

Christianity and the Subversion of Just About Everything!

By Wayne Northey

PREFACE

The Christian witness in the Western world has been exceptionally weak in this century. Outside of a few arenas, where the church is being persecuted, the world has had a greater impact on the church than the church has had on the world. In most instances the message of the Gospel has been lost through Christians exercising power and influence over people rather than living by the truth of the gospel. Christians have been so concerned about being relevant and effectual that they have lost their first love - the relationship to Christ that issues in a life lived "in Christ".

Christians have not realized the extent to which the powers of darkness have conquered the church. Its members have accepted the methods of power, influence and dominance and have become persecutors rather than be sufferers for the sake of Christ. In fact, most of the more evangelical churches have assumed that the Gospel is about personal salvation only and not about economics and politics. Little attention has been paid to the social, political and economic implications of the gospel. Few have been aware of the way dysfunctional structures, institutions and methods have come to hold people captive. These "powers" have subverted the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

This essay is meant to disturb the comfort and complacency of the church and to point us in a new direction - a direction the church has been loathe to take; it is meant to expose the extent to which we have given assent to the Gospel without translating it into everyday living; it is meant to underline the importance of overcoming evil with good; and it explains how the truth of God challenges and undermines the power of darkness operating in the world.

Rather than allowing the powers to subvert the truth of God, the writer claims that when Christians "put on" Christ they subvert the powers of evil. Christians who have put on Christ will manifest the character of Christ in all that they do. They will respond to evil not by doing evil themselves, but by acting out of love to all. In this way the truth will expose falsehood, justice will challenge injustice and love will overcome evil. This is the subversion the author is talking about.

This essay deserves careful reading by Christians and non-Christians alike. It sets out a new way by listening to the words of Scripture and by taking seriously the life of Jesus Christ. It calls for what John Howard Yoder called "revolutionary subordination" to the powers in order to subvert them. The reader will be richly rewarded for reading and heeding this message.

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INTRODUCTION

Sometimes in the study of Christian Scripture we see things in a new way to the point of being startled. So it was for me in developing this theme of Christianity as subversion. I am convinced that the overarching teaching of the New Testament regarding God's relationship with human beings and the creation involves the impact of subversion so sweeping, that one day, in God's place and time, the old order of things will pass away and God will make all things new! This will occur in one's personal, private and inward being, and in the entire social-political matrix in which we live out our days (Rev. 21:4 & 5). Paul put it, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation [alternatively: there is a new creation]; the old has gone, the new has come! (II Cor. 5:17)".

I am especially indebted to Jacques Ellul for his paper entitled *Anarchism and Christianity* (1980), and to Vernard Eller for his book, *Christian Anarchy* (1987). Both supplied the term "anarchy" for this New Testament call to the subversion of just about everything: certainly of all principalities, powers, hierarchies, traditions, conventions, institutions, structures, governments and organizations, etc. All belong to the sick brokenness of this groaning world; all deny us freedom and keep us in slavish subservience.

ORDERS OF CREATION

The text that all human righteousness is as filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6) and others influenced some Reformed thinkers to the doctrine of total human depravity. Conversely however, these same reformers maintained the belief that government, political authority, and control structures within society were somehow less depraved than individual humans. Hence the offices of government were respected by the reformers as part of what would later be identified as God's "Orders of Creation" (a term originating in the 19th century).

Even though persons in government office were seen as depraved and fallen humans, reformers carried a disposition to obey even "depraved" political leaders. They argued that the offices of state were ordained by God. The offices of state were respected even though persons within the office were believed to be depraved and sinful.

In God's economy the "orders of creation" doctrine implied that there were human governance systems and structures that were not (so) corrupted as were the humans running those systems. The totality of government was clearly less sinful than the sum of individual humans within it!

It is strange indeed that such theologians during the Reformation period believed the fall-out from sin somehow left the orders of creation largely uncorrupted. It was as if the "groaning of creation" Paul mentions in Romans 8 did not include these orders; as if the "old order of things" in Rev. 21:4 was not a reference to all orders of creation; as if the new orders of creation in Christ did not radically subvert the old orders: i.e. government and human systems of corporate existence.

READING THE BIBLE FROM BELOW

I consider that the perspective from which one's theology is understood and expressed is central to reading the Bible with a "subversive" or a "nonsubversive" understanding. When Emperor Constantine declared Christianity to be a legal (ultimately state) religion in the early fourth century, cultural dominance enjoyed by Western Christians made it axiomatic that the state be seen as a legitimate "order of creation". If one reads the Bible "from below", i.e., from the position of the underdog, the idea of the Gospel as subversion is more readily grasped.

Lord Acton observed that *power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely*. This is a profound biblical insight. The closer the church is associated with levers of cultural/political structures, institutions, organizations, etc., the more likely there will be a "top-dog" theology of social ethics, and it follows there will be less commitment to conduct power according to the Sermon on the Mount. Since Constantine, "top dog" theology has tended to corrupt the biblical message. It is for this reason that Christians within historic denominational and established conventional traditions across the centuries have often missed perceiving the Gospel as subversion.

The Bible was written from the perspective of the "underside of history", an expression used by Jack Nelson (1980). The Bible was written on behalf of the underdog and the powerless. Christians who are unable to empathize, or identify with this underside view of things are therefore at a distinct disadvantage in correctly handling the word of truth (II Tim. 2:15). I suggest that a "top-dog" theological perspective in Western Christianity has seriously hamstrung biblical understandings of social ethics throughout all the dominant Christian traditions since Constantine.

Alistair Kee argues this at times abrasively (1982). John Yoder does so more gently in "The Constantinian Sources of Western Social Ethics" (1984).

DOING GOOD AS THE SUBVERSION OF EVIL

The idea that God's Good News in Jesus Christ is about the subversion of just about everything rose for me after another look at Paul's teaching regarding the state. In the context of early, pre-Constantinian Christian understandings of the state as *Public Enemy Number One*, Paul called on believers to overcome that evil power, not with a show of revolutionary fervour, equally evil, but with good. Thus, taught Paul, the Gospel would totally subvert the evil of the Roman or any Empire/government.

This early Christian "good" response to evil, as Jean Lasserre points out (1974), was most likely a reflection of their understanding of the Ten Commandments, or Old Testament Law. Jesus sweepingly summarized this law as LOVE for God, neighbour, and enemy. Paul and other writers took up this theme, often dropping love for God because it was so

obviously assumed. Paul's teaching accurately reflected the words and example of Jesus. Biblical writers stressed love for one's neighbor as fulfillment of the law. Love was the overarching theme of Paul's entire understanding of ethics in Romans 12 to 15. Christians who love intend no harm to neighbour, and overcome enmity by doing good, not evil.

As recorded in Romans 8:37, Paul exulted, that "... in all these things ...", things such as trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger or sword, Christians are "more than conquerors". For him the source of evils over which Christians were more than conquerors was largely the Roman state. It was the state that "bore the sword" (Romans 13:4). Paul used the same words as in Romans 8:37, "overcoming evil", again in chapter 12.

Paul understood such conquering over evil in a manner that was a far cry from the revolutionary spirit of some early Christians. Influenced by the Jewish Zealots, they were ready to incite armed insurrection against the hated Roman state. To these Peter likewise wrote about the need for submission to the enemy-state. "If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or as a *revolutionist* (I Peter 4:15)."

To my awareness, the term "revolutionist" was never used in English translations of the Bible even though, I suggest, it accurately reflects the meaning Peter intended in the above text (Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich, 1957, p. 39). Certainly in the context of first century Christianity the term "revolutionist" was used to describe grievous crimes against the Roman state; something a Zealot, such as Barabbas, would be proud to commit. Paul taught that Christians are more than conquerors over angels and demons. He used the term "*archai*" translated "demons"; the same *archai* of whom Paul wrote in Titus 3:1. "Remind people to be subject to rulers [*archai*] and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good". Both Peter and Paul, even as Jesus did, said NO to all revolutionary action against the state, and any other "fallen" powers under which Christians were obliged to exist.

There is consistent teaching by both New and Old Testament writers that all human powers and principalities belong to Satan's realm and that Christians overcome evil by doing good. It is God's will that by loving the enemy Christians overcome an oppressive state, an abusive parent, a misogynist male, an intolerant religionist, an overbearing master, etc. Jesus' teaching was submission to one's enemies, even when they do us evil, though as a means, not an end. Later I will show that Paul taught this most clearly in Romans 12 and 13.

BEWARE WHEN CHRISTIANS GAIN POLITICAL POWER

In our Christian West often when Christians have gained political power, they have used it not to bless their enemies. In past and contemporary times the Western church has for instance blessed state-centred, harshly punitive justice systems, which often have employed torture and execution quite freely. (See Berman, 1983.) The church has avidly supported or even incited a call to arms in response to international conflict ever since Constantine. The

great Protestant leader, Martin Luther, called on the German nobility to “smite, slay and kill” all rebellious peasants in response to an early 16th century uprising, claiming God’s complete blessing, based on Romans 13. Thousands were slaughtered. Luther’s views on the Jews were consonant with this, and in this sense he contributed to the evils of the Nazi Holocaust. Christian desire to exercise “power over” has not been the exception to the rule, but precisely the rule that has not readily known exceptions. Christians have throughout the centuries in our Western history been far better persecutors than sufferers.

In light of this we need once more to hear Paul saying that he considers present sufferings [at the hands of the state or other enemies] are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us (Romans 8:18).

CHRISTIANS IN AN EVIL STATE: NONRETALIATION AND SUFFERING

Consider now the theme of suffering as a direct consequence of nonretaliation to one’s enemies. The consistent call of Jesus was to follow him into suffering. God’s communication with the newly converted Saul of Tarsus included the chilling words, “I will show him how much he must suffer for my name (Acts 9:16).” Later, Paul wrote: “... we are heirs - heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, *if indeed we share in his sufferings....* (Romans 8:17)”. Similarly Paul’s litany of sufferings in II Cor. 11 abounds with references to enemy-inflicted pain and suffering.

Reference to suffering made by the New Testament writers is suffering caused by one’s enemies. Enemies were the source of Christ’s sufferings. But after the church emerged “top dog” in the West, in the early fourth century, Christians have “doggedly” pursued avoidance of suffering at the hands of their enemies. To the contrary, and up to the present, they have been willing to sacrifice and destroy enemies for perceived good, and they supported such actions by unbiblical notions of ‘freedom’¹. Since then the church’s consistent stance and action toward its enemies have been retaliation and counter-persecution. Retaliation is, after all, what one can do when in a position of power, authority, and influence. Powerful people lord it over enemies, regardless of Christ’s teaching and example to the contrary.

Inflicting destruction on the enemy, so utterly contrary to the way of Christ and early church example, was first used against “pagans” in retaliation for pagan-incited state persecution of Christians. Then in ever-widening circles, the church encompassed all other enemies of the faith in its treatment of enemies. Violence against enemies eventually included Jews, Muslims, heretics, war-time enemies, criminals, Anabaptists, Huguenots, abortionists, secular humanists, communists and so on. The list is as endless as the case-studies are myriad.

Since the era of Constantine, the face-saving recourse of the church has been to reinterpret

¹ Lloyd Billingsley’s book, *The Absence of Tyranny* (1986) produced by a reputable evangelical publisher (Multnomah Press), is a glaring example of unbiblical thinking about freedom passed off as Christian.

Christ's teachings so that they appear to agree with this kind of malignant treatment of the enemy. Eventually this recourse included notions of a two-tiered system of morality. This may still prevent individual Christians from personal retaliation against an enemy, but it permits or even mandates the state to destroy the enemy through whatever violent means it deems appropriate. Alistair Kee (1982) points out that this represented an amazing reversal of all that Christ stood for. It led to the triumph of an alien, anti-Christ ideology that became a normative response to enemies of state and church. Kee described it as a perversion of ethics, widely practised during hundreds of years of church history.

The church, in almost all its denominational manifestations, has simply "put on Emperor Constantine", instead of "putting on the Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 13:14)." It has for many centuries strutted about in clothes alien to Jesus and the early Christians, and, illustrative of Hans Christian Andersen's *The Emperor's New Clothes* (1949), there has been only a minority dissenting voice crying out that the church has on the wrong clothes.

SUBVERSION AS HOPE FOR CREATION

Hear Paul in Romans 8:18 - 25: "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God... We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently."

Notice that the grand theme of this passage, waiting and hoping, is the very antithesis of any form of acting out in retaliation to whatever evil Christians encounter. We are resolutely called to nonretaliation even though that appears as sheer passivity and folly. Paul declared nonretaliation to be "glorious freedom". He wrote that creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

These words of Paul form the key New Testament text for the doctrine that God's gospel is the subversion of just about everything. Paul used exactly the same language of such subversion in Romans 13. In the Romans 8 text, the grand enemy of all creation is "futility"; possibly with reference to the emptiness, void or chaos out of which God originally created all things. For the effect of sin has been to plummet us headlong toward undoing all God's good in creation.

Nonetheless observe how God subjected creation to this great, grand invidious evil or chaos and futility! Why did God subject his creation to malignant powers, principalities

and powers which hold sway over God's fallen creation, including all humanity and all orders of creation? The answer is: "...in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God." The will of God, in history and in response to the overwhelming evil threatening his entire creation, is submission, precisely with a view to subversion, or liberation! His *modus operandi* throughout history (following Eller's cue (1980)) has been the resurrection.

Liberation is the corollary of subversion. One undermines to free; subverts to liberate. Submission *per se* is never the end of God's will. In fact, as an end it is utterly invidious to God's purposes. Submission is only the temporary means to the end. Brokenhearted love toward an enemy will one day overcome the enemy. It will do so either by the enemy's freely entering into the overcomer's circle of friends, or by the enemy's experiencing the consequence of wrath and judgment freely chosen. For love denied is ultimate wrath and destruction.

Whenever Paul is interpreted as conservative and *status quo* toward the social institutions of his day, his message of subversion is misunderstood or altogether missed. Means have been mistaken for ends. Paul wants to conserve precisely nothing of creation's "bondage to decay". He strenuously rejects buttressing the *status quo* of rotten social institutions and conventions, whether they be state-citizen, Jew-Greek, master-slave or male-female relationships.

God's grand movement and strategy in history has been and still is submission to the enemy. In the spirit of Jesus, God calls his people to turn the other cheek, give one's cloak if the tunic is taken, go the extra mile (Matt. 5:39 - 41), in hope that one day, by the mighty power of the resurrection, there will be glorious liberation of all God's good creation from bondage to the enemy. The Christian's hope rests in the resurrection power of Jesus that will one day gloriously reverse this terrible process of decay.

Jesus submitted to his enemies in a double sense; first, to his arch-enemy, the evil one, and second, to the Roman state. But in the process, he triumphed over them. He turned the other cheek to the Roman state without reviling and allowed his clothes to be stripped from his back without calling twelve legions of angels. He went the extra mile, carrying the cross to Golgotha, even when it meant certain death. Thus by abject submission he broke the power of the state, though not without being executed in the process.

Alas, when the early fourth century church triumphed over the state, it was a Pyrrhic victory. The church was seduced to employ the very means of obscene power consistently denied Christians by Jesus and Paul. Progressive secularization in the West of the state within the past four hundred years has broken the abominable relationship between church and state. In this sense, secularization has been God's gift to the world.

In the 16th century, Anabaptists (Radical Reformers) called for total separation of church and state. Mostly they defended this very revolutionary stance in a nonviolent, nonretaliatory way. They therefore effected the eventual enshrinement of that principle in

theory at least, in Western civilization. Their action led to overcoming an evil which had haunted the church for centuries.

The one consistent and recurring stance of the writers of the New Testament is that the Gospel is a subversion that leads to liberation. Indeed the Christian continues to battle against personally besetting sins, such as lust, envy, anger, bitterness, etc., from which there is also the need for liberation. Paul supplies several exemplary lists. But the Christian's standpoint to demands for subservience to the numerous power-systems under which we live is rooted in Jesus' and Paul's response: liberation by subversion! Theirs was and is a most unconventional way of attaining such a goal. It was and is contrary to all common sense, and most common practice, given our common fallenness.

In this teaching may lie the nub of every revolutionary's quarrel with Jesus and Paul since the dawning of the Christian era. On first blush, both are mistakenly perceived to be profoundly a-political, *status quo* oriented and conservative. In no way did Jesus even hint at armed insurrection against one of the most unjust, repressive regimes of all history. On the contrary, he openly rejected the way of the Zealot. Marxists and certain liberation theologians alike are offended at that. Similarly, some feminists are disgusted with Paul's counsel of submission to patriarchy. And his views seem no better when he comments on parent/child relationships or slavery.

GOD'S GOSPEL IS AN UPSIDE DOWN AFFAIR

Jesus' and Paul's counsel was that Christians not react with power plays, retaliation and threats toward the many enemies that hold them in bondage. Jesus' counsel of submission to one's enemy has consistently been derided and belittled as politically suicidal, disgustingly passive or as simply impractical in the real world in which everyone else lives. But that is precisely the marvel of "the upside-down kingdom", that Donald Kraybill argued for in his book by that title (1978).

Peter wrote, "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone, and ... a stone that causes men to stumble; and a rock that makes them fall" (I Peter 2:7 & 8). This Stone is Jesus the Christ! This resurrected living Christ, not an abstract Christ of mere dogma, calls us to radical conversion, to follow him in word and deed, as supremely demonstrated in relationship to neighbour and enemy. "As you come to him, the living Stone, rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him, you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (I Peter 2:4 & 5)." The term "sacrifices" here is the same as the living "sacrifices" in Romans 12:1 - 2. Christians offer themselves to God sacrificially precisely so that they may, as Paul wrote in Romans 13:14, be clothed with the Lord Jesus Christ. Similar to what Paul wrote in Romans 12, Peter implied that Christians become "living stones". Notice that in our words and deeds we are to become clones, as it were, of that original Stone, Jesus Christ.

It is in the very same context of clothing ourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ that Peter

moves on to discuss the Christian's response to the state, and he does so in terms similar to those used by Paul. After he calls for submission to the enemy, the state, he continues, "Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God" (I Peter 2:16). Paraphrased, Peter is saying, yes be subversive toward the state, but not in anarchic insurrection (as "murderer, thief, criminal, *revolutionist*" - I Peter 4:15), for that would be overcoming evil with evil! Through submission the Christian is free from the power of the state, freedom is one's right as joint-heirs with Christ. Through nonretaliatory submission Jesus subverted every authority known to humanity. God alone has the right to absolute lordship over us. Evil shall not lord it over us, least of all the evil state!

Peter also discusses how Christian slaves should respond to their (evil) masters, and how Christian wives should respond to (domineering) husbands. It is all of a piece! New Testament writers called for love for and overcoming of the enemy through submission; through refusing any show of power-play, counter-force, or retaliation. All called for understanding of what suffering is and means at the hands of the enemy. "For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God.... To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly (I Peter 2:19 - 23)."

The implication is of course, that neither state nor master (nor counter-insurrectionists!) is capable of meting out anything remotely approaching God's way of justice. It is not for us to take into our hands, through any form of retaliation, the righting of wrongs and the enforcement of freedom! Biblical freedom is not "the absence of tyranny". Freedom is not obtained by attacking evil by every violent means known. For the Christian freedom means *not to* retaliate by resorting to violence. Revengeful retaliation cannot produce the freedom humanity seeks.

Freedom for Christians means to entrust ourselves to God and the ultimate power of the resurrection and love, whether or not we attain freedom from social and political tyranny in our lifetime. Jesus did not. In the litanous description of the suffering of the "cloud of witnesses" the writer of the book of Hebrews (11:39), says, "These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised." That is reminiscent of Paul's words, "But hope that is seen is no hope at all (Rom. 8:24)."

Freedom is God's will for Christians and the entire creation. God's way of achieving it is nonretaliation. The great flaw of retaliation is failure to recognize that the very taking up of violent means to establish freedom proves ironically to be only greater enslavement to the fallenness and futility of creation. To react with violence is a perpetuation of bondage to decay desperately in need of the glorious freedom of the children of God. Retaliation only spreads the fire of violence; it never douses it.

Christians do not take revenge; but leave room for God's wrath. Paul quotes the Old Testament, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay (Romans 12:19)." Jesus, Peter, and Paul all counselled submission seen as nonretaliation to the enemy as a preliminary response leading to God's ultimate goal; the just overcoming of that enemy. It matters not if the enemy is the punitive state, the abusive spouse, the oppressive master, the intolerant religionist and so on. That is why true Christianity is the subversion of just about everything!

"ENDUO": CLOTHED WITH JESUS CHRIST

There is a kind of code expression used by Paul on several occasions when dealing with the socially and politically entrenched evil structures of control. To accomplish the task of overcoming evil with good, Paul held that, through resurrection empowerment, it was possible to love the enemy until the death of the tyranny is realized²! Such love is profoundly the biblical way of subversion. Paul's code expression is found in Romans 13:14: "Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ." I take these words to mean that it is possible to be so immersed in the words and ways of Jesus in his response to the enemy, that we will respond to all our enemies in similar fashion.

I wish to examine more fully Paul's teachings in Romans 13:14, appearing in the context of relation to the state. In this text, as well as in some others, is an expression that rises from the Greek word *enduo*, meaning "to put on", "to clothe". But first a quick aside.

In Hans Christian Anderson's classic tale, *The Emperor's New Clothes* (1949), the Emperor discovered, following an outcry from his subjects, that his new clothes ostensibly made of fancy new material were indeed no clothes at all! "The Emperor felt very silly for he knew that the people were right but he thought, 'The procession has started and it must go on now!' So the Lords of the Bedchamber held their heads higher than ever and took greater trouble to pretend to hold up the train which wasn't there at all (1949, p. 44)."

Though Emperor Constantine was not the only person responsible, he best illustrates the great reversal of social ethics which occurred in his time, and has dominated ever since in Western Christianity. A whole new way for the church to exercise its mission in the world was begun. It was the way of political power and dominance. The state church that emerged became **unclothed** of the Lord Jesus Christ and the newly appointed "Lords of the Bedchamber" typified sycophantic or unsuspecting historians and theologians ever since. Whether Eusebius, Augustine, Calvin or Niebuhr, or countless others, all have, whatever else their otherwise grasp of biblical teaching may have been, pretended to discover in the Bible a social ethic which is not there.

² The founder of Koinonia Farms, Clarence Jordan, tells the possibly apocryphal story of a senator who addresses President Lincoln at the time of the defeat of the South with the words: "Mr. Lincoln, we ought to move in now and utterly crush those Southerners!" To which Lincoln replies: "Mr. Senator, do we not also destroy our enemies by making them our friends?" That is profoundly the biblical way of subversion, as Romans 5 so beautifully lays out.

John Yoder best comments on this by saying “...if *kenosis* [a reference to Phil. 2:1 - 11, meaning God’s self-emptying in the Incarnation] is the shape of God’s own self-sending, then any strategy of Lordship, like that of the kings of this world, is not only a strategic mistake likely to backfire but a denial of gospel substance, a denial which has failed even when it succeeded. What the churches accepted in the Constantinian shift is what Jesus had rejected, seizing godlikeness, moving *in hoc signo* [in this sign] from Golgatha to the battlefield. If this diagnosis is correct, then the cure is not to update the fourth-century mistake by adding another ‘neo-’ but to repent of the whole ‘where it’s at’ style and to begin again with *kenosis* (1984, p. 145).”

In Romans 13:14, Paul’s call for Christians to be clothed with the Lord Jesus Christ is immediately followed by the antithesis: “...do not think about how to gratify the desires of your sinful nature.” In the context of his letter to Christians at Rome who had felt already the rising threat of imperial power³, Paul’s call to clothe oneself with Jesus Christ meant not to gratify the sinful nature through any kind of vengeful thoughts, or resort to revolutionary fervour, least of all to any notion of violent retaliation against Roman officials such as practised by the Zealots. Rather, as Paul put it only two verses earlier, Christians are to “... put aside the deeds of darkness and put on [*enduo*] the armour of light.”

Jean Lasserre in *War and the Gospel* (1974) wrote that Paul’s words in Eph. 6:10 - 18 should be seen as key to understanding the Christian’s response to the state and all other power structures. To the Ephesians Paul said, “Put on [*enduo*] the full armour of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes (v. 11)”. In both the Romans and Ephesians passages Paul asks that Christians avoid gratifying the desires of the sinful nature, including all desire for revenge against one’s enemy. Then he goes on, in verse 12 of Ephesians to say, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the *rulers*, against the *authorities*, against the *powers* of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” The terms are identical to those in Paul’s discussion of the state in Rom. 13. This reflects a consistent biblical view that all states are in Satan’s realm, and are subject to God’s ultimate judgment. The state was indeed Public Enemy Number One to Christians in Paul’s time, but his counsel to the Ephesian Christians was to put on the full armour of God. In Romans 13 his admonition was to put on the armour of light. In both cases Christians were told thereby to put on the Lord Jesus Christ, the only valid Armament, the only true Light of the world.

Why does one put on Christ? “Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then... (Eph. 6:13 & 14a).” The identical Greek term for “stand your ground” is used by Jesus in his admonition in Matt. 5:39: “Do not *resist* an evil person”. So clearly Jesus’ words as interpreted by Paul in no way represent counsel of

³ Jews not long before the time of Paul’s writing had been expelled from Rome by Emperor Claudius.

mere passivity, or worse yet, sheer yielding defenselessly to evil.

Walter Wink demonstrates persuasively in his book *Violence and Nonviolence in South Africa: Jesus' Third Way* (1987), that Jesus' counsel was the refusal of any kind of "retaliation in kind." This is the New Testament meaning of "submission". Paul wrote that it was impossible to overcome evil with evil. All the pages of the New Testament rustle with the call that Christians are to overcome evil with good. Even so the Ephesians passage is fully consonant with the Romans 12 and 13 account to overcome the evil of the state with good. Both are consistent with Jesus' way and words. He called for submission to the enemy, not like a doormat, and certainly not as an end, but as a means of accomplishing the greatest good imaginable, namely, turning the enemy into a friend! To this end, we must be willing to offer *limitless* forgiveness to our enemies, as Jesus taught in Matt. 18⁴.

PAUL'S LETTERS AS SUBVERSION

In Galatians 3:26 - 29, Paul says, "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were united with Christ in baptism have been clothed [*enduo*] with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus..."

What astounding results from being clothed with Christ! All the old conventions, institutions, hatreds, and everything else belonging to the old *aeon* are done away! Paul may have limited his examples here in keeping with the classic rabbinical prayer he likely knew, which thanked God for not having been born a Gentile, slave, or woman! But the examples doubtless extend to all orders of creation and hierarchies caught up in radical sinfulness. Paul clearly will have none of them!

Religious intolerance, slavery, and patriarchy are all enemies of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. All these are entrenchments of cultural, societal norms and mores that the Gospel writers set out vigorously to subvert and overcome. In Paul's allusion to the "sons [and daughters] of God", one can hear echoes of "the glorious freedom of the children of God" already discussed in Romans 8. Over against all such social conventions, traditions, structures, institutions, norms, mores, etc., Paul's cry is, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery (Gal. 5:1)."

The immediate context of Paul's letter to the Galatian church was judaistic legalism which he so vehemently resisted throughout his letter. Doubtless his allusion to a "yoke of slavery" and to Christians' being "... enslaved by the basic principles of the world (4:3b)" was in keeping with the "bondage to slavery" of all creation in Romans 8. According to Paul, What God is about, in Christ Jesus, is nothing less than the complete subversion of

⁴ An outstanding exegesis of that chapter, arguing this point well, is found in *Das Recht im Dienst der Versöhnung und des Friedens* (1972).

all these elemental, longstanding and perverse ways of destructive relationships throughout history.

Writers of New Testament scriptures taught the complete subversion of all hierarchy, chain of command, or brutal authority legitimized by the church during medieval Christianity or any other era. To Paul, Peter and Jesus, hierarchy was as surely *anathema* as judaistic legalism. There is only one legitimate *archy*, namely the Kingdom of Jesus, over against which all other *archies* or *hierarchies* are illegitimate pretenders. In Jesus' kingdom, the way of all relationships was exemplified when Jesus took the servant role, and washed his disciples' feet.

In Ephesians 5:21 Paul admonished both male and female to be mutually submissive. While such submission among believers was an "end" called for by New Testament writers, unilateral submission (nonretaliation) was also a means to the end of overcoming the enemy with good. Peter especially encouraged this, saying, "... so that ... they [husbands] may be won over without talk by the behaviour of their wives... (1 Peter 3:1). "

Further as example of such submission, Paul advised Onesimus, a run-away slave who had become a believer, to return voluntarily to his owner Philemon, urging Philemon to welcome Onesimus "... no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother" (Philemon 16). On the surface this gesture appears to be have been a denial of the freedom which everyone created in God's image should rightfully have. In the long run however, Paul told both master and slave that mutual submission was the only "Charter of Freedom" guaranteed to free them both from that contextual enemy, the institution of slavery. In God's good time, or by the end of time, both would be free indeed. Paul counselled submission to the power of the state, knowing that one day, within or at the end of history, its power will be overcome. In chapter Ten of his book, *Christian Anarchy* Vernard Eller lays out delightfully the implications of this counsel. In it he ruminates "On Ways More than One of Skinning Cats or Accomplishing other Good Ends (1987, p. 237)".

Likewise Paul counselled children to submit to parents, knowing that, apart from the promise of Deut. 5:16, there was no other way to overcome abusive fathers who provoke their children to wrath. (Compare Eph. 6:4, and Col. 3:21).⁵

The entrenchments of destructive relationships among fallen humanity can be found in all cultures and societies, and show up in myriads of hierarchies of abusive and oppressive power against others. Jesus described these as "lording it over others" (Matt. 20:25). Jesus taught and demonstrated the way of hope to overcome them all; not through violence and

⁵ This of course raises troubling questions about domestic violence. The argument of this paper is: submission means refusal to retaliate in kind to be sure, but also to overcome the evil of child abuse, spousal abuse, elder abuse, etc., with good. How that is done is problematic in a culture that inflicts pain for pain inflicted so routinely that any intervention to stop abuse carries with it an inevitable sting against which this paper is arguing. Much more work needs to be done beyond the scope of this paper on how to overcome the evil of domestic violence in a nonretaliatory way.

retaliation, but love.

There is nothing in what Jesus taught that is even remotely a call to conservatism or the *status quo*! Jesus calls his people to love intensely the enemy, and so to become a survivor in an ultimate way. To overcome the enemy means one freely chooses to suffer the wrong rather than inflict suffering. To overcome evil with good is pursued even if the attempt is the way of suffering and death. Jesus exemplified this, responding to his immediate enemies at the crucifixion with “Father forgive them”! The same cry was heard from the lips of the first Christian martyrs (witnesses), and repeatedly down through the centuries. But it has often been muted or relegated to an inimitable counsel of perfection outside the *realpolitik* of life. The cry is unthinkable for the average Christian; it is at least so for the state in response to domestic or foreign enemies.

The Christian does not rise above the Master in this regard. There is no better way than Christ’s way of resolutely loving the enemy and doing so in the sure hope of the resurrection! However the Christian church over the length of the Christian era has tended to think it could do better than Christ. Hence John Yoder asserts that the church failed even when it “succeeded” through use of “power over”. The original Gospel of subversion by love became inverted into religious social power and tyranny, practised and promulgated by the church throughout most of the Western Christian era. This inversion remains, I suggest, a primary contributing factor to the great modern-day rejection of Christian faith in the West. It is similar in cultural impact to the idolatry of front-end “rationality” which has dominated Western culture since the Enlightenment (though is now being displaced by “post-modernism” at the end of the 20th century.⁶)

Throughout most of church history, the “fruits” of Christianity appear to be directly opposite to its ideal of love! One writer, in examining contemporary manifestations of the evangelical movement said there is lots of faith, much hope, but *no charity* (Haiven, 1984)! Is this not perhaps why there is such a pressure on Christians to relativize the absoluteness and finality of the revelation in Christ? Christian mission has often presented an image of a triumphalistic Christ bent on destroying rather than liberating humanity and culture. Missionaries have too often employed the “military secret” of Hudson Taylor who preached the Gospel in the wake of British gun boats. There appears to be profound truth in seeing the church’s violence as one reason for the great rejection of Christian faith within Western culture which the church so profoundly shaped and nurtured. Christ rejected violent scapegoating but the Western church has been a prime instigator or supporter of scapegoating throughout Western history.

⁶ A philosophical rule of thumb is: The reigning worldview of today becomes inevitably the myth of tomorrow. Lesslie Newbigin in *Foolishness to the Greeks* (1986), argues persuasively against the so-called “modernism” of the Enlightenment. René Girard, Gil Bailie, James Alison and others, mentioned in the NOTE at the essay’s end, deal with the Gospel’s revolutionary demythologizing power from a literary and anthropological perspective. A similar book to Newbigin’s needs to be written entitled, *A Stumbling Block to the Powerful*, that would present the case for the nonviolent way of the cross against all legitimations of resort to violence and scapegoating. Both titles arise from Paul in I Cor. 1:18ff.

The uniqueness of Christian truth rightly stands against culturally driven pressures to privatize and relativize Christ's saving work. This applies also to the social and political application of Christ's saving power. The tendency has been to allow Christian social ethics to become clothed in that which was contrary to the way of Christ; as contrary as any notion that there can be any other Light of the world than Jesus, or any other Way to God, than ultimately through Christ.

The entire third chapter of Paul's letter to the Colossian church rings with the same need to be clothed with Christ to overcome the old ways of relationships. In verses nine and ten Paul wrote, "... you have taken off the old self with its practices and have put on [*enduo*] the new self..." This, said Paul, resulted in "putting to death" (v. 5) all manner of personal sins: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, etc. All represented idolatry, i.e., bondage to the old orders of creation. Paul then continued with another list of old orders equally subverted by clothing oneself with Christ: "Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all. Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves [*enduo*] with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.... And over all these virtues put on [*enduo*] love, which binds them all together in perfect unity (11, 12 & 14)."

According to Paul the language of submission also applied to all relationships so that wives, children, and slaves were encouraged to submit to abusive, domineering, oppressive, ways of being treated. They were advised to submit even though they were created in God's image. On the other hand Christian husbands were told not to be harsh with their wives and Christian fathers were not to provoke their children to wrath. We know from Philemon that Christian masters were to treat slaves as brothers. All this was urged precisely in the hope of ridding oneself of whatever belongs to the "earth". It was thus possible to subvert all fallen relationships, and move toward the new kingdom reality of the "glorious freedom of the children of God".

There is one further statement made by Paul to consider, Phil. 2:1 - 11. This was likely an early Christian hymn. In verse 8 Paul wrote, "... [Jesus] humbled himself and became obedient to death even death on a cross!" This is the language of submission, this time to the "last enemy" (I Cor. 15:26). Again the model of freedom by submission emerges. Submission to death is the means for a complete reversal of death to life.

Paul here repeats his death-resurrection message as in I Cor. 15:26 & 27, "For he [Jesus] must reign until God has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For he 'has put everything under his feet'." This "everything" includes "all dominion, authority and power" (v. 24) - the precise language of the state. So we read again in Phil. 2:9 - 11: "Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (verses 9 - 11)".

The pattern is consistent. Submission in the form of nonretaliation to an enemy is God's way to know full freedom and victory. The call is to constant subversion of all the old orders of creation, in order to effect "the glorious freedom of the children of God." Submission to and nonretaliation towards one's enemies are God's means to overcome the enemy with the greatest good - making him or her a friend! For this is what God did to us while we were yet sinners, and his enemies (Rom. 5:6 - 11).

SOME APPLICATIONS

1. *A call to ongoing conversion*

There are some who argue that the early church was not primarily or consistently pacifist since it so easily changed to a diametrically opposite mode in the early fourth century.

This argument is obviously specious. But it is easy to understand how the church abandoned this call to faithfulness to the nonretaliatory way of the crucified God. One need only attempt trying to apply the principles of nonviolence and loving the enemy in one's personal life for a day, or even a week! One quickly discovers how opposite the natural human bent is, and how lacking in will, creativity, and imagination we all are, to apply loving subversion to all spheres of human relationships. So when the church suddenly was offered power in the fourth century, it was an irresistible temptation in that historical context. It had scarcely emerged from ruthless state-sanctioned persecution, and the temptation was too great.

The temptation to resort to power is present whenever one is in a position of power. Refusal to resort to retaliation requires a unique resolve which the church had originally affirmed then largely let go. There is a circumstance one might call "*Constantine's Law*" whereby those with power invariably resort to the full use of power (especially retaliation and scapegoating), unless an ethical principle stops them. As soon as the Americans had nuclear weapons, they used them, and have threatened their use ever since. It could not have been otherwise, and will not be in any future confrontation of super-powers - without a countervailing ethic. Living out this lifestyle of subversion consistently is a call to endless conversion. It is a highly demanding call, not immediately attractive at all.

2. *We live with both good and evil*

According to New Testament writers the Gospel is subversive of all fallen orders of creation. But it does not follow that the various institutions, conventions, traditions and governments, etc., under which influence we all live, are "totally depraved". Rather, just as in our fallen humanity, the image of God, built into us at creation, is never extinguished, however marred. So within the most fallen of structures some good shines. For example women in our Western Christian culture have been considered inferior over the centuries, but chivalry at least offset the total trampling of women's dignity and rights.

It is true that power over others can be used for good. This is the case for instance in

disciplining children, but it can be so easily abused. Jacques Ellul warned somewhere that the State's prosperity always implies the death of innocents. The early Christians were nonetheless immensely grateful for the *pax Romana* (the great peace of the Roman Empire secured through tight military control), although they knew all too well Rome's evil too. Until Constantine, they had a love-hate relationship toward the Roman Empire. They recognized that, embryonic in every state, is the head of the Beast.

Capitalism, despite its basis in avarice, and the resulting oppression of many, has done much good for many people. Also communism and socialism, despite all the trampling of individual freedoms and rights, have served the poor well in some countries.

However pragmatism *per se* is no reason for judging any system as good. Compared to God's kingdom in Jesus Christ, there is no "order of creation" that is good, no not one! Everything is in need of liberation "... from bondage to decay ...". The good is invariably mixed in with the evil, the weeds with the wheat. We must hold out for the good, seek to root out the evil, but carry this out in a spirit of humble compassion for those who broker power.

In my work within the Canadian criminal justice system I have seen my role as subversive of much within it. From the overarching goals of those in power who run the system, and on down, what occurs is often contrary to the message of this paper. This is not to say that the entire system is bad, and certainly in no way do I suggest that those who work in it are evil! But I argue that the system is seriously flawed, and needs constant changing in the direction of kingdom peacemaking values.

As Jesus talked about being "in the world but not of it.", Christians are to be active subverters of all the old, fallen ways. So I strive to be 'in the system of criminal justice, but not of it'. I want to subvert and thus overcome everything which is at enmity with the Gospel of Christ. But I want to do so in the spirit of Peter's admonition, "... with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. It is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil (I Peter 16 & 17)."

3. *Christians and the exercise of power*

I am convinced that the biblical message is a glorious Emancipation Proclamation. It leads to the subversion of just about everything in human relationships which prevents humans from fully embracing freedom and *shalom*, and from developing to their full potential. Freedom is not something to be grasped at any more than Jesus grasped at equality with the Father according to Phil. 2:6. Nor is subversion something to be imposed upon those holding oppressive sway over others by engaging in power-plays.

The early church knew that in Christ women were liberated from male domination. It also understood the cruelty and evil of the tyranny of Rome and hence permitted among them those who bore incipient revolutionary attitudes against Rome. To them all Paul counseled

loving submission to one's enemy, and mutual submission of women to men and men to women (Eph. 5:21), in hope which would not disappoint them (Rom. 5:5). Paul wrote these words right in the context of suffering of early Christians at the hands of the enemy, Rome. Paul told the Christians that God had poured out His love into their hearts by the Holy Spirit. He reminded them again that the Christians' use of the subversive power of Love is in direct inverse relationship to the cruelty and violence of the enemy. Only love works when one subverts an enemy. But when the church accepted the invitation to become a major power within the evil Roman state church leaders also embraced the very evil that had suppressed them. Incredibly the church took up arms.

Eventually, overcoming the evil Empire led the 4th century church leaders to embrace the very evil of the Empire. In similar manner emancipation of black slaves in America led to bitter black-white relationships ever since. Has modern-day Israel so quickly forgotten its Holocaust, that it now readily employs violence towards its domestic and foreign enemies? The Christian-led women's liberation movement of last century has given way in many quarters to a radical feminism more counter-oppressive than much male chauvinism. Radical feminism has contributed to a worse denial of heterosexual relations than the Augustinian perversion leading to celibate monastic and priestly vows.⁷

Paul and the early church knew that in human relationships submission and love were the only safe ways for Christians to exercise power. The Christian's uppermost motivation was to serve the neighbour or the enemy, and to refrain from ever engaging in injurious wrongdoing to anybody. "Love does no harm to its neighbour. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law (Rom. 13:10)."

4. *Working for political change*

Christians must ever be vigilant about employing political processes to achieve victory. Jacques Ellul in *The Political Illusion* (1972) speaks to this point well. The early church "overcame" the evil of the Roman Empire by finally gaining legal status, but the victory was, in Kee's words, a "Judas kiss (1982)", or as previously described, a Pyrrhic victory. Rather than be free in Christ, the church entered a new bondage to the abuse of power and violence. This was an enslavement not readily recognized as a defeat in the very jaws of political victory. *Pragmatism* in the social ethics of Western Christianity has apparently provided greater motivation for Christians than *faithfulness* to Jesus Christ. This is seen for instance in such notions as "just war". Over against Jesus' alternate way of subversion, Christians may "win", but lose in the long run. Remember Paul's words: "... hope that is seen is no hope at all (Romans 8:24)."

The ethics of Jesus make for a chronically unsettling way for Christians to live. Jesus' ethic

⁷ Walter Wink provides many illustrations of a similar point in a disturbing article entitled: 'On Not Becoming What We Hate', the first of four which appeared in *Sojourners*, November, 1986, through February, 1987.

of love is alien to much exercise of power, even though deeply concerned about the life of humanity under political powers and authorities. Jesus' ethic makes it difficult to put down roots or to build monuments for posterity. But this should not surprise us, given, for example, the language of Hebrews 11 - 13: "And they admitted that they were foreigners and strangers on earth... looking for a country of their own... a better country - a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city [*polis*] for them... here we do not have an enduring city [*polis*], but we are looking for the city that is to come (11:13b;16 & 17; 13:14)."

Despite their relative legitimacy, all earthly political institutions fail to approximate the Kingdom of God. It is an illusion, as held by postmillennialists, that one can establish fully God's kingdom within the *polis* of fallen human history. To try through power brokering is to create a nightmare of varying degrees of horror. Pope Gregory's Holy Roman Empire, Calvin's Geneva, Cromwell's England, Puritan colonial America, not to mention similar failed attempts in Western democracies, etc., are all examples of such terror and folly. Writers of New Testament scriptures say that the only way Christians can influence the *polis* for good according to dynamics of the coming kingdom, is from a position of relative powerlessness. The Christian's influence rests in truth, spoken and acted out in love towards all one's neighbours and enemies.

C. J. Cadoux, in an Epilogue to his study of the pre-Constantinian church, *The Early Church and the World* (1925 & 1955), says of the early church era: "... we certainly have a moral reformatory movement on a scale and with a potency unparalleled at any other epoch before or since... the achievements of the early Church can defy comparison with those of any other moral or religious movement known to history (p. 611)⁸." But this powerful effect upon the *polis* was achieved without Christians' having had even a legal standing within the Empire! It was done from the position of weakness and political powerlessness.

Lesslie Newbigin asked, "When the ancient classical world, which had seemed so brilliant and so all-conquering, ran out of spiritual fuel and turned to the church as the one society that could hold a disintegrating world together, should the church have refused the appeal and washed its hands of responsibility for the political order? (1986, p. 101)". Of course the answer is "No". But from the vantage point of biblical subversion, should it have taken over the state's means of exercising power? Are they not contrary to Jesus' way? He said,

⁸ Such a claim could likewise be made concerning the church growth of this time. This is one reason, incidentally, why so much current witnessing seems to be, to steal a phrase from *Sojourners* magazine, 'evangelism without the Gospel'. For what shall it profit one to evangelize the whole world, and never preach nor demonstrate the Gospel? In our evangelistic efforts are people really being called to a *metanoia* in their behaviour? If instead only some kind of mere change of belief is in view, quite abstract and highly individualistic, is this Christian conversion at all? While there is a need for a change of belief, this is barely the beginning of the matter - certainly not in Jesus! It seems such minimalist Christianity arises from a footnote theology of John 3:16 that reads: "Except out enemies!" after "For God so loved the world", "whoever believes", and "shall not perish".

“The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them are given the title Benefactor. But you are not to be like that (Luke 22:25 & 26a).”

What Jesus prohibited is what the church became, and continued to be throughout its quest to be a benefactor of culture through dominant exercise of power. This has persisted right into the era of modern democracies. Jesus said starkly that one cannot be a benefactor to the *polis* if one exercises power in the manner of the Gentiles. How then is true power exercised? “Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves (v. 26b).” What a stark contrast! But this is what is to be expected from one who came to subvert just about everything! What an overwhelming inversion of worldly ways, of the common bureaucratic notion of ‘civil servants’.

Alistair Kee wrote, “But there is one conquest made by Constantine, the effect of which still continues to the present day, his most surprising yet least acknowledged... He conquered the Christian church. The conquest was complete, extending over doctrine, liturgy, art and architecture, comity, ethos and ethics... But this achievement, unheralded then, unrecognized now, represents Constantine’s greatest conquest, the one which has persisted largely unchallenged through the centuries in Europe and wherever European Christianity has spread...

“To be declared heretical by the norms of orthodox Constantinian Christianity may be a source of relief and encouragement to those who seek to follow Christ (1982, pp. 154 & 169).”

5. *Christian spiritual formation*

Finally, I am convinced that the only way of Christian spiritual formation, including theological formation, is somehow to learn to identify with the poor, the marginalized, the alien, the outsider, the outcast, the criminal, etc. This means to suffer their pain along with them in empathy or compassion until one reads the Bible from the perspective of the powerless, not the Establishment, the underdog, not the top dog, the poor, not the well-heeled. The early church had just such an under-dog vantage point and from it effected amazing changes within the *polis*. As Kee wrote at another point: “It is not that the perspective of the early church provides the norm for critically assessing the life of the church today. To the contrary, after Constantine, it is the church under the sway of imperial values which now provides the perspective for reading the Bible (p. 168).”

This would revolutionize Christian education in church and Bible school, home and seminary. What if a student obtaining a diploma from a Christian Bible school, a degree from a liberal arts university or a seminary, or undergoing ordination to Christian ministry, would first be required to demonstrate that real empathetic identification with the poor and with the nation’s domestic and foreign enemies had occurred? This would be doing incarnational spiritual and theological *transformation*. The Incarnation is unthinkable in the context of Jesus’ hobnobbing with the rich, established, and powerful of his day, of calling

down destruction on his enemies, or without intense suffering, pain and even death⁹.

Ominous, however, is the obvious fact that throughout the centuries since Constantine, a majority of the great thinkers, theologians and teachers have approached the Bible from the top down, rather than from the bottom up. Is it any wonder then that this doctrine of subversion by love should have been lost to the church over the centuries? Doing theology from the bottom up is like pulling the rug out from under oneself, and turning one upside down. That however is the upsetting Gospel imperative. Jesus' truth is *The Upside-Down Kingdom* (Kraybill, 1978).

The non-Christian way to get things done is shot through with selfishness, like a pile of filthy rags. Diametrically opposed is the way of the Incarnation or *kenosis*; the way of suffering love for one's enemies. Such patient subversion of just about everything is rooted in the sure hope of the resurrection.

I suggest therefore that the tradition of top-down theological education is itself one of the fallen powers and systems of bondage from which Christians are called to be free. Jesus spoke of glorious liberation from oppressive pharisaic theological traditions.

Church historian Douglas Frank argues that the core characteristic of dominant evangelicalism is a spirit of pharisaism; a spirit not likely easily to disappear from those who in positions of leadership set the evangelical agenda. He yearns nonetheless for, "... a church that awakens to the Stranger, Jesus Christ, the Jesus Christ of the biblical witness; not the denatured, ideologically and morally useful Jesus Christ of evangelicalism..."¹⁰ (1986, p. 277)"

This is hardly good news for some in positions of power and influence within the church. In the 16th century, such used their power to hound, torture and execute countless thousands with whom they disagreed. Today however, the church has no recourse to direct manipulation of state power (thank God!). Persons committed to the way of subversion in the Gospel of Jesus Christ are often simply ignored, or else labelled "saints". To the latter Dorothy Day used to demure by saying she refused to be dismissed so easily!

A professor of church history once warned me of the dangers of ideological bias in thinking that the early church was essentially pacifist. He seemed oblivious to how that warning could be turned around. Alistair Kee's book, *Constantine versus Christ* in this regard is subtitled, *The Triumph of Ideology* (1981). During personal discussion with John Yoder, he alluded to the fact that few mainline scholars accept his pacifism, yet none generates biblical arguments opposing it. He suggested that theologian Stanley Hauerwas

⁹ It would mean as well a great hesitancy in the use of the electronic media, since they are intrinsically so opposite to incarnational ways.

¹⁰ John Alexander similarly dedicates his book, *Your Money or Your Life: A New Look at Jesus' View of Wealth and Power* (1986), to his father this way: "He is an unusual fundamentalist; for he believes that inerrancy extends to the teachings of Jesus."

might better have served the cause of Christ by not declaring himself pacifist. He might have instead written his ethics as a kind of fifth columnist, never openly showing himself.

When *Christianity Today* did an otherwise positive article on Stanley Hauerwas, it was simply said that evangelicals would not like his pacifism! Yet pacifism pervades all his writings on Christian ethics, and therefore must be taken as fundamental to his (biblically based) thought. In his book *The Peaceable Kingdom* (1984), he recognized that seriously following Christ' teachings relegates one to the backwaters of debate over ethics within academic circles.

To this, the writer to the Hebrews would say: "Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come (13:13 & 14)."

Sadly, there is a parting of the ways; a parting as serious as the denial of any central issues of faith. Yoder suggests this in "A Critique of North American Evangelical Ethics" (1985). Sufficient to say that the hoary tradition of dominant Christian teaching in the area of ethics represents a fallen power equally to be reckoned with as the fallen power of the state.

A profound reformation, in line with *ecclesia semper reformanda*, is needed! In the 16th century, church and state on Catholic and Reformed sides of the Reformation sought to oppress, root out, torture, and execute all who took the ethics of Jesus seriously. Jesus' words then and now are apt, "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you (Matt. 5:11 & 12)."

The entrenched hegemony of religious establishments within the history of both Judaism and Christendom invariably have been persecuting powers. It is no less so today, even though the means of violent oppression have of necessity been curtailed in contemporary democratic states.

CONCLUSION

I am convinced that we Christians are not sufficiently converted. This is the reason the Gospel as Subversion is overlooked and missed. It is also the reason the Bible has been consistently used in support of the conservative *status quo* whereby the exercise of oppressive power over others is perpetuated.

So that we may begin to see the kingdom right side up we need to be fully stood upside down! This cannot be accomplished by the pharisee amongst us! Our hermeneutics of reading the Bible must change. Paul said: "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (Eph. 6:12)." And again: "The creation waits in eager expectation ... [to]... be liberated from its bondage to decay and

brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God (Rom. 8:19 & 21).”

What a PROCLAMATION OF EMANCIPATION! What a hope and prospect! We may now begin to know something of the stirrings of that freedom. We venture out in faith empowered by the crucified and resurrected one, who overcame evil by doing good. This same resurrected Jesus founded a movement destined to culminate one day in the subversion of just about everything!

POST-SCRIPT I

This paper was originally drafted in 1986 after a fresh study of Paul’s teaching about the secular state in Romans 13. It was written to get some ideas on paper, with no thought of publishing it. Since then Jacques Ellul has written an entire book (1991) in response to Vernard Eller’s book (1987) mentioned in the paper. Furthermore, based on the work of René Girard and many influenced by him, the impact of a nonsacrificial biblical hermeneutic is increasing¹¹. There is a truly subversive way of reading the Bible with conclusions in the same direction as this paper, and much farther reaching.

In 1996 the board of the Christian Conciliation Service of British Columbia encouraged me to make the original paper available now. Time and space constraints prevented inclusion of reference to more recent writings. If writing this now, and with more room to develop the ideas, I would also have included interaction with Walter Wink’s impressive three-volume study of the Powers (1984, 1986, 1992) and the exegesis of the Sermon on the Mount and related material by Glen Stassen in his Just Peacemaking (1992).

I look forward to dialogue with readers and sincerely invite reaction to what I have written. I invite in particular reaction to my reading of enduo wherever power relationships are discussed in the New Testament alongside the so-called Haustafeln. I found this part of my research very exciting. Please write to me at our board address.

Through various discussions and exposures, I am aware that the issues of nonretaliatory submission and subversion are problematic for victims of abuse and their advocates. I count myself as one of those advocates. I have raised this concern in Footnote 5. Truth is always tested in real-world encounters of theory and action. I look forward to robust critique from victims and others active in overcoming specific and systemic abuse in our society. I am convinced the above thesis applies in this area as well, albeit with lots more work needed than was given here. I do not argue that it is right for abused wives, children, racial minorities, and other oppressed peoples to see their condition as valid or justified. On the contrary!!! At issue is rather how one overcomes such blatant evil with good.

¹¹ See for instance: Girard, (1986, 1987). For biblical interpretation influenced by Girard, see Williams (1991); Hamerton-Kelly (1992, 1994); Alison (1993, 1996, 1998). For a highly original cultural critique of violence from a Christian anthropological perspective, indebted to Girard, see Bailie (1995). For a well-presented sampling of Girard’s thought, see Williams (1996).

Finally, I am thankful to Cliff and Jeanette Ratzlaff for editing and preparing this paper for publication. June, 1998

POSTSCRIPT II

Thanks significantly to the influence of Ron Dart, I am much more predisposed to a positive role of the state. I am convinced however that there is a single biblical ethic for the individual and the state and that the Church's role in politics is subversive: to hold the state to the biblical ethic, in particular of nonviolence.

So please wrestle with me in the above thesis. You may e-mail me at: wayne@smartsettle.com. June, 2009

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