

The Mother of All Christian Heresies

By Wayne Northey

“The king asked the fellow, ‘What is your idea, in infesting the sea?’ And the pirate answered, with uninhibited insolence, ‘The same as yours, in infesting the earth! But because I do it with a tiny craft, I’m called a pirate: because you have a mighty navy, you’re called an emperor.’ (St. Augustine, *Concerning the City of God Against the Pagans*, trans. Henry Bettenson, New York: Penguin Books, 1984, IV, 4, p. 139).”

The War just fought against *pirate* Saddam Hussein and Iraq, with recently reported Iraqi civilian casualties of over 37,000¹ is another classic instance of the pot calling the kettle black; of *Emperor* Bush demonstrating *moral* equivalency to Saddam Hussein with one *strategic* difference: America’s might was unparalleled, and hence, as always throughout most of history, “right”. And my fellow Evangelicals once again in the main, in particular in America, backed President Bush’s War on Iraq, and War on Terrorism, all the way.

My biggest quarrel with my fellow Evangelicals is that astonishingly, they teach as *gospel* that one may ardently evangelize “the world” *and* simultaneously slaughter the enemy! The “Great Evangelical Exception Doctrine” is that somehow, perhaps by divine casuistry but certainly without a shred of biblical warrant, those whom God loves—*our enemies*—are excluded from “the world” for whom Christ died. Evangelicals flagrantly teach—against all Christian biblical witness and evangelistic call—that we may cheerfully (or sadly, it doesn’t matter in the end) do to our enemies the absolute inversion of The Great Commission: *literally bomb them to hell!* Not good seed is indiscriminately sown in love for a harvest of life and peace; but bombs, bullets, and missiles are fired for a holocaust of death and destruction.

Can anyone tell me where Jesus asked us to do this? Do Evangelicals really have in their King James Bibles (or whatever) version of John 3:16 the footnote “except our enemies” after “world”, “believeth in him”, “should not perish”, and “everlasting life”, adding to the last two: “and they must be slaughtered”, and “and they can go to hell!”? Do they really practice such a blatant *footnote theology*?

What is most breathtaking about Jesus and the New Covenant he established is that it states in the starkest most non-negotiable and exception-less terms that “Love of God” is not a stand-alone! It is entirely predicated on “Love of Neighbour.” And Jesus repeatedly delivered the *coup de grâce* (Grand Evangelical irony in that term!) by teaching, modelling, and eliciting the New Testament witness that “Love of Enemies” is the final test case of “Love of Neighbour” (which is the ineluctable litmus test of “Love of God”). To deny or ignore this fact is to reject the only “Evangelical essentials” so designated by Jesus (Mark 10:21; Luke 6:27–36, 10:25–37, 42): *Love God/Neighbour/Enemy indivisibly*.

¹ Twelve times the civilian casualties of September 11, 2001, in America!

Søren Kierkegaard (*Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, 3, 1851, p. 2434) nailed this teaching when he said “Love to God and love to neighbour are like two doors that open simultaneously, so that it is impossible to open the one without opening the other, and impossible to shut one without also shutting the other.” Yet when it comes to that special biblical test case of the neighbour dubbed “enemy,” the vast majority of Evangelicals—from Billy Graham to C.S. Lewis to John Stott to Charles Colson to J. I. Packer to James Dobson to Charles Swindoll (the list of noted Evangelical leaders is endless) to the average worshipper in the pew—have locked and bolted the door! They have grasped hold of the Cross—the ultimate symbol of divine/human peacemaking and reconciliation—inverted it, and thereby turned it into the very sword with which the state executed the Lord of Glory. The incongruity is utterly stark and unprecedented. A powerful potion, whose recipe is tradition, reason, and experience *but not Scripture*, makes Evangelicals teach and do *exactly opposite to* univocal New Testament peace witness (as Jesus said more generally of the Pharisees in Matthew 23:3 and 23).

And most Evangelicals do not bat an eye! Worse, when called on it, “the lords of the bedchamber, our Evangelical leaders, take greater pains than ever to appear holding up a biblical oxymoron, namely “*just war*”² doctrine, although, in Christian biblical reality, there was no such doctrine to uphold at all.” (*The Emperor's New Clothes*, Hans Christian Andersen, slightly paraphrased.)

Evangelicals normally call such deliberate rejection of Scripture and invention of extra-biblical text “Liberalism.” Jesus called it “Pharisaism.” Saddam Hussein, the West's current “Public Enemy Number One,” might legitimately call it “the Mother of All Christian Heresies.”

² “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.

John Howard Yoder (*When War is Unjust: Being Honest in Just-WarThinking*, Maryknoll, N.Y., Orbis Books, 1996) argues convincingly there has never been a “just war” fought according to Augustinian or subsequent variations on his standards in the history of the church! In any event, the doctrine was developed by Augustine *from entirely extra-biblical sources*. Lee Griffith points out that Augustine, an empire loyalist, however never promulgated a theory of “just piracy” (see opening story by Augustine nonetheless), or “just terrorism”, or “just revolution”. Griffith cites Charles Villa-Vincencio (“Introduction”, *Theology & Violence: The South African Debate*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988, p. 1): “The dominant tradition of the church has... tended to bless the state's use of violence while condemning violent revolution against the ruling authorities.” Interesting! A biblical pox on all their houses! (See Lee Griffith, *The War on Terrorism and the Terror of God*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002, p. 20.)