

Friendship Baptist Church Panel – March 2, 2003: *Jesus, Suffering, Hope*

In a profound theological study on forgiveness by Gregory Jones, entitled *Embodying Forgiveness*, there is a section at the beginning that asks: “Is Violence Master of Us All?” He concludes not, if Christians and others practise the “lifecraft” of forgiveness at every level of their lives.

In another profound study on domination systems in the world we live, linked to the New Testament language of “principalities and powers”, entitled *Engaging the Powers*, the author claims at the outset that “Violence is the ethos of our times (p. 1)”. His call throughout echoes Jesus’ and Paul’s: to overcome the evil of violence with good.

In yet another study called *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, when the question is asked, “[I]s it ever God’s will for Christians to employ violence in defense of justice (p. 317)?”, after a thorough look at the witness to Jesus, the author says the one voice of the New Testament is, “No”.

When one looks at violence on the larger scale, one concludes that we as a society and culture, and as a church, have been complicit with its employ throughout the centuries.

In my sermon, I tried to underscore how radically away from violence Jesus points us. When Jesus was asked, “Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”, Jesus responded: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind (Matt. 22:37).”

He was asked for one command, but went on with a second, “And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ (Matt. 22:39)” As if to say you cannot have the one without the other. They are inseparable. Then Jesus added some arresting words: “All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments (Matt 22:40).”

It is the authority of Jesus who claims that the entire sweep of God’s revelation is summed up in two intertwining commandments. However else we understand the violence of the Hebrew Scriptures, we understand it through the way of Jesus to be fulfilled in love of neighbour.

As we know, Jesus extended that love to include the *extreme* neighbour: the enemy.

Since the Reformation, there has been a move to drive a wedge between the personal nature of this “love of enemies” ethic, and the socio-political sphere. Some have used God’s call to be subordinate to the political rulers in their use of “the sword” – violence - as indication of this. I respectfully submit that there is only one ethic taught and modelled in the New Testament, supremely caught in two statements by Paul in Romans 12 and 13: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good (Rom. 12:21)”; and “Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law. The commandments, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ ‘Do not murder,’ ‘Do not steal,’ ‘Do not covet,’ and whatever other

commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law (Rom. 13: 8–10).” - of the entire Old Testament. Rather than endorse the state’s violence, Paul was disallowing Christians from using violence not only against others, but against the unique form of the neighbour, the enemy state, that had already employed violence against Jews and Christians, and was poised to do much worse.

Finally, two authors in a book entitled *On the Moral Nature of the Universe* argue for a “kenotic” or self-emptying ethic of non-violent forgiveness towards neighbour and enemy as the essence of how the cosmos is constructed. They argue that “The moral character of God is revealed in Jesus’ vulnerable enemy love and renunciation of dominion. Imitation of Jesus in this regard constitutes a social ethic.” (p. 178).

That should be enough for us to chew on!

Amen!