



Book Review of *Covenant of Peace: The Missing Peace in New Testament Theology and Ethics*, Willard M. Swartley, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006; 542 pp.

By Wayne Northey

It was my good fortune to have spent a little time with Mennonite New Testament theologian Willard Swartley at the June, 2006 Colloquium on Violence and Religion (COV&R) in Ottawa, Canada. I first heard from him about what surely is his *magnum opus*, the volume under review. Though he has written and edited over 20 books during his fruitful career as professor (now emeritus) of New Testament at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana.

I sent him an e-mail upon completing the read, saying: “I sat back with a sense of not a little ‘overpeace’. It was as daunting as it was exquisite... I sit here in a kind of awe-shock at the amazing richness of the New Testament call to peace. You have, happily, overloaded all the circuits!” Let me explain why.

The author informs us that this book has been “brewing for twenty years (p. xiii).” He further states: “[T]his book is focused on a more modest and clearly defined task, namely, to show that the major writings in the NT canon speak to the topic of peace and peacemaking. Further, it intends to show *how* we are to seek peace, the *motivations* that guide such actions, and what ‘habits of the heart’ or *practices* lead to peacemaking...”

He asks at the outset how is it that a major volume on NT theology or Pauline theology would have only one or two references to peace, even though that word and associated motifs are throughout – over one hundred times in NT literature, and in every NT book except I John. “Put simply, why have *peace* and *peacemaking* been topically marginalized in the NT academic guild? (p. 3)”

Appendix I gives detailed analysis with reference to peace of twenty-five major works of theology and ethics over the last half-century. The point is established: there is serious deficiency of peace in these studies. In only two of the twenty-five publications do peace and peacemaking shape the material. Yet neither is a full investigation of the NT. Peace is neglected, even missing, in all the other studies. That deficiency extends to even major works in missiology as well. Swartley further laments Christians who promote peace not from Scripture but general notions of justice and fairness. He also wonders at Christians who stress biblical authority “and then put peace and peacemaking on discount, regarding it secondary, perhaps even unimportant, to the evangelistic mission of the church (p. 7).”

Swartley himself helpfully summarizes the content of the book:

Chapter 1 shows how fundamental the *peace-gospel* emphasis is to the core NT teachings, especially Jesus’ announcement and inauguration of the reign of God... This sets the stage for the entire endeavour. For even amid diversity of moral emphases, the strength and coherence of this vision permeates the whole NT canon.

The second chapter takes up a study of OT understandings of *shalom* and *eirēnē* in Greco-Roman usage and addresses as well what may appear to be

contrary emphases, texts that are often used to defend use of violence for self-defense or Christian participation in war. With Chapter 1 functioning as foundational to the project as a whole, Chapter 2 presents a necessary definitional component.

... [M]y method of treatment is largely canonical, as becomes clear in the order of Chapters 3 – 12 [that discuss the entire sweep of NT books], with the exception of treating the Gospel of John as part of the larger Johannine corpus and thus contiguous to Revelation...

The three concluding chapters (13 – 15) are more *thematic*. Chapter 13 is a cross-sectional NT study of “discipleship and *imitatio Christi*” together since both are related to modeling Jesus’ way of peace. Chapter 14 then loops back to issues raised in Chapters 2 and 3 but latent throughout as well: To what extent does the peacemaking imperative reflect God’s moral character? What does one make of the warrior-God so prominent in OT thought? As this study shows, some texts portray Jesus coming to battle against evil, thus extending the OT warrior motif. Hence Chapter 14 wrestles with this issue... Finally, Chapter 15 takes up the hermeneutical and “performance” challenge prompted by this study. It also summarizes in schematic format key elements discussed in Chapters 3 – 12 directed toward moral formation of character.

In the Summary and Conclusion I identify leading emphases of this study, including test-criteria for the NT Theologies and Ethics volumes analyzed in Appendix 1. I also identify important issues to be considered as we take up the challenge of this study: to be people of peace who seek to promote peace in our world. I raise the life-commitment question: what does it mean to live in light of this teaching, personally and corporately as God’s people? (pp. 9 & 10)

Swartley points out that Historical Jesus studies by writers such as N.T. Wright, Marcus Borg, and John Dominic Crossan do emphasize the peace of Jesus, and wonders at the gap between such research and ethics and theology studies. That said, except in N.T. Wright’s case, such Historical Jesus studies tend to drive a wedge between Jesus and the New Testament writings, which latter are viewed, through the postmodernist lens, with suspicion as texts of power. Swartley on the other hand reads the canonical texts as the “play” to watch, while not unaware of the vast array of theories about what goes on behind the scenes. At the very least, most Historical Jesus studies seem to say as much about the researcher’s personal preferences as about anything substantive about Jesus.¹

¹ Richard Hays observes: “Second, despite the apparent objectivity of beginning with an appeal to the ‘historical,’ the history of New Testament research demonstrates that efforts to reconstruct the historical Jesus have been beset by subjectivity and cultural bias. Albert Schweitzer’s classic study *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* amply documented this difficulty in nineteenth-century ‘life of Jesus’ research, and the problem continues unabated in the present renewed outpouring of studies of the historical Jesus. The temptation to project upon the figure of Jesus our own notions of the ideal religious personality is nearly irresistible. As Martin Kähler sagely observed almost one hundred years ago, the critic who reconstructs a ‘historical Jesus’ inevitably becomes a ‘fifth evangelist,’ cutting and pasting the tradition so as to articulate a new vision of Jesus for his or her own time (*The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*, Richard B. Hays, Harper, 1996, p. 159.)”

Swartley convincingly points out that the “way” of Jesus was hardly one of power, rather of persecution and death. Is the NT therefore the central world text of deconstruction of power over/violence, and “crucifying” it (René Girard) the ultimate act of cutting off the nose to spite the face? Similarly, Swartley draws on studies that show the early church selection of the NT canon and martyrdom stand in vital relationship to each other: hardly the way of power posited by postmodernists. René Girard, much discussed by Swartley in the thematic chapters, in fact argues that the NT texts like no other ultimately deconstruct scapegoating and the scapegoat mechanism, so fundamental to all exercise of power over.

At the end of his last chapter, Swartley quotes Richard Hays at length, commenting: “I affirm Hays’s nonviolence manifesto and call for the complement of positive peacemaking teaching and action as revealed to us by NT Scripture (p. 429).” I once asked George F.R. Ellis, cosmologist and winner of the 2004 Templeton Prize for Progress Toward Research or Discoveries about Spiritual Realities, why Christians through the ages so rarely lived out this dominant NT “covenant of peace”. He replied quietly: “I guess it’s just too difficult.”

Willard Swartley’s book is outstanding clarion call to embrace the unthinkable – peace for this world, and living a life of peace, knowing that “with God all things are possible.” One can scarcely imagine the revolutionary impact of a worldwide shift in the church towards the NT vision for peace and peacemaking.

I will conclude with Richard Hays’ manifesto quoted and endorsed by Swartley:

Those who are members of the one body in Christ ([Rom.] 12:5) are never to take vengeance (12:19); they are to bless their persecutors and minister to their enemies, returning good for evil. There is not a syllable in the Pauline letters that can be cited in support of Christians employing violence.

With regard to the issue of *violence*, the New Testament’s message bears a powerful witness that is both univocal and pervasive, for it is integrally related to the heart of the kerygma and to God’s fundamental elective purpose. [Swartley comments: “My version of this claim is that the NT speaks univocally and pervasively of *peace/peacemaking* as one central feature of the gospel (p. 418).”]

One reason that the world finds the New Testament’s message of peacemaking and love of enemies incredible is that the church is so massively faithless... Only when the church renounces the way of violence, will people see what the Gospel means... The meaning of the New Testament’s teaching on violence will become evident only in communities of Jesus’ followers who embody the costly way of peace (p. 429).²

² *ibid*, pp. 331, 314, 343-344.