty (19:6). The "Bride," symbolizing the followers of the Lamb, is said to have made herself ready by putting on the fine linen given to her to wear. The linen "stands for the just acts of the saints" (19:8).

This passage celebrates salvation. Negatively, this means that all that has stood in the way of God's rule has been removed (cf., the account in chapters seventeen and eighteen and the ultimate effect of the plague series, along with the visions in 19:11-21 and chapter twenty). Positively, it means that the New Jerusalem can now come down.

The affirmation that God's sentences of judgment are "true and just" alludes back to the altar in 16:7, to the song of Moses and the Lamb in 15:3, and to the announcement of judgment in 11:18. Salvation, glory, and power belong to God. These are political terms and gain significance when seen in the political context of John's day. Augustus had been called "savior of the Greeks and of the whole inhabited world," "savior and benefactor," "savior and founder," and "savior and god," whose birthday was called the beginning of "good tidings" (gospel). He was known as the "just and generous lord" whose reign promised peace and happiness, i.e., salvation. The heavenly choir John saw was therefore asserting: It is not Caesar's but God's power and salvation that is revealed in the justice given out to Babylon/Rome and it cohorts.[31]

The genuine celebration here is not for the destruction of Babylon per se but only of that as one element of the coming of God's reign and the "marriage of the Lamb."[32] The key aspects of the references to "justice" here are: (1) the tying together of God's justice, the destruction of the evil powers, and ultimate salvation, and (2) the emphasis on the importance of the Lamb's followers doing deeds of justice.

### The warrior for justice: 19:11-21.

This passage is particularly interesting because it is the only reference to *Jesus'* justice in Revelation. It is a complicated section that has been explained in various ways.

The reference to the rider as "Faithful and True" (19:11), "the Word of God" (19:13), and "King of kings and Lord of lords" (19:16) make it clear that this is indeed Jesus, of whom 19:11 states: "in justice he judges." The white horse he rides (19:11) symbolizes victory. He comes as the one who has conquered sin, death, and evil through his death and

[31]Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Invitation to the Book of Revelation* (New York: Doubleday, 1981), 177.

[32]Beasley-Murray, *Book*, 174.

resurrection. As the following verses make clear, he comes to this apparent battle with the forces of the antichrist (a "battle" foreseen in 16:14: "The three evil spirits that looked like frogs ... go out to the kings of the whole earth to gather them for the battle on the great day of God Almighty") already victor.[33] The outcome of the "battle" is not in doubt.

The rider is called "faithful and true;" evoking "the faithful and true witness" of 1:5 and 3:14. He is the one who remained faithful and true to God even when it meant a martyr's death. That is how he gained the white horse. We see a key image in 19:13. The rider approaches the battle "dressed in a robe dipped in blood." The blood has already been shed before the battle begins, an allusion to Jesus' blood shed in his death and the reason why no actual battle takes place here.[34] He can already ride the white horse because the real battle is over, and he won it on the basis of his death and resurrection.

The "armies of heaven" (19:14) seem to be the saints wearing their bridal linen (19:7-8). They carry no weapons. They too are already victorious. The only weapon mentioned at all is the sword that comes out of Jesus' mouth—his word, the gospel (cf. Heb 4:12 and Eph 6:17). This is what eventually brings the nations to their knees.[35] The "winepress of the fury of God's wrath" (19:15) may refer to the means by which the wine that brought down Babylon is prepared. These means are the witness of Jesus and the saints.[36] Now God causes the wine to take effect.

I understand the "great supper of God" (19:17-8) to be the same as the "wedding supper of the Lamb" (19:9). It is the time of judgment; for those who belong it is a time of great rejoicing, for those who do not it is a time of condemnation (cf. Jesus' parable of the supper in Matthew 22 where the one without wedding clothes is booted out). The picture of the birds eating the flesh of all people (19:18) is one of judgment that reveals the true status of all people—either they are with God or against God.

The Beast and the kings and armies are all ready for battle (19:19). In spite of the enormous massing of all the enemy's forces (the same thing is described in 16:12-6), they have only to be "seized" and "thrown" into the lake of fire (19:20). And their followers fall away before the word of Christ (19:21). There is no trace of any battle. An angel can arrest the Dragon and render him harmless for a time (20:4-6). Even his last rebellion after his liberation serves only "one purpose": to reveal his powerlessness (20:7-10).

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[33]Matthias Rissi, *Time and History* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1966), 26-7.

[34]Vernard Eller, *The Most Revealing Book of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 177.

[35]Caird, *Commentary*, 245.

[36]Caird, *Commentary*, 246.

A decisive feature in this picture of the End is that John never gives up his central christological affirmation. There is only one battle and one victory of Christ that already lie in the past. With Jesus' birth into the world, his death and resurrection, he hurled the dragon from his place in heaven and enabled his church to win the victory (12:5,10f.). As the slain Lamb he has become the "lion of Judah" who is everywhere victorious and into whose hands dominion over the world has been committed (5:5)—an affirmation made prior to the plague visions. John knows nothing of any other battle or victory of Jesus. The future eschatological war, for which God's enemies prepare, will not take place.[37]

"The rest of them" (19:21), those who were deceived by the false prophet, are now judged by Jesus' word. The birds ate their flesh. Perhaps that also referred to their being judged for where their ultimate trust really resides. With the deceiver gone, maybe they have some hope of seeing the light. At 21:24 we read that the kings of the earth bring their splendor into the New Jerusalem. John is convinced that Jesus, in his death and resurrection, won the only battle necessary to defeat evil. To picture him in another battle would be to imply that the first victory was not good enough. The picture of Christ's victory in this passage is simply the revelation of the one sufficient victory he has already won.

Again Mounce and Yarbro Collins may serve as representatives of views that differ from mine, though also diametrically opposed to one another. Mounce reflects a strong futuristic interpretation of Revelation. He sees the visions in 19:11-21 as eschatological in an absolute sense. John describes a great future historic event that brings an end to the antichrist and his forces and an end to temporal human history.[38] These visions picture a literal battle closely modeled after Isaiah 63:1-6.[39] What happens here is messianic judgment upon the wicked. Mounce sees the blood that stains the rider's garment (19:13) as not Jesus' own blood but the blood of his enemies shed in the conflict.

It seems to me that Mounce misses the realized eschatological thrust in Revelation and thus misinterprets or ignores the imagery in this passage that makes it clear that no battle takes place. He ties John too closely with John's sources. Certainly Isaiah 63:1-6 contributed to John's imagery here. Throughout the book however (and Mounce recognizes this elsewhere), John diverges significantly from the meaning of the source texts and at times even stands the meaning on its head—which is what I think he does here. Mounce ends up making an unwarranted and disastrous division in the work of Jesus Christ, seeing his parousia as in

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[37]Matthias Rissi, *The Future of the World* (Naperville, IL: Allenson, 1972), 26-7.

[38]Mounce, *Book*, 349.

[39]Mounce, *Book*, 345.

some sense totally different from his first coming. There is nothing in the New Testament to support this. It is the temptation of the ages to try to explain away the eternal normativeness of the suffering Messiah.

Yarbro Collins interprets 19:11-21 quite differently:

> This passage describes the final victory of the forces of creation over those of chaos. This does not necessarily mean that at some point in the future the values of creation will be permanently established and fully eliminate those of chaos. Rather, it implies that the fundamental character of reality is better expressed in order than in chaos, that order, peace, and justice are more real and true than their opposites. Therefore one can assume an attitude of trust in the creator; it is worthwhile aligning oneself and one's efforts with the forces of order, peace, and justice.[40]

I do not disagree with what she says. However, her interpretation seems to separate John's vision from the concrete and historical reality of the Christ-event and to weaken the claims of that event on us. John's sense of realized eschatology meant that in a concrete, historical event the kingdom of God broke into human history. This presence of the kingdom is what provides people of faith with hope and strength to resist the allures of the Harlot and the brute strength of the Beast and thus to be effective instruments of God's kingdom of peace and justice.

Jesus' "war" for justice (19:11) is a war to set things right, a war to establish God's kingdom fully. It is a war fought with the weapons of the cross and resurrection; i.e., total, all-powerful love.

### The ultimate result of God's work

"Just" is a key term used in Revelation to evaluate what God is envisioned doing. Why is God "just" in Revelation? John intends to show that all that happens in human history is somehow used by God for the purpose of establishing the New Jerusalem. All of God's "just deeds" are ultimately redemptive—for creation, for the faithful witnesses, and ultimately for the nations and the kings of the earth (cf. 21:24).

Jacques Ellul concludes in *Apocalypse* that justice in Revelation is consistent with:

> The evangelical image of God which is the parables of the worker at the eleventh hour, and the lost sheep, and the pearl of great price, and the prodigal son, and the unfaithful steward—such is the justice of God. Neither

[40]Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Apocalypse* (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 1979), 138.

> retributive nor distributive. It is the justice of love itself, who cannot see the one he judges except through his love, and who is always able to find in that fallen miserable being the last tiny particle, invisible to any other than his love, and which he is going to gather us and save.[41]

There are indeed visions of destruction in Revelation (cf. chapters six through twenty), but they are bracketed by the overarching vision of God as creator and redeemer (chapters four and five), who is the one who makes all things new (chapters twenty-one and twenty-two). Thus the carnage and chaos are seen to be within God's plan and to lead through into the fulfillment of human destiny in final union with God.[42]

This final redemptive product of God's just deeds is not just a collection of individuals. John believed in a purpose for collective human history. Into the New Jerusalem are brought not only faithful people but the wealth and glory of the nations; and down the middle of the city's streets are avenues of the trees of life, whose leaves provide healing for the nations. Any achievement of people in the old order, however imperfect, provided it has value in the sight of God, will find its place in the healed and transfigured life of the New Jerusalem.[43] As in the exodus, so also in Revelation, the crucial event is not the plagues. Those do not exemplify God's justice but only serve the true end of God's justice: the redemption that leads to the new world.

## The controlling metaphor in the book

The fulcrum of Revelation is not Jesus' return and the descent of the city of God, described in its closing visions. Rather it is the vision of God and the Lamb in chapters four and five. The slain and risen Lamb pictured there has accomplished redemption, he has risen to the throne of God, and he has begun his reign with God. The turn of the ages lies in the past.[44] John says that if one wants to see the clearest and most decisive expression of God's justice, just look at the Christ-event.

The Lamb in chapter five is also identified as the ruling Lion of the tribe of Judah. The Lamb that is slain is at the same time the bearer of seven horns (the symbol of power) and the seven spirits of God (the symbol of the fullness of the Holy Spirit). Revelation proclaims again and again the paradox that the suffering and dying Christ is the victor.[45]

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[41]Jacques Ellul, *Apocalypse* (New York: Seabury Press, 1977), 212-3.
[42]Sweet, *Revelation*, 47.
[43]Caird, *Commentary*, 300.
[44]Beasley-Murray, *Book*, 25.
[45]Rissi, *Time*, 38-9.

John sees Jesus Christ as both as both the redeemer and the judge. Not one after the other, but one because of the other. In two passages (14:14-20 and 19:11-6) there is indeed a picture of judgment, but it is the judgment of the cross. It is not intended to tell us that Christ and the saints will some time in the future conquer and judge their enemies, but to tell us that by the virtue of the victory won once for all on the cross, Jesus and his faithful followers "are more than conquerors," and that this applies to all post-incarnational history.[46]

That Christ's death and resurrection are central is seen in how the visions of Revelation never show him engaged in direct battle with the Dragon. Nowhere does John mention such a battle, not even in the portrayal of Christ's coming in 19:11ff. It is only as the Lamb who dies for the world that Christ has won his battle (5:5, 9; 3:21). Therefore, according to the hymn of 12:10-2, humankind's possibility of victory over the dragon is found only "by the blood of the Lamb," that is, in the death of Jesus for them and therefore only "by the word of their testimony," whose content is the victory promised them by the Lamb's death.[47]

This centrality of the Lamb in Revelation leads to a reversal of conventional wisdom regarding power and justice. The power of love is true justice. If the Lamb reigns over history, it is not as a crowned king like Caesar, but it is as the incarnation of love itself, the love that goes so far as to give itself, to abandon itself; and his power is no other power than that of this kind of love.[48]

### Punishment of evil powers, not people

Revelation affirms that God's just deeds accomplish the destruction of the evil powers that imprison humankind. John clearly differentiates between these powers, who are God's real enemies, and human beings, for whose sake these powers must be destroyed.

John sees a power of evil beyond the wills of individuals (personified in Revelation by the Beast, the Dragon, the False Prophet, and the Harlot) at work in the processes of history. Its effect is destructive of all that is good in this world, and it exceeds the wit or strength of humankind to overcome it. Just as Christ by his redemptive deeds delivers from sin and brings the powers of the age to come into this world, so too Christ alone can bring the struggle between the powers of good and the powers of evil for ultimate sovereignty over creation to its final conclusion.

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[46]Hanson, *Wrath*, 176-7.
[47]Rissi, *Time*, 38-9.
[48]Ellul, *Apocalypse*, 120-1.

It is perhaps here that John's apocalyptic imagination is the most profound. His visions show a procession of plagues (most of which reflect natural and social catastrophes endemic in all eras of human history). Even after the worst of these plagues, human beings remain on the scene (cf. 16:21; 18:9-19). The culmination of the plagues is the destruction of Babylon (chapter eighteen) and the casting of the Dragon, Beast, and False Prophet into the lake of fire (20:10). After this, John reports a vision of the New Jerusalem, where by the light of the glory of God "the nations walk; and the kings of the earth shall bring their glory into it" (21:24).

The goal of the "just deeds" of God, according to the overall message of Revelation, is not the punishment and destruction of people but rather the destruction of the destroyers of people. It is upon these that God's retribution falls.

## The Lamb's people

We saw earlier in looking at the marriage supper of the Lamb (19:1-10) that what makes the Lamb's bride ready for the marriage feast is the fine white linen that it is given—linen that was earned by the "just deeds" of the saints. Discipleship is not a theme elaborated on in much detail in Revelation, but it is nevertheless an important concern to John.

A central aspect of this concern is the exhortation to Christians to remain "pure," not to conform to the society around them. Revelation speaks not only of judgment against anti-God Powers but also warns Christians not to give in to these Powers' concrete pressures. The book therefore begins with the seven letters, which form a section of censure and challenge to faithfulness. The injunctions, beatitudes, warnings, and promises that run through the book continue this function.[49]

The only way that the followers of the Lamb participate in the battle versus the evil powers is to remain faithful throughout their lives. In that way they will conquer. This participation that Christians are called to in Revelation is, however, seen to be quite important. The church has been appointed by Christ to be a "kingdom of priests" (1:6; 5:10) to mediate his royal and priestly authority to the whole world. Through the church, as pictured in Revelation, the Lamb is to exercise his authority over the nations (1:5; 2:26f.; 11:15ff.; 12:5; 15:3-4; 17:14; 19:11ff.). Through the church he mediates God's forgiveness and lead the world to repentance (3:7-9: 11:13; 14:6-7; 20:1-6). And all this Christians may achieve only by following the Lamb wherever he goes (14:4).[50]

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[49]Schussler Fiorenza, *Invitation*, 30-1.

[50]Caird, *Commentary*, 297.

This means that the separation of the church from the world is thought of more in moral terms than physical. Christians are called upon to refrain from moral and spiritual impurity while acting as agents of God's justice, maintaining "the testimony of Jesus" and validating it with their lives in "the streets of the great city" (12:13-7).[51]

## "Corrective justice"

To conclude, I will touch on a few of the ways that I think taking the message of Revelation seriously can help our thinking about justice.

The message of Revelation regarding justice is that justice has more, ultimately, to do with concepts like correction, reconciliation, and the restoration of relationships than with concepts like retribution and an eye-for-an-eye. Like most of the rest of the Bible, Revelation strongly challenges any tendency to separate God's love from God's justice. God's "just deeds" in Revelation serve God's loving intention of making the New Jerusalem a reality and, by doing so, decisively bringing about the healing of the nations (cf. 22:2).

A Christian concern for justice should take a redemptive slant. It opposes injustice, but never in a way that contradicts the dictates of love and reconciliation. In Revelation twenty-one and twenty-two the only way that the kings of the earth could make it into the New Jerusalem was to be converted (cf. 21:27); they did not make it as oppressors and worshippers of the Beast. But Revelation hopes that even they can be converted. They are not objectified as "enemies" and then disposed of.

***A difference in attitude and goals.*** In the perspective I present, justice not redefined in the sense that it is now concerned with different kinds of things, but rather in the sense that it is considered with a different attitude and different goals. Justice, in light of Revelation's message, still cares about brokenness in the world, scarcity, violation of moral norms, distribution of goods and services, and the like. But the attitude and goals are not so much how I or someone else can get our due, how our self-interests can be balanced, how we can maintain a moral equilibrium in the world, how the punishment can fit the crime.

The goals take the shape more of how the values of God's kingdom can be incarnated in the human order, how social brokenness can be corrected for the good of all, how enemies can be reconciled, how victim and offender can experience healing; recognizing that there is something missing from the New Jerusalem if it is not also accessible to the kings of the earth should they be freed from the Beast's snares.

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[51]Sweet, *Revelation*, 34.

***Faithfulness to the Lamb is crucial.*** Revelation asserts that the short-term result of the saints' just deeds will be suffering. Jesus' just deeds result in his death. So, a Christian perspective on justice cannot expect to be rationally acceptable to everyone in the world. The message of Revelation points toward a perspective on justice that challenges Christians to embrace the particular insights that they have, based on the Christ-event, concerning justice as care for the outcasts and other needy, love for enemies, and self-sacrifice to the point of martyrdom.

Such a perspective places a premium on one's faith commitment and thus immediately parts company with natural law, rational liberalism, and other philosophical approaches. It is not that all of these viewpoints would disagree on all specifics, but the ultimate commitments are different. The point of John's apocalyptic exhortations were to call Christians to "follow the Lamb wherever he goes," even when that seems, in many ways, to be "irrational."

***The "narrow" way.*** As I understand it, Revelation's theology affirms that what is best for human society, and indeed for all of creation, is the way of the Lamb and his faithful followers. The book includes an implicit criticism of the worship of coercive power as being ultimately satanic and idolatrous and thus total self-defeating for anybody.

If this theology is true, then the most socially "responsible" thing Christians can do is practice the Lamb's justice in every way possible. Revelation promises that such practices will likely lead Christians to share in Jesus' fate. It is not reading too much into history to assert that that promise has often been fulfilled and continues to be, daily, in our time.

Such a stand is, according to social theorists such as Ernst Troeltsch,[52] inevitably "sectarian" and by definition marginal and of little long-term social relevance. Perhaps the term "sectarian" is irredeemable. Many who have been labeled such no doubt have been escapist and selfish and thereby "irresponsible." But Revelation asserts that the real hope for the world and its legitimate structures lies in the perfect obedience of the Lamb and the faithfulness of his followers. I am not sure that it is totally idealistic and naïve to think that maybe John was on to something.

[52]Cf. his classic text *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (Macmillan, 1910).

# SECTION TWO: Theological Essays

## 13. Is God nonviolent?

*[This essay was previously published in Ted Grimsrud,* Embodying the Way of Jesus: Anabaptist Convictions for the Twenty-first Century *(Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2007), 47-53.]*

The importance of self-conscious theological reflection for Christians in the Anabaptist tradition may be illustrated by considering an issue at the heart of Christian ethics, the moral acceptability (or not) of the use of violence.[1] From its beginning in the 16th century, the Anabaptist movement has as a rule affirmed pacifism as the will of God. However, this affirmation has not generally stemmed from sustained theological reflection so much as from a more existential belief that Jesus' commands to love enemies apply in all circumstances. What has sustained this belief has generally been the on-going existence of pacifist communities that have claimed a loyalty from its members higher than the loyalty given to nation-states that might ask involvement in warfare of its citizens.

However, in the 21st century, the close-knit, homogenous, rural communities that sustained Anabaptist pacifism in a way that did not require sustained theological reflection are disintegrating. If pacifism is to remain a central aspect of Anabaptist convictions, such theological reflection will become more important—including, at its heart, reflection on the character of God.

### God and violence? The urgency of the question

In our day of heightening sensitivity to the role of religion in violent conflict—"terrorism," "wars on terrorism," retributive criminal justice practices, religious-supported nationalist movements—the question of

[1] This chapter originated as a presentation to the Mennonite Scholars and Friends forum at the American Academy of Religion and Society of Biblical Literature annual convention, November 2001, Denver, Colorado. A shorter version was published in *The Conrad Grebel Review* 21.1 (Winter 2003), 13-7.

how we understand God in relation to violence has never been more urgent. Certainly, not only pacifists have a stake in this question. And not only religious people have a stake. The urgency of the question stems not so much from the need to "get it right" about how God actually is (as if human beings could actually nail this down). Rather, the urgency stems from the reality that our view of what God is like greatly shapes our behavior. How people act in relation to their view of God affects us all.

The connection between our view of God and our behavior in relation to violence may be understood in four possible ways. Most people who believe in God believe God is violent and that human beings thus are also appropriately violent, at least in morally justifiable circumstances. As human existence grows ever more precarious, though, this simple assumption grows more problematic—violence, it becomes increasingly clear, leads to more violence. The spiral of violence is more clearly all the time becoming a threat to the very viability of human life itself.[2] And, of course, for Anabaptist Christians, the assumption that human violence is appropriate has always been questioned.

As a second logical possibility, one could presumably believe that God is nonviolent but that human beings need not be, though I am not aware of anyone taking this stance.

A third view would be that God is not nonviolent—but human beings should be. Some of those who believe human beings are called to nonviolence, understand this calling to stem more directly from the specific teaching of Jesus, not God's own pacifism.[3] Perhaps based on the biblical portrayal of the "warrior God," perhaps based on the need to allow God freedom from anthropocentric moral restraints, perhaps based on the necessity of recognizing God's need to use violence in effecting final justice in relation to a rebellious creation, perhaps based on an awareness of nature itself as "red in tooth and claw"—for these reasons many pacifist Christians answer our question, "is God nonviolent?" with a clear "No, but we should be."

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[2] For analyses of problematic connections between assumptions about God as violence and retributive criminal justice practices see Ted Grimsrud and Howard Zehr, "Rethinking God, Justice, and the Treatment of Offenders" *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation* 34 (2002) and Ted Grimsrud, "Violence as a Theological Problem," 198-217 in the present book.

[3] See, for example, A. James Reimer, "God is Love but Not a Pacifist," in *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2001), 486-92, and Scott Holland, "The Gospel of Peace and the Violence of God," in Fernando Enns, Scott Holland, and Ann K. Riggs, eds., *Seeking Cultures of Peace: A Peace Church Conversation* (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2004), 132-46.

Other pacifist Christians hold a fourth view, that God is nonviolent and that human beings are called to be likewise. In this view, human nonviolence is both what God through Jesus commands us to embody and what has become a necessity for the sake of our survival in the contemporary world. And, God's nonviolence is the necessary grounding for human nonviolence.[4] If nonviolence does not go with the grain of universe, if our deepest ethical imperative does not cohere with God's character, we are in the end hopeless romantics to think that nonviolence is a realistic human possibility. And if nonviolence is not a realistic human possibility, pacifism is indeed parasitic idealism of the worst sort —calling us to live in ways that are impractical, irresponsible, counter-productive, needlessly guilt-inducing, and (ironically) conflict fostering.

## The emergence of Anabaptist peace theology

Traditionally, Anabaptist pacifists have not concerned themselves with speculation of the sort implied by this question. They have not worried a great deal about the logical ramifications of their pacifism in terms either of theological coherence or of the applicability of nonviolence to the wider world.

Various factors have contributed to the transition from what sociologists Leo Driedger and Donald Kraybill call "quietism" to "active peacemaking."[5] Some of these include (1) general acculturation that has pushed Anabaptists to identify more thoroughly with their wider culture and to apply their pacifist convictions as widely as possible; (2) increasing participation in social movements inspired by the transformative nonviolence of Gandhi, with their optimism about the applicability of pacifism; and (3) growing engagement with philosophical and theological currents that provide deeper intellectual grounding for a more positive view of human possibilities in the world (for example, Process thought, the I-Thou philosophy of Martin Buber, and liberation theology).

Is God nonviolent? Yes, I believe so, though evidence is ambiguous. People from opposing points of view cite data to support their views. The debates continue without resolution. We get mixed messages everywhere we look. Let's think in terms of the standard sources for theology: scripture, history or tradition, and present experience.

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[4] For two examples, see Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992) and Ray C. Gingerich, "Theological Foundations for an Ethic of Nonviolence: Was Yoder's God a Warrior?" *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 77.3 (July 2003), 417-35.

[5] Leo Driedger and Donald B. Kraybill, *Mennonite Peacemaking: From Quietism to Activism* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1994).

## Scripture

The Bible does present God as directly involved in violent acts as well as commanding human beings to commit violence. The evidence is well known and massive. If we draw our conclusions from the perspectives of the many specific biblical references, we have to say that the God of the Bible is violent. If we go from the particular to the general, from individual stories of violence to general conclusions, and give equal weight to all these individual stories, then we will conclude that the Bible clearly teaches that God is violent.

This is the God who brought the overwhelming flood down upon Noah's generation, who rained fire and brimstone upon Sodom and Gomorrah, who brought death to all of Egypt's young children, who massacred hundreds of Hebrews when they idolized golden calves, who ordered the massacre of every man, woman, and child in various areas of Canaan in the time of Joshua—and I could go on. If I were to do so it would likely become clear that I was proving too much. That is, this violence of God in the Bible becomes too much to believe.

We need to recognize that the biblical materials contain other evidence.[6] The God of the Genesis one creation account—in contrast to other gods—does not create in the context of violence but in peace. The God of the Hebrew people from the calling of Abraham and Sarah down through the exile and beyond is a God in many ways who barks more than bites. The God of the actual story is characterized by patience and persevering love, a God whose saving intentions toward the Hebrews find expression, time after time, in acts of unearned love and mercy. The story gives the impression that God has determined to work within the framework of historical processes, bringing salvation ultimately through mercy, not through coercive power.

This is how God is shown in the life and teaching of Jesus and the first Christians: the merciful father of the wayward son in Jesus' parable, the one who brings rain on the just and unjust alike, that one who—in Paul's words—loves us even while we are God's enemies.

The ambiguity of the Bible's portrayal of God in relation to violence can be seen in a paradigmatic way in the book of Revelation. One way of reading the book, focusing first of all on the specifics, concludes that Revelation portrays God as profoundly violent. Another way, focusing more on the book's overall message, concludes that Revelation actually

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[6] See Ted Grimsrud, *God's Healing Strategy: An Introduction to the Main Themes of the Bible*, revised edition (Telford, PA: Cascadia Pubishing House, 2011) for an attempt to show that the overall message of the Bible supports nonviolence.

portrays a God who through persevering love ends up healing even God's enemies—the kings of the earth and the nations (Rev 21).

## Tradition

Christian tradition continues this ambiguity. Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin portray God as having a violent side. Not surprisingly, such theologians also accepted the Constantinian accommodation with its assumption that Christians at times are called upon to imitate God's retributive style of justice. Yet there have always been dissenters. Many have been silenced (often violently, in the name of God), labeled heretical, dismissed as irrelevant and worse. But they keep springing up because they can draw directly on the life and teaching of Jesus as the basis of critiquing the pro-violence viewpoint.

If we see upper-case T Tradition as normative for our understanding of God, we would be bound to conclude that God is violent. But if we look at the entire tradition, we see diversity. Many Christians indeed have understood that God is violent, but that understanding has fostered behavior that has undercut the gospel of Jesus. Stephen Toulmin argues that we find in the 16th-century wars among Christians (fought in the name of a violent God) the roots of modern atheism.[7] Another consequence of the Christian tradition's portrayal of God as violent, according to Timothy Gorringe,[8] is that we can see a direct connection between traditional theologies of God and the soul-destroying criminal justice practices in present-day America.

So, history and tradition are also ambiguous, depending upon how one weighs the evidence. We have clear evidence of beliefs that God is violent and minority dissent from those beliefs. We also see problematic consequences to belief in God as violent that have jeopardized witness to Jesus. These problematic consequences are not themselves evidence that God is nonviolent, but they at least challenge us to question the utility of the belief that God is violent.

## Experience

Present-day experience also offers ambiguous evidence. If we include our perceptions of nature under this rubric, assuming that in some sense the natural order reflects the character of its Creator, we easily find

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[7] Stephen Toulmin. *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (New York: Free Press, 1990).

[8] Timothy Gorringe, *God's Just Vengeance: Crime Violence and the Rhetoric of Salvation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

evidence of this ambiguity. The sociobiology perspective of writers such as Edward O. Wilson[9] tends to assume that nature is inherently violent. Wilson is an atheist, but many Christians are sympathetic to the understandings of the sociobiologists and use their arguments as evidence for the creator also being violent.

On the other hand, anthropologist Ashley Montagu[10] argues that human beings and nature are not naturally violent. International scientists in "The Seville Statement on Violence" (1986) state it is scientifically incorrect to say "that we have inherited a tendency to make war from our animal ancestors…that war or any other violent behavior is genetically programmed into our human nature…that in the course of human evolution there has been a selection for aggressive behavior more than for other kinds of behavior… that humans have a violent brain."[11]

Criminal justice theorist Robert Q. Wilson argues that experience proves that human beings are innately violent; whereas James Gilligan, a long-time prison psychiatrist, argues that violence is something we are socialized for. Those who believe human begins are created in God's image could use Wilson's argument as support for seeing God as violent, or Gilligan's for the opposite conclusion.

It appears that we cannot draw decisive evidence from nature or human experience to prove that God is violent or not violent. This is true as well, of scripture and Christian tradition. We will never find resolution simply based on these three central sources of guidance. Nonetheless, we do not actually live as if all we have are uncertainty and ambiguity. We do make choices, and they are theological choices. To use violence, I believe, is ultimately to assume that it is God's will that we do so. Or, truly to reject the use of violence is to make certain assumptions about the nature of the universe and, hence, about the nature of God.

## Vision

So, which view of God should we affirm? I suggest that we need to add a fourth source along with scripture, tradition, and experience. This source I will call "vision." By "vision" I mean our convictions about both where we are going and about what we believe we are called to do. We must ask, what concept of God best fits with our vision for our lives?

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[9] See, for example, Edward O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (New York: Knopf, 1998).

[10] Ashley Montagu, *The Nature of Human Aggression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

[11] Cited in Alfie Kohn, *The Brighter Side of Human Nature: Altruism and Empathy in Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1990), 269-70.

Where do we believe we are meant to go? What kind of concept of God will help get us there?

I believe, for the sake of the flourishing of human life, that we need to understand God as a God who seeks healing, not retribution, a God who defeats evil not through redemptive violence but through persevering love. We need to understand God as a God who empowers us to respond to our enemies with love and not with hostility. These "needs" might be pipe-dreams if the universe clearly went the other way. These "needs" might be heretical if the Bible and tradition clearly went the other way. But they do not.

Christians confess Jesus as our normative revelation of God, a confession that means different things to different people. Some argue that our Trinitarian confession of three distinct members means we ought not move from the revelation of God in Jesus to drawing conclusions about "God the Creator."[12] However, following John Howard Yoder,[13] I believe that only understanding Jesus as revelatory of God protects us from making God a projection of human power politics. Following Gordon Kaufman, I believe that what distinguishes Christian views of God is to see Christ as paradigm for God. Kaufman writes, "To worship the God-revealed-in-Christ—the God defined and constructed with Jesus and the new order of human relationships surrounding him as the model—is to worship the true God."[14]

This is to say that, although even in the story of Jesus we find some ambiguity regarding God and nonviolence, Jesus ultimately pulls us toward a view of reality that reveals nonviolence to be with the grain of universe. We are not simply whistling in the dark when we say that we need a vision of a nonviolent God. This vision will best foster the flourishing of life. It is possible to understand such a vision as coherent with the vision we are given in the life and teaching of Jesus and in the community that arose around him.

To have the conviction that God is nonviolent is therefore not arbitrary, nor does it impose extra-biblical thinking onto the Bible. It simply affirms that we read scripture and life through the lens of Jesus' life and teaching. With his way as central, the ambiguity of some of the biblical materials, of the message of the Christian tradition, and of present-day experience shrinks. Not that we do not still get mixed messages. Rather, we have an interpretive key allowing us to see the

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[12] See Reimer, "God is Love."

[13] Stated most thoroughly in John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus,* second edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994).

[14] Gordon D. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 388.

consistent nonviolence of God being expressed amidst these mixed signals of history and present experience. This key comes to us from Jesus, and it gains clarity when we realize that Jesus teaches us what it is that we are meant to be (and will become).

# 14. Violence as a theological problem

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We live in a world where all too many people "purposefully contribute to the harm of another human being, either by action or inaction" (my working definition of violence). In such a world, an unavoidable moral question arises, how do we respond to violence, how do we respond to evil?

Despite widespread occurrences of inter-human violence, the case may be made that most human beings tend to want to avoid lethal violence toward other human beings. If this were not true, the human race could never have survived to evolve to the point it has. In human experience people need some overriding reason to go against the tendency to avoid lethal violence. To act violently, especially to kill other human beings, is serious business, undertaken because some other value or commitment overrides the tendency not to be violent.

Almost all violence emerges with a rationale that justifies its use. Psychiatrist James Gilligan, who worked in the criminal justice system for many years, argues, based on his extensive work with extremely violent offenders, that even the most seemingly pointless acts of violence usually nonetheless have some justification in the mind of the perpetrator.[1]

Other more obviously rational uses of violence (for example, warfare, capital punishment, corporal punishment of children) generally follow a fairly self-conscious logic. At the core of this "logic" rests a commitment to the necessity of retribution. When the moral order is violated by wrongdoing, "justice" requires retribution (that is, repayment of violence with violence, pain with pain).

The legitimacy of retribution is widely accepted in the United States. Where does this commitment to retribution come from? One key source

[1] James Gilligan, *Violence: Our Deadly Epidemic and Its Causes* (New York: Putnam, 1996).

is Christian theology, the belief that retribution is God's will, or that the need for retribution stems from the nature of the universe. That the nature of the universe requires retribution is a part of what most Western Christians believe, leading to strong support for retribution (that is, for justifying violence as the appropriate response to violence).

## The logic of retribution

A theological framework I will call "the logic of retribution" underlies many rationales for the use of violence. The logic of retribution understands God most fundamentally in terms of impersonal, inflexible holiness, seeing God's law as the unchanging standard by which to measure. This framework understands human beings to be inherently sinful. God responds to sin with punishment. We justify violence as being an expression of this deserved punishment (that is, inflicting pain in response to wrong-doing). God wills such punishment. God's holiness means that God cannot countenance sin; if God has direct contact with sin, God must destroy it.

The evangelical theologian, Millard Erickson, articulates this position in terms that echo epoch-shaping theologians such as Augustine, Anselm, Luther, and Calvin: "The nature of God is perfect and complete holiness. This is … the way God is by nature. He has always been absolutely holy…. Being contrary to God's nature, sin is repulsive to him. He is allergic to sin, so to speak. He cannot look upon it."[2]

Erickson directly follows John Calvin in how he articulates this view. Calvin wrote in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, "there is a perpetual and irreconcilable disagreement between righteousness and unrighteousness." Hence, Christ has "to undergo the severity of God's vengeance, to appease his wrath and satisfy his just judgment."[3]

Human beings have been given laws from God that tell us what violates God's holiness. When humans violate those laws, we sin against God himself. Erickson writes, "The law is something of a transcript of the nature of God. When we relate to it, whether positively or negatively,… it is God himself whom we are obeying or disobeying. Disobeying the law is serious…because disobeying it is actually an attack upon the very nature of God himself."[4] When human beings violate God's holiness, our sin makes God angry. God must (due to God's holiness) punish sin.

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[2] Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984), 802.

[3] Cited in John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 120.

[4] Erickson, *Christian*, 803.

According to the logic of retribution, then, inflexible holiness governs God's behavior. Human beings invariably violate that holiness. God may not freely act with unconditional mercy toward rebellious human beings. Simply to forgive would violate God's holiness. "For God to remove or ignore the guilt of sin without requiring a payment would in effect destroy the very moral fiber of the universe, the distinction between right and wrong."[5] Justice works to sustain the balance of the universe. If human beings upset the balance, justice requires recompense to restore the balance. We make this payment through punishment, pain for pain.

The doctrine of the atonement enters here. Due to the extremity of the offenses of human beings versus God's law, God can relate to human beings only if there is death on the human side to restore the balance. This happens through the death of God's own son, Jesus, whose holiness is so powerful that it can balance out the unholiness of all of humanity.

Jonathan Edwards, for example, wrote that the crucifixion of Jesus "was willed and ordered by God" and was "the most admirable and glorious of all events" because only in this way could human beings be granted salvation.[6] Human beings, when they confess their own helpless sinfulness, may claim Jesus as their savior from God's righteous anger. Jesus satisfies God's retributive justice (pain for pain) on our behalf.[7]

Within the logic of retribution, salvation achieved as the result of violence is consistent with the basic nature of the universe as founded on impersonal holiness. Salvation happens only because the ultimate act of violence—the sacrificial death of Jesus—satisfies God's holiness. In this view, it is God's plan that God's own Son be violently put to death. In light of this understanding of the nature of God and of the fundamental nature of the universe, the logic of retribution indeed leads to acceptance of "justifiable violence." Violence may be the best response to violence.

## Retributive responses to crime[8]

Let us look more closely at one particular expression of retributive violence, criminal justice. Criminal justice is only one issue among many where the logic of retribution exerts a major influence, but it may be the

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[5] Erickson, *Christian,* 816.

[6] Cited in Philip Greven, *Spare the Child: The Religious Roots of Punishment and the Psychological Impact of Physical Abuse* (New York: Knopf, 1991), 50.

[7] Erickson, *Christian*, 804.

[8] This section draws upon Ted Grimsrud and Howard Zehr, "Rethinking God, Justice, and Treatment of Offenders," in Thomas O'Connor, ed., *Religion, the Community, and the Rehabilitation of Offenders* (New York: Haworth Press, 2002), 259-85.

one most obviously shaped by this logic. Punishment involves the intentional infliction of pain; it is a form of violence. Punishment, then, requires some justification as it involves the state acting violently, something normally considered morally and socially unacceptable.

In the Western criminal justice tradition, overriding justifications for harsh punishments, even to the point of death, continue to be tied to an understanding of reality requiring retributive justice because fundamental laws are violated. Such "retributive justice" restores the moral balance.[9] Given the religious roots of Western culture, this understanding to a large extent follows from a particular understanding of God: retribution is needed to "satisfy" God's will that violations be paid for with pain.

So, in the arena of criminal justice, the issue of authorized human beings inflicting pain (including death) on other human beings is a theological issue. The close connection between Western political philosophy and Christian theology dates back to the early fourth century with the first "Christian" emperor, Constantine, and was given powerful theological grounding in the work of Augustine at the end of that century.[10] This connection grew as Western concepts of justice were decisively shaped during the Middle Ages through an interaction between Christian theology and newly emerging concepts of law. The theology/law interaction deeply influenced Western culture as a whole and helped to reinforce a retributive view of justice.

Retributive theology has infused the social, political, and cultural life of the West in fundamental ways, going back not just to the medieval period but into antiquity. Timothy Gorringe makes a strong case that the atonement theology of Anselm of Canterbury provides a crucial link in applying this view of God to the practice of punitive criminal justice.[11] However, the roots of such an application of these theological themes go much further back, to the infusion of Greek philosophy and Roman

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[9] See United States Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia's essay, "God's Justice and Ours," *First Things* 123 (May 2002), 17-21. The Roman Catholic Scalia, interestingly, rejects the Vatican's recent anti-death penalty statement, *Evangelium Vitae*, and uses the Bible (specifically Romans 13) to justify his pro-retributive justice convictions.

[10] See James Caroll, *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 2001), "Part Three: Constantine, Augustine, and the Jews."

[11] Timothy Gorringe, *God's Just Vengeance: Crime, Violence, and the Rhetoric of Salvation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 85-125. For Anselm's treatment of atonement theology, see "Cur Deus Homo?" in Brian Evans and G.R. Evans, eds., *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 260-356. For an important recent critique of Anselm that is very much in harmony with the perspective I will arguing for, see J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001).

political thought into Christian theology, fostered especially by the extraordinarily influential writings of Augustine of Hippo.[12]

Greek philosophy's impact on theology may be seen in emerging notions of God's impassivity, the growing abstraction of concepts of justice, and objectifying or "othering" offenders (in Augustine's case—and in the following generations—especially the objectification of "heretics," providing the basis for their severe punishment).

Acknowledging these older antecedents, I focus here on the Middle Ages, sketching the impact of retributive theology on the criminal justice practices of the West.[13] In the early Middle Ages, the church, struggling with the state for dominance of European society, utilized the law of the later Roman Empire as its instrument for solidifying its authority. It merged its theology with this newly rediscovered legal system to create canon law. Secular authorities, in their turn, followed suit.

The Greek-influenced theology affirmed God's impersonal holiness and retributive response to violations of that holiness. This theology merged with Roman legal philosophy, also centered on impersonal principles. Instead of being based on custom and history, law in this perspective stood alone. Roman law was written law, based on principles that were independent of specific customs. As embraced by the medieval church in its canon law, it had an accompanying method for testing and developing law, scholasticism. Roman law could not only be systematized and expanded but also could be studied and taught transnationally by professionals. This universal character explains its appeal and almost immediate spread to universities throughout most of Western Europe.

From the base of Roman law, the church built an elaborate structure of canon law, the first modern legal system. This revolutionary development provided the papacy with an important weapon in its struggle. By providing for prosecution by a central authority, the church established a basis for attacking heresy. The extreme expression of this new approach was the Inquisition in which representatives of the Pope ferreted out heretics and tortured them.[14]

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[12] For Augustine's social writings, see Henry Paolucci, ed., *The Political Writings of St. Augustine* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1962); especially Sections I and IV.

[13] I draw here on Harold J. Berman, *Law and Revolution: The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition* (Cambrdige, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Herman Bianchi, *Justice as Sanctuary: Toward a New System of Crime Control* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994); Gorringe, *God's Just Vengeance*; and Howard Zehr, *Changing Lenses: A New Focus for Crime and Justice,* 3rd edition (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2005).

[14] Bianchi, *Justice*, 16-7; see also Bernard Hamilton, *The Medieval Inquisition* (New York: Holmes and Meier Publishers, 1981).

No longer was the individual or local community the primary victim of crime. In the Inquisition, it was an entire moral order that was the victim, and the central authority (the Church) was its guardian. Wrongs were no longer simple harms regarding redress. They were sins requiring retribution. God's holiness, understood in terms of retributive theology, necessitates punishment carried out by the human agents of God's will.

Punitive practices following from such retributive logic diverged from earlier approaches. In the early church, wrongs were seen as wrongs against persons. In Matthew 18, for instance, wrongdoers are to make it right to the victim, then the obligation is loosened in heaven. In the medieval understanding, wrongs violated the impersonal moral order. The representative of that order was a legalistic, punishing figure. God took the place of the victim, and salvation became a matter of appeasing an angry God.[15] God's punishment was portrayed as so awful that attention needed to focus on saving the sinner from punishment, leading to ignoring the needs of to the victim. This theology—as with the emerging legal system—focused on dealing with the offender.

Justice became a matter of applying rules, establishing guilt, and fixing penalties—without concern for finding healing for the victim or the relationship between victim and offender. Crime was a sin, not just against a person but against God, and it was the church's business to purge the world of this transgression. From this understanding of sin, it is a short step to assume that as the social order is willed by God, crime is also a sin against this social order. The church (and later the state) must therefore enforce that order. Increasingly, focus centered on punishment by established authorities as a way of doing justice.

By the end of the 16th century, the cornerstones of state justice were in place, and they drew deeply from retributive theology. Criminal codes began to specify wrongs and to emphasize punishment. Enlightenment thought increased the tendency to define offenses in terms of lawbreaking rather than actual harms. If the state represented the will and interests of the public, people could more easily justify defining the state as a victim and giving up to the state a monopoly on intervention. Enlightenment thinkers instituted more rational guidelines for administering pain. They also introduced new mechanisms for applying punishment.

The primary instrument for applying pain came to be the prison. One attraction of prison was that one could grade terms according to the offense. They could calibrate punishments in units of time, providing an appearance of rationality and even science in the application of pain.

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[15] See Julian Pleasants, "Religion that Restores Victims," *New Theology Review* 9.3 (1996): 41-63.

Between the mid-1800s and the 1970s, the practice of criminal justice in the United States, in some important respects, partially evolved away from strictly retributive justice.[16] David Garland argues that an approach he calls the "penal-welfare" model gained ascendancy, with a concern for rehabilitation of offenders and a diminishment of focus on strict punishment.[17] This model, however, never received widespread support among the general population. Because politicians for a long time found it disadvantageous to try to intervene in criminal justice issues due to conventional wisdom that criminal justice was a no-win issue with which to be identified, the prison system was allowed to pursue its own agenda.

However, with a significant increase in the crime rate in the United States in the years following World War II, politicians came to discover that "law and order" rhetoric actually gained them popularity. Because the modern criminal justice system did not have a wide constituency, and, probably more importantly, because the modern criminal justice system tended to be centralized and bureaucratic and not noticeably effective in reducing the incidents of crime, when strong critiques were raised in the 1960s and 1970s, the somewhat ineffective focus on rehabilitation was soon significantly lessened.

Garland traces the strong re-emergence of the retributive approach that has led to an extraordinary transformation of the US criminal justice system. The logic of retribution that became embedded in our criminal justice practices by the 19th century, even though it was mitigated against somewhat during the penal-welfare era, has returned with a new intensity in the last quarter of the 20th century and the early years of the 21st.

The retributive model of justice, efforts to make criminal justice more rehabilitative notwithstanding, reflects a movement that transformed Western culture since the 11th century. Through this process, crime came to be defined as against the state, justice became a monopoly of the state, punishment became normative, and victims were disregarded.

Retributive theology, which emphasized legalism and punishment, deeply influenced Western culture through rituals, hymns, symbols. An image "of judicial murder, the cross, bestrode Western culture from the

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[16] This evolution was paralleled in Europe. See the story of the gradual movement to abolish the death penalty in Great Britain in Harry Potter, *Hanging in Judgment: Religion and the Death Penalty in England* (New York: Continuum, 1993). For many years once the movement to abolish the death penalty in Britain emerged in the early 19th century, it was opposed by the hierarchy of the Church of England. The final step that enabled the anti-death penalty proponents to win turned out to be a change of perspective among Anglican leaders.

[17] David Garland, *The Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

11th to the 18th century," with huge impact on the Western psyche. It entered the "structures of affect" of Western Europe and "in doing so, … pumped retributivism into the legal bloodstream, reinforcing the retributive tendencies of the law."[18] This dynamic led to an obsession with retributive themes in the Bible. A kind of historical short-circuit occurred in which certain concepts were separated from their biblical context, interpreted through the lens of Roman law, then in turn used to interpret the biblical text. The result was an obsession with the retributive themes of the Bible and a neglect of the restorative ones—constructing a basic theology of a retributive God who desires violence.[19]

## A recipe for alienation

The paradigm of retributive justice that dominates Western criminal justice is a recipe for alienation, as is readily apparent in the United States in these early years of the 21st century. By making the "satisfaction" of impersonal justice (or, in traditional Christian terms, the "satisfaction" of "God's impersonal holiness") the focus of our response to criminal activity, the personal human beings involved—victims, offenders, community members—rarely find wholeness.

Moreover, the larger community's suffering often increases. Instead of the healing of the brokenness caused by the offense, we find ourselves with an increasing spiral of brokenness. Many victims of violence speak of being victimized again by the impersonal criminal justice system.[20] Offenders, often alienated people already, become more deeply alienated by the punitive practices and person-destroying experiences of prisons.

Garland portrays the "culture of control" in criminal justice as a new form of social segregation. Criminal justice practices now focus not so much on rehabilitating and reintegrating offenders, but, more, to the contrary, on identifying and then isolating offenders. "The prison is used today as a kind of reservation, a quarantine zone in which purportedly dangerous individuals are segregated in the name of public safety."[21] Present dynamics emphasize the difference between offenders and law-abiding citizens. "Being intrinsically evil or wicked, some offenders are not like us. They are dangerous others who threaten our safety and have

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[18] Gorringe, *God's*, 224.

[19] For an example, see H. Wayne House's biblically-based theological argument in favor of capital punishment in H. Wayne House and John Howard Yoder, *The Death Penalty Debate* (Dallas: Word Books, 1991), 1-104.

[20] See Howard Zehr, *Transcending: Reflections of Crime Victims* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2001).

[21] Garland, *The Culture of Control*, 178.

no call on our fellow feeling. The appropriate reaction for society is one of social defense: we should defend ourselves against these dangerous enemies rather than concern ourselves with their welfare and prospects for rehabilitation."[22]

James Gilligan has drawn on his extensive experience working closely with violent offenders to articulate a strong critique of retributive justice as manifested in the U.S. criminal justice system. Gilligan asserts, "a society's prisons serves as a key for understanding the larger society as a whole."[23] When we look through the "magnifying glass" of the our prison system, we see a society focused on trying to control violence through violence, a society that willingly inflicts incredible suffering on an ever-increasing number of desperate people.

Despite our democratic principles, our belief that a person is innocent until proven guilty, and our self-identification as a "Christian nation," the U.S. leads the world in per capita prison rate. Between 1924 and 1975, the rate of incarceration remained fairly steady at around 100 prisoners per 100,000 population—a rate at that level higher than most industrialized nations. But after 1975, the rate increased by more than four times, to 478 per 100,000 in 2000.[24]

This exploding prison population faces increasingly worsening conditions. U.S. prisons have become "cruel, inhumane, and degrading, with severe overcrowding, frequent rapes and beatings, prolonged and arbitrary use of solitary confinement, grossly unsanitary, disease-inducing living conditions, and deprivation of elementary medical care."[25] U.S. society's tolerance of these dehumanizing conditions, it appears, follows from what Gilligan calls the "rational self-interest" theory of violence.[26] According to this theory, we humans decide to use violence based on a rational calculation of costs and benefits. If people understood the costs of wrongdoing to be high enough, they will be deterred from such wrongdoing. The assumption follows from this theory that allowing our prisons to be hellholes will prevent violence by deterring would-be wrongdoers. A similar logic applies to the rationale for the death penalty.

Robert Hughes tells a story from the 19th century that illustrates this theory.[27] Australia was founded as a British penal colony in the late 18th

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[22] Garland, *The Culture of Control*, 184.

[23] Gilligan, *Violence*, 185.

[24] Richard D. Vogel, "United States Capitalism and Incarceration Today," *Monthly Review* 55.4 (September 2003), 39.

[25] Gilligan, *Violence*, 23-4. See also Garland, *Culture,* 130.

[26] Gilligan, *Violence*, 94-5.

[27] Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore: The Epic of Australia's Founding* (New York: Knopf, 1987), pages 460-551. Pages numbers of quotes from this book will be

century. The British government sought to foster a terrible reputation for Australia to help deter crime out of fear of being exiled to the south Pacific. Over time, life in Australia proved to have its attractions, so officials sought to establish a prison within the prison that would indeed be worthy of even the most hardened criminal's terror.

Norfolk Island sits some 1,000 miles east of the Australian mainland. "Magnificent in scenery, Norfolk Island was also a natural prison, harborless, cliff-bound and girdled with reefs on which the long Pacific swells broke with a ragged, monotonous booming" (99). In 1824, Thomas Brisbane, Australia's governor, under orders from Britain to "prepare a place of ultimate terror for the incorrigibles of the System" (455), made plans to resettle Norfolk Island for a prison of last resort from which no escape would be possible. Brisbane intended this island to serve as "the nadir of England's penal system," the lowest level of hell. "Although no convict could escape from it, rumor and reputation would. In this way, the 'Old Hell,' as convict argot termed it, would reduce mainland crime by sheer terror" (456).

"On Norfolk Island, [Brisbane] promised, all pretence at reform would be dropped. It's sole purpose would be to provide 'the ne plus ultra on convict degradation.' The island could not support many prisoners, and those it contained must be the absolute worst of those double-damned by the System," that is, those convicted first of crime in Britain and again in Australia. Brisbane wrote "the felon who is sent there is forever excluded from all hope of return." Norfolk Island prisoners would have no legal rights; they "have forfeited all claim to the protection of the law" (456).

The resettlement of the island began in 1825. The government's philosophy was concisely expressed by the governor of New South Wales, Ralph Darling: "My object was to hold out that settlement as a place of the extremest Punishment, short of Death" (457). This object was achieved; Norfolk Island became "the worst place on earth."

An indication of the hellishness of Norfolk Island may be seen in the common practice where a group of prisoners would draw straws, designating one man as the murderer, the second the victim, and the rest of the group witnesses. After the killing would happen, since the commander of Norfolk Island did not have the authority to try capital crimes, the murderer and the witnesses had to be sent to Sydney for trial. The prisoners "yearned for the meager relief of getting away from the 'ocean hell,' if only to a gallows on the mainland. And in Sydney, there

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given in the text. See also John Hirst, "The Australian Experience: The Convict Colony," in Norval Morris and David J. Rothman, eds., *The Oxford History of the Prison* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 236-65, especially 260-2.

was some slight chance of escape" (468). After a several years of such murders, the government began sending judges to the Island to try, convict, and hang the murderers there.

In 1834, Norfolk Island prisoners rebelled. After the rebellion was put down, several dozen conspirators were convicted and of those fourteen were hung. Shortly before the time of execution a Catholic priest came from the mainland. He informed those convicted of conspiracy who would be hung and who would be spared. He later wrote: "Those who were to live wept bitterly, whilst those doomed to die, without exception, dropped on their knees, and with dry eyes thanked God that they were to be delivered from such a place" (478-79).

Hughes sees the actual purpose of Norfolk Island as not only to punish those unfortunate enough to be sent there but, even more so, to make an impression on those who could potentially be sent there. "Norfolk Island held a thousand convicts, but its real use was the intimidation of tens of thousands more. If it was not 'demonic,' it would have been as useless a deterrent as a gallows with no rope. Mercy on the mainland needed the background of terror elsewhere" (484).

Hughes quotes a leading Scot churchman, Rev. Sydney Smith, who supported this rationale. Rev. Smith asserted that a prison should be "a place of punishment from which men recoil with horror—a place of real suffering painful to the memory, terrible to the imagination, a place of sorrow and wailing, which should be entered with horror" (484).

Alexander Maconichie, Professor of Geography at University College, London, traveled to Australia in 1837 to investigate the treatment of prisoners. His report condemned the System, which he believed "debased free and bond alike" (490). This report ended up in the hands of John Russell, the head of the British penal system. Russell, who opposed the System of transportation of convicts to Australia, distributed Maconochie's report widely to bolster reform efforts. In 1840 Maconochie was appointed head of Norfolk Island and given the chance test his philosophy that prisons should rehabilitate more than punish. This appointment surprised Maconochie. He believed that Norfolk Island would be a less than ideal context for him to try out his theories given its extreme isolation and the damage already done to its prisoners.

However, enthusiastic to try his theories, Maconochie finally accepted the appointment. His initial encounter with the prisoners gave him hope. "He had the Old Hands mustered in the jailyard at Kingston and strode in to confront the collective stare of twelve hundred men, nameless to him, masks of criminality and evasion, burnt by sun and seamed by misery, the twice convicted and doubly damned, Scottish bank clerks and aboriginal rapists, Spanish legionnaires and Malay pearlers, English

killers and Irish rebels. 'A more demonical-looking assemblage could not be imagined,' he later wrote, 'and nearly the most formidable sight I ever beheld was the sea of faces upheld to me.' They looked at their new commander with utter skepticism" (502).

As Maconachie explained that his role was not to be their torturer but to help the men change their lives, the prisoners began to cheer. According to one witness, "from that instant all crimes disappeared. The Old Hands from that moment were a different race of beings" (502-3).

Maconachie took many books to Norfolk Island for the prisoners to read and sought, as his main form of therapy, to encourage the inmates to make music. From the start, many criticized his new approach, but the distance left him with a great deal of freedom. "Maconachie dismantled the gallows, which had stood as a permanent emblem of dread outside the gate of the prisoners' barracks. He threw away the special double-loaded cats used by the floggers. The island had never had a church, but now Maconachie built two, one for the Catholics and the other for the Protestants, each accommodating 450 men…. He gave every man a plot of rich soil, set up classes in vegetable and fruit gardening…and encouraged them to sell their surplus to the officers" (510).

Maconochie's reforms met with mixed results, having a much more positive impact on the Old Hands who, on the island when he arrived, had born the brunt of earlier cruel administrators than on the New Hands who arrived after Maconochie. George Gipps, Governor of New South Wales, visited Norfolk Island and gave Maconochie's work qualified endorsement. Maconochie met with success in rehabilitating the "worst of the worst" criminals. Under his administration, 920 prisoners were discharged to freedom in Syndey. As of 1845 (two years after Maconochie's leadership of Norfolk Island had ended), only 20 of them had been convicted of new crimes (519).

However, success did not insure Maconochie's tenure. British officials recalled him in 1843, after three years as commandant. The increase in crime rates in Britain during the 1830s and early 1840s led to more harsh prison practices, including support for having a symbol of the threat of extreme terror as a deterrent. Norfolk Island filled this requirement.

Hughes describes Maconochie's successor, Joseph Childs as "a dull, vacillating military hack, distinguished only by his severity" (533). "From the moment Childs [reached the island] in February 1844, the trust Maconochie had struggled to establish between convicts and Authority caved in….All the men on Norfolk Island were, in Childs's language, 'the worst men that the annals of criminal jurisprudence can hold forth to the world as an example of all combined evil'" (534). Childs's term ended in 1846 with a mutiny that resulted in the execution of twelve prisoners.

Childs was succeeded by John Giles Price, "the most notorious of all the commandants of Norfolk Island" (543). In contrast to Maconochie's opening words to the prisoners in 1841 that elicited the applause of hopefulness, Price's opening words surely elicited only despair: "I am come here to rule, and by God I'll do so and tame or kill you. I know you are cowardly dogs, and I'll make you worry and eat one another" (544).

"Price did not believe that reformation was possible; he assumed that good behavior was a sham and that everything any prisoner said about his own state of mind or moral purpose was a lie. 'Whenever a fellow is recommended to me by the religious instructor,' Price declared, 'I always set that fellow down as the greatest hypocrite of the whole lot'" (546).

In time, knowledge of Price's extreme brutality elicited protests from a few ministers who visited Norfolk Island and observed Price's handiwork first hand. This led governmental leaders, who did not necessarily themselves oppose such treatment of prisoners, to fear that Price "might become a serious embarrassment to the Crown" and to remove him from his position in 1853. He moved on to lead another prison, where in 1857 a group of aggrieved inmates murdered him (549-50).

The government closed the prison on Norfolk Island shortly after Price left. Britain's practice of sending convicts to Australia was winding down by that time, though it did not come to a complete stop until 1871.

The story of Norfolk Island illustrates the logic of retribution and the deterrent impact of the promise of punishment for wrongdoers. The purpose of the Island, seen in the rejection of Maconochie's fruitful efforts to rehabilitate the prisoners, centered neither on the reform of offenders nor on protection of society from the dangers of recidivistic convicts. Rather, Norfolk Island served as the symbol of ultimate terror—regardless of the costs to the actual prisoners who suffered mightily at the hands of the brutal administrators of the Island.

## Social consequences

Ironically, it would appear that the effect of treating prisoners with brutality and other dehumanizing tactics actually serves to put the broader society more at risk. James Gilligan argues that "if the purpose of imprisonment were to socialize men to become as violent as possible—both while they are there and after they return to the community—we could hardly find a more effective way to accomplish it than what we do."[28] Treating people violently makes them more violent. A large amount of the violence that is part of our criminal justice practices is

[28] Gilligan, *Violence*, 155.

segregated behind prison walls and invisible to the outside world. However, since nine out of every ten prisoners eventually return to society, we cannot escape the truth that treating prisoners violently and thereby making them more violent endangers all of us.

Psychologist Alice Miller makes an analogous point in her critique of the use of corporal punishment on children. Punishing alleged wrongdoing, responding to alleged violence with violence, only socializes children to become more violent. Even if violent punishment occurs in the early years of a child's life and is segregated from the outside world, it sets off ripples that in time foster more violence in general.[29]

Gilligan, too, sees a direct connection between people being treated violently as children and later acting violently. The strongest predictor he has found for people being violent is their own being treated violently, especially as children.[30] "Violence does not occur spontaneously or without a cause, it only occurs when somebody does something that causes it. Therefore, all we need to do to prevent violence is to stop doing what we have been doing to cause it."[31] The logic of retribution is not an answer to the problem of violence; it is one of the central causes.

Nonetheless, we remain in the grip of that logic in our criminal justice practices—with many negative consequences:

1) U.S. culture is increasingly characterized by growing social fragmentation, exacerbated by the "othering" of convicted criminals. David Garland calls this the "criminology of the other." We have incentives not to treat criminals as understandable, for then they would enter into our domain, we would humanize them, seeing "ourselves in them and them in ourselves. The criminology of the other encourages us to be prepared to condemn more and understand less."[32]

2) We pour an ever-higher percentage of increasingly scare governmental resources into our prison system. Ironically, one effect of reducing public investments in education, job creation, and other means

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[29] See especially Alice Miller, *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-Rearing and the Roots of Violence* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1984). A similar argument from an anthropological perspective that using violence on people actually makes them more likely to be violent is made by Ashley Montagu, *The Nature of Human Aggression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976). See also, Philip Greven, *Spare the Child: The Religious Roots of Punishment and the Psychological Impact of Physical Abuse* (New York: Knopf, 1991) and, from an overtly theological perspective, Donald Capps, *The Child's Song: The Religious Abuse of Children* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).

[30] Gilligan, *Violence*, 25.

[31] James Gilligan, *Preventing Violence* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2001), 20.

[32] Garland, *Culture*, 184.

of heightening the stake citizens have in our society is to make crime more attractive for ever more needy people.

3) With the growing privatizing of prisons, we foster a more austere system with fewer resources available to make prison life humane and a means for rehabilitation and make corruption more likely.[33]

4) The combination of the extraordinary growth of the imprisonment rate with punitive laws that permanently, in many states, disenfranchise convicted criminals, leads to a growing segment of the population that has no sense of being vested in the wider society. This sense of alienation, ironically fostered in the name of public safety, makes all of us less secure.

5) More broadly, beyond literal disenfranchisement, all convicts are given a lifetime stigma few will escape. They will spend the rest of their lives with the identity of "ex-con" living with a "debt to society" they are never allowed to repay.[34]

6) The prison system increasingly breeds more violence. As we see a reduction of the role of prison education in usable life skills (the best predictor that convicts will not return to prison after release is if they have earned a college degree while in prison[35]), we see as increase in the role of prisons as a context for de facto education in violence.

7) Disturbing evidence is growing to show that our present population of long-term prisoners is becoming a ticking time bomb due to high incidents of terrible communicative diseases that are likely to spread to the wider population in time.

Journalist Wil S. Hylton gives details for one example of the likelihood of a major public health problem within the prisons spreading to the broader society in his article, "Sick on the Inside: Correctional HMOs and the Coming Prison Plague."[36] One risk is that a growing Hepatitis C (the most serious variety of Hepatitis) epidemic in the prisons will spread to the wider society (remember, again, that nine out of ten prisoners will

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[33] See, for example, Eric Schlosser, "The Prison-Industrial Complex," *The Atlantic Monthly* 282.6 (December 1998), 51-77.

[34] Gerald Austin McHugh, *Christian Faith and Criminal Justice: Toward a Christian Response to Crime and Punishment* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978), 148. Eugene Bianchi writes, "once a crime has been committed there is no forgiveness, and no activity of the offenders can bring them back into the community, not even passive submission to the harm we inflict on them" (*Justice*, 29-30).

[35] James Gilligan, *Preventing*, 98-9. According to Gilligan, separate studies in the Massachusetts, Indiana, and California prison systems all showed that "not one prisoner who had acquired a college degree while in prison had been reincarcerated for a new crime."

[36] Wil S. Hylton, "Sick on the Inside: Correctional HMOs and the Coming Prison Plague," *Harper's Magazine* (August 2003): 43-54.

eventually be released). "Somewhere between twenty and forty percent of American prisoners are, at this very moment, infected with Hepatitis C, and therefore quite contagious."[37]

However, the prison system does little to screen for the disease among prisoners in most states. For the few who may be diagnosed, treatment is difficult to obtain. As infected prisoners are released (and most will be), the U.S. will face a drastic increase in Hepatitis C infections in the broader society—in part due to the retributive philosophy of actually fostering punishment among convicts, both to effect punishment for their wrong-doing and to serve as a deterrent for potential wrong-doers.

Gilligan argues that nothing stimulates crime as effectively as punishment.[38] "Punishment is a form of violence in its own right, but it is also a cause of violence." It makes people more violent.[39] Punishment humiliates its recipient, having the ironic impact of fostering shame in a way that reduces a person's sense of guilt and responsibility. People who feel profound shame, Gilligan argues, are especially prone to acting violently, especially when the inhibiting influence of guilt is absent.[40]

He describes how the dynamic tends to work: "Man's greatest pain, whether in life or in prison, is the sense of personal insignificance, of being helpless and of no real value as a person, an individual—a man. Imprisoned and left without any voice in or control over the things that affect him, his personal desires and feelings regarded with gracious indifference, and treated at best like a child and at worst like an animal by those having control of his life, a prisoner leads a life of acute deprivation and insignificance. The psychological pain involved in such an existence creates an urgent and terrible need for reinforcement of his sense of manhood and personal worth. Unfortunately, prison deprives those locked within of the normal avenues of pursuing gratification of their needs and leaves them with no instruments but sex, violence, and conquest to validate their sense of manhood and individual worth."[41]

The spiral of violence intensifies – people hurt others, then the state steps in and hurts the violator, part of this state-sanctioned hurting takes the form of setting the violator in a culture of extreme violence (the prison) that further socializes the violent person to be violent. Eventually, often more severely damaged than when entering prison, the violator returns to society primed for more violence.

This spiral must be broken.

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[37] Hylton, "Sick," 45.
[38] Gilligan, *Violence*, 187.
[39] Gilligan, *Violence,* 184.
[40] Gilligan, *Violence*, 187.
[41] Gilligan, *Violence,* 181.

## Against retribution

A crucial step in breaking free from the destructive dynamics of violence responding to violence is to recognize that the notion of ultimate reality (drawing from a particular notion of God) that underlies the retributive justice paradigm is a human construct. These ideas about God are ideas human beings have drawn from human investigations of the world and, especially in the West, of the Bible and Christian tradition.

Theologian Timothy Gorringe's "archaeology" of the impact of Anselm's theology on penal practices in the West provides a good example of such a recognition.[42] Gorringe helps bring to the surface the interplay between human culture and humanly constructed theology in formulating a rationale for punitive criminal justice practices.

All theology, in the broad sense of our views of ultimate reality, is a human construct. To quote Gordon Kaufman: "All understandings of the world and of human existence are human imaginative constructions, grown up in a particular historical stream to provide orientation in life for those living in that history. But at any given time it is always an open question whether the conceptions and values and perspectives inherited from the past remain suitable for orienting human existence in the new present; this is a question to be investigated, never a position which can simply be taken for granted."[43]

The notions of ultimate reality that underlie the retributive paradigm outlined above are not set in concrete. The ever-deepening and destructive spiral that results from responding to violence with violence need not be inevitable. In part, the spiral may be resisted, even broken, because its ideological basis has no ontological standing but is simply based on human ideas—ideas that may be challenged and refuted. Retributive notions are the result of human reflection and human application. If these constructs contribute to brokenness instead of healing, furthering the spiral of violence instead of fostering genuine peace, they need to be deconstructed and replaced.

For Christians, recognizing the humanness of all theology does not leave us without criteria for ascertaining better and worse theological constructions. We need not sink into moral relativism. Our confession of Jesus as the definitive revelation of God gives us, in his story, a clear sense of direction concerning which theologies contain truth and which do not.

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[42] Gorringe, *God's Just Vengeance.*

[43] Gordon D. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 43.

Ironically enough, given the roots of our predicament in "Christian" theology, if we would return to Christianity's founding document, the Bible, and read it free from the filters of the later retributive paradigm of Christendom, we discover bases for a different understanding of justice, ultimate reality, and God. This re-reading provides bases a new understanding of justice, restorative justice rather than retributive justice. Restorative justice offers us a different perspective on how we may respond to violence. Perhaps with a new perspective, we may be able to imagine responses to violence that break the cycle, striving for healing rather than punishment of wrongdoers.

To put it another way, the source of our problem might actually provide a way to overcome the problem. Dutch law professor Herman Bianchi argues for applying "homeopathic therapy" to our situation. Maybe it will take a dose of what made us sick to cure us. Since an interpretation of theology landed us in this "illness," Bianchi suggests that it may well take a dose of theology to heal us.[44]

At the heart of the retributive understanding we find assumptions about God's holiness and justice that make salvation a matter of sacrificial violence that in some sense balances out the evil human beings have done. In this paradigm, violence is necessary for God to be appeased; God requires violence . In such a world we find inevitable links between the belief that God requires violence in response to violence and the justification of human beings (acting as God's agents) serving as agents of such required violence against other human beings.

If, as an alternative to a retribution-oriented understanding of salvation that understands God to desire violence, we may construct an understanding of salvation that has no need for violence (ultimately, even, no place for violence) we may be in a better position to refute the logic of retribution as it is applied to criminal justice policies.

While recognizing that the Bible does not offer a simple, totally unified understanding of salvation, we may find less of a gulf between the Old Testament portrayal of sacrifice (as it was intended to be) and the prophetic perspective than many expect. A case may be made that the Old Testament actually presents sacrifice as being analogous to how it presents the law. In both cases, what we have are not means to salvation so much as responses to God's saving initiative. In both cases, we also have problems that arise when the order is reversed and either the law or the sacrifice is seen as means to gain leverage over against God.

The problem lies not with the idea of sacrifice per se, even less with an alleged Old Testament idea that God's anger needs to be appeased

[44] Bianchi, *Justice*, 2.

through an act of violence in killing in order to make sacrifice. Salvation in the Old Testament from start to finish is not presented as being linked with a will of God for violence.[45] Rather, Old Testament salvation is an expression of God's mercy. The role of sacrifice is meant to be how people show their commitment to God as a response to God's saving works—just as following the law is meant to be how people show their commitment to God as a response to God's saving works. We see this most clearly in Exodus 20:1-2 where Moses prefaces the Ten Commandments by confessing God's saving work already expressed.

Another way to make this point is that in the Old Testament, the beginning point in thinking about salvation is God's gracious saving intervention. Nothing needs to be appeased or changed within God before God will act to save. The changes that need to happen to effect salvation are strictly on the human side. Authentic sacrifice and authentic use of the Law are all about the human side of the dynamic.

According to the Old Testament salvation story, human beings do not sacrifice nor do human beings follow the Law in order somehow to effect a change in God's attitude toward them (as in appeasing God's holy anger). Sacrifice is a response, following the Law is a response, meant to express the human choice to trust in God and follow God.

Understanding sacrifice in this way then has a significant impact on how we read the prophetic critique of sacrifice in the eighth-century prophets. The prophets do not reject the rationale for sacrifice as it was meant to be practiced. Rather, they reject the way sacrifice found expression in their context. Sacrifice, in effect, according to Amos, became a means to make claims on God's favor that were separated from the demands of the core of the Law for just living as the central required response to God's mercy. That is, when sacrifice co-exists with profound injustice, it has been cut off from its life-source and rationale. When sacrifice is not a response to mercy leading to just living it proves that the mercy has not been accepted.

The prophetic understanding of salvation does not repudiate sacrifice per se, but rather underscores that salvation from the beginning in the Old Testament is strictly a gift from God, initiated by God, and appropriated first by trust in God alone (that is, a rejection of idols) and then actualized through sacrifice and obedience to the law.

Jesus' own teaching was fully compatible with the Old Testament's understanding of salvation. Jesus himself did not portray God as needing

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[45] This is not to claim that the Old Testament explicitly rejects all violence. However, if salvation itself is understood as being nonviolent, the way is cleared to see Jesus' rejection of violence as in continuity with the core biblical salvation story—in fact, as its logical outcome.

an act of violence in order to establish a restored relationship with human beings. Jesus reflects the ideas of the prophets (and the ideas of most of the Old Testament) when he is twice recorded as quoting Hosea's words, "I desire mercy and not sacrifice" (Hos 6:6; Matt 9:13; 12:7)

One major implication of this direction of thought is the likelihood that Jesus' death is not best understood as being a necessary sacrifice in order to satisfy God's honor, to placate God's holiness, or to balance the scales of justice. If the basis for salvation is simply God's mercy, then Jesus' death loses much of the theological meaning that traditional theology assigns it.

Why did Jesus die, according to the story, and what meaning did that death have? Jesus died because the combined violence of cultural, religious, and political Principalities and Powers. The basic significance of the death of Jesus for salvation is that his death exposes the Powers that put him to death and reveals that these powers are rivals to the true God. We find in Jesus' death the bases for anti-idolatry, a disillusionment with the central Principalities and Powers that seek to dominate human life and to separate people from God. The death of Jesus reveals the difference between the reign of God and the rule of evil. Evil uses violence, and God's reign does not.

Hence, the story of Jesus death is not a story of necessary violence as an expression of God's punitive justice and as a requirement for human salvation. Rather, the story of Jesus' death is a repudiation of violence, a revelation that the Powers' claim to need to use violence is actually pure rebellion against God.

The saving significance of Jesus' resurrection may be found in how it vindicates Jesus' life, reveals the Powers as idols, and promises that trust in God's love is the source of empowerment to find freedom from idols and restoration of harmony with God.

The Bible portrays the means of salvation as free from sacred violence. Hence, we appropriately affirm that God never desires violence. This affirmation of God's rejection of violence takes the ground out from the logic of retribution and should lead people of faith actively to seek alternatives to the various justifications of violence as the appropriate response to violence.[46]

[46] For a detailed examination of the themes in this section, see Ted Grimsrud, *Instead of Atonement: The Bible's Salvation Story and Our Hope for Wholeness* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013).

# 15. Core convictions for engaged pacifism

*[This essay was first published in the* Conrad Grebel Review*, 28.3 (Fall 2010), 22-38.]*

"One of the most pressing questions facing the world today is, How can we oppose evil without creating new evils and being made evil ourselves?"[1] These words opened Walter Wink's *Engaging the Powers* nearly twenty years ago—and voice the concern that remains at the center of many peacemakers' sensibilities.

Wink's question about resisting evil without adding to the evil points in two directions at once, thereby capturing one of the central tensions we face. On the one hand, we human beings of good will, especially those of us inclined toward pacifism, assume that we do, at the heart of our lives, have a responsibility to resist evil in our world, to seek peace, to be agents of healing—that is, to enter into the brokenness of our present situation and be a force for transformation.

Yet, on the other hand, we recognize that all too often efforts to overcome evil end up exacerbating the brokenness. We recognize that resisting evil all too often leads to the use of tactics that end up adding to the evil—and transform the actors more than the evil situation.

So, how might we act responsibly while also remaining not only true to our core peaceable convictions but also serving as agents of actual healing instead of well-meaning contributors to added brokenness?

In recent years, strategies to address these issues have arisen such as adding teeth to the enforcement of international law (the International Criminal Court) and the emergence of what has come to be known as the "Responsibility to Protect" doctrine affirmed by the United Nations Security Council in 2006. In this general arena of seeking to respond creatively to evil, we could also include creative thinking that has been emerging out of peace church circles related to themes such as restorative

[1] Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 3.

justice,[2] "just policing,"[3] and projects such at the 3-D Security Initiative[4] and Mennonite Central Committee's "Peace Theology Project."[5]

One way of setting up the tension seemingly inherent for peacemakers in these efforts at responding to evil is the tendency to incline either towards "responsibility" in ways that compromise our commitment to nonviolence and the inherent worth of all human beings, even wrongdoers, or towards "faithfulness" in ways that do not truly contribute to resisting wrongdoing and bringing about needed changes.

We face a choice. Will we understand this tension to signal a need to choose one side of the tension over the other—either to retreat into our ecclesial cocoon and accept our "irresponsibility" or to embrace the call to enter the messy world in creative ways that almost certainly will mean leaving our commitment to nonviolence behind? Or will we understand this tension as a call to devote our best energies to finding ways actually to hold together our nonviolence with creative responsibility?

I affirm the need (and the realistic possibility) of taking the "tension as opportunity for creative engagement" path. A number of the people and writings I have just cited in footnotes 2–5 have been embodying just this kind of "creative engagement" path; I do not mean to imply that peace church practitioners haven't make significant progress in understanding and applying our peacemaking convictions to the "real world."[6]

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[2] See Howard Zehr, *Changing Lenses: A New Focus for Crime and Justice*, 3rd edition (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2005) and Jarem Sawatsky, *Justpeace Ethics: A Guide to Restorative Justice and Peacebuilding* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008).

[3] See Ivan J. Kauffman, ed. *Just-Policing: Mennonite-Catholic Theological Colloquium 2002* (Kitchener, Ont: Pandora Press, 2004) and Gerald W. Schlabach and Jim Wallis, eds. *Just Policing, Not War: An Alternative Response to World Violence* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007).

[4] The 3D Security Initiative was founded by Lisa Schirch, formerly Professor of Peacebuilding at Eastern Mennonite University's Center for Justice and Peacebuilding. The "three Ds" are development, defense, and diplomacy. The Initiative's website (www.3dsecurity.org) summarizes its focus thus: "The 3D Security Initiative is a policy voice for civil society and conflict prevention with a new take on human security: connecting policymakers with global civil society networks, engaging in civil-military dialogue, and increasing investments in conflict prevention and peacebuilding."

[5] The fruit of MCC's study project were published in Duane K. Friesen and Gerald W. Schlabach, eds., *At Peace and Unafraid: Public Order, Security, and the Wisdom of the Cross* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2005).

[6] For background leading about up to the point where the various Mennonite-related efforts at creative engagement alluded to above became operational, see Leo Driedger and Donald B. Kraybill, *Mennonite Peacemaking: From Quietism to Activism* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1994).

However, I am not content that we have yet done the necessary work to sharpen our understanding and articulation of the "faithfulness" side of this responsibility/faithfulness dialectic. I fear that our creativity in engaging these issues may be drawing on increasingly depleted traditions of principled pacifism that found their roots more in traditional communities than in carefully articulated theological ethics. We may not have the resources to live creatively with this dialectic unless we do more work as clarifying and solidifying our understanding of our peace ideals.

In this essay I articulate a perspective on pacifism meant to be usable for thoughtfully engaging human security issues. My contribution is as a pastor and theologian, not a practitioner. I focus on philosophical underpinnings, not directing a program of engagement—though I will conclude with a few thoughts of how I see the pacifist perspective I will outline possibly being applicable to our present situation.

## What is pacifism?

The word "pacifism" has the virtue of being a positive term, connoting the affirmation of peace more than simply the opposition to violence. It is a new word. It was not listed in the 1904 *Complete Oxford Dictionary*. According to the Supplement to the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1982, the first occurrence came in 1902 at an international peace conference as an English version of the French word *pacifisme*, used to express opposition to war.[7] However, the French term originally had the meaning of "making peace," not simply "opposing war."

The root word is "paci" (from *pax*), "peace." If we take the word "pacifism" literally we could define it as love of peace, or devotion to peace. We might best think of "pacifism" as the conviction that no other value or necessity takes priority over the commitment to peace. Hence, "pacifism" is more than simply approving of peace (which everyone in some sense would do). It also includes the conviction that peace stands higher than any commitment that could justify the use of violence.

The kind of peace that pacifism values as the highest of values is widespread wellbeing in human communities, peace with justice, peace with equality, peace with health for all. In what follows, I will sketch a fuller understanding of pacifism and present it as a foundational orienting point. What are the key elements that make up this orienting point? What are the key convictions that provide a pacifist context for discerning how to respond to evil?

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[7] Jenny Teichman, *Pacifism and the Just War: A Study in Applied Philosophy* (New York: Blackwell, 1986), 1.

## Core pacifist convictions

***(1) Love of neighbor is the heart of being human.*** At its core, pacifism follows from the conviction that as human beings our central calling is to love our neighbors. The Bible emphasizes this call in both Testaments. One of the strongest statements comes in Luke's gospel. A teacher of the Law asks Jesus what a person must do to attain eternal life—that is, what is the highest calling for human beings. Jesus asked the teacher to answer this question himself, drawing on the core teachings of his tradition. The teacher responds, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27).

Jesus strongly affirms the teacher's response: "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live" (10:28). In Matthew's version of this encounter, Jesus adds an important assertion concerning Torah: "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matt 22:40). If you were to boil the Old Testament Law down to just a few words this would be it: Love God and love neighbor.

As Luke tells the story, the teacher then zeroes in on implications of the Love Command. "And who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29). He recognizes that love of God and love of neighbor belong inextricably together. If you don't love the neighbor, you simply are not loving God (see affirmations of this point, 1 John 4:21-2 and Rom 13:8-10).

However, the teacher's challenge to Jesus has to do with definition of "neighbor." Who are these people? Jesus takes the challenge, and responds in a way that makes it clear that "neighbor-love" indeed directly calls for pacifism. Imagine a friend of yours, he says to the teacher, a fellow Jew traveling from Jerusalem down to Jericho (a steep, winding, and dangerous trip). And imagine that your friend is attacked, beaten, robbed, and left for dead.

Now comes the provocative part. As the traveler lies there bleeding, a couple of people pass by and notice the victim. Rather than help, they sidle to the far side of the road and continue on. These are not random passers-by; they are the very people a Jew would consider "neighbors": a priest and a Levite, two embodiments of the faith community. Finally, someone comes by who is willing to help, extravagantly as it turns out. This "Good Samaritan" was, in fact, a Samaritan. Shocking, because the Samaritans were the last people the teacher of the law would ever imagine being "neighbors." They were enemies, members of a rival clan.

Jesus' story clearly defines "neighbor" as the one who cares for others in need, including those labeled as enemies. To find eternal life (to fulfill our highest calling as human beings) we must practice this kind of

neighbor love. This is the only way we can embody (and validate) our claim to love God.

This articulation of what it means to be fully human centers on a vision of each human being linked with each other human being. Pacifism, in light of this vision, has to do with loving each particular person—certainly the extreme cases such as the Samaritan loving his Jewish enemy, but everything less extreme as well. Jesus gives us our marching orders for every relationship, every aspect of life.

***(2) No value or cause takes precedence over love of neighbor.*** If we understand love of neighbor to extend to each person, without exception, including even enemies, we are recognizing that such a call to love is our "ultimate principle." To understand love of neighbor as the core of human morality will lead one to recognize that no other value or conviction or principle can take precedence over this love.

As a consequence, any calculation of moral responsibility must take this commitment to love as central to discernment concerning morally appropriate action. Love of neighbor stands as the conviction that may never be compromised in relation to other convictions. When other important values come into play (such as defense against aggression, the need to hold wrong-doers accountable for their actions, one's duties as a citizen of a particular nation-state, efforts to free people from oppression and injustice, and many others), these must all be acted on in ways that do not violate the call to love each neighbor.

Such an understanding of the love command calls us to action, not to withdrawal and passivity. As John Howard Yoder points out, throughout Jesus' public ministry he faced one central temptation: to use violence in order to uphold the core concerns of Torah.[8] Jesus did not take seriously the temptation to withdraw in order to "love" the world through avoiding impurity or through his own suffering. However the "Zealot" option, the option to bring God's rule into being by force, to "do good" at the expense of treating some people as means instead of ends, did tempt Jesus. He understood the call to love the neighbor as a call actively to resist the injustices of the day and actively to seek to empower and liberate those oppressed by such injustices.

However, the call to love the neighbor is not a call to draw lines between the "neighbor" one fights to support and enemies not considered neighbors. From early on in Jesus' ministry, he makes it clear that his kind of active love refuses to draw such lines. The kind of transformation Jesus embodied meant that injustice would be resisted in

[8] This is a central argument in Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994).

ways that did not visit suffering upon the enemy but instead accepted self-suffering as the cost of genuine love.[9]

Jesus' approach challenges pacifists today to hold two truths together at all times. The first truth is that love of neighbor leads to involvement in resistance and transformation work. The second truth is that love of neighbor requires of us a refusal to exclude anyone from that love. Hence, the need for creativity. How do we involve ourselves in ways that show love toward everyone? How do we resist evil in ways that are consistent with love for each neighbor?

The term "pacifism" connotes that "peace," holistically understood as pertaining to widespread wellbeing linked with all-encompassing love of neighbors, stands as our core value. This is the one "ism" that does not elevate the penultimate to an ultimate because holistic peace (love of God and neighbor, in Jesus' terms) is the ultimate.

***(3) Pacifism has to do with life in every aspect of human existence.*** Since pacifism stands at the center of our understanding of morality, we believe it informs all areas of life. For example, Jesus' message speaks to life in the here and now. So we reject a present/future separation, as if Jesus love-centered ethic is normative only in some future heavenly setting. Jesus used apocalyptic imagery to "reveal" God's rule in the present, requiring immediate choices about our loyalties. Jesus called for a commitment to God's kingdom vis-à-vis Caesar's kingdom, a commitment that could lead to a confrontation to the death.

As well, we reject any kind of personal/social separation, as if Jesus' love-centered ethic is normative for his followers' personal lives in families, neighborhoods, and faith-communities, but another ethic of "responsibility" governs one's actions as a citizen. This "responsibility" ethic has traditionally been understood indeed to call for violence on occasion, where the enemies of one's nation-state become non-neighbors.

Jesus did speak directly to political relationships. His most alluring temptation was *how* to be political, not *whether* to be or not. The love command calls the pacifist to seek wholeness in all areas of life, but always to do so in ways that are consistent with love. This calls us both to see all areas of life as places where we should participate and all areas of life as lending themselves to being shaped by the call to love.

This is a call to think and act as if pacifism is always one's core moral value.[10] One does not limit the relevance of one's convictions by

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[9] On this point, Gandhi captured the essence of Jesus' message better than the vast majority of Christians. See Joan Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence: The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1958), 16-34.

[10] See Gerald Biesecker-Mast and J. Denny Weaver, eds., *Teaching Peace: Nonviolence and the Liberal Arts* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003);

accepting a high level of incommensurability between pacifist convictions and the "real world."[11] The Bible contains myriad examples of prophets and teachers who understood the word of God, the message of Torah, the teaching of Jesus, to speak to the world of kings and empires.

Pacifists will challenge leaders who wield power always to consider the requirements of respect and compassion for all people. The pacifist will expect that such challenges can be understood and can be acted upon. Because of the universal applicability of pacifist values, pacifists should also recognize that their role need not always be one of standing outside the "corridors of power" beseeching decision-makers to take them seriously. Pacifists need not exclude themselves from the exercise of power in principle. The responsibility to practice consistent love should lead anyone in power to make decisions that are respectful and always move away from violence and injustice.

***(4) We are destined for wholeness; the key issue is how we reach that destination.*** We may think of human destiny in two mutually reinforcing senses: destiny has to do (1) with our nature and purpose and (2) with our final outcome. A pacifist anthropology understands human beings to be capable of living at harmony with one another and with the rest of creation, with hope that such harmony is the direction toward which we are moving.

This peaceable destiny may be derived from seeing human evolution to be grounded in cooperation more than competition.[12] Of course, many evolutionists argue that human beings are naturally inclined toward violence. This debate may be interminable, though it seems clear that debaters' assumptions provide a powerful influence on how the ambiguous data are interpreted. Pacifist assumptions may not be easily vindicated, but neither are they easily refuted.[13]

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Nancey Murphy and George F. R. Ellis, *On the Moral Nature of the Universe: Theology, Cosmology, and Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996); and James C. Juhnke and Carol M. Hunter, *The Missing Peace: The Search for Nonviolent Alternatives in United States History* (Kitchener, Ont: Pandora Press, 2001).

[11] For a critique of pacifists affirming this incommensurability via use of a "two-language" analysis, see Ted Grimsrud, "Anabaptist Faith and American Democracy," in *Embodying the Way of Jesus: Anabaptist Convictions for the Twenty-First Century* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2007), 141-59.

[12] See Peter Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (Charleston, SC: Forgotten Books, 2003 [1902]); Ashley Montagu, *The Nature of Human Aggression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); Andrew Bard Schmookler, *The Parable of the Tribes: The Problem of Power in Social Evolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); and Mary E. Clark, *In Search of Human Nature* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

[13] See Wink, *Engaging*, 33-9.

The biblical story also seems to lend itself to various interpretations. However, the most fundamental orientation of the Bible assumes that human beings are indeed capable of moral responsibility.[14] Torah, the teaching of Jesus, and Paul's moral exhortations all presuppose the likelihood of faithfulness. The call to peaceable living is doable in this life.

The Book of Revelation—despite the tendency for many to read it as a book of violence—makes clear that human beings who so choose may indeed "follow the Lamb wherever he goes" (Rev 14:4). Revelation portrays the culmination of human history in a healed community populated by reconciled enemies (Rev 21–22; note especially the presence of "the kings of the earth" [21:24] and the healing of "nations" [22:2]—these are both specified earlier in the book [and throughout the Bible] as enemies of God and God's people).

The message of Revelation speaks to the human need for hope and purpose. In face of a sense of the overwhelming power of the idolatries and blasphemies of the Roman Empire, Revelation promises an outcome of healing and restoration. The focus of this message, however, was not on a pre-determined happy outcome of human history regardless of humanity's actions but on the means to achieve the hopeful outcome.

Revelation portrays Jesus' path to peace, summarized in 1:5-6: "the faithful witness" who lived according to the love command and suffered martyrdom as a consequence, "the first born of the dead" whose witness God vindicated through resurrection, the "ruler of the kings of the earth" who reveals the true nature of the grain of the universe, and the one who makes of his followers "a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father."

The message of Revelation, thus, illustrates the conviction that regardless of how certain we may be about the actual paradisical conclusion to human history, we may be certain about the only means for achieving that outcome. The New Jerusalem is home for those who embody the way of Jesus, following his path of love even in the face of the overwhelming violence and domination. And Revelation promises that in following this path, Jesus and his followers may hope to transform the very nations who have persecuted them through the ages.

***(5) We understand our social ethics in relation to the Powers—and the hope that they might be transformed.*** An understanding of human beings as not inherently violent and having a peaceable destiny leads to paying close attention to the dynamics in human existence that do foster violence. If the terrible violence that

[14] For a defense of this assertion, see my chapter, "Humanness: A Blessing or a Curse?" in *Theology as if Jesus Matters* (Telford, PA: Cascadia, 2009), 106-19. I also challenge the "nature as red in tooth and claw" perspective in the chapter, "This is God's World: So What?" in that same book, 75-89.

bedevils our world does not originate in human nature, how do we understand its presence?

We may draw on New Testament language of "principalities and powers." A Powers analysis, articulated by Walter Wink,[15] suggests that violence has mostly to do with "fallen" social structures that shape our environment in ways that move us toward violence. The Powers are simultaneously created good, fallen, and redeemable.[16] We live our lives amidst these social dynamics that reach into every area of existence.

The "goodness" of the Powers means that they are necessary for the functioning of human life. The Powers enable human society to organize on behalf of accomplishing needed tasks to sustain life—for example, local government provides for public utilities, the Postal Service delivers our mail, colleges educate, agriculture provides our food. The purpose of human institutions is to serve human wellbeing.

The "fallenness" of the Powers means that these structures tend to seek our loyalties in ways that foster alienation and conflict. We require organization for economic activity yet some of the organizations that have evolved become hungry for more and more profit at the expense of environmental health. The nation-state meets many important human needs, but also becomes an object of violence-enhancing idolatry.

The "redeemability" of the Powers means that the structures do not have to be idolatrous and destructive to human wellbeing. We do not have to have a criminal justice system that focuses more on punishment and privatized profit than the healing of victims and offenders. We do not have to have an agricultural system that treats farming as an extractive industry rather than a sustainable and cooperative effort.

Wink argues that violence in our society stems from religious-like beliefs in the redemptive nature of violence. The Powers of militarism benefit from this myth of redemptive violence. Our nation goes to war because of the momentum created by those Powers who shape our values, not because of careful moral discernment. We believe (blindly, against the actual evidence) in the efficacy of investing more money in our military-industrial complex than does the rest of the world combined.

Pacifists argue that self-awareness about our core values (human community, suspicion of the story told by our government and popular

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[15] Wink's key writings: *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1984); *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces that Determine Human Existence* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1986); *Engaging*; and *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Doubleday, 1998). See also, Ray Gingerich and Ted Grimsrud, eds. *Transforming the Powers: Peace, Justice, and the Domination System* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006).

[16] Wink, *Engaging*, 65-85.

culture about the necessity of militarism, careful assessment of the true consequences of preparing for and making war) frees us from the spiral of violence our world currently is locked into. Such a freeing requires awareness of the ways the Powers shape our consciousness toward self-destructive and irrational policies and practices.

This analysis helps us understand roots of violence in our society[17] and possibilities of resistance. Pacifism plays an essential role in discernment. Pacifists suggest that the presence of violence is likely always a sign of the domination of fallen Powers; violence serves as kind of a canary in the mine signaling the presence of distorted loyalties.

***(6) The enemy is evil-doing itself, not any particular nation or group of human beings.*** In our moral discernment, we should focus on stable understandings of the values that we see as central—not on more fluid uses of values language that serve particular interests. Only with stable understandings applied evenly may we hope to discern and respond in ways that address the true problems of violence and injustice.

Let's consider, for example, the issue of "terrorism." We can agree that terrorism is a bad thing and should be opposed. People of good will should also agree, then, that terrorism should be opposed and overcome regardless of who is its source.

We start with a reasonably stable definition of terrorism so we know what we are opposing. The United States Army in the Ronald Reagan administration in face of the emergence of terrorism as a central national security theme presented this definition: "The calculated use of violence or threat of violence to attain goals that are political, religious, or ideological in nature through intimidation, coercion, or instilling fear."[18] This definition may not be the best we could imagine, but it would surely strike most people of good will as reasonable and a good start. The key moral issue, then, would be to seek a consistent and objective application of this definition. If terrorism itself is our problem and our responsibility is to resist terrorism, we would oppose any and all incidents of "the calculated use of violence" to attain "political, religious, or ideological."

When we follow a stable definition of terrorism and apply it consistently, we will see terrorism itself as our key problem—not any particular group of alleged terrorists. That is, if we truly oppose terrorism, we will not allow the rubric of terrorism to lead us to label only certain people as "terrorists" in a way that serves political agendas.

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[17] James Gilligan, *Violence: Our Deadly Epidemic and Its Causes* (New York: Putnam, 1996) argues for the social dynamics that lay at the heart of American violence, thereby providing support for a Powers analysis.

[18] *United States Army Operational Concept for Terrorism Counteration* (TRADOC Pamphlet No. 525-37, 1984).

We will be sensitive to use of the label of terrorism both to stigmatize political opponents in ways that justify violent responses to them and to justify acts that according to any stable definition of terrorism are actually terrorist acts themselves. In his history of car bombs, Mike Davis shows that the driving force in the use of car bombs has actually been covert American operatives and allies such as Israel.[19] This illustrates how tactics that clearly to fit the U.S. Army's definition of "terrorism" are not generally defined as "terrorism" when used by status quo powers.

The use of terrorist methods (surely including aerial bombardments and "targeted assassinations"[20]) is immoral regardless of who uses them. Pacifists could agree that terrorists must be brought to account for their actions. Terrorist acts are indeed crimes of the most heinous variety. However, such accountability must be applied consistently.

***(7) In the name of "realism," we should not trust our nation's power elite when they use violent methods.*** While operating with an optimistic anthropology that denies that human beings are inherently violent by nature, pacifists also take seriously the human proclivity in the world we live in toward selfishness and seeking advantage over others. However, in contrast to "realists" who highlight such human proclivities (e.g., Augustine, Thomas Hobbes, and Reinhold Niebuhr), pacifists draw from this awareness of human sinfulness the opposite of support for coercive discipline from the power elite to "keep sinful humanity in line." Because of their realistic view of human morality, pacifists insist that people in power are the ones least likely to be capable of careful, morally constructive uses of "limited" violence.

In the name of "realism," pacifists argue for a strong attitude of suspicion toward justifications of violence coming from people in power. If it is true that humanity is shaped powerfully by sin and selfishness and thus prone to misuse of power, the people most likely to be guilty of such misuses are the people with the most power. So, pacifists counter the stereotypes the realists use regarding pacifism as unsuited for the real world by saying that in fact those who believe people in power tend to act objectively and in service of genuine human security are the ones being the most naïve and romantic.

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[19] Mike Davis, *Buda's Wagon: A Brief History of the Car Bomb* (New York: Verso Books, 2007).

[20] See Jane Mayer, "The Predator War," *The New Yorker* 85.34 (October 26, 2009), 36-45, on one example of the CIA's "targeted assassination," authorized by President Obama, of a Taliban leader hiding in Pakistan. Baitullah Mehsud was finally killed in August, 2009, in a drone missile attack that also killed eleven others. Mayer notes that the effort to kill Mehsud involved 16 missile strikes and killed perhaps as many as 321 people.

Just one set of examples may be cited. An examination of the U.S. war in Vietnam shows a web of self-defeating and immoral policies that arose from ignorance, incompetence, and willful selfishness on the part of American leaders. As we learn more of the internal processes of the U.S. government in that war, their problematic character is more obvious. For many years after policy analysts clearly understood that the Americans could not win this war, the government pressed on. The continuation of the war caused unimaginable death and destruction not in hopes of actually winning the war but mostly for domestic political concerns.[21]

To the extent that human beings are shaped and motivated by selfishness and hindered from acting on the basis of neighbor love, we should be especially wary of giving the power of death-dealing violence to people in leadership. Reinhold Niebuhr's "moral man, immoral society"[22] analysis contains wisdom. However, rather than concluding that the "immorality" of groups should encourage more acceptance of the "rough justice" of order-based public policy, awareness of such "immorality" should instead lead to heightened resistance to allowing people in power to make decisions in favor of enhanced military power.[23]

Pacifists should especially be wary of the temptations to accept the "rules of the game" made by people corrupted by holding death-dealing power. We indeed should take every opportunity to work within the system to reduce its reliance on violence.[24] However, we must also recognize the tendency toward corruption in these halls of power.

***(8) The system may always make decisions for less (or no) violence, but a pacifist commitment to peace over loyalty to the system also requires one to stand aside on occasion.*** Even though the nation-state's systemic dynamics tend consistently to select for violence,[25] pacifists understand that in each choice that policy-makers make, options for less rather than more violence exist.

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[21] See Marilyn Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1991) and John Prados, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2009).

[22] Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man, Immoral Society: A Study of Ethics and Politics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002 [1932]).

[23] See James Carroll, *House of War: The Pentagon and the Disastrous Rise of American Power* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 2006), for one case where access to death-dealing power corrupted American leadership.

[24] Note the career of longtime American Friends Service Committee director Clarence Pickett who used his direct access to Franklin Roosevelt to good effect, but who maintained a consistent stance in opposition to state violence. See Lawrence McK. Miller, *Witness for Humanity: A Biography of Clarence Pickett* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1999).

[25] Schmookler, *Parable*.

So, we do have justification for advocating alternatives to the most violent actions in the midst of conflicts. Even more so, may we advocate farsighted policies that diminish the likelihood of conflicts emerging. Pacifists should join with others of good will, including those seeking to adhere to a just war theory that is applied rigorously,[26] in supporting and seeking to enact violence reducing policies.[27]

Traditional historical discussions minimize or ignore altogether currents of creative nonviolence in world history. However, we are learning more that such currents may indeed be identified.[28] Alternatives to violence do exist and have been followed.[29] Yet, pacifists also recognize that their advocacy may be ignored, and nation-states may make irrevocable choices in favor of violence. In such cases, pacifists simply will not be able to play a public policy role while still adhering to their convictions concerning the centrality of love of neighbor.

This recognition of the need for pacifists to "stand aside" does not stem from a quest for purity. Rather, it stems from a sense that pacifists' central calling is seeking actively to love neighbors, not to hold power or to further the interests of any particular nation state or other human institution. Pacifists recognize that in the same of pursuing genuine peace they must at times seek other avenues of involvement than policy-making and state-centered activities. If the core criterion for appropriate action is seeking to love neighbors, pacifists will reject the claim that the only way to be "responsible" is to act within the paradigm of inevitable violence.

For example, numerous American pacifists were aware of the dangers facing Jewish people in Nazi Germany in the 1930s. They actively sought to address that danger in numerous ways, generally finding their efforts rebuffed by the American government.[30] When the events evolved to the point of total war, the pacifists turned their efforts to other problems, offering whatever assistance they could to deal with the wounds of war and address other human needs (such as the care for mentally ill people).

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[26] See John Howard Yoder, *When War is Unjust: Being Honest in Just-War Thinking*, 2nd edition (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1996).

[27] See Wink, *Engaging*, 220-29.

[28] See, for example, Juhnke and Hunter, *Missing Peace* and Peter Ackerman and Jack Duvall, *A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001).

[29] See Gene Sharp, *Waging Nonviolent Struggle: 20th Century Practice and 21st Century Potential* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 2005).

[30] See Nicholson Baker, *The Beginnings of World War II, the End of Civilization* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008) and Clarence E. Pickett, *For More Than Bread: An Autobiographical Account of Twenty-Two Years' Work with the American Friends Service Committee* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1953).

They did not believe that violence could solve the problem of Nazi hostility toward Jews, but when they faced a series of dead ends in seeking to save Jewish lives, they found other avenues to protect life.

The twentieth century saw the emergence of remarkable efforts by pacifists to meet human needs and thereby provide what were in effect alternatives to violence-centered politics. Quakers with American Friends Service Committee, Mennonites with Mennonite Central Committee, and the Brethren with the Brethren Service Committee, created organizations that greatly expanded their work as the needs increased. These works of service stand as a remarkable witness to the powerful commitment pacifists have made to being responsible and relevant in face of human security needs. And this witness stands as proof that a commitment to love of neighbor may bear remarkable fruit even when not channeled through the coercive dynamics of state politics.

## Engaged pacifism

These eight convictions of engaged pacifism may be summed up thus: We live most authentically as human beings when we love our neighbors. We best understand this call to love the neighbor as a call to consider each person as our neighbor and thus deserving of our love. We love even those considered to be enemies, even those who commit evil acts.

Seeing the call to love neighbor as a commitment that cannot be superseded by any other cause or value leads us in two directions simultaneously: (1) we do have a calling to engage, actively to resist evil and to help vulnerable people; this calling applies to all areas of life and (2) however we do engage, we remain bound by the call to love wrong-doers and enemies. These two parts of our calling—actively to engage in resisting evil and while doing so to remain committed to loving our adversaries—may be a particular burden for engaged pacifism. However, they are also a call to creativity.

In relation to the question of pacifist perspectives on strategies of intervention such as the International Criminal Court (ICC) and Responsibility to Protect (R2P), we may think both on the level of more general political support for governmental officials and more specific support for and participation in these strategies.

Pacifists may support governmental officials who seek to involve their countries in institutions that respond to evildoing with "police action" founded on international law and international cooperation. Such support especially contrasts with tendencies all too common in the U.S. to oppose international collaboration in lieu of the mostly unilateral projection of American military power. Pacifists should also challenge

officials to treat values and laws as stable entities that apply equally to all parties. Hence, for example, insofar as the ICC ignores violations of international law in incidents such as the United States' invasion of Iraq, we should be calling for more rigorous and morally consistent practices.

Pacifists will remain suspicious of the use of R2P philosophies that too easily justify violence and that, in practice, serve interests of wealthy and powerful nations.[31] A key criterion will be whether the R2P proposals provide loopholes that would allows countries such as the United States to conduct their own military operations under the cover of R2P.

Since pacifism concludes that violence is never consistent with the fundamental call to love all neighbors—and that this conviction is true of all violence—pacifists will not be able to offer direct support for or participation in responses to evil-doing that do rely on violence.

The fruitful work of non-governmental organizations (e.g., the peace church service committees) in enhancing human wellbeing in conflict situations without violence provides alternatives. The choice for pacifists is not either support "necessary" violence in the name of responding to evil doing or else withdraw into irresponsible purity. Pacifists may actively participate in these alternative means to enhance wellbeing, and may also provide critical input to the practices of the ICC and R2P and hope to move those practices toward consistent practice of neighbor-care.

In the end, though, the discussion of responses to evil doing should challenge people of good will, especially pacifists, to cultivate a healthy skepticism towards nation-states and the proclivity the state has to enhance its own power via violence. The nation-state as we experience it today is a human construct that needs to be critiqued, not deferred to, when it comes to issues of responding to the human need for security.[32]

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[31] In his critique, Noam Chomsky, *Human Rights in the New Millennium* (London, UK: Centre for the Study of Human Rights, 2009), draws a distinction between two formulations of Responsibility to Protect philosophy, one from the Global South reflected in the 2005 United Nations World Summit and the other from the Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty on Responsibility to Protect, known as the "Evans Report" due to the leading role played by former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans.

[32] Two recent, quite different, books enhance our awareness of the violent tendencies of nation-states: William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) and James C. Scott *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009). For a challenge to the idea that in face of natural disasters we need state and military centered, top-down order, see Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster* (New York: Viking, 2009).

# 16. Pacifism and truth in John Howard Yoder's theological ethics

*[This essay was first published in* Mennonite Quarterly Review *77.3 (July 2003): 403-415.]*

For John Howard Yoder, pacifism[1] was unequivocally true. But what would this statement have meant for Yoder—"Pacifism is unequivocally true"? What would have been Yoder's basis for making such a claim? And how did this "truth" work for him?

Reflecting on these questions is a useful way to consider even bigger questions: How do we find our way between foundationalism and relativism? How do we best argue for a hierarchy of values? How do we avoid a coercive rationalism where, in the words of Robert Nozick, one seeks to construct arguments so powerful that one's interlocutors must

[1] In *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1971), Yoder defined "pacifism" as follows: "The renunciation of the sword to which Jesus called his disciples" (9). His book *Nevertheless: Varieties of Religious Pacifism,* 2nd ed (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1992) states that "'pacifism' is not just one specific position spoken for authoritatively by just one thinker. Instead, it is a wide gamut of views that vary and are sometimes even contradictory" (12). While Yoder develops his own distinctive understanding of pacifism, he also acknowledges a commonality with all pacifists—those who "recognize the wrongness of war and…devote themselves to the service of their fellow human beings" (*Nevertheless,* 142). An ecumenical statement Yoder helped write (Douglas Gwyn, George Hunsinger, Eugene F. Roop, and John Howard Yoder, *A Declaration on Peace: In God's People the World's Renewal Has Begun* [Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1991]), does not directly define pacifism but begins with this statement: "Is loyalty to Jesus Christ compatible with participation in war? We believe that it is not" (11). In this paper, I will use "pacifism" in this way: "The in-principle conviction that it is never morally acceptable to participate in warfare or other forms of death-dealing violence." As will be clear in what follows, this core conviction of pacifism has wide-ranging implications for how one understands all of life. "Pacifism" for Yoder is a much more positive concept than simply saying no to violence. It is a philosophy of life.

either give in or have their brains explode?[2] On the other hand, how do we avoid the paralysis of many contemporaries who cannot find a way to condemn evil and do not have the clarity of conviction that would empower them to suffer, even to die, for the cause of peace.

In his posthumously published essay, "'Patience' as Method in Moral Reasoning," Yoder provides in a sentence the basic outline for my paper. He wrote, "Nonviolence is not only an ethic about power, but also an epistemology about how to let truth speak for itself."[3] These are the issues I will address: (1) How is nonviolence (or pacifism; in this paper I will use these two terms interchangeably, as Yoder often did) an "epistemology"? (2) What is the "truth" of which Yoder speaks here? (3) What is involved in letting "truth speak for itself"? I will conclude by reflecting how Yoder's understanding of these issues might contribute to working with present-day struggles the churches are facing.

To state my central argument in a nutshell: Yoder's pacifist epistemology is an alternative to the Western epistemological tradition. For Yoder, the way Christian pacifists approach knowing qualitatively differs from the approach to knowing that has over the centuries relied in one way or another on coercive power—either as in the use of the sword against "heretics" as in the use of logical arguments that everyone who plays by the epistemological rules must assent to.

## How is nonviolence (or pacifism) an "epistemology"?

Epistemology is "that branch of philosophy concerned with the nature of knowledge, its possibility, scope, and general basis."[4] We may say that when Yoder speaks of pacifism as an epistemology, he asserts that a pacifist commitment actually shapes how a person knows. A pacifist sees the world in a certain way, understands in a certain way. The commitment to nonviolence is a life-shaping, mind-shaping kind of conviction, a conviction that shapes all other convictions.[5]

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[2] Cited in Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics After Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 295.

[3] John Howard Yoder, "'Patience' as Method in Moral Reasoning: Is an Ethic of Discipleship 'Absolute'?", in Stanley Hauerwas, Harry J. Huebner, Chris K. Huebner, and Mark Thiessen Nation, eds., *The Wisdom of the Cross: Essays in Honor of John Howard Yoder* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 27-8.

[4] D. W. Hamlyn, "Epistemology, History of," in Ted Honderich, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 242.

[5] Chris K. Huebner also sees in Yoder a "pacifist epistemology," applying it to thinking theologically about globalization: "Globalization, Theory, and Dialogical Vulnerability" *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 76 (January 2002), 49-62.

Yoder refers to Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., when he asserts that pacifism is more than simply "a position in political ethics." "The renunciation of violence … is … an epistemology." Pacifism is a way of knowing that has at its center the commitment to offer "good news for the other."[6] Gandhi and King both shaped their pragmatic strategies in line with their core philosophical commitment to nonviolence.

In thus aligning himself with Gandhi and King, Yoder commits himself to a process of knowing that is unwilling to rely on power over others. This is a major move away from the epistemology of western philosophy that is at its core coercive; one "knows" on the basis of logically compelling justifications irresistibly following from certain absolutes or foundations. One has no "choice;" one must assent to such knowledge. Yoder rejects seeking a truth system that is based on a sense of possession. Instead of seeking "a truth system with which to defend ourselves as those who possess it," he argues for an approach that accepts relative powerlessness over against others.[7] In this way, as with the rest of his ethics, he draws his cues from his understanding of Jesus.

One of the most relevant elements of Jesus' way for Yoder's pacifist epistemology is Jesus' vulnerability, even to the point of his crucifixion. In his vulnerability, Jesus modeled a willingness to respect others' freedom either to accept or reject his message. Yoder contrasts this vulnerability with the quest for invulnerability he sees in foundationalist appeals to "truths" that must be accepted. "The foundational appeal remains a mental power play to avoid my being dependent on your voluntary assent, to bypass my becoming vulnerable to your world in your otherness."[8]

A big problem with the way people in the West have approached knowledge is that it is based upon a desire to be "on top," to be in power. If we ourselves do not happen to be in power we still tend to imagine being in power. How would I think if I were the one in charge? However, being in such a position, or wanting to be in such a position is, in Yoder's view, the opposite of being in a position to know accurately. He wrote, "being on top of the heap consistently keeps one from seeing things as they are. Even wanting to be there has that effect."[9]

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[6] John Howard Yoder, "Meaning After Babble: With Jeffrey Stout Beyond Relativism," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 24.1 (Spring 1996), 135.

[7] John Howard Yoder, *To Hear the Word* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999), 39.

[8] Yoder, "Meaning," 134.

[9] John Howard Yoder, "The Burden and the Discipline of Evangelical Revisionism," in Louise Hawkley and James C. Juhnke, eds., *Nonviolent America: History Through the Eyes of Peace* (North Newton, KS: Bethel College, 1993), 34-5.

For Yoder, there is a direct connection between the fact that thinkers within the Western epistemological tradition are open to the use of violence and that they have difficulty accurately perceiving the nature of reality. To say that pacifism is an epistemology is to say that there are elements of a pacifist commitment that actually serve to foster better, more accurate knowing. One of the ways that pacifism can foster knowing is that does not understand the quest for truth to be a zero-sum, scarcity-oriented, competitive process. Rather, our understanding of truth depends upon our listening to others, even our adversaries.

For Yoder, as for Gandhi, knowing requires nonviolent ways of relating to others, all others. He wrote "the reason one renounces violence in social conflict is that the adversary is part of my truth-finding process. I need to act nonviolently in order to get the adversary to hear me, but I need as well to hear the adversary."[10] For Gandhi—and Yoder—life is "an experiment with truth."[11] As we seek truth, we enter a process of moving toward it, a process we never dare to cease because we never arrive. Because of our finitude, we must always be learning from others, including our adversaries. Truth is too big, and we are each too limited, to think we may know the truth fully.

Gandhi asserted that the quest for truth excludes the use of violence. We are not capable of knowing the absolute truth. Hence, we must never close off the possibility of learning from our adversaries, nor must we ever take upon ourselves the absolute certainty that killing others assumes.[12]

Yoder's pacifist epistemology, like Gandhi's, renounces coercion and affirms the possibility—the requirement—that we learn from everyone, even our adversaries. He goes even further, though. We not only should renounce coercion and affirm openness as we seek to know, we must actually renounce all tools of privilege and power as means of accessing truth.[13] "The epistemological privilege of the poor," Yoder writes, "means that if you see things from below, you see them as God does."[14] He directly delinks power, the capacity to coerce, standing "at the top of the heap," from authentic knowledge of truth.

Yoder's pacifist epistemology privileges vulnerability, trust in God's kind of power (the power of self-giving love), renouncing privilege, of

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[10] John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 1992), 69.

[11] Yoder, "Meaning," 135.

[12] Joan V. Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence: The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967), 16.

[13] John Howard Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 314.

[14] Yoder, "Burden," 34-5.

respecting the freedom and insights of the other, process—everything the epistemology of domination does not.

## What is the "truth" of which Yoder speaks?

"Truth," for Yoder, has much more to do with practical ethics, with concrete expression in life, than with theories and abstract principles. He takes as his "location," as his context for theological reflection, the community of faith. For Yoder, "what it means to qualify a statement as 'true' in the faith community is not an ontological statement about the status of a proposition. It is an historical judgment about the statement's compatibility with the life directions and value insights, the narrative memories and the practices, of that community."[15] What matters most, that is, are ways that truth-claims foster faithful living within the community and are coherent with past expressions of faithfulness.

Yoder understands faithful living ("truthfulness") to be by definition outward focused. Faithful living means fostering healing and restorative justice in a broken, alienated, and unjust world. That is, faithfulness requires witnessing to the "good news" of God's mercy and right-making love. This mercy and love must be lived-out—characterizing the community of faith's internal life and its message to the wider world.

So, according to Yoder, "at the center of Christianity we find 'news,' not 'out there' absolutes." This "news"—the story of God's healing love—is the "truth" to which the faith community witnesses. But it is a different kind of "truth" than the Western epistemological tradition affirms. This "news" originates in a particular setting, is contingent, historical, non-esoteric, and translatable into any language.[16]

Yoder's "truth," then, is not absolute, timeless, authoritarian, under the control of people in power, or accessible only through some sort of universal language that is more real than particular languages. What makes the "news" accessible to everyone is not that it is expressed in some kind of over-arching, transcendent language—but, rather, because it can be translated in meaningful ways into each particular language.

This apparent weakness of the truth is actually responsible for its very power to bring life. Only this kind of news fosters authentic wholeness. It matters that the content of the "news" includes nonviolence. "News is 'good'," Yoder writes, "when it fosters wholeness—this cannot happen when the news is imposed by authority or coercively."[17]

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[15] Yoder, *To Hear the Word*, 40.

[16] John Howard Yoder, "On Not Being Ashamed of the Gospel: Particularity, Pluralism, and Validation," *Faith and Philosophy* 93.3 (July 1992), 290.

[17] Yoder, "On Not Being Ashamed," 292.

The key image Yoder draws upon to characterize the nature of truth is God's vulnerability. The news we affirm requires a relinquishment of dominance and control. In reporting this news we always allow others to challenge it, even reject it. "We do not have the truth," Yoder writes. "We confess a truth which has taken possession of us through no merit of our own. The truth, being the revelation of God's own vulnerability on the cross, cannot be otherwise commended than in the vulnerability of open encounter with the neighbor."[18]

Yoder believes to follow Jesus and grant freedom and respect toward others is a crucial way of ourselves being truthful. "We do not have to follow Jesus," he writes. "That we do not have to is the profoundest proof of his condescension, and thereby of his glory."[19] Jesus is the truth not in spite of his always respecting others' freedom, but because of it.

Truth is lived out, concrete, on-the-ground. It is inextricably linked with non-coercive communication. The evidence that matters of truth's existence, that truth can be known, that there is truth according to which human beings thrive best when they shape their lives in coherence with it, is found not in logical proofs but in "the vitality of communities in which a different way of being keeps breaking in here and now."[20]

Yoder uses "evangelical" to characterize people committed to Jesus' news as the "way, truth, and life." He differentiates this use from what he calls "High Protestant Scholasticism" that fixates on epistemology and reason in a way that reflects "a concession to Enlightenment and not a victory over it. It looks like an acceptance of the scholastic notion that we seek a truth system with which to defend ourselves."[21] In contrast, "to be 'evangelical' is not to claim universality as achieved either on the grounds of a revelatory privilege or because one can apologetically subject it to everyone else's concept of natural reason. It is to discover approximations to universality in the lived experience of transtribal communication and reconciliation."[22] By "transtribal communication and reconciliation," Yoder means that it is necessary—and possible—across cultures to embrace our common humanity and to share commitments to Jesus.

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[18] John Howard Yoder, *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited* (Notre Dame, IN: Shalom Desktop Publications, 1996), 112.

[19] John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 62.

[20] Yoder, *Priestly,* 94.

[21] Yoder, *To Hear the Word,* 39-40.

[22] John Howard Yoder, "Theological Revision and the Burden of Particular Identity," in Harlan R. Beckley and Charles M. Sweezey, eds., *James M. Gustafson's Theological Ethics: Interpretations and Assessments* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1988), 76.

The truth Yoder sees in Jesus is not totalitarian, exclusivist, nor separate from other expressions of truth. Rather, it serves more as an ordering principle for all knowing. He writes, "the point is not that all truth is in Jesus or in the Bible. It is that the truth that is in Jesus is the truth that matters the most, which must therefore regulate our reception and recognition of other kinds and levels of truth rather than being set in parallel or subordinated thereto."[23]

In linking truth so closely to Jesus, Yoder means the particular first-century human being who lives in a particular culture and spoke a particular language. Yoder resists the universalizing emphases of sophisticated philosophical method. In actual on-the-ground reality, truthful human beings always have drawn on eclectic sources in learning and living out truth. "There is nothing necessarily wrong with real life," Yoder writes, "in which modes such as ends, means, story, contract, virtue—and others—are mixed together helter-skelter, with no need for one of them always to have priority."[24]

"The truth question is rooted in the real world, in communities holding to various faith claims, to which diverse people find themselves adhering for all kinds of reasons."[25] The point, then, is not that there is some clear method that delivers perfect truth. To the contrary, the truth that matters is something that may be messy, complex, ambiguous, partial, imperfect—just like human beings and human communities. Amidst these complexities, truth may be discovered and lived.

Jesus lived the way he did because of how he understood the universe to be. He trusted in how things "really are"—he understood God as the One creator and sustainer of a universe in which love and nonviolence are at home. Yoder asserts, "it has always been true that suffering creates shalom. Motherhood has always meant that. Servanthood has always meant that. Healing has always meant that. Tilling the soil has always meant that. Priesthood has always meant that. Prophecy has always meant that. What Jesus did was that he renewed the definition of kingship to fit with the priesthood and prophecy. He saw that the suffering servant is king as much as he is priest and prophet. The cross is neither foolish nor weak, but natural."[26]

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[23] Yoder, *To Hear the Word,* 54.

[24] John Howard Yoder, "Walk and Word: The Alternatives to Methodologism," in Stanley Hauerwas, Nancey Murphy, and Mark Nation, eds., *Theological without Foundations: Religious Practice and the Future of Theological Truth* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press,1994), 81.

[25] Yoder, *To Hear the Word,* 38-9.

[26] John Howard Yoder, *For the Nations: Essays Evangelical and Public* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 212.

Yoder's view of truth, then, embraces a kind of paradox. He confidently speaks of truth—we can know, truth is real. But the truth is accessed only amidst the particularity and relativity of on-the-ground social life among actual human beings. And the entirety of reality witnesses to the ultimate truthfulness of suffering love.

### What does Yoder understand to be involved in letting "truth speak for itself"?

The key here is Yoder's affirmation that people of faith must be open to all the truth—and that God's Spirit enables us to do so. We may (we must) admit various points of view, even when contested. And we may (we must) trust that the truth will be served by open encounter.[27]

Yoder links together confidence in the power of truth with a conviction that truth is nonviolent. A third element of the mix, with belief in the power of truth and in nonviolence, is our human finitude. We cannot know it all; we must keep learning. We may trust that it is possible to keep learning and that it is sure that our questions, our doubts, even our distorted motivations, will not quench the truth. We do not need to use coercion of any sort to insure the survivability of truth—and, in fact, if we do use coercion we will invariably separate ourselves from the truth.

So we do not need to fear give and take and the lack of absolute certainty. Yoder argues that "what we are looking for is not a way to keep dry above the waves of relativity, but a way to stay within our bark, barely afloat and sometimes awash amidst those waves, yet neither dissolving into them nor being carried only where they want to push it."[28]

Truth speaks for itself, then, when we open ourselves to hearing all relevant voices, recognizing that each makes a contribution, while we retain the conviction that we can know truth, remain afloat, and be empowered to resist the "waves of relativity" as they seek to push us "only where they want." At the core of our capability of holding together openness and conviction lies nonviolence. The power of the truth of the gospel ("good news") is to be found in "its renunciation of coercion. You do not have to believe." Yoder argues that this renunciation contrasts with other epistemologies. "The temptation with which foundationalism flirts is to find a mental or verbal move that will coerce assent."[29]

Since truth for Yoder is understood in terms of the gospel, the "good news," he places special importance on the translatability of the truthful

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[27] Yoder, *For the Nations*, 230.
[28] Yoder, *Priestly,* 38.
[29] Yoder, "Meaning," 134.

message of God's suffering love. And the characteristics of this translating work themselves reflect the nature of the truth. We do not seek a "higher" or "absolute" language with the expectation that people encounter truth only as they leave their own particular languages (and cultures) behind. Rather, we accept as necessary the task of entering "concretely into the other community long enough, deeply enough, vulnerably enough, to be able to articulate our Word in their words."[30]

This vulnerability finds expression in our need to validate our message by living it out. What we are saying is seen to be truthful, ultimately, not by our careful and irresistible logic, but by the coherence between "walk and word." "Ultimate validation," Yoder writes, "is a matter not of a reasoning process which one could by dint of more doubt or finer hair-splitting push down one story closer to bedrock, but of a concrete social genuineness of the community's reasoning together in the Spirit."[31]

Besides having our lives face scrutiny as part of the evaluation of the truthfulness of our words, vulnerability in letting "truth speak for itself" also means allowing others freedom to disagree. In this way we are consistent with Jesus. "Jesus makes on his hearers' assent no claims but by the truth inherent in his words and his being there at their mercy. Rejection, according to the 'news' brought by Jesus and his witness, is part of the validation."[32]

One way the community witnesses to the truth of its understanding of God is how it communicates with those outside itself. Vulnerability, non-coerciveness, meeting the others on their turf and in their own language reflect deep-seated trust in the power of God's love as the core truth of the universe. Another way the community of faith witnesses is in how it processes its own internal conflicts. "To be human is to have differences," Yoder writes. "To be human wholesomely is to process those differences, not by building up conflicting power claims but [rather] by reconciling dialogue."[33] The same vulnerability required of the followers of Jesus in their communicating with the wider world is also required in their internal community life, for the same reasons—this is how to find truth and this is how the watching world will best perceive the nature of truth.

Because conflict follows simply from being human socially, the community of faith can never expect to be free from conflict—nor should it. Unity within this community is indeed important, but the unity must be authentically human. So Yoder makes the point that what is profound in followers of Jesus working together is not that their common work is

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[30] Yoder, "Meaning," 132-33.
[31] Yoder, "Walk and Word," 83.
[32] Yoder, "On not Being Ashamed," 293.
[33] Yoder, *Body Politics,* 8.

the fruit of their agreeing with one another. No, the common work is profound when they are open about their differences and commit themselves to "talk together with a view to reconciliation."[34]

Yoder goes so far as to characterize this "talking together" as a "sacrament"—one of five concrete practices that are ways God acts among believers to show truth to the watching world.[35] "Truth," for John Howard Yoder, must be lived. It is best lived in the context of a faith community committed to learning and growing in understanding the good news of God's healing love. As this "news" is understood, it must be shared with others; and as it is shared the words of those within the community must cohere with their walk.

## Conclusion

To conclude, I will summarize the main elements of Yoder's view of truth and make application to the most conflictual issue that U.S. Mennonite churches have ever faced, the conflict over the church's response to sexual minorities.

Yoder affirms that truth indeed is real. All people in all times and places are subject to this truth. However, it is embodied by witness, vulnerability, and openness, not coercion and domination. The ultimate criterion to ascertain truthfulness is the fostering of peaceable living, more so than carefully constructed, sophisticated, logically impeccable belief systems. Truth is a way of life more than a collection of ideas.

No one perspective can be certain of possessing the entire truth on any issue. Consequently, we need to listen to others, ready to learn and adjust our understandings. Indeed, we especially need to listen to those with whom we differ as they are often the ones who best may make us aware of limits in our perspective. The community must seek all points of view within the fellowship. Dissent from majority perspectives is to be welcomed, not stifled. People with differences of perspective must listen to one another in open, safe, respectful conversation or they will not move toward truth.

The viability of the truth the churches witness to is to a very large degree dependent upon people in the churches living consistently with this truth. For example, if the church preaches nonviolence as core of its understanding of the good news, for this message to be credible, nonviolence must be a characteristic of the church's internal life.

No set of issues within our faith communities has ever tested our

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[34] Yoder, *Royal Priesthood,* 282.

[35] Yoder, *Body Politics,* 71.

commitment to epistemological nonviolence within our faith communities quite like the debate over homosexuality. I envision the following model as an ideal drawing upon Yoder's epistemology.

(1) From denominational settings, educational institutions, regional conferences, local congregations, down to Bible studies and Sunday School classes, the churches must seek open conversation on these difficult issues. By open conversation, I mean the refusal to let those who wish to impose a pre-mature certainty and unwarranted closure on the discernment process. Participants in these conversations should include all members of our fellowship, to make it clear that the church recognizes that the Holy Spirit works through each member. The church needs to insist that a key prerequisite for having a voice in the decisions it makes is that all decision-making participants listen to all other members.

(2) The kind of open conversation that a pacifist epistemology sees as necessary for discerning God's truth has as a necessity a sense of safety for all participants—certainly, safety from immediately hurtful comments and actions from other participants. Practically, this also means safety from longer-term negative repercussions. For example, participants in the conversations who work for church institutions (pastors, teachers, administrators) will be limited in their ability to speak openly and honestly if they have to fear for their jobs. Voices asserting, "come let us reason together" are going to be hollow unless these assertions contain some sort of guarantee of "safe passage" for all participants.

(3) In the process of discernment, the voices of dissenters must be sought. We can not rely on powerless and marginalized people to assert themselves. However, as Yoder continually emphasized, it is precisely the voices of dissent that play a crucial role in the churches discernment of truth. In our present Mennonite context, people from both the "left" and the "right" are marginalized and too often ignored. Those voices must be heard or the quest for truth will be short-circuited.

(4) People in the churches who are in positions to have an impact on this discernment process must be willing to pay a cost for insisting on an authentically open process. In Gandhi's articulation of his philosophy of *satyagraha* (nonviolent action), he articulated three foundations. The first was his conviction about the reality of truth and his commitment to pursue that truth. The second was his conviction that the means of pursuing truth must be nonviolent. And the third, was his commitment to suffer in pursuing truth.[36] This third foundation is crucial in our present context. People in leadership positions especially must understand that seeking truth is costly. Jesus made that clear. The survival of the church

[36] See Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence,* chapter one.

as the agent of the "good news" of God's mercy is at stake. So, whoever is in a position to do so has the responsibility to insist on the kind of on-going, safe discussion with special attention paid to dissenters as mentioned above—even in the fact of strong opposition to this sort of discussion. This insistence may involve some suffering.

(5) People on all sides of the issues must be willing to accept the necessity of policy decisions from time to time. We should all respect the time and commitment that have gone into such decisions to date and be willing to find ways to live with those decisions. However, and this is crucial, the making of such decisions must never be seen as a means of quenching the on-going discernment process. Along with policy decisions, we also need overt and active commitments to continue to give voice to dissent and to encourage such voices by providing safety for dissenters. And dissenting voices should be actively listened to. The very nature of truth requires this kind of openness.

If we accept Yoder's perspective that our access to truth itself (that is, our access to the Spirit of God) depends upon our embracing a thoroughgoing pacifist approach to knowing, then we are bound to take this crisis in our churches with utmost seriousness. In the intense desire by many in the Mennonite Church USA, perhaps even a large majority, to resolve issues of the place of sexual minorities in the church once and for all time, the importance of genuine listening to dissenting voices may easily be minimized.

A pacifist approach to knowing would prefer to err on the side of listening too much rather than listening too little. All voices within the community must be treated with respect for the community genuinely to be healthy. As Gandhi insisted—and Yoder agreed—as finite human beings our quest for the truth must place the highest priority on how we seek it. In Yoder's terms, the church's announcement of "good news" loses its credibility when its "walk" does not cohere with its "word."

If Mennonites genuinely share in Yoder's pacifist approach to knowing, they would do well to be slow to invoke what may be a premature closure to their current struggle to discern God's will. Precisely when our disagreements become the most intense that the style of open and respectful "reconciling dialogue" that Yoder advocated[37] becomes most crucial.

[37] Yoder, *Body Politics*, 8.

# 17. Should Anabaptist theology be distinctive?

*[This is a significantly revised version of "Whither Contemporary Anabaptist Theology," first published in Ted Grimsrud,* Embodying the Way of Jesus: Anabaptist Convictions for the Twenty-First Century *(Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2007), 23-36.]*

Is there such a thing as "Anabaptist theology" for the present day? Is seeking to construct a distinctively Anabaptist theology an appropriate task for the 21st century? John Howard Yoder did not consider himself a systematic theologian, and as far as I know would not have called himself a constructive theologian. However, his work certainly directly relates to the task many Mennonites, and other spiritual descendants of the 16th century Anabaptists see as vital for Anabaptist communities—namely, self-conscious work at articulating their theological convictions in ways that might provide sustenance to their tradition.

We may call Yoder's model "practice-oriented" theology. To help understand his approach, and why it's an exemplary model for constructive Anabaptist theology for the 21st century, I will first look at a somewhat different model for contemporary Anabaptist theology and reflect on the differences between these two models.

## Tom Finger's contemporary proposal

Tom Finger, like many other Mennonite writers wrestling with the challenge of working within the Anabaptist tradition (notably a marginal perspective in the history of Christian theology), seeks to find links of commonality with more mainstream traditions. In doing so, he takes an approach I call "doctrine-oriented" theology. Finger's work has many features unique to his own perspective, certainly, yet in relation to the key points I will focus on, his approach is at least somewhat representative of the general approach taken by Anabaptist-Mennonite theologians seeking rapprochement with mainstream theologies.

I understand the central characteristics of "Anabaptist theology" to be centered in an integration of theological convictions with ethical practices. The ethical commitments of the 16th century Anabaptists such

as their pacifism, their emphasis on economic sharing, and their rejection of the subordination of the church to nation-states, reflected a distinctive theology that placed central importance on commitment to the way of Jesus in costly discipleship.

Finger helps us a great deal in understanding central characteristics of Anabaptist theology. However, in his decision to frame his theological proposal within the general approach of mainstream Christian theology (which has not placed ethical faithfulness to the way of Jesus at the center of theological reflection), he risks minimizing the theological convictions that may be the most important contribution Anabaptists have to make the Christian existence in 21st century North America.

Finger joins with others who have sought to construct Anabaptist theology in ways that stress commonalities with mainstream Christian theology and place major importance on drawing on the post-biblical (and, maybe even more so, the post-4th century) dogmatic theological tradition and on centering more on the internal rituals of Christian communities. These emphases may threaten to diminish Anabaptist distinctions and the potential of theology in the Anabaptist tradition to recover the core ethos of the biblical portrayal of the life of faith.

Finger's most thorough treatment of these themes, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive*,[1] examines Anabaptist theology in great detail, both in the 16th century and in our contemporary North American setting. Finger read thoroughly in 16th-century Anabaptist sources, and probably no one has read as widely in 20th- and 21st-century Anabaptist/Mennonite theology.

Finger's book begins with a brief summary of key aspects of the 16th-century Anabaptist movement based on up-to-date scholarship, followed by a summary of currents in recent historiography. Next comes a description of what Finger calls "Contemporary Approaches to Theology in Anabaptist Perspective." In considering "approaches to theology," Finger's "contemporary Anabaptist" category is pretty much synonymous with "Mennonite," though he does include Baptist James McClendon and Nancey Murphy from the Church of the Brethren.

In sketching the present scene, Finger's concerns are theological. He states, "since I am mainly concerned with comprehensive theologizing, I will chiefly consider authors who have completed at least one work of this kind or who often addressed this task otherwise."[2] As becomes clear in the course of the book, what Finger has in mind with "contemporary theologizing" is a pretty traditional view of "theology." He focuses on

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[1] Thomas N. Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

[2] Finger, *Contemporary*, 57.

doctrines, understandings of salvation, and church rituals. He defines theology thus: "The discovery, understanding, and transformation of the basic convictions of religious communities, and relating these convictions coherently to each other and to whatever else exists."[3]

The heart of the book contains in-depth discussions of six themes that presumably constitute what Finger sees as Christianity's core convictions. These are: (1) the personal dimension (personal salvation and justification theology), (2) the communal dimension (the community of faith especially focused on baptism, the Lord's Supper, church discipline, and economic sharing), (3) the missional dimension (evangelism and responses to the world), (4) Jesus and divine reality (doctrines of the person and work of Jesus Christ and the Trinity), (5) human nature (theological anthropology), and (6) the last things (eschatology).

Finger follows the same outline for each theme. He summarizes 16th-century Anabaptist views, then he describes and critiques contemporary Anabaptist discussions of his themes. He concludes each chapter by articulating his own constructive proposal. Though Finger's concern is with theology (as defined above), he seeks to view theology in an ethically oriented way. He understands one of the central elements of Anabaptist theologizing to be a concern with integrating belief and practice, not simply focusing on disembodied ideas. Finger expresses this concern by suggesting at that since Anabaptist theology emerged among people on the margins of their societies, it might have special relevance today for reflecting theologically about present-day situations of marginalization.

Finger provides access to 16th-century materials rarely presented in an overtly theological context—drawing on historical scholarship and, most importantly, noting the present-day theological relevance of these materials. Side-by-side with this effort of historical retrieval, Finger gives us a fascinating portrayal of theological ferment among current Anabaptist theologians. He helps us to see the wide diversity in our dynamic community of scholars. Finger also helps us to see how those within this diverse community of thinkers are nonetheless united in their deep concerns for peace and for the integration of belief and practice.

Though Finger is obviously concerned with ethics, and with how theology translates into practice, as a rule this concern is evinced mostly in statements that he has this concern more than in the clear content of the theological analysis. That is, Finger in practice still seems to treat theology more as ideas and disembodied beliefs than as always-embodied convictions that reflect political and socio-cultural interests and cannot truly be understood apart from those interests. For Finger, ethics seems

[3] Finger, *Contemporary*, 95.

more like an add-on to pure theology than something that is inextricably a part of all theological reflection.

Finger is strongest on description. He carefully and cautiously describes, then proposes. This descriptive element of his work contrasts with the sharper prophetic critique and ethical exhortation that seems to have been at the center of 16th-century Anabaptist faith. The irenic tone of *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology* will insure that it will not alienate and drive away readers from other traditions.

This means that Finger does not share the conflictual dynamics characteristic of his Anabaptist forebears that followed from their directly challenging status quo religion. Given that probably the most universal characteristic shared across the diversities of 16th century Anabaptism was how their convictions and practices got them into serious trouble, one wonders whether there might be some tension with latter-day theologies that want to call themselves Anabaptist and yet end up being safe and comfortable.

Finger's seeking to be irenic, while a laudatory approach in many respects, may also run the risk of muting key Anabaptist distinctives. An overly irenic approach may lead to allowing the mainstream traditions to set the agenda in a way that privileges their (non-pacifist!) concerns and leaves crucial Anabaptist concerns (especially related to Anabaptist pacifist convictions) unmentioned or relegated to footnotes or appendices to the discussion that "truly matters."

**What should contemporary Anabaptist theology be like?**

More than ever before, North American Anabaptists are challenged to become self-conscious about articulating our theological convictions. This tradition has been sustained for many generations more by the strength of family and cultural ties than by clearly, overtly stated common convictions. However, in North America's ever-more transient culture, into which Anabaptists are increasingly being acculturated, those old ties are weakening. The future viability of the Anabaptist tradition cannot be taken for granted. Consequently, the importance within the tradition of self-conscious constructive theology has grown significantly.

I read Finger as making an important contribution in uncovering and helping to make more coherent important theological resources from the 16th century and familiarizing his readers with contemporary options. Certainly his constructive proposals are well-considered, and useful for contemporary Anabaptists (and all other Christians, for that matter).

However, my take on what questions contemporary Anabaptists ought to be asking is different. I am not convinced that theologizing as

Finger has done, focusing mostly on doctrinal formulations, the internal debates of theological discourse, and the sacramental practices within the church—reflection that will likely not get him into trouble with anyone—best captures the spirit of 16th-century Anabaptist theology or is the best kind of contribution pacifist Christians might make to theology seeking to engage our present historical context.

As Finger shows, we in the Anabaptist tradition need continually to reflect on what our theology is and should be. For one reason, as pacifist Christians, we have a call to witness to Jesus' way in the face of whatever forces in our present world are hurting, violating, oppressing, and dominating the human beings God loves.

I support Finger's use of "Anabaptist" as a rubric for the kind of theology we need to be producing. This rubric both anchors us in a particular tradition, the spiritual descendants of the Radical Reformers, and allows us to be open in engaging the entire Christian tradition and to seek to be relevant in the catholic Christian community. I mean here to affirm John Howard Yoder's sentiment at the beginning of his book, *The Priestly Kingdom*: "The vision of discipleship projected in this collection is founded in Scripture and catholic tradition, and is pertinent today as a call for all Christian believers."[4] However, in many ways Yoder's approach contrasts sharply with Finger's.

Like Finger has been, Yoder was an ecumenist, deeply concerned with respectful interaction with other Christians, and a regular official Mennonite representative in global ecumenical settings. However, whereas Finger focuses a great deal of energy in finding common ground with the mainstream tradition, Yoder emphasized the need to focus on the differences—in part as a way to keep the core convictions of the minority group from being absorbed by an emphasis on the similarities.

I agree with Yoder's approach. One important ramification for Anabaptists is that we are responsible assertively to articulate our core convictions that may well be at variance with mainstream assumptions. Early in his academic career, Yoder made this point in his theological analysis of the dialogues of the earliest Swiss Anabaptists with their Reformed adversaries. He argued that those Anabaptists modeled "a truly fraternal polemic" that remains worth emulating.

> Both the past and the present will be better served if the oppositions are revealed and not silenced in the interests of an alleged ecumenicity. The tragic part of the Reformation history, and especially the relationships of the Reformation to the Anabaptists, is not that there were differing opinions at

[4] John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1983), 8.

> that time, but rather that they did not find the Christian way to deal with their differences of opinion; that is, that their differences were not resolved theologically, but rather by police action.[5]

One way to understand Yoder's subsequent work is to see it as an effort to embody what he understood to be the heart of the Anabaptist way of theologizing—a quest for ecumenical dialogue that combines respect and genuine listening with honest voicing of differences and seeking to hold all theology accountable to the message of Jesus.

He returned to this theme of ecumenical conversation in the final essay he wrote before his death in December 1997:

> The foundational mandate to be reconciled, the one that matters, is the one that applies where we differ. That we can work together when we agree is not yet the gospel. That is the sociological works-religion, something we can do for ourselves, in our own strength. The word of reconciliation, on the other hand, directs us to talk together when we disagree. The gospel is that despite ourselves, by grace, we have been made one with people with whom we were not one."[6]

In between these two writings, in his most famous book, *The Politics of Jesus*, Yoder emphasized that one of the New Testament's main teachings was the call to reconciliation among formerly alienated Jews and Gentiles, called together to witness to the world of God's healing power that breaks down walls of enmity that divide disparate people. The point here, too, is not a muting of differences but unity amidst the differences.

The lesson is not to place our highest priority on commonality in a way that mutes differences (and inevitably silences minorities and blocks the conversation group as a whole from the minorities' insights). Rather, according to Yoder, the New Testament doctrine of justification emphasizes the social nature of salvation—and the community that justified people form is a place for conversation, mutual learning, and communal discernment that is only possible when differences are aired and various points of view are allowed to find expression.

Anabaptists should learn most of all from the distinctive elements of our tradition and not be defensive or apologetic about those in

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[5] John Howard Yoder, *Anabaptism and Reformation in Switzerland: An Historical and Theological Analysis of the Dialogue Between Anabaptists and Reformers* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2004), 142. This book was originally written and published in German in two volumes in 1962 and 1968. The first volume was Yoder's doctoral dissertation at the University of Basel.

[6] John Howard Yoder, "On Christian Unity: The Way from Below," *Pro Ecclesia* 9.2 (Spring 2001), 177.

conversations with other Christians. Our theology should be first of all Anabaptist theology, then we build on the common ground we find with others—rather than letting the agendas of other traditions mute our own central convictions as Anabaptists.

What are the key Anabaptist convictions? Contemporary Anabaptist theology should read Anabaptist history (16th century and the years since) similarly to how we read the Bible. We today are part of the same, on-going story as the biblical people, especially Jesus, and as the Anabaptists of the 16th century and since. We do not critically distance ourselves from the story, but we also recognize that we need to read the story truthfully, to allow it to challenge us and not simply say what we want it to say. We consider the entire story and listen to it on its own terms. However, we use a reading strategy that privileges themes in the broader story that (1) accurately support Jesus' own summary of the Law and Prophets (that is, his commandment to love God and neighbor) and that (2) most helpfully support our calling today to apply Jesus' commandment to our context.

Reading the Bible and the Anabaptist stories in the light of Jesus' life and teaching underscores that both stories at their cores integrate belief and practice. The stuff of biblical theology and the stuff of Anabaptist theology reflect real life, concrete moral practices, the effort to live faithfully. This kind of theology does not place abstract doctrines or what other theologians have said about theology at the center.

The 16th-century Anabaptists rarely wrote formal theology. Most leaders had little formal education and the few more highly educated ones ended up dying early (e.g., the one leader with a doctorate in theology, Balthasar Hubmaier, was killed by the Viennese government in 1528, three years after the movement began). Few of their spiritual descendants have written formal theology either; until recently this relative silence has led to debates about how much we should assume they share with the mainstream of orthodox Christian theology.

Do their mostly positive allusions to common Christian doctrines (e.g., trinitarianism, creedal formulations) imply that they are best seen as theologically orthodox Christians who added on some distinctive ethical practices such as pacifism? Or does their basic lack of interest in formal dogmatic theology imply an alternative orientation to Christian faith that privileges right practice over right belief in ways that actually, if spelled out, would lead to an entirely different type of theology, root and branch?

I lean towards the latter inclination in relation to Anabaptist theology.[7] I believe that theology done after the Anabaptists (meaning,

[7] I have been influenced by J. Denny Weaver's work on this point. See especially *Anabaptist Theology in Face of Postmodernity* (Telford, PA: Pandora Press US, 2000). See also Weaver's critique of Finger's book: J. Denny Weaver,

following their path even while going beyond what they directly said) should be a distinctive kind of theology. Anabaptists have resisted the systematizing and formalizing of theology into doctrinal formulations and insider language games. Their approach to faith has been more concrete and practical.

If North American Anabaptist communities are in a new era, where the times require us to more self-consciously articulate our theological convictions (since we may no longer so easily depend upon family and cultural ties to sustain our tradition), is our best strategy to link more closely with traditions with a longer history of formal theology, simply adding our ethical distinctives to the already-formulated "classical" theologies? Or is the best strategy to think through the entire theological enterprise anew in light of core Anabaptist convictions?

This latter approach, which I endorse, would, say, emphasize that a pacifist doctrine of God might be different than doctrines of God[8] formulated by theology in Augustinian, Thomistic, Lutheran, or Calvinist traditions that have explicitly approved of Christians fighting wars.[9]

To be clear, on this point we could call ours "radical pacifist Anabaptist theology." Since such a term, in my mind, would actually be redundant, I will not seriously propose to use it. But in saying that "Anabaptist theology" should be seen as, by definition, meaning "radically pacifist Anabaptist theology" I assert that the core of "Anabaptist theology" is pacifism.

Of course, our definition of "pacifism" will determine what this core has to do with. By pacifism, I mean the conviction that no values or commitments are as important as the value and commitment to love God and neighbor. Anabaptist theology bases this conviction on Jesus' life and teaching. Hence, the core of "Anabaptist theology" as pacifist theology is the message of Jesus. Yoder made this profoundly clear in the basic argument of *The Politics of Jesus*: The Jesus of the New Testament (and the Jesus of history) at the heart of his message emphasized love and servanthood in imitation of Israel's God, and this Jesus, appropriately confessed by Christians as Son of God, provides the norm for all subsequent Christian belief and practice.

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"Parsing Anabaptist Theology: A Review Essay of Thomas N. Finger's *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology*," *Direction Journal* 34.2 (Fall 2005), 241-63.

[8] See the *Conrad Grebel Review* symposium, "Is God Nonviolent?" 21.1 (Winter 2003).

[9] Here I may be emphasizing a theme that goes beyond even what Yoder himself affirmed. See Ray C. Gingerich, "Theological Foundations for an Ethic of Nonviolence: Was Yoder's God a Warrior?" *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 77 (2003), 417-35.

Theology drawing on the Anabaptist stream sees the foundational theological conviction being Jesus' love command. Hence, it is "radical pacifist theology," "radical" in the sense that at its root pacifism affirms love as the core truth. By "pacifist" I mean understanding the loving God and each human being as the core conviction that exceeds all others. For pacifism, no other value, truth, conviction, or commitment can be important enough to take priority over the love command—that is, no value is worth committing violence for.

It is important for Anabaptists today to emphasize (in a way not clearly seen in our tradition until quite recently) that the "peace" Jesus embodied was the "peace" described in the Old Testament with a cluster of socially oriented terms such as shalom ("peace"), *mishpat* and *sedeqah* ("justice") and *chesed* ("mercy"). This is a positive, life-affirming, injustice-resisting, and world-transforming concept. Peace for Jesus includes direct involvement in resisting evil (nonviolently), in seeking to bring healing to the world's brokenness through fostering genuine social justice.[10]

Reading the Anabaptist convictions that matter most as "radical pacifist convictions" captures the core of the tradition as read through the lens of Jesus' message. This is not to say that Anabaptists have always embodied this message so much as to say that insofar as they have done so, at that point what matters most about the tradition is at the forefront.

For "radical pacifist Anabaptist theology" (from now on, simply "Anabaptist theology"), the stuff of theology is the message of love, its embodiment in actual life, its need in our broken world, and theological reflection in light of this message, embodiment, and need. The doctrines, formal traditions, creeds, technical theological language, only have value for Anabaptist theology insofar as they illumine the message of love; they are not valued as ends in themselves.

## Practice-oriented theology

Contemporary Anabaptist theology may thus be conceptualized as directly connected to social life and concrete ethics. It seeks to follow the

[10] On "restorative justice" see Howard Zehr, *Changing Lenses* 3rd edition (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2004) and Christopher Marshall, *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment* (Grand Rrapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001). On Jesus' vision as one of active nonviolence, see John Howard Yoder, *The Politics Jesus,* 2nd edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdman, 1994) and Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992). See also Leo Driedger and Donald Kraybill, *Mennonite Peacemaking: From Quietism to Activism* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1994) for an account in the evolution of Mennonite understandings of their peace position.

biblical mode of focusing on people's actual lives and applying theological convictions directly to practices that sustain a people's faithfulness to their vocation as agents of God's shalom. It sees as its model Jesus' style of communicating his convictions concerning God and truth—life-oriented, practical, accessible, embodied in life, directly in service of the love command.

This practice-oriented theology sees its central concern as theological reflection on the stuff of actual life. It may be contrasted with other types of theology that focus their reflection more overtly on doctrines and creeds, past and current theological formulations, and insider rituals as the stuff of theology. This more doctrine- and ritual-oriented theology primarily refers to theology, its own internal set of concerns.

Yoder addressed philosophical ethics in an essay called "Work and Word: The Alternatives to Methodologism," but some of his points could also be applied to doctrine-oriented theology. He warns of the dangers of "word-spinners" substituting preoccupations with definitions and deductions drawn from the definitions for the "ordinary language" of actual life. "Language is never self-contained unless it be, like algebra, the product of a mind abstracting from moral community."[11]

Contemporary Anabaptist theology as practice-oriented theology will tend to be theological reflection that directly applies the biblical story to life in the world such as the problems of violence and poverty, the quest for meaning in a consumerist society that dominates the world economically and militarily, and environmental degradation. This focus contrasts with theological reflection that focuses first of all on theological formulations in various forms and only turns to life in the world as a second level concern.

Anabaptist theology will see the life and teaching of Jesus as the most fundamental contribution the Bible makes to present-day theology. Rather than focusing energy on the formulation of doctrines of scripture's authority, it will focus on drawing on the story of Jesus for interpretive clues for engaging with the crucial issues of present-day life.

Earl Zimmerman has helped us see how directly Yoder's recovery of the "politics of Jesus" stemmed from his immersion in post-World War II Europe's recovery from the devastation of the immense violence that lasted from 1914-1945.[12] Yoder believed that one of the roots of that period of total war may be found in the failure of the European churches

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[11] John Yoder, "Walk and Work: The Alternatives to Methodologism," in Christian Early and Ted Grimsrud, eds., *A Pacifist Way of Knowing: John Howard Yoder's Nonviolent Epistemology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 91.

[12] Earl Zimmerman, *Practicing the Politics of Jesus: The Origin and Significance of John Howard Yoder's Social Ethics* (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2007).

to be clear about the message of Jesus. He believed that what was needed was not a witness from the margins from a small sect but a message taken to the mainstream about the actual message of the Jesus all Christians claim as Lord and Savior. However, his take on Jesus surely stemmed from his own Anabaptist convictions. His was an Anabaptist theology—but one aimed to speak to all Christians based on those core Anabaptist convictions that the other traditions had avoided.

These are some of the questions contemporary Anabaptist theology might engage:

•Why does so much theology support violence? Why are American Christians more likely to support capital punishment and the War in Iraq than non-Christians? How might we think theologically in ways that overcome this problem? How do we challenge what Walter Wink calls the "myth of redemptive violence" so widespread in American society?

•How does Christian theology respond to its rival, the "faith" of capitalism that is transforming our world into a "planet of slums"?

•What are the religious beliefs that underwrite the commodification and accompanying destructive exploitation of our natural environment?

•How do we reflect theologically on the ways many Christians have lifted the alleged sins of gay and lesbian Christians as bases for unprecedented levels of intra-church conflict all out of proportion with the weight these "sins" are given in the Bible?

We may contrast these questions with other types of questions and concerns expressed in doctrine-oriented theology, both from the evangelical side and from the mainstream side.

The kinds of concerns focused on by evangelical theology may be illustrated Roger Olson's final section, entitled "Issues in Evangelical Theology," in his handbook on evangelical theology.[13]

•How do we understand the baptism and gifts of the Holy Spirit? Do we think in terms of a "second blessing" or second definite work of grace that lifts the Christian to a new level of faith-experience or more in terms of one completed baptism of the Spirit at the point of conversion?

•What beliefs are acceptable for one who wants to be identified as "evangelical"? What are the boundary lines to acceptable belief?

•How does one know the status of truth claims about God? Is true knowledge of God based only on special revelation? Can the existence of God and the resurrection of Jesus Christ be rationally proven?

•Which view about the End Times is most persuasive—premillennialism, amillennialism, or postmillennialism?

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[13] Roger E. Olson, *The Westminster Handbook to Evangelical Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 291-315.

•Is the Bible perfect—historically accurate and internally consistent—in every detail or is it more that it is trustworthy in what it teaches concerning salvation while also reflecting human fallibility in some of its historical accounts?

We may illustrate the concerns of mainstream theology by noting a randomly chosen (June 14, 2005) issue of *The Christian Century* that devoted its cover article to various contemporary views of the doctrine of justification by faith. The article examines recent writing on this doctrine, focusing on how theological ideas about justification are being debated. As it turns out, the article concludes with some sharp questions of these writers and their neglect of the social-ethical relevance of justification. Nonetheless, except for these questions at the end, the article focused on an internal doctrinal theme as an example worth extensive discussion illustrating what is currently seen as important in ecumenical theology.

Another example of the concerns of mainstream theology, concerns tending to be theological ideas more than actual life, may be seen with the table of contents from another randomly chosen issue (April 2005) of *Modern Theology*. These are some of the article titles: "On the Meaning and Relevance of Baader's Theological Critique of Descartes," "Philosophy and Salvation: The Apophatic in the Thought of Arthur Schopenhauer," and "The Simplicity of the Living God: Aquinas, Barth, and Some Philosophers."

My point with these contrasting tendencies is not to critique more doctrinally-oriented theology but simply to suggest that Anabaptist theology is something quite different.

## Whither contemporary Anabaptist theology?

With this perspective on "practice-oriented" theology in mind, I want to return to the contrast between Finger and Yoder's respective approaches to Anabaptist theology. I do believe Tom Finger has made a major contribution to the task of Anabaptist theology today. Yet I remain convinced contemporary Anabaptist theology is better pursued somewhat differently.[14]

[14] My concerns are parallel to these comments from John Driver: "Members of radical faith movements frequently direct their lives according to the authority of scripture. They often attempt to translate scripture into living experience. Historically, that has contrasted with the established church's dependence on right doctrine, as defined in ecumenical councils, and on the church's institutional tradition, embodied in its clerical leadership and ecclesiastical polity. Clearly there exist notably different understandings of what constitutes a history of the Christian church. The history of established Christianity is traditionally

One question is whether in trying to mediate between Anabaptist and mainstream theologies, Finger tilts too far in the direction of the latter style of theology. Two others who have also produced major theological works that could be seen as "contemporary Anabaptist theologies" (though neither used that term for their work), James Reimer and James McClendon, reflect similar tendencies.

Reimer's *Mennonites and Classical Theology*[15] has the sub-title, "Dogmatic Foundations for Theological Ethics." Reimer explains that though often criticized for focusing too much on "dogmatics," he does indeed take ethics (defined as "the principles guiding human behavior") seriously. But he believes that "ethics, particularly Christian ethics (including the Mennonite concern for peace, justice, and nonviolent love) needs a ground outside itself"—what he calls a "foundation."[16]

Consequently, "there are few essays in this volume which deal specifically with ethical topics."[17] Indeed, beyond a few mentions that he is concerned with ethics, Reimer's theological reflection rarely touches down in concrete reality—focusing almost exclusively on thinkers, thoughts, and traditions. In doing theology that serves as a "foundation" for ethics while rarely directly touching on real life ethics—and, for that matter, in understanding "ethics" primarily as "principles" rather than concrete, embodied practices—Reimer situates himself much closer to the doctrine-oriented than to practice-oriented theology.

McClendon completed his three volume systematic theology in 2000. Most of his life a Southern Baptist (he joined a Church of the Brethren congregation late in life), McClendon coined the term (lower-case "b") "baptist" to describe his theology. However, he did write that, under the influence of John Howard Yoder, he became, "though I still have no love for the term itself—an 'Anabaptist' Baptist."[18] McClendon wrote his

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told through church doctrines and institutions, with a focus on the influence of clerical leaders. Considerable attention is also given to the on-going development of doctrine and tradition. Radical movements tend to focus on the salvation story as told in the Old Testament and New Testament. The biblical history is central to the history told by radical movements because that story underpins their own life and mission. Radical movements generally bear a closer resemblance to the Messianic restoration movements of biblical history than do their established church counterparts." *Radical Faith: An Alternative History of the Christian Church* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1999), 328.

[15] Kitchener, Ont: Pandora Press, 2001.

[16] Reimer, *Mennonites*, 15.

[17] Reimer, *Mennonites*, 16.

[18] James Wm. McClendon, Jr., "The Radical Road One Baptist Took," in John D. Roth, ed., *Engaging Anabaptism: Conversations with a Radical Tradition* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001), 22.

trilogy as an alternative to the mainstream Christian traditions. Rather than starting with the "foundations," he started with "ethics." Then came his "doctrine" followed only at that point by the more foundational third volume. And even that volume turned out to be "witness."

So McClendon sought to give us what could certainly be termed "a contemporary Anabaptist theology." However, his volumes are notable for their detailed focus on other theological work more than on life itself; this is especially the case with volume two, *Doctrine*. McClendon tells us why he took this approach. "I was determined to write every sentence in light of my new-gained radical convictions, and yet to write in such a way that standard-account people, those who shared my pre-Yoder standpoint, could make sense of it."[19] Admirable as McClendon's strategy may be, what he produced is more accurately described as doctrine-oriented theology seeking to address the problems of theology in that mode than as actual practice-oriented theology.

Finger also works within the mode of doctrine-oriented theology. He intends to move it toward practice-oriented theology. He brings core Anabaptist convictions (e.g., peace, close attention to Jesus' life and teaching, an integration of belief and practice) to bear on the theological enterprise in a way that "makes sense to standard-account people." Like McClendon, I perceive that Finger would hope to persuade "standard account people" to regard Anabaptist convictions more positively.

However, is theology done in the doctrine-oriented mode, even with overt delineation of Anabaptist convictions, the best approach for contemporary Anabaptists? This mode may relativize these convictions so much that what we end up with is not truly "radically pacifist."

The construction of contemporary Anabaptist theology remains an always-open task. The ideal I point toward combines serious engagement with the biblical story with careful analysis of contemporary social issues. It remains a point of debate whether Anabaptist theology may take the form of systematic theology and remain consistently Anabaptist. If such an articulation is possible, it must retain at its core a privileging of the biblical story understood as centered in Jesus' life and teaching over later creedal formulations and internally-oriented rituals. That is, an Anabaptist systematic theology must remain "radical pacifist" theology.[20]

In the past half-century's emergent theological scholarship among Anabaptists, John Howard Yoder has approached my ideal.[21] Yoder's

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[19] McClendon, "Radical Road," 22.

[20] See Ted Grimsrud, *Theology as if Jesus Matters: An Introduction to Christianity's Main Convictions* (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2009).

[21] J. Denny Weaver and C. Norman Kraus are two important Mennonite theologians who would also, in my opinion, be good examples of creative

most overtly doctrinal book, *Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method*[22] aptly illustrates his practice-oriented approach even to what we could call doctrinal theology. He takes the life and teaching of Jesus as his foundation. Only after that starting point does he then trace the development of Christological doctrines. Yoder does deal seriously with the later creeds and confessions, by and large affirming their truthfulness. However, they remain supplementary to the practical, concrete, ethically-engaged life of the person Jesus of Nazareth.

Yoder's book, titled as it is, *Preface to Theology*, could also be seen as a preface to Yoder's 1972 book, *The Politics of Jesus*. Read in light of *Preface*, *Politics* may be seen as a further development of Yoder's account of his doctrine of Christ. This doctrine is inextricably linked with ethics. Because of Jesus' life, he is affirmed as God Incarnate—and this life remains the concrete model for all Christians and the measuring rod for all subsequent doctrine.

Doctrine-oriented theology, which starts with the creeds and confessions ("definitions and deductions from the definitions") does not approach the dogmas as supplementary to the story of Jesus told in the New Testament. We see the problem from the earliest widely-used creed, the Apostle's Creed (probably first formulated in the late 2nd century). This creed, which served as the model for many later statements and remains central in creedal churches around the world, simply bypasses Jesus' life and teaching altogether, jumping from "born of the Virgin Mary" to "suffered under Pontius Pilate."

## Conclusion

I propose that if we understand embodying and applying Jesus' love command (what I call "pacifism") as our core Anabaptist conviction, then Anabaptist theology should self-consciously focus on practical social

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constructive Anabaptist theologians who are more practice-oriented than doctrine-oriented. See, among many writings, Weaver's *The Nonviolent Atonement* , 2nd edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011) and Kraus's *God Our Savior: Theology in a Christological Mode* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1991).

[22] John Howard Yoder, *Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2002). This book originated as transcribed lectures from a course Yoder taught at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries. He first made the written lectures available to students in 1968 and edited them for informal publication in book form in 1982. The Brazos book, which largely follows the 1982 version, was edited after Yoder's death by Stanley Hauerwas and Alex Sider. I was a student in this class the last time Yoder taught it at AMBS, Spring 1981.

ethics as an intrinsic part of all our theologizing rather than seeing it as a second-level concern after working on "pure theology." That is, our theology from the start and throughout should be practice-oriented more than doctrine-oriented.

Pacifist theology, which by definition is concerned at its core with the embodiment of Jesus' love command, will always be practice-oriented. Since Anabaptist theology understands itself as, above all else, based on the message of Jesus, it should always be pacifist theology. Such a theology will find itself at odds with non-pacifist theology in relation to its articulation of the core convictions of Christian faith.

Rather than trying to fit within the Western (non-pacifist!) theological tradition, accepting this tradition's basic theological articulations but adding on an ethical, even nonviolent, component, contemporary Anabaptist theology has the calling to rethink theology root and branch in light of its most fundamental conviction—that no other value or commitment takes precedent over the love command.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ted Grimsrud is Professor of Theology and Peace Studies at Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, Virginia. Prior to joining the EMU faculty in 1996, Ted spent ten years pastoring Mennonite congregations in Oregon, Arizona, and South Dakota. He has published twelve books, including *Instead of Atonement: The Bible's Salvation Story and Our Hope for Wholeness* (2013); *Proclaiming Peace: Collected Pacifist Writings, Volume Two—Sermons and Blog Posts* (2012); *God's Healing Strategy: An Introduction to the Bible's Main Themes* (second edition, 2011); and *Compassionate Eschatology: The Future as Friend* (2011). Ted blogs at ThinkingPacifism.net and has a website that collects many of his writings at PeaceTheology.net.