

Is Violence Master of Us All?: Christians and Peacemaking **South Langley Mennonite Brethren Church, April 22, 2001**

by Wayne Northey

Introduction

I used to think that a talk on violence within any Mennonite church was a bit like taking coals to Newcastle: superfluous. And one would think as an outsider to Christian faith that claims to follow the “Prince of Peace” would show massively in peacemaking initiatives from the Christian church throughout all church history. Wrong! And wrong!

Need I say more? There is a *huge* discrepancy between the teachings of Jesus and the New Testament about violence, and Christians’ response throughout most of church history.

Richard Hays, in a major work entitled *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (1996), puts it pointedly: “This is the place where New Testament ethics confronts a profound methodological challenge on the question of violence, because the tension is so severe between the unambiguous witness of the New Testament canon and the apparently countervailing forces of *tradition, reason, and experience* (p. 341).”

In an entire chapter devoted to whether New Testament teaching in any way warrants Christians to support violence to achieve justice, Hays concludes: “Our exegetical illustration of Matthew 5:38—48 has led to the conclusion that the passage teaches a norm of nonviolent love of enemies.... The question that we must now consider is how Matthew’s vision of the peaceful community fits into the larger witness of the canonical New Testament. Do the other texts in the canon reinforce the Sermon on the Mount’s teaching on nonviolence, or do they provide other options that might allow or require Christians to take up the sword?”

“When the question is posed this way, the immediate result—as Barth observed—is to underscore how impressively univocal [one-voiced] is the testimony of the New Testament writers on this point (p. 329).” There is one consistent New Testament voice only on the theme of violence: its utter rejection!

Why then, if the New Testament is so consistent in its witness for nonviolent peacemaking, should commitment to nonviolence be the overwhelming minority position of the Christian church? Hays again: “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. On the question of violence, the church is deeply compromised and committed to nationalism, violence, and idolatry. (By comparison, our problems with sexual sin are trivial.) This indictment applies alike to liberation theologies that justify violence against oppressors and to establishment Christianity that continues to play chaplain to the military-industrial complex, citing just war theory and advocating the defense of a particular nation as though that were somehow a Christian value (p. 343).”

“Violence is the ethos of our times. It is the spirituality of the modern world (Wink, 1992, p. 13).”, writes one contemporary cultural observer and New Testament theologian, Walter Wink. More than any religious spirituality, including Christian, violence is the cultural air we breathe like no other. How can this be so after 2,000 years of Christian influence on culture? Simply put, it is too often as Søren Kierkegaard wrote: “My position is that the whole prevailing official proclamation of Christianity is a conspiracy against the Bible - we suppress what does not suit us (quoted in Bellinger, 2001, p. 98).”

This past century has seen more people slaughtered than all previous centuries combined - 107 millions in wars and regional conflicts by the mid-90's. Christians have led, blessed, and participated in the vast majority of this killing, and continue to do so into the third millennium. What ever happened to following Jesus on the issue of violence?

Outline of Three Sunday Sessions

I wish to pursue that question today: **Following Jesus on the Issue of Violence**. Then next week, I will look at the premier 20th century theorist on violence, René Girard, who has just published a book specifically on Jesus and the New Testament, entitled *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (2001). It will be entitled: **The Gospel, René Girard and Violence**. In the third week, I will apply the theory we have been looking at to the real world issue of crime and punishment. I will call it: **Biblical Perspectives on Crime and Punishment**.

Each Sunday there will barely be enough time to do more than scratch the surface. What I offer is a copy of an outline of the session, and a paper written by me for those interested. And hopefully reasonable opportunity for discussion. I also have a bibliography of select works on the topic that I will make available each Sunday.

Pre-Christian Origin of Contemporary Ethos of Violence

One author traces Western history's central ethos of violence to the Babylonian creation myth in existence well over a thousand years before Christ. Creation is seen in Babylonian religion as an act of violence.

Without elaborating for the sake of time, in this myth, creation is a violent victory over an enemy older than creation. Evil is prior to good. Violence is in the godhead itself. Humanity is created out of bloody violence, and hence humans are seen to be violent to the very core.

“The distinctive feature of the myth,” explains one author, “is the victory of order over chaos by means of violence. This myth is the original religion of the status quo, the first articulation of ‘might makes right’.” He continues: “Peace through war, security through strength: these are the core convictions that arise from this ancient historical religion (Wink, 1992, pp. 16 & 17).”

With rare exceptions, this myth permeates contemporary culture the world over. This “religion” is at the heart of Western culture, in particular North American society, like no other rival such as Judaism or Christianity.

Christian Origin and History of Contemporary Christian Ethos of Violence

There is no question that Emperor Constantine, who first legalized Christian worship in the early fourth century, also caused the Church to embrace for the first time an ethic of state violence which Christians have largely endorsed ever since. In turn however, this ethic arises from Old Testament norms of violent treatment of enemies. I shall return to that.

In the 11th century, Saint Anselm of Canterbury wrote a famous treatise, *Cur Deus Homo* (Why God Became Man), on the atonement. The atonement concerns the effect of Christ’s death on the cross. There have been three discernible views of the atonement in the history of the church, of which the second, the "satisfaction theory", has been the most dominant in Western history since the 11th century. "The second group of theories may be said to have originated with Anselm, who saw sin as dishonor to the majesty of God. On the cross the God-man rendered satisfaction for this dishonor. Along similar lines the Reformers thought that Christ paid the penalty sinners incurred when they broke God's law (Morris, "Atonement", p. 83)."

Without elaboration, Anselm’s theory created a cultural “structure of affect”¹ that understood God’s justice in primarily violent terms: God clearly demanded blood satisfaction for wrongs against him. It was and is consequently not a big step for Christians who embrace the satisfaction theory of the atonement to employ violence in the pursuit of justice. This pursuit has dominated Western Christendom ever since.

1. A Short History of Christian Violence²

I will now give you a quick bird’s eye view of some of the church’s most violent moments. *I am purposely centering out the violent aspects of that history. That is not the whole story by any means!* Thankfully, there is also lots of good news throughout! Here goes.

a. As Christianity expanded into the Roman Empire during its first three centuries it met with significant resistance from the governmental authorities, which often took the form of direct persecutions resulting in Christian martyrdoms. During this period, Christians were, generally speaking, the recipients of violence rather than the perpetrators of it. After Christianity became a tolerated and then an official religion, however, it became much more common for violent acts to be carried out by Christians. This change began in 311 AD, when Emperor Constantine first declared Christianity a legal religion.

¹ This is Timothy Gorringer’s term (1996).

² Much of this is based on Bellinger (2001).

b. Priscillian was a Spanish ascetic. His enemies in the Spanish church lobbied the Emperor Maximus, and succeeded in obtaining his condemnation for heresy. Priscillian and one of his followers, the noblewoman Eucrotia, were beheaded in 384. This was the first case in which heretics had been formally tried, convicted, and executed through the cooperation of church and state, foreshadowing the extensive powers of the Medieval Inquisition (Dowley, 1995, 150-151).

c. In the year 390, the people of Thessalonica murdered the military commander of the city. The Christian Emperor Theodosius ordered a massacre of the city's inhabitants, which resulted in more than 7,000 deaths. Under pressure of excommunication, exerted by Ambrose, Theodosius publicly repented of his sin (Dowley, 1995, p. 151).

For centuries afterwards, the church generally shrank from endorsing violence as a means of achieving justice. But this all began to change in the 11th century, when Saint Anselm wrote his treatise on the atonement, during what is called by some the "Papal Revolution". It was so-called, because of the explicit move by the Church to be the ultimate power in Europe.

d. The Crusades were a series of military expeditions organized by Western European Christians, during the 12th and 13th centuries, in an effort to recover the Holy Land from the Muslim "infidels." The first Crusade was very successful militarily, achieving several victories over the "Turks" as the Western armies advanced toward Jerusalem. On July 1, 1097, one of the main Muslim armies was defeated and almost completely decimated by the Crusaders. Two years later the Crusaders reached Jerusalem and captured it after a relatively brief siege. In the course of taking the city they massacred most of the inhabitants—men, women, and children. Jerusalem was described by observers as being "awash in a sea of blood." The Crusaders saw their actions as being an expression of God's righteous judgment on the Muslim "infidels" who deserved to die for their rejection of Christ and their "desecration" of the Holy City. Various subsequent Crusades were carried out during the next two centuries, most resulting in military failure or short-lived Latin kingdoms in the East. The net result of the Crusades was to further separate the Eastern and Western branches of Christianity from each other and to ensure the alienation of the Muslim world from Christianity—an alienation which to a large extent has continued up to the present day (Dowley, 1995, pp. 278 - 279).

Between 1209 and 1229 a Crusade was organized against the Albigensian heretics in southern France. Because a significant portion of the nobility of that region had sided with the Albigensians, the fighting was long and drawn-out, resulting in tremendous loss of life. The Roman Catholic bishop of the city of Beziers, when asked by the besieging soldiers how to tell the heretics from the orthodox, is reported to have said: "Kill them all, God will sort them out."

e. The Inquisition was the internal European institution which corresponded to the external Crusades. Its main function was to identify and punish the "infidels" within the Western world who were perceived as a threat to society. The Inquisition was organized in the first half of the thirteenth century, largely in response to the Albigensian heresy in France, but its power was soon extended into many areas of Europe. Typically, the

Inquisitors would enter a city and establish a court. They would summon all heretics to come forward and confess their heresy. Those who did so were treated with relative leniency. Those who were accused of heresy by others and found guilty were punished more severely, sometimes with death (at the hands of the civil authorities, not the Inquisitors themselves). In 1252 Pope Innocent IV officially approved the use of torture by the Inquisition to extract “the truth” from defendants. Justification for this procedure was found in the tradition of Roman slave law. Methods of torture included the rack and placing hot coals on the soles of the feet. At the close of the court proceedings, the sentences of those found guilty were announced publicly in a ceremony referred to as an auto-da-fé—an ‘act of faith’ (Dowley, 1995, pp. 321-324).”

In 1478 a relatively autonomous branch of the Inquisition was established with papal approval in Spain. It carried out a campaign against Jews and Muslims whose conversions to Christianity were thought to be insincere, against “witches,” and in later decades against those accused of Protestant leanings. Tomás de Torquemada, the notorious Grand Inquisitor of Spain, burned at the stake thousands of alleged heretics between 1487 and 1498. The Spanish Inquisition was not formally dissolved until 1834 (O’Malley, 1996).

Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century taught that the Church hoped for the conversion of the heretic, thus allowing him to respond to a “first and second admonition.” But if he remained unrepentant, then the Church ceased to hope for his conversion and “looks to the salvation of others by excommunicating him and separating him from the Church, and furthermore delivers him to the secular tribunal to be exterminated thereby from the world by death.” Aquinas quoted Jerome in support of this course of action: “Cut off the decayed flesh, expel the mangy sheep from the fold, lest the whole house, the whole dough, the whole body, the whole flock burn, perish, rot, die (Aquinas, 1988, p. 256).”

f. The magisterial reformers, Luther and Calvin, were not much different from the Roman Catholic leaders of the day with regard to their attitudes toward violence. Luther’s teachings had indirectly contributed to the Peasants’ Revolt in Germany in the 1520s. Luther called for suppression of the rebellious peasants in these well-known words: “Let everyone who can, smite, slay, and stab, secretly or openly, remembering that nothing can be more poisonous, hurtful, or devilish than a rebel. It is just as when one must kill a mad dog (Porter, 1974, p. 86).” In 1525, about 50,000 peasants were slaughtered by the German princes, urged on by Luther. The Consistory in Calvin’s Geneva burned at the stake the anti-trinitarian heretic Michael Servetus in 1553. Calvin is reputed to have favored beheading as a more humane form of execution in this case. Nevertheless, he approved of the Consistory’s decision, and said that Servetus “cried like a Spaniard” as he was being burned.

g. The Catholics and the Protestants, especially the Reformed groups, were united in their fear and loathing of the Anabaptists, who had the audacity to proclaim that Christians should not be in the business of killing. For teaching this they were killed. The following record of the execution of Anabaptist leader Michael Sattler conveys the atmosphere of the time very effectively:

... The judges having returned to the room, the sentence was read. It was as follows: "In the case of the attorney of His Imperial Majesty vs. Michael Sattler, judgment is passed that Michael Sattler shall be delivered to the executioner, who shall lead him to the place of execution and cut out his tongue, then forge him fast to a wagon and thereon with red-hot tongs twice tear pieces from his body; and after he has been brought outside the gate, he shall be plied five times more in the same manner...."

After this had been done in the manner prescribed, he was burned to ashes as a heretic. His fellow brethren were executed with the sword, and the sisters drowned. His wife, also after being subjected to many entreaties, admonitions, and threats, under which she remained steadfast, was drowned a few days afterward (Hunston, 1957, pp. 141 - 144).

Scenes such as this were repeated many times during the sixteenth century, resulting in the deaths of thousands of Anabaptists, who were perceived as dangerous heretics attacking the very foundations of Western Christian culture.

h. Violence between Catholics and Protestants occurred sporadically during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, erupting finally on a grand scale in the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) (Dowley, 1995, p. 427). During this period the Catholic armies of the Holy Roman Empire entered into battles with the Protestant armies of Bohemia, Germany, Denmark, and Sweden. Success and defeat ebbed and flowed for both sides for many years. Most of the fighting took place in Germany, resulting in widespread devastation. Historians estimate that the overall population of Germany was reduced by fifteen to twenty percent.

i. The American Civil War took place between 1861 and 1865. Historians estimate that 620,000 persons died in the war (Litwack, 1996). On both sides there were Christian soldiers ministered to and encouraged by chaplains who claimed that God was on their side.

j. In the 20th century, about 110 millions were slaughtered in two Great World Wars, and hundreds of lesser conflicts. Christian chaplains were found in all countries with Christian origins fully supportive of their nation's war efforts. When for instance President Truman watched the detonation in the Nevada desert of the world's first nuclear bomb, he declared it was the greatest event in the history of the human race! Truman was a Baptist Sunday School teacher who supposedly believed in the Resurrection... Shortly after the first test explosion, two atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, under Truman's authority, and with subsequent full blessing of American Protestant, Evangelical, and Catholic churches, instantly killing about 120,000 civilian men, women, and children in those cities. A few months earlier, with similar support by Allied Christians the world over, 100,000 civilian men, women, and children were slaughtered in one night of an incendiary bombing raid on Tokyo, Japan.

Father George Zebalka was the Catholic chaplain with the US Army air force who blessed the men who dropped the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. He said this in an

interview: “The mainline Christian churches still teach something that Christ never taught or even hinted at, namely the just war theory, a theory that to me has been completely discredited theologically, historically, and psychologically.

“So as I see it, until the various churches within Christianity repent and begin to proclaim by word and deed what Jesus proclaimed in relation to violence and enemies, there is no hope for anything other than ever-escalating violence and destruction.”

Remember Richard Hays’ quote: “*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. On the question of violence, the church is deeply compromised and committed to nationalism, violence, and idolatry.*”

If the essence of the “law” - of how we should live -, according to Jesus is *justice, mercy and faithfulness* (Matt. 23:23 - compare to Micah 6:8, high water mark of OT spirituality), the church stands overwhelmingly guilty of faithlessness on the issue of violence.

Spiritual Origin of Violence

Violence is not necessarily found in all human societies past or present. It is possible that widespread violence, developing into what one author calls a “Domination System” (Wink, 1992), emerged in human history only after a certain degree of societal density, complexity and conflict had been reached.

According to René Girard, however, who has been studying violence and its cultural origins during the past 40 years, violence is basic to human society from its earliest beginnings. Violence within a given society would build up to a certain point, then erupt sometimes into uncontrolled mayhem. The impetus towards violence arises from what Girard calls “mimetic desire”: imitating the desire of another. So for example, a child in the nursery picks up a toy, and suddenly another child in the nursery wants it. And violence erupts! This is how Tom Sawyer in Mark Twain’s classic got his fence painted! It is also the story of Jacob’s repeated run-ins with Esau in the Bible.

Violence often follows from this “mimetic desire” - this covetousness. As James puts it succinctly: “What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but you don’t get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight (4:1 & 2).”

According to Girard, the origin of violence is as simple, yet as profound, as our desires going unchecked until they explode into violence.

The biblical story of the first murder is a classic illustration of this: Cain desires what his brother has - a satisfactory relationship with God. And he kills for it. But of course alienation, not relationship, results.

Universal Responses to Violence: Scapegoat Mechanism

Once violence has erupted, it threatens the well-being of the community. So a scapegoat must be found to siphon off the violence. In most societies, religious institutions traditionally served to create a “scapegoat mechanism” by which the scapegoat could be identified and sacrificed. All according to a strict ritual. “Religion is therefore, according to Girard, organized violence in the service of tranquillity. Religion covers up the sacrificial mechanism by means of myth, ritual, and prohibition (Wink, 1992, p. 146).”

The problem is, the scapegoat mechanism only siphons off the violence for a time. It in no way is capable of removing violence altogether, for violence in fact is foundational to it. This is the dilemma of all human cultures built upon a scapegoat mechanism. It is the ongoing participation in the Babylonian creation myth that violence is legitimate: so long as it is appropriately channelled through a religious mechanism or a secular means such as criminal justice, with all its prohibitions, rituals, and myths. Violence never removes, rather it breeds, violence.

Jesus' Alternative to Violence

Jesus offered and modelled a ‘third way’ in response to violence that takes one from a flight or fight response, to transformative “just peacemaking” initiatives in the face of violence. Paul Anderson sums this up well in an essay entitled, “Jesus and Peace”.

“Finally, ... these instructions must be read in light of Matt. 5:39a, which is often mistranslated “Do not resist an evildoer.” ... a more correct interpretation of the text does not negate resistance, but only violent resistance; what Jesus forbids is ‘to resist *violently*, to revolt or rebel, to engage in an insurrection [Wink, 1987, p. 185]’. One might also amplify the sentence to read, ‘But I tell you, do not counterstrike the evildoer; but if someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn and face him, offering also the other.’ The implication is that evil cannot be overcome by evil means. When one responds violently to violence, evil wins a double victory. First, its essential nature remains unexposed and thereby it prolongs its life. Second, it succeeds in seducing those with good intentions into its way. History is full of examples of revolutionaries who became what they had originally hated: oppressors. Jesus’ strategy brings true reform and avoids this tragic end. Says [one writer],

His way aims at converting the opponent; failing that, it hopes for accommodation, where the opponent is willing to make some changes simply to get the protesters off his back. But if that fails too, nonviolence entails coercion: the opponent is forced to make a change rather than suffer the loss of power, even though he remains hostile. But Jesus’ way does not employ *violent* coercion [Wink, 1987, p. 192].

“The strength of [this] interpretation of Jesus’ teachings on nonviolence is that it clearly portrays the third way Jesus instructed his disciples to follow. Jesus advocated neither a fight nor a flight response to domination, but a nonviolent, redemptive engagement of the powers that be. While he did not aspire to be a political leader in the popular sense, his teaching was thoroughly political in its implications. It aimed at nothing short of creating

a new earth in which God's just and loving will would be done as perfectly as in heaven (Anderson, 1994, pp. 119)."

What About Violence in the Bible?

Once, when I was teaching a Sunday School class on the Luke 6 passage, which specifically enjoins love for the enemy, and indicates that God is merciful to the wicked every bit as much as to the good, a man in exasperation said that Jesus may say that in *this* passage, but there are lots of other passages where he could get the kind of message towards criminals he wanted: retribution pure and simple!

Another time, in an evening forum on capital punishment organized by a criminology class in a community college, I was asked to present a Christian perspective. Three others gave varying views. During the response time, a man indicated he was directing his remarks towards me. He began by quoting the King James Version of Matthew 23:23: "ye... have omitted the weightier matters of the law, **judgment...!**" He fairly thundered the last word, then proceeded with a diatribe against me and my ilk so full of invective that, had capital punishment been on the books for misinterpretation of Scripture, I think by his reckoning I should have been sentenced to the gallows that night!

The point is, both these people are right. They are drawing on wellsprings of violence attributed to God in the Bible. (Though Matt. 23:23 actually continues with the words "mercy, and faithfulness", drawing on Micah 6:8, which specifically calls God's people to practise "justice" - the preferred translation, not judgment -for the poor, the widow, etc. - instead of scapegoating!)

There are, for instance, "six hundred passages of explicit violence in the Hebrew Bible, one thousand verses where God's own violent actions of punishment are described, a hundred passages where Yahweh expressly commands others to kill for no apparent reason... Violence... is easily the most mentioned activity and central theme of the Hebrew Bible (Wink, 1992, p. 146)." And there are portions of Revelation and other texts scattered about the New Testament with a violent tinge or avowal.

The sacrificial system of the Old Testament embraces the scapegoat mechanism. The beginning of the Hebrew religion is the scapegoating of an animal instead of a human being, in the surrogate sacrifice of a ram instead of Isaac. Animal sacrifice in the Old Testament is never far from human sacrifice. There is a move away from this scapegoat mechanism, especially during the time of the later prophets (Barbé, 1989, pp.24ff.) For instance Micah identifies animal sacrifice as child sacrifice disguised in the very passage Jesus draws on in Matthew 23. Hosea favours sincere conversion of the heart over mere sacrifice, as does Isaiah.

The New Testament however teaches in John 1 and Hebrews 1 that we read the Bible through the work and words of Jesus. Jesus is our "hermeneutical" or interpretative lens enabling us rightly to understand God's Word. And it is in Jesus that we meet sacrifice only to find in his teaching and through the Cross its complete rejection. "It is mercy I

desire and not sacrifice” Jesus says straightforwardly, quoting from Hosea 6:6 (Matt. 9:13). Jesus moves “from the logic of the scapegoat - that of the compulsory sacrifice - to the logic of the Lamb of God - that of the freely offered sacrifice of the innocent one, the righteous one (Barbé, 1989, p. 6).” According to the book of Hebrews, Jesus is the last scapegoat sent to reconcile us, once for all, to God (Hebrews 10:5 - 10 and others). According to I John, Jesus was the “...atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world (2:2).” No one **ever need atone for sins - his or hers - again!**

Hays says: “This is the point at which one of the methodological guidelines proposed in Part III must come into play: the New Testament’s witness is finally normative. If irreconcilable tensions exist between the moral vision of the New Testament and that of particular Old Testament texts, the New Testament vision trumps the Old Testament. Just as the New Testament texts render judgments superseding the Old Testament requirements of circumcision and dietary laws, just as the New Testament’s forbidding of divorce supersedes the Old Testament’s permission of it, so also Jesus’ explicit teaching and example of nonviolence reshapes our understanding of God and of the covenant community in such a way that killing enemies is no longer a justifiable option. The sixth antithesis of the Sermon on the Mount marks the hermeneutical watershed. As we have noted, the Old Testament distinguishes the obligation of loving the neighbor (that is, the fellow Israelite) from the response to enemies: ‘[B]ut 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.’ Once that word has been spoken to us and perfectly embodied in the story of Jesus’ life and death, we cannot appeal back to Samuel as a counterexample to Jesus. Everything is changed by the cross and resurrection. We now live in a situation in which we confess that ‘in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us’ (2 Cor. 5:19). Those who have been entrusted with such a message will read the Old Testament in such a way that its portrayals of God’s mercy and eschatological restoration of the world will take precedence over its stories of justified violence (pp. 336 & 7).”

Jesus shatters for all time the legitimacy of the scapegoat mechanism. From his time on, no enemy may ever be put outside the circle of God’s or our love. Love in the New Testament in fact means **the concrete embracing of the other to make that person a friend.**

The Biblical Interpretation Dilemma

An unusual picture was once circulated around our Church when I was a kid. I remember it well. The brief notation below the picture explained that a man had been travelling along the highway after a pristine snowfall sparkled its brightness everywhere under a glorious sun. At one point he stopped, and noticed an unusual play of shadow against the backdrop of the freshly fallen snow. Being an amateur photographer with his own dark room, he took out his camera and snapped a few pictures of the strange phenomenon. He was astounded when, upon developing them, one in particular displayed an amazing likeness to the traditional artists’ depiction of the face of Jesus. We all were invited to see what he saw.

What I saw first however, as did most, were dark blotches against a snow-white background. There was no face of any kind to see. Except there was! It took some doing, some adjusting, but finally I got it! I saw the face too!

Then, what was fascinating after that was, no matter how I looked at the picture, sideways glance, upside down, back to front even when held against a clear window, I never failed immediately to recognize the face of Jesus in that photo.

We all know this phenomenon. There is a technical term for it that escapes me.

But some never did see the face. Their eyes simply never adjusted. They even doubted that we who saw really “saw”.

Theology means literally, a word, or words about God. What theology really is concerning is creating for us, the believer, an accurate *word-picture* of God’s face. Unfortunately, there are no artists’ drawings of the real face of Jesus that have come down to us. So we have to discover the face of Jesus, and thereby the face of God, we Christians say, somehow in the written word - the Bible. The data of Scripture, in ongoing dialogue with Christians’ interpretations through the ages and our faith community’s understandings today all help us throughout our lives to form an ever sharper image of God.

Once an editor (in his 50’s) of a theological piece I had written and was publishing said to me as the task was completed: “I have never been able to shake a picture of God I have had since my childhood. That picture is one of a God who is stern, harsh, totally demanding, punitive, a ‘Hangin’ Judge’ ready to condemn me severely for anything I do wrong, and likely to relegate me to hellfire should I ever so slightly step out of line.” He was a Christian, to be sure, and a faithful church-goer, he acknowledged, but he wasn’t entirely sure that spending an eternity with such a “god” would not be more like his understanding of hell!

The dilemma we are in can be put as an analogy. The Bible is like a monstrous jigsaw puzzle, with a vast number of individual pieces to it. It’s in fact the Ultimate Cosmic Jigsaw Puzzle, we Christians believe! I have seen once in my life the kind of jigsaw puzzle I am comparing the Bible to: one with identically shaped pieces. In the puzzle I saw, they were all squares. Now, it was a daunting enough task to put the puzzle together that I saw with the original box and the picture on it. Try doing an identically shaped pieces jigsaw puzzle sometime! But what if there were rival box cover pictures, and debate about which was the authentic one?

I am suggesting that the biblical data is precisely like that kind of jigsaw puzzle with identically shaped pieces. I’m suggesting further that we would have no hope of putting it together at all were it not for the face of Jesus we discover in the New Testament revelation, which becomes for us the ultimate picture of the face of God. I am suggesting that all other box covers than that of Jesus as seen in the New Testament revelation, are inadequate or wrong. But I am suggesting further that it is nonetheless difficult to see the

face of Jesus properly. For some they “see”, but all that is seen are “dark blotches”: a God still of violence. And I think that one in that case does not really “see”. Piece together the jigsaw puzzle when one only sees dark blotches, and one’s picture of God will turn out entirely differently from doing it with the face of Jesus seen aright!

The Christian and War: Reflections on “Saving Private Ryan”

Two Summers ago, Steven Spielberg released the film, *Saving Private Ryan*. “War is hell”, observed Civil War General William Tecumseh Sherman. And Steven Spielberg dipped us right into its fiery midst in his 1998 Summer release.

War is indeed hell. Yet, in the long history of the Christian Church, apart from the earliest era, every war engaged in throughout Christendom has been supported by the Church on both sides of the conflict. How in the name of Jesus can this be?

Like Timothy, I was raised on Scripture. From a child I recited the all-time favourite verse of evangelicalism, John 3:16 - in my case in the majestic King James Version: *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”*

I discovered only later to my shock that apparently John 3:16 has a footnote inserted into many Christians’ Bibles. It is never quoted out loud, however. But it is obviously no less binding dogma. After “world”, “whosoever”, and “perish” the footnote reads: *“Except our enemies!”*. They must in fact yield or indeed “perish”! Yet, I always was told it was the “Liberals”, masters of the exception clause, who played fast and loose with Scripture...

What of the following line-up of texts, read without commentary? Does “Except our enemies” likewise get inserted every time? Here goes:

“Love your enemies (Matt. 5, Luke 6).”

“So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets (Matt 7:12).”

“... ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments (Matt 22:37-40).”

“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).”

“If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing right (James 2:8).”

“We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he

is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother (I Jn 4:19-21)."

Can you see how much "scissors and paste" must be used to get us out of nonviolence towards neighbour and enemy? Remember Richard Hays' comment: "The question that we must now consider is how Matthew's vision of the peaceful community fits into the larger witness of the canonical New Testament. Do the other texts in the canon reinforce the Sermon on the Mount's teaching on nonviolence, or do they provide other options that might allow or require Christians to take up the sword?"

"When the question is posed this way, the immediate result ... is to underscore how impressively univocal is the testimony of the New Testament writers on this point (1996, p. 329)."

Is it possible that all these witnesses, Jesus included, did not read their Old Testaments? Or is it likelier that many Christians have not read (seriously enough!) their New Testaments? Are John 1 and Hebrews 1 *not* really in the Bible, both of which point to the primacy of Jesus as the final revelation of God's will?: "*In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe (Heb 1:1-2).*"

Watching Spielberg's film, with the overwhelming random slaughter and maiming, it occurred to me again that *war is the most complete inversion of evangelism imaginable!* Not good seed, but bullets and bombs are scattered with abandon, thereby utterly inverting the evangelistic mandate. One means "life abundant", the other delivers "death indiscriminate". At least 110 millions have been annihilated in largely Church-endorsed wars this century alone! *Is this not profoundly disturbing?! What could be more blatantly anti-Christian?*

What of the Apostle Paul's declaration?: "*For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds (2 Cor 10:3-4).*" Is war not the ultimate worldliness, a "total depravity", according to the New Testament? How can something so patently anti-Christian be so blessed by so many Christians throughout so many centuries? What kind of awesome brainwashing, what potent spell, is at work here? Dare we call it, simply, sin?

The truth that sets us free (John 8:32) is obedience to God's will summed up in the two greatest commandments (Matt. 22; Mark 12; I John): love of God and love of neighbour. As believers, failure to love in this way is to invite Jesus' warning: "*Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but **only he who does the will of my Father** who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'* Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and **puts them into practice** is like a wise man

who built his house on the rock (Matt 7:21-24)."

Was Gandhi right?: "The only people on earth who do not see Christ and His teachings as nonviolent are Christians."

War is indeed hell. In the movie, Captain John Miller comments: "For every man I kill, the further I get from home." Of course! A Nazi defendant at the post-War Nuremberg Trials said: "You have defeated us Nazis. But the spirit of Nazism has arisen like a Phoenix amongst you." Precisely! We always become what we hate. When the U.S. dropped the first nuclear bomb on Hiroshima, and obliterated instantaneously 100,000 lives, then three days later thousands more were slaughtered in Nagasaki (in sheer death-dealing magnitude utterly dwarfing this past decade's Oklahoma City bombing), President Harry Truman declared: "That was the greatest event in human history!" This from a lay Baptist preacher and Sunday School teacher... Astounding! What, in God's name, could be a more blatant denial of the Resurrection than those bombs and that statement?! *The Resurrection alone is the greatest event in human history!* And it means everything war does not: life abundant and everlasting. What business did that Bible-believing Christian have in so utterly contradicting the very centrepiece of Christian faith? And did not the majority of Bible-believing Christians at the time in the West support Truman? Do not the vast majority of Bible-believing Christians still applaud the continued development of post-War weaponry and its deployment, which, in 1996 dollars in the U.S. alone, has amounted to 5.5 trillion dollars and countless lives for whom Christ died snuffed out?

"Home" (Captain Miller) ultimately is where love is. Where God is. Its opposite is hell. So hell is also war! For hell is in the end the obstinate refusal to love God and neighbour; the endless attempt at doing end runs around the two greatest commandments: love God and love neighbour (Matt 25). The biblical witness is: the only test case for love of God is love of neighbour (I John 4). And the test case for love of neighbour is love of enemies (Matt. 5 - 7, Luke 6). Failure to love the enemy is failure to love God is hell.

Spielberg got it right: war is hell. The question begs asking: What business have Christians ever had propagating hell?

Story - my reception from ChristianWeek of the above material:

"Hi, Wayne-sorry to take so long to get back to you this time around. We decided not to use your article for reasons of length (too long!), style (too many rhetorical questions) and tone (too harsh).

Thanks for going to the trouble of thinking this through and writing down your thoughts.

Debra

My simple addition to why it was rejected: "And argument: too true?"

The Christian and Hell: Theological Moorings of Violence in the Image of God

Understanding war as hell begs the question of hell itself. I wish to briefly discuss the doctrine of hell in the context of a Christian consideration of violence. For a theological discussion of violence inevitably brings us to the most extreme instance of violence in God, if the traditional, most dominant, doctrine of hell is indeed biblical - eternal conscious punishment of the unbeliever. I will do this by interacting with a recently published book, *The Other Side of the Good News*, by Larry Dixon.

The central conclusion of the book in the author's words is that there is an "adequacy [in] the traditional view of hell... and that alternative views do not adequately reflect the scriptural data concerning hell... (p. 173)."

The author writes: "One's doctrine of the final judgment of the wicked is a direct reflection of one's doctrine of God (p. 165)." Indeed. And one's doctrine or *picture* of God - the box cover - is ultimately seen in Jesus (John 1 and Hebrews 1).

One evangelical New Testament theologian, Chris Marshall, in a significant draft manuscript on hell in a forthcoming book on biblical restorative justice (my area of ministry), writes: "Jesus shows that those who think of God in terms of strict distributive or retributive justice *fundamentally misunderstand God* (Matt. 20:1 - 16) (Marshall, 1999, p. 17, emphasis added)." *Yet, I suggest, this is the central "dark blotches" misunderstanding of the picture on the puzzle cover of God in the book under review.* God is depicted as ultimately violently retributive towards the wicked. On the contrary, Marshall, in surveying the biblical evidence, writes in the conclusion of his paper: "For our purposes the point to notice is that God's final word is not retribution but restoration, the re-creation of heaven and earth so that sin, suffering, sickness and death are no more (1999, p. 21)." God's ultimate word biblically is, indeed, nonviolent, all-inclusive love, *which subsumes all biblical categories of wrath, judgment and punishment!* I submit gently, but firmly that, to miss that is to miss, simply, the Good News.

In the end, the greatest critique of the traditional doctrine of hell is simply this: *there is biblically no "other side of the good news"!* There is Good News, period! Hell too is embraced by God's love. Dixon presents a "gospel" without good news that reads, *à la Four Spiritual Laws*, thus: "God loves you, and has a wonderful plan for your life... *But if you don't buy in before death, God hates you, and has a horrible plan for your after-life!*" No genuine love affair human or divine is imaginable with that kind of time-limited vicious threat hanging over one's head.

There is ultimately no room for the violence of the traditional view of hell in the biblical Good News that is shot through with God's "Amazing Grace" - how sweet the sound! I suggest this view is not arrived at because of the biblical evidence but by a misguided hermeneutic: the wrong "box cover". Biblically, God's love *is* the ultimate word, and judgment and redemption equally are subsumed under that love. In the end, "mercy triumphs over judgment (James 2:13)!" in an amazing paradox of grace whereby God is both "just and justifier" (Rom. 3:26). For, as Jesus called for repeatedly (Matt. 9:13 and 12:7): "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." Such a call is above all a call to *conversion*.

Story: I feel a personal sadness in critiquing Dixon's conclusions. On p. 178, he writes: "A former missionary friend, who has since moved away from the traditional doctrine of hell, said to me that 'God's *penultimate* word is *wrath*, but His *ultimate* word is *love*.'" I am that "former missionary friend". We served together doing evangelism in West Berlin from 1972 to 1974. The author's rejoinder to my statement was: "We would have to disagree (p. 178)". "We" did disagree at the time he was writing his book when I visited him; we disagreed after he gave me Chapter Five to read in manuscript form; we still disagreed in subsequent correspondence.

Finding Our True Selves and Jesus Invariably in the Other

The trinitarian doctrine of God's creation of humanity suggests a self connected always to the other. Not an "autonomous self", rather a "person-in-community" is the biblical view of who humans are. An "individual self" is in fact a biblical oxymoron, a contradiction. We are not ourselves until we find ourselves in the other is the biblical perspective. Jesus simply upped the ante: he said finding ourselves in the other is still heresy (a false choice) if it does not move beyond nepotism (me and mine first). The test case for Jesus of a person's becoming a true self is love of enemy. Failure in this is, he taught, *metaphysical suicide*. Further, Jesus made it clear that becoming our true selves happens only as we discover Jesus in the other. Put differently: finding Jesus means finding our true selves. It also means it is impossible to find Jesus if we do not find ourselves in the other, supremely in the enemy. Failure to love the neighbour/enemy therefore is failure to love Jesus and ourselves.

The biblical view is that we are created in God's image as persons-in-community, as God is a community of dynamic love between Father, Son, and Spirit from before creation. When we are called to "love our neighbour as ourselves", it means, "You shall love your neighbour *as being your own self*." Your neighbour is your true self. You have no self in yourself. And Jesus pushed the bounds of who is the neighbour to the limit to include the enemy. Further, the teaching from Matt. 25 (31ff) is that Christ is invariably to be found "in the least of these" - in any and every neighbour without exception, in any and all enemies without exception. Love in the New Testament is the ceaseless attempt to make the enemy a friend, to try without limit to draw a circle of inclusion around the other.

Therefore a "Christian soldier", a "Christian executioner", or any kind of "Christian-cum-destroyer-of-neighbour/enemy" is a contradiction in terms, or, baldly stated: a heresy.

It is biblically impossible to come to Jesus without coming to the other, supremely the enemy. Failure to believe *and* destroying the enemy are equally denials of the faith.

Conclusion: Is Violence Master of Us All?

In the third chapter of *Embodying Forgiveness* (Jones, 1995), "Forgiveness Eclipsed" Jones asks whether violence is the master of us all. He tells the true story of a Catholic

priest, Maximilian Kolbe, who on July 30, 1941, in Auschwitz concentration Camp, stepped forward to offer himself for punishment of starvation by death in place of one of ten who were so sentenced. As the days ground on, and all the men slowly starved, the priest consistently responded to fellow captives and captors alike with love and forgiveness. His actions increasingly inspired his fellow captives and unnerved the captors. His refusal to submit to, and thus reproduce, violence, became recognized as a growing threat to the Nazis. On the 16th day, the Nazis killed the priest, since he was so subversive to the good order of the Camp. In the fictionalized novel about this true story, entitled *Orbit of Darkness*, one character says: “Those who give up their lives, at least in principle, become more dangerous to the Germans than planes or tanks. *They become the ultimate weapon* ([p. 249], Jones, 1995, pp. 91ff, italics added).” Interestingly, Kolbe has since been canonized by the Catholic Church.

This is precisely the Apostle Paul’s thesis in 2 Cor 10:4-5, as quoted earlier:
The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

The weapons Christians wield are subversive to the core of every cultural institution known to human history, caught in endless spirals of scapegoating violence. On the one hand there is the *wisdom of the world* that is *foolishness in God’s sight*. On the other, *there is the wisdom of the Gospel* that is *the most potent subversive force in human history*.

As one writer has taught us, the Nazis were defeated indeed, but Nazism called forth a response of violence so identical to the *spirit* of Nazism that we have reaped the whirlwind of violence in the West ever since. We became what we hated in the Nazis. The indiscriminate slaughter of hundreds of thousands of German and Japanese civilians through incendiary bombing raids on civilian targets in hundreds of German and Japanese cities, topped off by the dropping of two atomic bombs spelling instant death for multiplied thousands of non-combatants, is overwhelming witness to that horrible reality.

Christians are called to be *now*, what the world is meant to become *then*. We are called to lives “lived on eschatological edge (Johnson, 1986, p. 265).” Living the end now. And what is that end? Listen to Isaiah 11:6-9:

The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper’s nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

Amen!

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