



Book Review of *The Church's Peace Witness*, edited by Marlin E. Miller & Barbara Nelson Gingerich, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994, 228 pp.

This is an outstanding book on the topic.

The Preface explains that “This volume comes as an invitation to the process of reconciliation, of seeking a common foundation for our understanding of the church and its mission to the world, grounded in Scripture (p. viii).” It was initiated by the USA National Council of Churches of Christ (NCCC) with “participants in the conversation... from the Roman Catholic Church, from all the historic peace churches, and from all the member churches of the [NCCC] (p. viii).”

The Introduction indicates that “This volume attempts to... bring to the confessional explorations the church-dividing issue of the relationship between church and society raised at the Reformation by the Anabaptist churches (p. 7).” It continues: “The book begins with a background chapter on the uses of Scripture in various North American church documents from the 1980s on the topic of peace... Then follows the biblical core of the book.... (p. 7)” Two essays treat of Old Testament, two of New Testament considerations. Two essays follow with reference to church history: one on the pre-Constantinian understanding of the military, another on the move of the historic peace churches (Mennonite, Quaker, Church of the Brethren) from sectarianism to ecumenism. Finally, a chapter entitled “Toward Acknowledging Together the Apostolic Character of the Church’s Peace Witness”, and a section, “Consultation on the Apostolic Faith and the Church’s Peace Witness: A Summary Statement”, together with “Select Bibliography” and “Index of Scripture References” sections complete the volume. In all there are nine chapters and three final sections.

The Introduction’s conclusion states: “Christians agree that our divisions are sinful and that God calls us to unity, but we do not yet see clearly the way to unity... This study is offered in the hope that it will make a modest contribution to this great work of grace that God has given to the church (p. 14).” The quality of the essays is consistently high. The volume succeeds in its hope!

I have chosen one to analyze: “Jesus and Peace”, by Paul N. Anderson, a Quaker. Gandhi said rightly of Christians and nonviolence generally, “The only people on earth who do not see Christ and his teachings as nonviolent are Christiansⁱ.” Also, Father George Zabelka, Chaplain to the 1945 Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bomb squadrons, upon repentance for blessing the murder of hundreds of thousands in an instant, wrote that the just war theory is “something that Christ never taught nor hinted atⁱⁱ.” Further, Richard Hays, in his authoritative study, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (Harper, 1996) writes: “This is the place where New Testament ethics confronts a profound methodological challenge on the question of violence, because the tension is so severe between the unambiguous witness [for total nonviolence] of the New Testament canon and the apparently countervailing forces of *tradition, reason, and experience* (p. 341).” Put mildly, *the church - Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant - has been massively unfaithful to the nonviolent way of Jesus and the cross.* How, in light of that unfaithfulness, can it ever hope to convince outsiders of the truth of the Gospel? Hays again: “Those who are peacemakers are to be called ‘sons of God’ ([Matt.] 5:9) because, like God, they love their enemies (5:45, cf. 5:48). Thus the church’s embodiment of nonviolence is - according to the Sermon on the Mount - its indispensable witness to the Gospel (p. 329).”

Anderson’s opening comments in the essay before us raise two ironies: “It is a great irony of history that the cross, symbol of the ultimate triumph of peaceful means to peaceful

ends, has been used as a standard in battle... It is also ironic that differing views of Jesus' teachings on peace and their implications for his followers have been a cause of division within the church (p. 104)."

The first section looks at several of Jesus' "prophetic" contemporaries in their violent attempts at overthrowing Roman power. Anderson writes: "While [Jesus'] intention may have paralleled that of his contemporaries, one of its distinguishing marks was his absolute commitment to peaceable means to peaceable goals (p. 109)."

Under the next heading, "Jesus' Teachings on Peace", the author indicates that "Those who seek to follow Jesus must come to grips with his teachings on peace. Unfortunately, Christians have often found it too easy to embrace some of Jesus' teachings without heeding the most central ones [namely, on peace] (p. 109)." He quotes approvingly Ulrich Mauser: "It is... no exaggeration to say that the entire activity of Jesus, in word and deed, is the making of peace; and that the life of his community is given direction by his blessing on the peacemakers (*The Gospel of Peace*, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992, p. 65)." Hays similarly writes: "The vocation of nonviolence is not exclusively an option for exceptionally saintly individuals, nor is it a matter of individual conscience; it is fundamental to the church's identity and *raison d'être* (*The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, p. 337)." After listing several classic rationalizations for Christians' ignoring and/or disobeying Jesus' peace teachings throughout church history, Anderson writes: "These attempts to accommodate force and violence in an otherwise Christian ethic betray a profound misunderstanding of Jesus' teaching about the character of God's reign (p. 110)." (Richard Hays says about the entire sweep of the New Testament: "Thus, from Matthew to Revelation we find a consistent witness against violence and a calling to the community to follow the example of Jesus in *accepting* suffering rather than *inflicting* it (*The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, p. 332).")

Anderson proceeds to discuss seven essentials of Jesus' teachings about peace. They are, in summary: 1. to love unconditionally; 2. to love even enemies; 3. to renounce the right to revenge and to demonstrate a spirit of exceeding generosity; 4. to seek first the kingdom of God and its righteousness; 5. to turn the values of the world upside down; 6. to embrace the cross; and 7. to be peacemakers. In a footnote, Anderson summarizes an independently done similar list in Glen Stassen's *Just Peacemaking: Transforming Initiatives for Justice and Peace*. (This is also an outstanding study!)

He then discusses "Jesus' Third Way", drawing on the superb work of Walter Wink (along similar lines to Stassen's) in *Violence and Nonviolence in South Africa: Jesus' Third Way* (New Society, 1987), and *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Fortress, 1992). Over against the "fight" (just war) or "flight" (passive pacifism) options usually adduced in response to Jesus, Anderson holds out for a third way of "nonviolent, redemptive engagement of the powers that be (p. 119)."

The author summarizes Wink's key insights into Jesus' teachings about violence thus: "When one responds violently to violence, evil wins a double victory. First, its essential nature remains unexposed and thereby it prolongs its life. Second, it succeeds in seducing those with good intentions into its way. History is full of examples of revolutionaries [and "legitimate" democracies!] who became what they had originally hated: oppressors (p. 119)." One could list the 1999 Balkans War, the 1991 Gulf War, and the Vietnam War as classic examples. Anderson suggests there are no exceptions, never any "just" wars or revolutions. He writes: "...Christians' willingness to engage in warfare denies the core content of the gospel..." (p. 125, emphasis added)." Hays writes likewise: "... the New Testament offers no basis for ever declaring Christian participation in war 'just'. (*The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, p. 341)."

Three further headings detail “Problems with Jesus’ Teachings on Peace”, “The Way of Discipleship and the Way of the Cross”, and a summary “Findings” of the entire discussion. The author concludes the essay with these powerful words: “Following Jesus may increase our suffering, but we may be assured that if we are crucified with him we will also be raised with him. This is history’s final paradox and the basis of the Christian peacemaker’s hope (p. 130).”

Richard Hays summarizes succinctly the implications of Anderson’s conclusions: “One reason that the world finds the New Testament’s message of peacemaking and love of enemies incredible is that the church is so massively faithless. On the question of violence, the church is deeply compromised and committed to nationalism, violence, and idolatry. (By comparison, our problems with sexual sin are trivial.)... Only when the church renounces the way of violence will people see what the Gospel means, because then they will see the way of Jesus reenacted in the church... The meaning of the New Testament’s teaching on violence will become evident only in communities of Jesus’ followers who embody the costly way of peace (*The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, pp. 343 & 344).”

The entire book is well worth study by a Sunday School class or home group. It just may succeed in helping redirect a historically one-sided “peace with God” spirituality that generally leaves peacemaking with the neighbour near, and certainly the enemy afar, out of the spiritual equation. There are, after all, *two* Great Commandments!

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ii quoted in Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, p. 319