

## Jesus, Evangelicals, and American Empire

By Wayne Northey

**Disclaimer:** *The issues addressed in this article are immense. An entire book is needed to do justice to them. The article at points asserts several propositions without detailed supportive argument due to space considerations.*

The Jewish-Christian story culminates in the displacement of Caesar by Jesus as Lord. Jesus followers are marked by anti-Empire ways. One cannot serve Christ and Empire any more than God and Mammon. That is in part the New Testament ethical take on Empire. Though it is true that *Luke-Acts* has aspects of a more positive attitude towards Rome. And Jesus sets a tone of ambiguity in his statement: “Then give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s (Luke 20: 25.)”<sup>1</sup> In this statement the tension between God and Caesar is highlighted.

Given humanity’s history-long socialization in Empire ways, the mark of the Christian is Empire subversion just as the mark of the Beast in Revelation is Empire worship.

Greed/desire and concomitant violence top the New Testament’s list of personal sins. The body politic fares no better. Empire invariably protects greed through violence. This is not God’s intention; this is, rather, the organized political corollary of human sin. Unless Romans 13:1 – 7 is the exception, the “nation” biblically is invariably at odds with God’s Kingdom, because it ineluctably represents Empire ways, as surely as “all have sinned (Rom. 3:23)”. This is evidenced in the first biblical murderer, who went on to found a city, the first biblical emergence of “civilization”. Civilization was established by scapegoating murder, something ever since the central human cultural reality, claims anthropologist René Girard<sup>2</sup>. This continues with Israel’s choice of a king like other nations/Empires in I Samuel 8, and climaxes at the crucifixion in the representative anti-Christian cry of Empire loyalists: “We have no king but Caesar/[Emperor] (John 19:15)”.

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<sup>1</sup> The same verb, “give” (*apodidomi*) in Jesus’ statement is reprised in Paul (Rom 13:6-8): “This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, who give their full time to governing. Give (*apodidomi*) everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor. Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law.” Paul sets response to government in the context of love of neighbour. One should add: even if the neighbour is “enemy” (see Romans 12:19 – 21).

<sup>2</sup> See James Williams, *The Girard Reader*, (New York: Crossroad Herder, 1996) for an extensive introduction to, and bibliography on, Girard. See Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), for a contemporary cultural application of scapegoating theory. See James Williams, *The Bible, Violence and the Sacred: Liberation from the Myth of Sanctioned Violence* (San Francisco: HarperCollins and Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1991 and 1995), and James Alison, *Knowing Jesus* (Springfield, Ill: Templegate, 1993); *Raising Abel: The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1996); *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin Through Easter Eyes* (New York: Crossroad, 1997), for sustained theological presentations of scapegoating theory. Finally, see Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 2001), for a complementary *anthropological* presentation of scapegoating theory with reference to the New Testament, a document he considers the touchstone text.

The most consistent political phenomenon of normative American Evangelical Christianity has been its embrace of God and Flag (“Caesar” and Nation) over Christ and Kingdom. “One Nation Under God” is in fact “One Nation under Empire”. It is consistent therefore that the dominant Evangelical church response to the War on Terrorism draws on longstanding extra-biblical “just-war” theory<sup>3</sup>. In Dr. Richard Land’s summation: “God establishes the state to ‘bear the sword’, that is, to use lethal force to keep the peace and maintain justice. (“Seeking Justice in the Midst of Terror”, [www.beliefnet.com/story/88/story\\_8805.html](http://www.beliefnet.com/story/88/story_8805.html).” Dr. Land since 1988 has headed the *Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission* of the 15-million member Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). SBC is by far the largest block of American Evangelicals, who are estimated in turn to number about 100 millions or 35% of the United States population. About 84% of white Evangelicals voted for President Bush in the 2000 election. In support of the almost wholesale Evangelical endorsement of The War on Terrorism, Dr. Land writes: “The key Scripture passage supporting just war theory is Romans 13:4 (*ibid*)”.

Why have American Evangelicals *en masse* so embraced Empire ways? There are at least two key considerations:

1. American Evangelicals do not view their own foreign policy as building “Empire”, and hence fail to see their similarity to the Roman Empire that crucified Christ. On the contrary, since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they have largely affirmed a doctrine of “Manifest Destiny”, that claims God superintended and willed American imperialistic expansionism. By this doctrine “the American Way” became nearly synonymous with “the Way of Jesus”, something for which Billy Graham repented in his later years.
2. American Evangelicals have largely interpreted the Romans 13:1 - 7 text as unquestioned legitimation for their own government, while simultaneously delegitimizing “on demand” a long line of other authorities, beginning with the British Crown in the 1776 War of Independence. The Evangelical embrace of “just war” theory has necessarily rejected all similar claims by opponents. With this doctrine, Christians support the State to do to its enemies what Christians may never do. At its most duplicitous, the theory appears as an end-run around Jesus’ explicit teaching, example, and consistent New Testament witness: “Love your enemies.”

How does one respond to this amazing Eusebian interpretation of Christian political ethics that unquestioningly blesses American Empire, and has characterized dominant American Evangelical understanding for 250 years?

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<sup>3</sup> “During the fourth and fifth centuries, the church adopted from classical thought the teaching of the just war (“War”, *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, J.D. Douglas, General Editor, 1974, p. 1029.)” Saint Augustine of Hippo first developed this understanding when confronted with the horrors of a disintegrating Roman Empire. His original three criteria were: : “*just cause*”; “*legitimate authority*”; and “*right intention*.” To these were eventually added another three: “*proportionality*”; “*probability of success*”; and “*last resort*”. A seventh is sometimes included: “*noncombatant immunity*”. And there have been of course others.

First, freighting Romans 13:1 – 7, particularly verses 3 and 4<sup>4</sup> with a pro-Empire exegesis is untenable. Romans 13 was not the *locus classicus* for an early Christian understanding of the State: rather Ephesians 6:12 – 18 was. The use of the Romans 13 text to give the State *carte-blanche* right to use lethal violence against enemies is a post-Reformation, pre-Nazi Germany exegetical move, not unlike texts used to justify slavery and the slave-trade.

The Roman State, at the time of Paul's writing to Roman Christians he had never met, had just brutally and falsely executed Jesus the Christ. The early church well knew the Roman Empire as fallen "principality and power" (the language of Ephesians 6); invidious to converted Jews expelled from Rome by Emperor Claudius and just returning at the time of Paul's writing; brutal towards converted runaway slaves leading clandestine lives in Rome; and uncaring of marginalized *hoi polloi* – who collectively were the parishioners in early church Rome.<sup>5</sup>

Paul begins an ethical discussion in Romans 12 of how these believers should respond to neighbour and enemy. His pastoral concern about early Christian revolutionary sentiment towards Rome is arguably at back of this brief pericope on the "governing authorities" (*exousias*), the identical expression in Ephesians 6 where *exousias* and *kosmokratoras* ("world-rulers" – an epithet for Satan and minions) are nearly synonymous. In the historical context, Paul is compassionately cautioning these house churches against the perils of overt anti-government sentiment, while affirming simultaneously rulers' superintendence by God ("ordering") as in the case of Cyrus in Isaiah, God's "shepherd" (44:28) and "Messiah" (45:1), though a brutal Emperor. In this context, "he does not bear the sword for nothing" (Rom. 13:4) is a warning about vicious repressive state power that likewise crucified the Lord of Glory. Therefore "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities" (Rom. 13:1). That "governing authorities" do not invariably do everyone good (*pace* 13:4) is demonstrated throughout human history, perhaps climaxing in the Nazi Holocaust. For American Christians to read this text therefore as blanket endorsement of "government" is a travesty of interpretation, selectively and nepotistically applied, and of course contradictory of American expansionist history that repeatedly rebelled against *other* government authorities.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.*

<sup>5</sup> It is true nonetheless that Ephesians is more explicitly negative in its language about the State than Romans. Accepting that Paul was the author of both (though Ephesians is in dispute), and that Ephesians is usually dated later than Romans, this could demonstrate some development in Paul towards a definitive anti-State attitude. Paul was executed by Emperor Nero according to tradition.

<sup>6</sup> St. Peter followed Paul closely in his writings, including on "authority" (I Peter 2:13ff). It is intriguing that one meaning of the unique word *allotriepiskopos* (usually translated "busybody") in I Peter 4:15 is "revolutionary", which immediately fits the context and this argument like the anemic rendering "busybody" does not. (See Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974, p. 39).

There is politically, over against the violence of Empire, “the most excellent way” (I Cor. 12:31 and 13). It is anachronism to read Paul in Romans 13 as giving early Roman Christians a treatise on the benevolence of the State and its divine right to lethal force, when all those Christians knew of the Roman state was brutality and repression.

Second, when St. Augustine in 410 AD witnessed the sack of Rome, and the encroaching threat of “barbarians”, the Roman Church by then had embraced the legitimacy of Empire, which one church historian describes as “the triumph of ideology” (Alistair Kee, *Constantine versus Christ: The Triumph of Ideology*, London: SCM Press Ltd., 1982). By then, Empire ideology accepted widely by majority Church leaders contradicted the non-violent, nonacquisitive Way of Christ. It was consequently no stretch ethically to move to Crusades against external enemies, and Inquisition against internal enemies.

Such an easy accommodation to State violence persists amongst American Evangelicals in overwhelming support of its contemporary Crusade (the War on Terrorism), and its current Inquisition (arbitrary exercise of the death penalty; operation of a repressive criminal justice system).

In 1997, I debated Dr. Land on State use of the death penalty. Not surprisingly, Romans 13:4 was for him a key text. Land’s other key text, Genesis 9:1 – 7, particularly verse 6, collapsed as capital punishment legitimation under unrelenting exegetical scrutiny, not least though only one of many considerations that verse 6 is a chiasmic poem, and unless it is the exception, no law in Scripture ever appears as poetry. Romans 13:4 as State violence endorsement similarly implodes.<sup>7</sup>

When the Suffering Servant of Isaiah brings “justice to the nations” (chapter 42), no one is harmed (“A bruised reed he will not break”, verse 3). The worldwide phenomenon of “Restorative Justice”<sup>8</sup> is attestation to “the most excellent way”<sup>9</sup> of the politics of love over against Inquisition and Retribution, whereby accountability and healing are equal criminal justice thrusts, and no one is harmed consequent to the criminal act.

There is likewise “the most excellent way” in international relations that contradicts the violent ways of State and subverts Empire.<sup>10</sup> Dr. Land on the contrary, together with

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<sup>7</sup> Possibly still the best challenge to that interpretation is: John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994.

<sup>8</sup> A massive body of literature has grown up in the past few years. The best study to date specifically on the topic is *Restoring Justice*, Karen Heetderks Strong and Dan Van Ness (Cincinnati, OH: Anderson, 1997). The best overview of the wider context is *The Expanding Prison: The Crisis in Crime and Punishment and the Search for Alternatives*, David Cayley, (Toronto: Anansi, 1998). The first major study was *Changing Lenses*, Howard Zehr, (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1990) – considered a classic. An excellent annotated bibliography has also been produced, *Restorative Justice: An Annotated Bibliography*, Paul McCold, (Monsey: Criminal Justice Press, 1997). An anthology recently appeared: *A Restorative Justice Reader: Texts, Sources, Context*, edited by Gerry Johnstone (Devon: Willan Publishing, 2003.)

<sup>9</sup> See also Rom. 13:10: “Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.”

<sup>10</sup> See Duane Friesen, *Christian Peacemaking and International Conflict: A Realist Pacifist Perspective*, (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1986); Glen Stassen (editor), *Just Peacemaking: Ten Practices for Abolishing War* (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 1998); and Vern Neufeld Redekop, *From Violence to Blessing:*

other Evangelical notables such as Bill Bright and Chuck Colson, wrote an open letter to President Bush after the September 11 terrorist attacks declaring the War on Terrorism “right and just”<sup>11</sup>. Conversely to them, with reference to the Suffering Servant in Isaiah, “[The people of God] exist, so says this poetry, to make the case in the empire for a different truth, a different presentation of reality, a different basis for humanness in the world (Walter Brueggemann, *Deep Memory, Exuberant Hope: Contested Truth in a Post-Christian World*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000, p. 23.)” The reality is, Dr. Land’s letter is “post-Christian”, in the spirit of “anti-Christ”, ultimately idolatrous.

Perhaps most pernicious in the application of just war theory is the repeated claim to be protecting “innocent civilians”. The reality is however innocent civilian casualties, now claimed to be as high as 80 to 90% of all aerial bombing campaigns, are knowingly sacrificed by all Evangelical just war theory advocates and others as regrettable “collateral damage”. How Evangelicals square this with biblical teaching is inscrutable. Not least for consideration is Proverbs 6:16 & 17: “There are six things the LORD hates, seven that are detestable to him: . . . hands that shed innocent blood. . .” This is a given in the War on Terrorism. The counter is usually a numbers game foreign to Scripture: “But look how many innocents the dictator has killed/might kill!” By this argumentation, one must ask impossible of answer questions: How many innocents may one kill before it is wrong? And, What percentage of innocent civilians may one kill of a larger counter number of innocents otherwise killed/to be killed? Or, How many are dispensable when human rights for those dead civilians are trampled?

Over against this is Paul’s ethical summation of Scripture, “Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. (Rom. 13:10)”, echoing Jesus (Matt. 7:12; 22:39 & 40). One wishes Dr. Land and fellow American Evangelicals would follow Jesus who said: “Go and do likewise (Luke 10:37).”

The Great Beast of Revelation 13 is Empire. Its worship is idolatry. “One Nation Under God” proves amongst American Evangelicals throughout American history to be *de facto*: “One Nation Under the Gun”. That is how the West was won, not as widely claimed, by Divine Providence intervention. And that is how America currently pursues worldwide economic and military hegemony.<sup>12</sup> It is the same spirit of imperialistic expansionism that has dominated American Evangelical life for 250 years. Its antidote is repentance and conversion.

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*How an Understanding of Deep-Rooted Conflict Can Open Paths to Reconciliation* (Ottawa: Novalis, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> See website: <http://www.gutlesspacifist.com/evangelicalsonbush.htm>

<sup>12</sup> See on this for starters the new book by American scholar Chalmers Johnson, former CIA adviser: *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004). Read also his earlier work: *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire* (New York: Henry Holt, 2000).