

“Pardon Me?!”

A former friend, [Lloyd Billingsley](#), years ago confidently told me that “the left” by definition is *ideological*, “the right” by contrast *normal/normative*. Such in turn ideological blindness still gobsmacks me. Lloyd is an intelligent man but profoundly doctrinaire, and like a close acquaintance, Lloyd sadly is highly unloving – even hateful – towards “liberals/progressives” of every kind. *Such in fact is the black-and-white world of ideologues of every stripe: right, left, and centre. All in their various ways suffer from “bent wing syndrome” in their too often hatred of other wings.*

If “they’ll know we are **Christians** by our **love**...” as the 60s and 70s *Jesus People* era song put it (not to mention Jesus in John 13 and his High-Priestly prayer in John 17, *where love for the other and unity are the supreme – indeed only – Christian identifiers!*), then we would-be Jesus followers/imitators are inextricably bound to a *God of All-Inclusive Love. Period!* This then is the ultimate Great Divide in Christian theology, on the one and the other hands:

- Those who affirm that *God is All-Inclusive Love. Period!*
- Those who affirm *God To Be Anything Less!*

There is an obvious corollary to the above song/teaching as well:

*“They’ll also know we are **not Christians** by our **hate!**”*

For Christians then, the only *safe wings* of refuge and embrace are God’s transcendent wings (e.g. Psalm 91:4).

So when I observe the current virulent opposition by a consortium of Vancouver Canada evangelical churches against even optionally teaching a more inclusive sexuality in the classroom as an anti-bullying strategy (called SOGI/SOGI 123 – see [here](#)), or [observe](#) in October 2018 in Chilliwack Canada three School Trustees running then voted in on an anti-SOGI/SOGI 123 platform, I sigh, even weep, at what these “Christians” *qua Christians* are known for: *the very inversion of Jesus’ teaching about the only recognisable marks of Christians.*

As the local newspaper [reported](#):

That has led to some labelling the group “The Hate Slate” [*“They’ll also know we are **not Christians** by our **hate!**”*] for running on, at least in part, anti-LGBT platforms.

No wonder Jesus in the West has too often a bad rep! To quote theologian Walter Wink in a different context: *If this be Christianity, then the revolt of atheism is pure religion!* Sigh indeed...

What was patently clear during the Harper years of governing Canada (2006 to 2015) in relation to criminal justice was similar *dogmatic exclusionary bias*: the politically right wing Conservatives fully eschewed evidence-based research on “what works” in favour of inflexible anti-science ideology about maximum punishment as the ideal recidivism-reducing response to crime.

These guys either did not have kids, or their offspring did not turn out well with, or did in spite of, such a sad “smack-’em-into-submission” creed. They certainly paid no attention to the abundant research. See for example Craig Jones’ [“Penal Populism: The politicization of crime under Harper – The Harper Conservatives’ reverence for gain and disdain of evidence helped turn a justice system for the people into an enemy of the people.”](#)

One of the great tragedies of the Harper years was (and by two Christians – Harper and Public Safety Minister Vic Toews!) *eradication of the word “Pardon”* from criminal justice policy: the last remnant in Canada of Christian mercy enshrined in law.

More ominously: an aspect of *fascism* is *invariably excluding/scapegoating a segment of a country’s population from full citizenship*. Harper’s government in this legislation took a giant step in that direction. After conviction for three indictable crimes, a fourth automatically excludes this segment of offender from full citizenship. Incipient fascism of the kind ominously rearing its xenophobic head in many parts of the world, not least south of the border, is an alarming development towards (re)victimisation of minorities of every kind. Worldwide, “criminals” (usually from ethnic minorities and the poor) are amongst the most scapegoated of all time

On Good Friday 2010, Prime Minister Stephen Harper telephoned Public Safety Minister Vic Toews to overhaul Canada’s pardon legislation. He declared
there are some crimes that should never be pardoned.

On Good Friday! The Prime Minister, a Christian believer, called Toews, also a believer, the day Christians worldwide celebrate the *pardon* Jesus’ death offered all humanity including the thief on the cross.

Vic Toews now proposes changing the term “*pardon*” to the emasculated term “*record suspension*.”
“Forgiveness”, said Toews, “is not the business of government.”

One editorial remonstrated,
That seems *mean-spirited*.

Perhaps a tad *unmerciful* even? *Contradictory* even of The Lord’s Prayer that reads?:

Matthew 6:12

Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.,

with Jesus’ commentary:

If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins. (verses 14 & 15).

Stephen Harper and Vic Toews have been singing hymns for decades, one no doubt by prolific songwriter/theologian Fanny J. Crosby entitled “To God Be the Glory”. Verse Two goes:

*O perfect redemption, the purchase of blood,
To every believer, the promise of God;
The vilest offender who truly believes,
That moment from Jesus a **pardon** receives.*

Another doubtless by both reprised is Thomas Chisolm’s poem, “Great Is Thy Faithfulness”, whose third verse begins:

***Pardon** for sin and a peace that endureth...*

One can imagine both next time in church belting out “*record suspension*” instead: and the shocked looks...

Evidently a “greater than Jesus is here” in Harper’s and Toews’ proposing elimination of “pardon” from Canadian justice vocabulary. The irony: *two of Canada’s top Christian political leaders are expunging the most overtly Christian term we have in Canadian justice.* And an enormous incentive for thousands to do the will of Jesus is thereby expunged, namely:

Go and sin no more (John 8).

Where Jesus said,

Matthew 12:7

I desire mercy, not sacrifice,

Harper and Toews seemingly desire *unforgiveness* instead.

Where Harper and Toews seem to evoke Lamech’s principle of *limitless retaliation* in “*seventy-seven times*” vengeance (Genesis 4), Jesus stated the Gospel principle of *limitless forgiveness* in “*seventy-seven times*” grace (Matthew 18). In that passage, with legal experts as backdrop declaring “three strikes forgiven, the next you’re out”, like former Crown Attorney Toews wanting no “record suspensions” for any with three indictable offences; with Peter’s upping the conjecture to a presumed perfect seven in asking how often should one forgive harms done, *Jesus blows the roof off limits to pardon.*

Government is not in the business of forgiveness so central to the Gospel? If so, *what business do Harper and Toews as Jesus followers have in politics?*

“Some wrongs should never be pardoned”? If so, one can hope that when Harper and Toews cross over Jordan, they will not encounter Jesus’ indictment:

For in the same way you judge[d] others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use[d], it will be measured to you (Matthew 7:1).

To them Jesus will hopefully say:

Repent! You may yet find pardon.

§

Response to a Response

I responded to a critique of this piece (I do not have that copy) thus:

Thanks, Arthur, for your comments, and for those of others. I only found out about all this dialogue tonight.

It is true that I have not suffered serious criminal victimization. But I’ve spent years walking with crime victims in my work in criminal justice, and a good percentage of offenders turn out to have been repeat victims. I’ve worked with thousands. Wilma Derksen, who lost her daughter to kidnapping and murder, and who is a leading victims advocate voice in Canada, warmly endorsed the above article. You may read more by her (volumes!) at: <http://www.wilmaderksen.com/>. In my experience, most victims do not wish the kind of vengeance reflected in Harper’s and Toews’ bid to destroy “pardon”.

The “apples and oranges” comment is best addressed by a monumental study entitled *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* by New Testament scholar Richard Hays; or a massive study by evangelical theologians Glen Stassen and David Gushee called *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context*; or yet another amazing research project by

Mennonite theologian Willard Swartley, *Covenant of Peace: The Missing Peace in New Testament Theology and Ethics*. A great website is a section of “The Paul Page” (<http://www.thepaulpage.com/>), called “Paul and Empire” (<http://www.thepaulpage.com/paul-and-empire/introduction-and-summary/>).

All to say, “apples and oranges” are invariably “paired” (pun intended) in the Bible: there are no private personal ethics that are not social and political. That “divorce” sadly has a long and tragic history in the Church, traceable at least to Saint Augustine. Such a divorce is heresy (“false choice” biblically). The key biblical text about this marriage is II Cor. 5:17 – 21, beginning:

So if anyone be in Christ, there is a new creation; (Darby)...

The “new creation” covers all brokenness:

- “**theological**” towards God;
- “**psychological**” towards oneself;
- “**sociological**” towards others;
- “**ecological**” and “**cosmological**” *vis à vis* the Good Creation/cosmos.

The first two are private/personal in orientation; the latter social and political.

It is true that I am disrespectful of Harper and Toews in their removal of pardon from Canadian justice vocabulary. Biblical pedigree is Amos (4:1) who called political leaders of his day “cows of Bashan”; Jesus who called Herod “that fox” (Luke 13:32) and exercised “yellow journalism” against contemporary religious/political leaders (Matt. 23), even picked up a whip against authorized usury and gouging at the Temple (John 2:12ff); and Paul who wrote of certain authorities

Gal. 5:12

As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves! ... I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!

I did use mockery as a literary tool, but not so strongly as Elijah in I Kings 18.

I do however try to give those political leaders their due respect (Rom. 13), and pray for them (*obviously not enough!*, I say ironically) to choose the Christian way.

I am drawing attention however to perceived patterns by this government of “enemizing” discernible minorities. In this respect, difference of opinion becomes no mere polite conversation, but genuinely life and death as in the death penalty issue you mention. (See in this regard my review in this Volume of James Megivern’s enormously researched study, *The Death Penalty: An Historical and Theological Survey* (also [here](#)), in which he concludes:

In the end, as in the beginning, the case for respecting human life prevails: from a Christian perspective, the death penalty has nothing to be said for it, and everything to be said against it (p. 489).

Like Moses, in the widest sense of the term, I urgently call on my Christian brothers Harper and Tows to choose/respect life! I observe them instead choosing death. A political science scholar at York University, Rev. Michael Stainton, believes the anti-pardon legislation (Bill C-23) to be a “hate crime” in the making that “essentializes” certain kinds of criminals. (Essentializing is a process by which individual behaviours are interpreted as being a fundamental, natural, “essential” and unchangeable characteristic of a

stigmatized group. It naturalizes what is in fact a social construct. Essentializing is a basic strategy of racism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, etc.)

I find this rings true. The famous saying of Pastor Martin Niemoeller after World War II and his release from a concentration camp bears evocation:

...

In Germany, the Nazis first came for the Communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, but I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me, and by that time there was no one left to speak for me.

Harper and Toews succeeded on June 16, 2010 in rushing through parliament a piece of the proposed anti-pardon legislation in a direct bid to block Karla Homolka and others similarly "essentialized" from applying for a pardon. This is so contrary to the work of CoSA (Circles of Support and Accountability) celebrated by National Post columnist Barbara Kay here:

http://www.barbarakay.ca/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=239&Itemid=10.

Of special note is her comment about Christians in that article:

With expansion [of CoSA], recruitment of volunteers becomes harder. I suspect Christians will continue to be the majority among them. The Christian faith, uniquely among the world's religions, has inspired an awesome tradition of ministering to the lepers most of us cannot bear to look at.

Surely I may note that sadly, Harper and Toews are not to be numbered amongst those adduced "Christians", and rightly, I suggest, one questions their faith in the spirit of:

Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God...
God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him... We love because he first loved us. (I John 4:1, 16 & 19),

and

Matthew 7:20

Thus you will recognize them by their fruits...

In the story of the Sheep and the Goats, might one not wonder about Harper and Toews in light of their anti-least-of-these pardon expulsion legislation:

Matthew 25:44 & 45

They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' 'He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.' "

I ask you Arthur, do you see any spirit/fruit of love (in light of Matt. 5:38ff, Luke 6:27ff, and I Corinthians 12:31 and 13) in the action by Harper and Toews to expunge "pardon" from Canadian justice vocabulary and practice? I wish I did!

I agree that the spirit of exchange as noted in this string was great! Thanks for good modelling by all.

This response is long enough, so I will add no more! Well... except this: There is much on my website about the Conservative government's destructive 2011 Omnibus Bill C-10, "Safe Streets and Communities Act" [here](#).

Please read and consider taking action.

Every saint has a past. Every sinner has a future. And of course: There but for the grace of God go I.

May God have mercy on us all! I mean that also for Harper and Toews! I hope they will not be ultimately judged according to how they judged others in this harmful, profoundly exclusionary piece of legislation.

References

Megivern, James J. (1997). *The Death Penalty: An Historical and Theological Survey*, New York/Mahwah, N. J.: Paulist Press.

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