

WAR AND HELL – and Exception-Clause Footnote Theology

By Wayne Northey

War and hell are inextricably interlinked in Christian history and theology. Below are some thoughts about both, with relation to a movie and a book.

I. *The Christian and War: Reflections on “Saving Private Ryan”*

“War is hell”, observed American Civil War General William Tecumseh Sherman¹. And Steven Spielberg dipped us right into its fiery midst in his 1998 summer release.

War is indeed hell. Yet, in the long history of the Christian Church, apart from the earliest era, every war engaged in throughout Christendom has been supported by the Church on both sides of the conflict. How in the name of Jesus can this be? One may rightly ask about interpretation of Jesus’ teaching: How have Christians done a seeming end run around Jesus’ and other New Testament teachings in relation to destruction of external state enemies in war, and to destruction of domestic enemies in state executions?² Let’s see how exception clauses are at work in some classic Gospel statements:

¹ He wrote:

If the people raise a howl against my barbarity and cruelty, I will answer war is war...

War is cruelty, and you cannot refine it... War is hell.

War is also chillingly *banal*. A century ago, my wife’s forebear, Private Joseph “Goldie”

Fairholm, wrote in a one-time long-lost personal diary on January 1, 1917:

As usual made our New Years Resolutions. But they were a good deal different to those of my past years. To kill as many Huns as I had the chance. And I have made up my mind to return safely from “doing my bit.”

“*To kill as many Huns as I had the chance.*” How indeed chilling! How matter-of-fact! How banal! He was of course just “doing his bit” for Canada, and for all the *good guys*, “to make the world *safe* for democracy” (President Woodrow Wilson – and every subsequent President). To accomplish that, he had unfortunately to make the world lethally *unsafe* for those “Huns”; to exterminate the enemies like vermin; to commit merciless, brutal mass murder...

Fairholm fulfilled both resolutions. But the former was not learned as “all he needed to know” (Robert Fulghum) in any Edmonton Canada kindergarten, where he had likely been taught to know and do better...

And: the world has *not* been safe since; above all *from U.S. Empire* and its allies, including Canada. *Not at all*. (But of course they/we are the “good guys” in Western mythology.)

American Empire has in fact wreaked untold carnage across the world throughout the 20th century, into the 21st and counting. As Roman historian Tacitus wrote so long ago: “To plunder, butcher, steal, these things they misname empire; they make a desolation and call it peace/[democracy].” According to *Global Research*, the “**US Has Killed More Than 20 Million People in 37 ‘Victim Nations’ Since World War II**”. (See:

<http://www.globalresearch.ca/us-has-killed-more-than-20-million-people-in-37-victim-nations-since-world-war-ii/5492051>, last accessed April 9, 2017.) Yet this very day as I write (April 9, 2017), Joseph Fairholm and many other Canadians with him are being celebrated in Edmonton and at Vimy France for their mass murdering at Vimy Ridge. (See: <http://globalnews.ca/tag/goldie-fairholm/>, last accessed April 9, 2017.)

Likewise psychopaths of all descriptions have throughout history made and carried out similar resolutions against their enemies – always of course justified. Likewise “Mob” family members and cohorts have performed such favours for their bosses – always of course justified. Likewise... One could go on and on. It’s ever *the same banal scapegoating script*. (See René Girard below.)

Until humanity changes the script to “*Love your enemies*”, the sheer “banality of evil”, as [Hannah Arendt](#) used the term for Nazi concentration camps, will never cease arising in justification of endless immolation of victims.

² A few comments on the New Testament of the State:

- The state in the New Testament is worlds away from the contemporary state. New Testament scholar N. T. Wright (1990) discusses those differences, as well as Romans 13:1 – 7.
- There is growing consensus amongst scholars that:

Love your enemies [except state enemies] (Matthew 5, Luke 6).

So in everything [except in war and capital punishment], do to others [except enemies - see Matthew 5:43ff] what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 7:12).

... 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor [except your enemies] as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments (Matthew 22:37-40).

Jesus seems to indicate that the entire ethical teaching of the Hebrew Scriptures is summed up by “*Love God... Love neighbour*”? One wonders: What of all the violence at God’s command in those very Scriptures? Are they in Jesus “found and replaced” by the ethic of love?

What of other New Testament voices?

Paul: *Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another [except enemies], for he who loves his fellowman [except enemies] has fulfilled the law. The commandments, 'Do not commit adultery,' 'Do not murder [except enemies],' 'Do not steal,' 'Do not covet,' and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: 'Love your neighbor [except enemies] as yourself.' Love does no harm to its neighbor [except enemies]. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law (Romans 13:8-10).*

James: *“If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbor [except your enemies] as yourself,' you are doing right (James 2:8).”*

John: *“We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother [except his (non-Christian?) enemies], he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother [except his enemies], whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother [except his enemies] (I John 4:19-21).”*

It is fair to ask: What kind of exegetical gymnastics have been utilized to dodge such New Testament testimony? Is not the New Testament “face” of Jesus both in sayings attributed to him, and in other writers’ inspiration from him *univocally nonviolent*?

“Jesus’ way is the key to the interpretation. Romans 13:1 – 7 is about owing nothing but love to enemies, including the Roman government, and making peace with them; it is not about approving killing people (Stassen and Gushee, 2003, p. 207).” The Romans 13 passage, according to Stassen and Gushee,

... was not teaching about the death penalty [or war] but [Paul] was urging his readers to pay their taxes and not to participate in a rebellion against Nero’s new tax (*ibid*, p. 207).

William Cavanaugh has written extensively about the Church and the modern state. In two of his books (2009 and 2011), he claims that the modern state has displaced the Church as a kind of religion unto itself, one that claims ultimate allegiance to it; and one that elicits giving one’s life and killing for. He denotes that as idolatry, and calls on the Church in many respects, not least in the state’s claimed sole prerogative to do (lethal) violence, to be significantly nuanced in its relationship to the modern state. See my book reviews here:

<http://waynenorthey.com/book-review/the-myth-of-religious-violence-and-migrations-of-the-holy/>.

New Testament scholar Richard Hays writes in his massive study *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*:

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 nonviolence] of the New Testament canon and the apparently countervailing forces of *tradition, reason, and experience* (1996, p. 341, emphasis in original).

He writes further:

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* (*ibid*, p. 337).

Again:

Although the *tradition* of the first three centuries was decidedly pacifist in orientation, Christian *tradition* from the time of Constantine to the present has predominantly endorsed war, or at least justified it under certain conditions. Only a little reflection will show that the classic just war criteria (just cause, authorized by legitimate ruler, reasonable prospect of success, just means of conduct in war, and so forth) are—as [Karl] Barth realized—neither derived nor derivable from the New Testament; they are formulated through a process of reasoning that draws upon natural-law traditions far more heavily than upon biblical warrants. It is not possible to use the just war tradition as a hermeneutical device for illuminating the New Testament, nor have the defenders of the tradition ordinarily even attempted to do so (*ibid*, p. 341).

The Christian tradition for all but its earliest centuries has apparently on the issue of resort to violence been unfaithful to Jesus.

Hays asserts:

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 (*ibid*, p. 343).

The most extensive study to date on *eirene* (peace) in the New Testament is Willard Swartley's *Covenant of Peace* (2006). For sake of space I will only cite from a review of it by Richard Hays under the heading "The heart of the gospel":

Willard Swartley's powerful, comprehensive study of the theme of peace in the New Testament is his magnum opus. Swartley describes the book as a study of a single neglected theme in scripture and offers it as "a companion volume to texts in New Testament theology and ethics." But this volume is something much more. Not just an overgrown dictionary article on *eirene* in the New Testament, it is nothing less than a comprehensive theology of the New Testament presenting peace as the heart of the gospel message and the ground of the New Testament's unity (Hays, 2007).

The problem seems not to be what the New Testament text says. There is only so much elasticity that might allow for other than what is there: *univocal nonviolence*. The problem is a kind of (mixing languages) *sola Realpolitik*: "the way things are/must be above all" – as final appeal to authority. Protestant Christians at least since the Reformation have surely appealed to this as creed before *sola Scriptura* when it comes to political outworking of their faith. Roman Catholic

and Orthodox Christians also obviate the New Testament text through similar circumnavigation. Does this not strike one as failure of Gospel imagination and courage (contrasted with Gandhi for instance)? Is it perhaps the ultimate Christian political sin?

One asks: Is it possible that all the New Testament witnesses, Jesus included, did not read their Old Testaments? Or is it likelier that many Christians have not read their New Testaments? Are John 1 and Hebrews 1 *not* really in the Bible, both of which point to the primacy of Jesus as the final revelation of God's way, our central hermeneutical guide?:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it (John 1:1-5).

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe (Hebrews 1:1-2).

There is majesty in the King James Version of John 3:16:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

This is conservative Christians' most cited Gospel text, mine too having been raised in "quintessential fundamentalism", as historian Ernest Sandeen designates Plymouth Brethrenism³. I discovered only later to my shock that apparently John 3:16 has a reprised footnote inserted into so many Christians' Bibles – what one could call a *footnote/exception clause theology* at work in the text. It is never stated out loud, however. But it is observably no less binding dogma. After "world", "whosoever", "perish" and "life" the footnote reads: "except our enemies". They must in fact be exterminated – and be relegated to hell (whom as God's enemies Christians are to hate with a pure zeal, so claims Larry Dixon, whose sad book is reviewed below)! Yet, I was always taught in my upbringing it was the "Liberals", so-claimed masters of the exception clause and footnote theology, who played fast and loose with Scripture...⁴

Watching Spielberg's film, with the overwhelming random slaughter and maiming⁵, it occurred to me again that *war is the most complete inversion of evangelism imaginable!* Not good seed, but bullets and bombs and all manner of ordnance are scattered with intentional abandon, thereby utterly inverting the evangelistic mandate. One means "*life abundant*", the other delivers "*death indiscriminate*".

In excess of 110 millions have been annihilated in largely Church-endorsed wars this past century alone. I doubt if all evangelists worldwide for the entire 20th century, perhaps for the entire Christian era, could add up their collective "catch" to match that massive harvest of death and devastation. Yet, most evangelists, certainly throughout the Protestant era, in their work of "saving souls" have supported the unspeakable carnage. *Is this not profoundly disturbing?! What*

³ See Sandeen (2008).

⁴ John Alexander ironically dedicated 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."

⁵ Another, perhaps the most famous anti-war movie of all time, *All Is Quiet On the Western Front*, that won the Academy Award for Best Picture in 1930, and is based on the novel by the same title (German: *Im Westen Nichts Neues*, by Erich Maria Remarque), puts the same horror forward masterfully.

could be more anti-Christian, anti-Christ? Why has hardly any major evangelistic voice ever spoken out – and very few theologians?

On the contrary, many evangelists, and most military chaplains, have preached to the troops at war in hopes to see them “made right with God” *since tomorrow they might die*.

But when have those same evangelists and chaplains heeded Jesus by preaching the Gospel, *lest tomorrow they might kill*? How can their converts or the “converters” be right with God when they destroy/endorse destruction of, the neighbour; including the cosmological order of God’s Good Creation? Or can “love of brother/sister” somehow be twisted to mandate “slaughter of enemies”? And is such twisting the work of God or another’s work (à la Genesis 3:11 ff: “*Did God really say...*”)? Do evangelists and chaplains know better than Jesus? Did not Jesus always call for death of self, never death of the other?

Are there not two “Great Commandments”, not just one? Is not love of God, peace with God (Billy Graham’s famous book title), only half the Gospel – and when only half, a kind of heresy⁶ (false choice/direction)? What of Paul’s declaration?:

⁶ My good lawyer/journalist friend Flynn Ritchie quite challenges me on my use of this term, which he claims is “religiously loaded”. I agree that it is. I use it *deliberately* however in one of its Greek meanings: “**that which is chosen, a chosen course of thought and action** (*Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance*).” In my use, I mean it was a purposeful *false/aberrant* course chosen by the post-Constantinian Church in accepting full embrace by the newly “converted” Emperor Constantine in A.D. 313.

I use it *deliberately* as well because, since the era of Constantine, the Church in all its branches (arguably) charted a course so dramatically off course *away* from Christ’s teachings about peace/peacemaking/nonviolence, that it must be named for what it in my view is: a *Christian heresy*. (Even if one can identify many mitigating circumstances, not least that for the first time in its history, the early Church not only had a tolerant, non-persecuting Emperor in relation to Christian faith, it had one who actually embraced the faith – so thought at least – and offered its leadership significant political governance positions eventually throughout the realm. Within a century, Emperor Theodosius declared Christianity to be the only legitimate religion in the realm, thereby paving the way for a subsequent horror story of varying intensity, geographic location, and history, by the Church. (Thank God, that is not the only story about the Church!)

Sadly and in my view mistakenly, a host of theologians like Dixon and Packer have followed this arguably *wrong way* over the centuries such that it is long since viewed by them and a majority of theologians, as the *only “orthodox” way*, and directly derivative from Christ’s teaching. Such embrace of violence towards the state’s international enemies (*just war*), God’s enemies (*just hell of eternal conscious torment*), and by the 11th century (see Berman (1985) and Goringe (1996)) the state’s domestic enemies (*just deserts*), is of course in my understanding errant theology. Hence again for me the legitimate designation: *Christian heresy*.

A significant case is made in this respect by Alistair Kee (1982). See a fuller citation from Kee on this later in the essay. See also footnote 24 below, with reference to the justice trilogy of *just war*, *just hell*, and *just deserts*. This interpretation of post-Constantinian Christianity is variously widely affirmed. An out-of-print (though see here for obtaining the full (huge) text:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/235912121_The_Early_Church_and_the_World_A_History_of_the_Christian_Attitude_to_Pagan_Society_and_the_State_Down_to_the_Time_of_Constantinus)

comprehensive study that makes this case in meticulous detail is by C. J. Cadoux: *The Early Church and the World* (1925). In it he argues, I believe undeniably, for the existence of a largely nonviolent (at least) early Church – based on the New Testament, but by extension during much and most of the pre-Constantinian era. Of course too: when a religious group is a minority, it is not easy for it to engage in violence without consequence; and it is obviously in no position of power to influence the “state” – with acknowledgement of anachronism here – in the use or otherwise of violence. And when the Church was fully embraced by Emperor Constantine, it undeniably easily “transitioned” (if it did at all – there was for instance no recorded Church Council that met to debate the issue) to blessing state violence.

My somewhat cynical view of most historians of the early Church on this issue is: *they largely tend to*

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds (2 Corinthians 10:3-4).

Is war not a kind of supreme “worldliness”, a “total depravity”, according to the New Testament? How can something so patently anti-Christian be so blessed by so many Christians throughout so many centuries? One must wonder: What kind of brainwashing, what potent spell, what deafness and blindness, are at work here?

Is it possible that on this issue we have for centuries tended to be equally blind as another group of believers to whom Jesus said?:

Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. Yet because I tell the truth, you do not believe me (John 8:43-45)!

(Tragically however this very text, so in an “anti-Christ” manner, throughout European history was used against the “Jews” in paroxysms of recurring violence perpetrated against them in Jesus’ name.⁷)

Now the truth that sets us free (John 8:32) is obedience to God’s will summed up in the two “Great Commandments” (Matthew 22; Mark 12; I John): love of God and love of neighbour. As believers, failure to love in this way is to invite Jesus’ warning:

*Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but **only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven**. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’ Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine **and puts them into practice** is like a wise man who built his house on the rock (Matthew 7:21-24).”*

And what is God’s will, and what are Jesus’ words in textual context?: living out the Sermon on the Mount, living out love.

Can it be, that after all, many proclaimed followers/imitators, of Jesus are in fact not? At least: they are not following or imitating Jesus in his commitment to/practice of loving nonviolence? Is it possible that many Christians who claim “...not I, but Christ... (Galatians 2:20, KJV)” on the contrary embrace religious nepotism, of which patriotism is perhaps its most hideous expression?⁸ For all conservative Christians’ protestations, despite claimed supreme allegiance to what “The Bible says!” (Billy Graham’s all-time favourite expression; as was (footnoted) John 3:16 his all-time favourite text), do they

follow theologically/ideologically/“historiographically” what their already pre-disposed beliefs affirm – about violence/nonviolence. Sigh... For a balanced review of this issue in the academy until 2007, see: <https://apholt.com/2014/11/09/early-christian-pacifism/>, last accessed July 1, 2017. And since I am neither historian nor scholar, I defer to hopefully ever more enlightening historical work about attitudes to/practices of violence (by soldiers, for instance) in this era.

⁷ However, Wes Howard-Brook deals enlighteningly with the issue of “Jews/Judeans” here: <http://www.tikkun.org/tikkundaily/2014/07/01/jews-judeans-and-the-gospel-of-john-a-response-to-adele-reinhartz/#more-48782>.

⁸ There is no space to go into this, but William Cavanaugh’s two books, *The Myth of Religious Violence* (2009), and *Migrations of the Holy: God, State, and the Political Meaning of the Church* (2011), explore masterfully the supplanting of the Church’s claim of allegiance on every member, over against the modern state.

in the end dismiss it like the “Liberals”? Have many Christians been far closer to the spirit of Pharisaism⁹, one of murderous prevarication, than they ever dare admitting (John 8)? Does this spirit not directly contradict the “*weightier matters of the law*”: love of God and neighbour (Matthew 23:23, echoing Micah 6:8)?

Was Gandhi right?: “The only people on earth who do not see Christ and His teachings as nonviolent are Christians.” Is it thinkable that Bible-believing Christians stand in danger one day of hearing Jesus’ words: “ ‘...*Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels* (Matthew 25:41).’ ”, for “... ‘*I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these [except our enemies?], you did not do for me* (Matthew 25:45).’ ” Is that not “hell”: the failure/refusal to love (Jesus in) the neighbour and the enemy (Matthew 5 - 7, Luke 6, I John 4)?

War is indeed hell. In the movie, Captain John Miller comments: “For every man I kill, the further I get from home.” Of course! A Nazi defendant at the post-War Nuremberg Trials said: “You have defeated us Nazis. But the spirit of Nazism has arisen like a Phoenix amongst you.” Precisely! Do we not invariably become what we hate (since we already are that latently)? One need only casually peruse two books by William Blum, *Rogue State: A Guide to the World’s Only Superpower* (2000), and *Killing Hope: U.S. Military and CIA Interventions Since World War II* (1998), or a great mass of other witnesses¹⁰, to discover the wrenching truth of that challenge. But like Christian counterparts during the Nazi German era, one would rather not be exposed to such chilling truth.

When the U.S. dropped the first nuclear bomb on Hiroshima, and obliterated/wounded instantaneously 135,000 lives; then three days later 65,000 thousand more were slaughtered or scorched in Nagasaki (in sheer death-dealing magnitude rendering completely miniscule the Oklahoma City bombing April 19, 1995 by Timothy McVeigh, who was executed by the U.S. federal government; or the terrorist attacks against the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, September 11, 2001, or any terrorist attack before or since), President Harry Truman declared: “That was the greatest event in human history!” This from a lay Baptist preacher and Sunday School teacher... Astounding! What, in God’s name, could be a more blatant denial of the Resurrection than those bombs and that statement?! Christians claim *the Resurrection alone is the greatest event in human history!* And it means the absolute inversion of all forms of state-sanctioned murder: rather life abundant and everlasting. What business did that Bible-believing Christian have in so utterly contradicting the very centrepiece of Christian faith? Though from a different context, it is not inappropriate that Truman became known by the slogan: “Give ‘em Hell, Harry!” *Tragically, he did.*

And what business did the vast majority of Bible-believing Christians have at the time in cheering Truman on? And do not the vast majority of Bible-believing Christians still applaud the continued development of post-War weaponry and its deployment, which, in fiscal year 2015, as you

⁹ Douglas Frank specifically claims that (American) “Evangelicals” have indeed embraced the spirit of Pharisaism more than any other contemporary Christian tradition. See his *Less Than Conquerors* (1986/2009).

¹⁰ The most recent of which I know is: *The Violent American Century: War and Terror Since World War II* (2017).

What could the reallocation of global military spending achieve?

The annual cost of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a share of total global military expenditure in 2015.

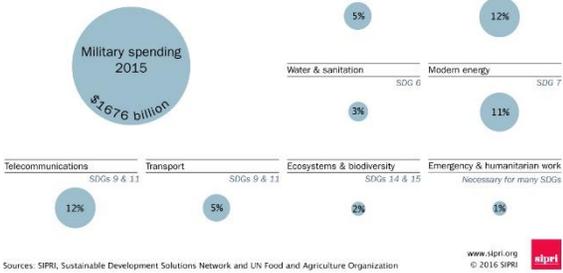


Figure 1: Juxtaposition of 2015 world military expenditures with estimated costs as share of military expenditures in numerous "love-of-neighbour/enemy" areas of need worldwide.

see in the chart, was \$1.676US trillion – and countless lives for whom Christ died snuffed out? (In 2015 the U.S. accounted for 36% of world spending on the military: \$596US billion.)¹¹ *Where are the leading Christian voices opposing this anti-Christ obscenity? Why, in Jesus' name, are they silent?*

Home, Captain Miller observes, at last is where love is. Where God is. Its opposite is hell. So hell is also war! For hell is in the end the obstinate refusal to love God and neighbour; the endless attempt at doing end runs around the two Great Commandments. The biblical deductive logic is: *the only test case for love of God is love of neighbour (I John 4). And the test case for love of neighbour is love of enemies (Matthew 5 - 7, Luke*

6). *Failure to love the enemy is therefore failure to love God – is choosing hell.*

Spielberg indeed gets it right: war is hell, and (in this case) hell is war. Chillingly, unconscionably, unimaginably, yet apparently, the vast majority of Bible-believing, God-fearing, self-proclaimed "Christ-centred" Christians past and present wholeheartedly endorse such pure hell!

The simple question begs asking: *What business have Christians ever had propagating hell?* The tragic question is: *Who of such ilk, from Martin Luther to John Calvin, from D.L. Moody to Billy Sunday, from Saint Augustine to Billy Graham¹², from Francis Schaeffer to J.I. Packer, has sanctioned other than hell?*

In response to a version of the above material, I received this terse response from a Christian Editor:

Hi, Wayne-sorry to take so long to get back to you this time around. We decided not to use your article for reasons of length (too long!), style (too many rhetorical questions) and tone (too harsh). My simple addition to why it was rejected: "... and argument (too true)".

I wonder when this particular Editor last read Matthew 23? Or if she had ever perused (Evangelical author) Douglas Frank's earlier mentioned *Less Than Conquerors: How Evangelicals Entered the Twentieth Century* (1986) – especially Frank's haunting Epilogue proposing the modern-day Pharisees were conservative Christians; profoundly self-deceived as in Jeremiah 17:9?

In another context, J.I. Packer wrote in the Foreword to Larry Dixon's book discussed below on the issue of hell:

¹¹ See the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) website: <https://www.sipri.org/>; source for image: <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/blog/2016/opportunity-cost-world-military-spending>.

¹² Billy Graham eventually became a "nuclear pacifist". Presumably, the sheer mass murder capacity of such ordnance put it "over the top" for him. One wonders: just how few people for him and others killed by conventional weaponry is "under the top"? And given the limitless trajectory towards development of ever more lethal weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), just what threshold on numbers maimed and killed by WMDs might there be for such as Graham? When considered this way, the absurdity of Christians condemning some WMDs (nuclear) while condoning others (conventional) is surely patent, or at best morally casuistic?

It is suggested that the Bible is unclear, or incoherent, or inconsistent, or untrustworthy, when it speaks of the outcome of judgment after death, or alternatively that virtually the whole church has for two thousand years misunderstood the texts. I do not think so¹³ ... (Dixon, 1992, p. 7).

Yet this very phenomenon of misunderstanding the texts, so eloquently presented by Richard Hays, so compellingly exegeted by Willard Swartley, so dismissed by Dr. Packer, *seems precisely the reality when war is at issue*. Why should it not be surprising therefore that hell should for two thousand years likewise have been misunderstood? Especially when “war is hell”, and *vice versa*. One may ask with terror, horror and revulsion: *Just what “face” of Jesus has the Church been seeing since the era of Emperor Constantine?*¹⁴

With that terrifying question in mind, I am struck by the thesis of *Constantine versus Christ: The Triumph of Ideology* (Kee, 1982). The author writes:

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. And this is the greatest irony, that Constantine achieved by kindness what his predecessors had not been able to achieve by force. Without a threat or a blow, and all unsuspecting, the Christians were led into captivity and their religion transformed into a new imperial cult... 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 (Kee, 1982, p. 154).

The writer adds that:

...the reign of Constantine is a fundamental turning-point in the history of Europe, and not only Europe. From that time the imperial ideology, with all its implications for the accumulation of wealth and the exercise of power over the weak, was given religious legitimation by the Church (Kee, 1982, p. 168).

The *persecuted* Church too easily became the *persecuting* Church in its response to pagans, Jews, other outsiders, all rivals dubbed “heretics”, external enemies, and eventually domestic state enemies: criminals (see below). There has ever since been (*thankfully not only*) a tragic Church legacy of violence.¹⁵

“The corruption of the best is the worst”, Ivan Illich has taught in *The Corruption of Christianity and Rivers North of the Future* (Cayley, 2000; 2005). Is this what has happened since the fourth century when the cross was inverted from a sign of foolishness/weakness (I Corinthians 1:18ff) to a symbol of state power? (This became the sword of Peter *wielded* by the Church in endorsement of the state, of Empire/colonialism, etc., after all, despite for the Church Jesus’ definitive sheathing it (John 18:11), as Tertullian observed. “*If only!*” one can plaintively exclaim!)

¹³ Packer makes it clear here that the church can surely *not* be wrong for two thousand years in its theology about hell. Yet he virulently subscribes to Reformation orthodoxy that claims “that virtually the whole church” *had theologically been wrong in many areas for one thousand five hundred years*; and still is in its Roman Catholic and Orthodox expressions wrong to this day and counting. Is that not casuistry?

¹⁴ One of the protagonists in my novel, *Chrysalis Crucible* (2015, <https://waynenorthey.com/chrysalis-crucible/>, last accessed November 15, 2017), reacts in this very way (chapter 76) as the searing horror of Christianity’s mercilessly violent past sinks in.

¹⁵ Please see the recent publication by Wes Howard-Brook, *Empire Baptized: How the Church What Jesus Rejected 2nd - 5th Centuries* (2016).

Can it be that mainly another “(anti-)Christ” has been seen and projected by much of Christendom, instead of the face of Jesus? Unthinkable (Dr. Packer)? Then why do Protestants almost slavishly honour the Reformation? And what was one of the Reformation watchwords?: *Ecclesia semper reformanda*. The Church must always reform itself: must ever seek to see Jesus anew and aright.

It must amongst other things rediscover the *anthropological* thrust of the Gospel, brilliantly presented in René Girard’s *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (2001) and a vast array of related publications by and about him and his insights¹⁶.

And if the Church has after all seen and shown for centuries another Christ with reference to the enemy? *Then it must repent and rediscover a Jesus that it largely never knew*. Else the Church perpetuates *heresy* (again, in this context, heresy means *wrong choice/direction*). It embraces hell. It rejects Jesus, while all the time protesting vociferous allegiance to him. It is otherwise the naked Emperor and his sycophants in *The Emperor’s New Clothes* (2001). It needs instead to “*clothe [itself] with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience* (Col 3:12).” – in other words “*with Christ*”¹⁷, in particular towards the enemy.

II. *The Christian and Hell: Theological Moorings of Violence in the Image of God*

The doctrine of hell necessarily arises in the context of a Christian consideration of violence. For a theological discussion of violence inevitably brings one to the most extreme instance of violence in God, if the traditional, most dominant, Western doctrine of hell is indeed “biblical” – namely, *eternal conscious punishment of the unbeliever*. I will discuss this by interacting with *The Other Side of the Good News* by Larry Dixon (1992/2003)¹⁸.

The central conclusion of the book in the author’s words is:

that there is an “adequacy [in] the traditional view of hell... and that alternative views do not adequately reflect the scriptural data concerning hell (p. 172)...

However, he acknowledges:

Pointing out the weaknesses in the three alternative positions to hell does not in itself prove the truth of the *traditional eternal conscious punishment view* (p. 173, emphasis added).

Dixon continues at that point to:

set out four areas in which the traditional position enjoys biblical, as well as rational, support, after allowing that the traditional view “might also be erroneous (p. 173).”

I shall return to that possibility.

¹⁶ See Williams (1996) for an extensive introduction to, and bibliography on, Girard. See Bailie (1995) for a contemporary cultural application of Girard’s anthropology. See Williams (1991), Alison (1993; 1996; 1997), and Bellinger (2001), for sustained theological presentations of the anthropological thrust of the Gospel. See Girard (2001) for an anthropological presentation of scapegoating theory with reference to the New Testament. Finally, see this website, with its myriad links: <http://violenceandreligion.com/> (last accessed July 1, 2017), for understanding all human culture as foundationally *scapegoating*, the Hebrew Scriptures in recurring travail to break free from such a dynamic, and the revelation of Christ seen to finally subvert *scapegoating violence* in favour of *love*.

¹⁷ See my essay on the implications of “*clothing oneself with/putting on Christ*”, “Christianity and the Subversion of Just About Everything!” here: <http://waynenorthey.com/christianity-and-the-subversion-of-just-about-everything/>.

¹⁸ Dixon wrote a kind of sequel entitled: “*Farewell, Rob Bell*”: *A Biblical Response to Love Wins*, with a book cover image that for the life of me appears to be a chilling kind of Evangelical *fatwa* against Rob Bell. (See: https://www.amazon.ca/dp/B00564HX0A/ref=dp-kindle-redirect?_encoding=UTF8&btcr=1, last accessed July 1, 2017.) My response is here: <https://waynenorthey.com/book-review/farewell-rob-bell/>, last accessed July 1, 2017.

Widely read evangelical author J. I. Packer in the Foreword underscores the author's conclusions, as now more fully cited than earlier, thus:

To believe what the Bible appears to say about human destiny apart from the grace of God is a bitter pill indeed, and no one should wonder that attempts are made to explore alternative understandings of God's revelation on this topic. It is suggested that the Bible is unclear, or incoherent, or inconsistent, or untrustworthy, when it speaks of the outcome of judgment after death, or alternatively that virtually the whole church has for two thousand years misunderstood the texts. I do not think so, nor does Dr. Dixon... For one I am grateful for his work, and commend it to all who are willing to be biblically rational on this sombre subject (p. 7).

The implication is clear throughout the book and from Dr. Packer's words: one is simply *unbiblical* to deny the traditional view that *hell is eternal conscious punishment for all unbelievers who fail to accept Jesus Christ as personal Saviour this side of death*. As the author says at the end of the Introduction:

May we be ready to pay [the] price to bring lost people to Christ so that they won't spend eternity on *The Other Side of the Good News* (p. 14).

Dixon spends the bulk of the book refuting three alternative views. In his words:

Some today suggest that all without exception will be saved, whether they want to be or not (*universalism*, discussed in chapter 2). Others argue that hell is God's consuming of the wicked (*annihilationism*, addressed in chapter 3), not His eternally tormenting them. Still others hold forth the hope that death is not the end of opportunity for redemption, but perhaps a door to future chances for salvation (*post-mortem conversion*, the subject of chapter 4) (p. 13, emphasis in original).

The author does not wince at taking on theological heavyweights such as Karl Barth, C. H. Dodd, and Nels Ferré (all described by Dixon as outside evangelical orthodoxy). He also challenges evangelical heavyweight theologians such as Clark Pinnock, John Stott, and Donald Bloesch. Dixon in particular bemoans the erosion of evangelical theology as seen in these and other evangelical leaders' views of the traditional doctrine of hell. He writes:

The evangelical Christian, who can't forget hell, often seems, in boxing terms, to be "up against the ropes."

He describes the buffeting such an evangelical Christian endures from the cults who scorn hell, and writes:

He then returns to his corner for some encouragement and promptly receives several left hooks from his own manager.... One is hardly surprised that some young fighters for the faith seem ready to throw in the towel (p. 149).

His plea is poignant, however misplaced. One can feel his pain as a fighter for the faith "once delivered" at this sense of betrayal. Throughout much of the final chapter, he critiques in particular Clark Pinnock, whom Dixon quotes on p. 149:

"[E]verlasting torment is intolerable from a moral point of view because it makes God into a bloodthirsty monster who maintains an everlasting Auschwitz for victims whom He does not even allow to die."

Dixon's dilemma is clearly stated:

Obviously, no follower of Christ wants to be guilty of presenting God as one more heinous than Hitler. However, if the Bible is clear on this issue, the Christian must *not* throw in the towel (pp. 149 & 150, emphasis in the original).

And the author proceeds to present God in his holy hatred of sinners precisely in those terms: *as one more heinous than Hitler!*

The crucial conditional fulcrum for the entire thesis is Dixon's statement: "if the Bible is clear on this issue". Dixon and Packer, and indeed a host of Christian voices throughout the ages (though with significant exceptions in every age – some of whom are adduced by Dixon), say the Bible contains indeed precisely such clarity about hell *as a place of eternal conscious punishment*.

I am compelled to respond to Dixon's work because of my own vocation: since 1974 I have worked in criminal justice, and have wrestled from the outset with trying to think Christianly God's justice thoughts after him, in particular with reference to judgment and punishment, including the doctrine of hell. In such endeavor, I have become convinced over the years that:

God's justice is predominantly, and normatively, redemptive or restorative in intention (Chris Marshall, 1999.)

How can one however presume to fault Dixon's conclusions shared, as Packer rightly indicates, by majority Western Christians throughout church history (though not by Eastern Orthodoxy¹⁹)?



Figure 2

An unusual picture (see Figure 2) was once circulated around our Church when I was a kid. I remember it well. It can be found on the Internet now, and is the image you see. The brief notation²⁰ below the picture explained that a man had been travelling along the highway after a pristine snowfall sparkled its brightness everywhere under a glorious sun. At one point he stopped, and noticed an unusual play of shadow against the backdrop of the freshly fallen snow. Being an amateur photographer with his own dark room, he took out his camera and snapped a few pictures of the arresting phenomenon. He was astounded when, upon developing them, one in particular displayed an amazing likeness to the artists' traditional depictions of the face of Jesus. We all were invited to see what he saw.

What I saw first however, as did most, were dark blotches against a snow-white background. There was no face of any kind to see. Except there was!

It took some doing, some adjusting, but finally I got it! I saw the face too.

Then, what was fascinating after that was, no matter how I looked at the picture, sideward glance, upside down, back to front, even when held against a mirror, I never failed immediately to recognize the face of Jesus in that photo.

A related phenomenon is known as an autostereogram.

But some never did see the face. Their eyes simply never adjusted. They even doubted that we who saw really *saw*.

Theology means literally, a word, or words about God. What theology really is about is creating an accurate *word-picture* of God: God's face as it were. Unfortunately, there are no artists' drawings of the real face of Jesus that have come down to us. So we have to (re)discover the face of Jesus metaphorically, and thereby the face of God, we Christians say. The data of Scripture, in

¹⁹ See for instance: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eastern_Orthodox_theology, last accessed November 15, 2017.

²⁰ A variation may be found here: <http://jestkidding.com/kids-corner/jesus-in-the-snow/>, last accessed July 1, 2017.

ongoing dialogue with Christians' interpretations through the ages (Tradition) and our faith community's understandings today all hopefully help us throughout our lives to form an ever sharper image of God.

Once an editor (in his 50's) of a theological piece I had written and was publishing said to me as the task was completed: "I have never been able to shake a picture of God I have had since my childhood. That picture is one of a God who is stern, harsh, totally demanding, punitive, a 'Hangin' Judge' ready to condemn me severely for anything I do wrong, and likely to relegate me to hellfire should I ever so slightly step out of line." He was a Christian, to be sure, and a faithful church-goer, he acknowledged, but he wasn't entirely sure that spending an eternity with such a "god" would not be more like his understanding of hell!

The dilemma one is in can be put as an analogy. The Bible and its interpretation (Tradition) are like an enormous jigsaw puzzle, with a vast number of individual pieces. It, with Tradition are in fact the Ultimate Cosmic Jigsaw Puzzle, Christians believe. I have worked on the kind of jigsaw puzzle I am comparing the Bible to: one with identically shaped pieces. In the puzzle I saw, they were all squares. Now, it was a daunting enough task to put the puzzle together with the box cover picture. But what if there were rival box cover pictures, and centuries long debate about which was the authentic one?

I am suggesting that in Christian hermeneutics one is up against that kind of jigsaw puzzle with competing box cover pictures. I am suggesting that we have no hope of putting the puzzle together without the face of Jesus as interpretative guide. The trick is: to allow the box cover picture as guide, one must already have pieced together a face of Jesus, which in turn informs one's ultimate picture of God. I'm suggesting that it is nonetheless difficult to see the face of Jesus aright. Many are the claims: "*Lo, here is Christ.*" For some, what is seen are only dark blotches. In that case, one does not really "see", as Jesus and the prophets often claimed. Piece together the jigsaw puzzle when one only sees dark blotches, and one's picture of God will turn out differently from doing it with the face of Jesus seen "aright"! There is therefore in the long history of Christian interpretation a hermeneutical dance one ineluctably must participate in.

In my understanding, Dixon and Packer seem to look at a "dark blotches" violently punitive picture of Jesus on a puzzle box cover that was simply the wrong choice of guiding cover (a *heresy* in one of its original Greek meanings, as previously indicated), a failure to "see" Jesus' real face right before their eyes. That box cover differs, in the end profoundly, from the picture of Jesus who exemplified and said:

But love your enemies [except state/church "enemies"?!], do good to them... Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked [except to state/church enemies?]. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful [except to state/church enemies?] (Luke 6:35-36).

Interestingly, Dixon does not once in his book refer to this clarion call of Jesus based upon this "box cover" portrait of who God fundamentally is: *love*. Dixon avers:

One's doctrine of the final judgment of the wicked is a direct reflection of one's doctrine of God (p. 165).

Indeed. One might add: and a reflection of one's person. And one's doctrine or *picture* of God – the box cover – is ultimately seen in Jesus, as mentioned earlier (John 1 and Hebrews 1).

As also quoted earlier, Gandhi said of Christians and nonviolence generally, "The only people on earth who do not see Christ and his teachings as nonviolent are Christians." And, as Richard

Hays has been quoted earlier, *it is possible* for “virtually the whole church” to be wrong (*pace* J.I. Packer). With all due respect, and with profound sadness, it *has* in my view largely been wrong about Christian nonviolence. Dixon’s “traditional doctrine of hell” is a special category of that same majority Christendom misperception. The picture on the box of God in Christ for Dixon is *tragically one of ultimate violence*. I suggest that *only* if “Jesus” is a “dark blotches” box cover can one agree with Dixon’s assertion: “Jesus is our primary source for the [traditional] doctrine of hell (p. 147).” *The nub of the issue is our picture or vision of God in Christ*.

One evangelical New Testament theologian, Christopher Marshall, in reference to hell in a draft manuscript on biblical restorative justice²¹ (my area of ministry), wrote:

Jesus shows that those who think of God in terms of strict distributive or retributive justice *fundamentally misunderstand God* (Matthew 20:1 – 16, 1999, p. 1, emphasis added).

Yet, I suggest, this is the central “dark blotches” misapprehension of the picture on the puzzle cover about God in the book under review. God is depicted as violently retributive towards the wicked. On the contrary, Marshall, in surveying the biblical evidence, writes in the conclusion of his paper:

For our purposes the point to notice is that God’s final word is not retribution but restoration, the re-creation of heaven and earth so that sin, suffering, sickness and death are no more (*ibid*, p. 21).

God’s ultimate word biblically is, indeed, nonviolent, all-inclusive love, which subsumes all biblical categories of wrath, judgment and punishment! *I submit gently, but firmly that, to miss that is to miss, simply, the Good News: in Jesus’ words, to become “twice as much a son of hell” (Matthew 23:15)*. Put starkly: *There is no “other side” of Good News! There is Good News, period!*

The second analogy I mentioned to Dixon is of a document written in Romans script so that an English speaker can read the letters, but does not know a word of the language. It is crucial nonetheless that the reader understand the message in the document. So she phones a friend who speaks the language fluently and reads the document out loud over the phone, seeking an accurate translation. The native language speaker on the phone in exasperation finally says that she can barely understand anything, *for all the accents seem to fall on the wrong syllables!* In reading Dixon’s fifth chapter years ago, and later the entire book, I respectfully submit that *he consistently puts the accents on mainly the wrong biblical syllables*. Again: the ineluctable hermeneutical dance.

One example suffices: Dixon’s *central* (I believe *mis*)*use* in Chapter Five of the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus to discern explicit details about the nature of “eternal punishment” for the wicked. He quotes approvingly one author who says:

while it was not Jesus’ primary intent here to teach us about the nature of the intermediate state, it is unlikely that He would mislead us on this subject (p. 133).

Really? One could likewise assert (and some amazingly do!) that Jesus’ teaching in Luke 14:31 (*Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Will he not first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand?*), endorses war despite his repeated nonviolent call to “*love your enemies*”; or his words to the disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane about two swords being enough (Luke 22:38) was a call for disciples to take up arms despite Matthew 26:52 where Jesus tells Peter to

²¹ Since published. See Marshall (2001)

sheathe his sword (again, “*thereby disarming the church forever*”, commented Church Father Tertullian). Repeatedly, in this reviewer’s estimation, Dixon (and yes, most Christians throughout the ages) puts the accents in the Scriptures he adduces in largely the wrong places.

In this respect, Chris Marshall writes:

But it is crucial to recognize... the *figurative, parabolic nature of the language* used to describe realities which, *ex hypothesi* [in accordance with the proposed hypothesis], lie outside human experience (p. 14).

He then quotes one writer who says:

Such language is ‘figurative and connotative rather than denotative and literalistic’... To imagine some kind of cosmic torture-chamber where the lost suffer endless or prolonged retribution is to miss the figurative, apocalyptic nature of these utterances, as well as the paraenetic or pastoral intention behind them (p. 14).

I contend that Dixon sustains just such a profound misreading of biblical texts throughout his entire book, as sadly does Dr. Packer in his *carte blanche* endorsement of the book; as tragically do great swaths of Christendom.

So Marshall urges with reference to specific details about the fate of those who reject God that perhaps a humble agnosticism is the wisest option... Neither Jesus nor Paul supply specifics about the fate of the wicked, indicates Stephen Travis (1986). *Neither should we.*

And therefore I will not speculate either. I do not have an alternative view. God knows, and that is enough! That Dixon presses the biblical texts beyond what they were meant to reveal seems a singularly consistent fault of his hermeneutic, a *revelation* more about the interpreter than about God. It is so often what non-Christian cults do – ironically enough given his critique of the cults’ critique of traditional Christian teachings on hell.

But Dixon, with Packer’s full endorsement, will have none of this, and writes an entire treatise (and kind of tragic sequel) based upon a consistent misreading of the founding texts. *How can this be?*

A book-length treatment of precisely this issue with reference to misguided Christian retributive views in criminal justice is Timothy Gorringer’s *God’s Just Vengeance* (1996). At one point Gorringer asks, with reference to a pervasive and lengthy Christian tradition of retributive views towards “criminals”:

How is it that the question whether the law might be wrong, or even wicked, does not arise for these good Christian people (p. 5)?

Likewise, 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 at.” Yet almost all Christians have embraced just war and retributive justice theories throughout most of the Christian era. *Why, when they are biblically so unfounded, in fact colossal heresies?*

Similarly, while we both acknowledge that we follow the same Lord and take seriously the Bible, I could wish that Dixon would ponder more what he allows is at least possible, *that biblically the traditional view of hell* “might also be erroneous (p. 173).”

In Jesus’ direct allusions to hell, not once are “unbelievers” in view, but always the religiously self-righteous. As already mentioned a few times, Douglas Frank in *Less Than Conquerors* (1986), characterizes Evangelicalism as centrally prone to Pharisaism. “We are the Pharisees of our time, if

anyone is.”, he writes (p. 229). If Frank is right, can one see the profound irony in Dixon’s Pharisaical thesis?

In this reviewer’s estimation, what is lacking in Dixon’s reading of the biblical texts is a *Gospel imagination overwhelmed by grace*, which leads to a consequent theology of the subversion of all retribution and violence in God and humans. In short: *Christian conversion is wanted*.

Like the White Witch in C.S. Lewis’ *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Dixon seems unaware of the “deeper (James called it “royal” - James 2:8) law” of love on which “*hang all the Law and the Prophets* (Matthew 22:34 - 40).” We sing after all “Amazing Grace”, not “Amazing Justice”, Debbie Morris points out at the end of her gripping story, *Forgiving the Dead Man Walking* (1998)²². *She gets it, Dixon and Packer do not*. Is it woefully that stark? Is this a case of what Jesus often spoke of, for instance in Matthew 13:13ff?:

This is why I speak to them in parables: ‘Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.’

In Dixon’s reading, grace/restorative justice seems to have been arrested mid-stream in favour of a horrible retributive justice for the wicked – which is exactly mercy’s inversion. The author in interpreting Scripture on hell presents like the man in Matthew 18 who was forgiven an overwhelming debt, yet doesn’t get it at all, and withholds forgiveness at the first opportunity! In reality, the text implies that the “forgiven” man apparently didn’t really experience forgiveness, or he would have been forgiving towards even the “*ungrateful and wicked* (Luke 6:35)”. Or Dixon presents like Jonah who becomes furious at God for showing mercy to Nineveh. Yet, Jesus taught, a “*greater [in mercy] than Jonah is here* (Matthew 12:41)!” Or the author sounds like the elder brother in the “Prodigal Father” story (Luke 15:11ff) who just cannot fathom the Father’s unconditional mercy towards the wicked son.

Dixon and Packer seemingly have no categories for a consistent hermeneutic of grace. They consequently miss the message of the Gospel by a “*great gulf fixed*” as wide as that between “Abraham’s bosom” and the Rich Man in Luke 16. In their theology, *God’s grace is for a moment, but his wrath endures forever* (to invert Psalm 30:5; see also Isaiah 54:7 – 8).

As to the second reference just above, Walter Brueggemann (2016) indicates that

The term “abandon” [in these verses] is about divorce. It is the same word we know in the Gospel quote from Psalm 22, “Why have you forsaken?”...

The two verses deeply intertwine divine admission and divine resolve. Two times there is divine admission; two times there is rhetorical reversal. Twice there is “compassion”, first “great compassion” that leads to homecoming, second “in overflowing love.” We are left to wonder how it was that the poet could dare to host such a line of divine decision-making. More than that, we are left to pause over this revolution in God’s own heart. This is, to be sure, a God of overflowing wrath. But more than that! *This is a kind of self-critical reflection that permits Yhwh [sic] to act as a “better self” toward Israel, whether Israel seeks to return or not. Divine compassion is the order of the day* (2016, pp. 91 & 92; emphasis added).

²² She was kidnapped and repeatedly raped by two assailants, whom she subsequently forgave, and she explains thoughtfully in the book what forgiveness means for her.

Of course, in fact, *Divine compassion is the order of the universe – and without limits – time or otherwise!* Psalm 103:8 – 12 attests to that as in a Isaiah 54; similar avowals are found in Psalm 86:1, 2, 4, 6, 16, 17, in Psalm 103:13, and in Isaiah 49:15. Brueggemann comments on these passages:

It is that father, this mother, who meets the desolate in transformative resolve (*ibid*, p. 94, emphasis added).

Wes Howard-Brook (2016) in reading the Church Fathers from the second to the fifth centuries notes how universally the Fathers embraced supersessionism in relation to the Jews. The Church is claimed to have replaced Jews due to their (so the accounts go, often harshly) obstinate unfaithfulness. *It is interesting to note that the doctrine of supersessionism reads like the first significant development of the doctrine of hell in Augustine*²³. *It is also interesting to note that this is profound misreading not only of the Gospels, but of God in relation to Israel! There is no biblical doctrine of eternal “supersessionism”* whereby the Jews are forever banned from God’s covenant love. *There is likewise no biblical doctrine of a “hell of eternal conscious torment”* whereby all humanity is banned forever from God’s covenant love.

It is one thing for Augustine to have misread the Gospels and the Prophets so long ago. It is another that centuries later “theologians” like Dixon and Packer tragically *perpetuate that early Church travesty*. The Jews paid horrifically in the wake of supersessionism’s legacy – at the hands of Christians!²⁴ Humanity has also paid horrifically in a variety of ways – at the hands of Christians!²⁵

23

By far, the main person responsible for making hell eternal in the Western Church was St. Augustine (354–430 CE). Augustine... was made Bishop of Hippo in North Africa. He did not know Greek, had tried to study it, but stated that he hated it. Sadly, it is his misunderstanding of Greek that cemented the concept of eternal hell in the Western Church. Augustine not only said that hell was eternal for the wicked, but also for anyone who wasn’t a Christian. So complete was his concept of God’s exclusion of non-Christians that he considered un-baptized babies as damned. When these babies died, Augustine softened slightly to declare that they would be sent to the “upper level” of hell. Augustine is also the inventor of the concept of “Hell Lite,” also known as *Purgatory*, which he developed to accommodate some of the universalist verses in the Bible. Augustine acknowledged the Universalists, whom he called “tender-hearted,” and included them among the “orthodox.” (Dr. Ken R. Vincent, Ed.D., “The Salvation Conspiracy: How Hell Became Eternal,” <https://christianuniversalist.org/resources/articles/salvation-conspiracy/>, last accessed July 1, 2017).

It is worthwhile reading the entire article.

²⁴ See for starters Wikipedia: “Christianity and antisemitism”, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity_and_antisemitism, last accessed July 1, 2017.

²⁵ See, for one of innumerable examples, scholar Kathryn Gin Lum’s *Damned Nation: Hell in America from the Revolution to Reconstruction*. A review of it contains this:

Her book explores the ideas of theological leaders such as Jonathan Edwards and Charles Finney, as well as those of ordinary women and men. She discusses the views of Native Americans, Americans of European and African descent, residents of Northern asylums for the insane and Southern plantations, New England clergy and missionaries overseas.

“People on both sides of the emancipation debate used the threat of hell to argue against each other,” says Lum, who teaches intriguingly titled courses at Stanford such as *Demons, Death and the Damned* and *Is Stanford a Religion?* – along with classes on Asian American religions and race and religion in America.

According to Lum, *the prevalent belief at the time that most of the world was damned could justify genocide and imperialism* (<http://news.stanford.edu/2015/04/20/damned-nation-lum-042015/>, last accessed July 1, 2017; emphasis added).

Sadly, they, and many interpreters like them, appear, like Saul, to have “*given approval* (Acts 8:1)” to the same sacrificial violence that Jesus castigated in Matthew 23:33 – 35:

You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell? Therefore I am sending you prophets and wise men and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.

Christopher Marshall observes:

Throughout Christian history, the fear of being consigned to hell by a truly merciless God has fuelled and justified all manner of horrific violence (*ibid*, 2001, p. 6).

Dixon writes, in apparent approval of one such instance of “horrific violence”, the first Gulf War:

A brave journalist who was in Baghdad when the bombs landed, cried out in his television report, ‘I have been in *hell!*’ As horrible as war is we would have to say to him, ‘No, you haven’t. If we understand Jesus correctly, war is only a small foreshadowing of that final condition of the forsaken (p. 14, emphasis in original).

“If we understand Jesus correctly...”, writes Dixon; but quite simply I contend, “*they*” do not. The grand and joyous paradox of the Gospel, for those with eyes to see the wildly liberating “picture on the box cover” is: *God’s final judgment/wrath is his mercy!*²⁶ – just as the doctrine of original sin is a post-resurrection Christian doctrine of grace and forgiveness according to James Alison in *The Joy of Being Wrong* (1997).

No contemporary biblical theologian in fact this reviewer has read captures this eschatological insight better than James Alison in *Raising Abel* (1996), drawing on the work of René Girard (see above). The book is a sustained call for Christians in their conversion journey to acquire an “eschatological imagination” that subverts inevitably an anti-christian “apocalyptic imagination” such that:

The perception that God is love has a specific content which is absolutely incompatible with any perception of God as involved in violence, separation, anger, or exclusion (p. 48).”

Therefore:

The commonly held understanding of hell remains strictly within the apocalyptic imagination, that is, it is the result of a violent separation between the good and the evil worked by a vengeful god. It seems to me that if hell is understood thus, *we have quite simply not understood the Christian faith*; and the Christian story, instead of being the creative rupture in the system of this world, has come to be nothing less than its sacralization. That is, *the good news which Jesus brought has been quite simply lost* (p. 175, emphasis added).

To repeat: In the end, the greatest critique of Dixon’s thesis is simply this: *there is biblically no “other side of the Good News”!* There is Good News, *period!* Hell too is embraced by God’s love. Dixon presents a “gospel” ultimately without good news that reads, *à la Four Spiritual Laws*, thus:

²⁶ See theologian Klaas Goverts on this here: <https://waynenorthey.com/vengeance-is-love-klaas-goverts-trans-floris-and-judith-kersloot/>; last accessed September 18, 2017.

God loves you, and has a wonderful plan for your life... *But if you don't buy in before death, God hates you, and has a horrible plan for your after-life!*

No genuine love affair human or divine is imaginable with that kind of time-limited vicious threat hanging over one's head. Only abject fear, not love, is evoked.

One could wish Dixon and Packer on this issue would return to Scripture with eyes to see and ears to hear – and recover a truly Gospel-soaked “eschatological imagination”. One could wish this for Evangelicalism in the main: *they often do evangelism, but they too seldom preach the Gospel*. And, as Jesus said: “...*they do not practice what they preach*” (Matthew 23:3). Instead of the *Gospel*, many Evangelicals preach *scapegoating religion*, of whom Jesus would say: “*But do not do what they do...*” (Matthew 23:3).

Chris Marshall, in personal comment to me wrote similarly:

I did have a look at Dixon's book What a depressing piece!! It illustrates the problems in pulling out a single theme for analysis in isolation from the larger context of the biblical story (May 9, 1999, E-mail correspondence).

I repeat: “*What an anti-Christ/anti-Gospel piece!*”

There is in the end no room for Dixon's thesis in the biblical Good News that is shot through with God's “Amazing Grace” – how sweet the sound! Dixon consistently gives grace a terribly sour note, *just like the Pharisees*. I suggest he is not compelled to his view by biblical evidence but by a misguided hermeneutic dominant in Evangelicalism as in Christendom: the wrong depiction of Jesus. Biblically, God's love *is* the final word, and judgment and redemption equally are subsumed under that love. In the end, “*mercy triumphs over judgment* (James 2:13)!” in an amazing paradox of grace whereby God is both “*just and justifier* (Romans. 3:26)”. For, as Jesus said (Matthew 9:13 and 12:7): “*I desire mercy, not sacrifice.*”

I call on Dixon, Packer, and all who hold to an ostensibly at best sub-Christian, too often anti-Christ, though longstanding “traditional doctrine of hell”: “*Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'*” (Matthew 9:13).” Such a call is above all a call to *conversion*.

Theologian Lee Griffith writes:

It is upon the least lovable people that God heaps the burning coals of love (Romans 12:20 – 21). This is the terror of God. This is the fire of hell, the eternal torment. Those who would reject all love are forced to endure it... It is God who crosses the chasm. It is God who decides to go to hell armed with the burning coals of love... This is the terror of God from which we cannot hide because, in Jesus, God invades not only the earth but hell itself. God is the one who decides to go to hell. Hallelujah and amen (Griffith, 2002, pp. 184 & 185).²⁷

²⁷ A friend just alerted me to this publication: *Dare We Hope “That All Men Be Saved”?* (2014). A brief blurb about it notes:

Revelation gives us neither the assurance that all will be saved, nor the certitude that any are condemned. What it does require of us is the “hope that all men be saved” rooted in a love of Christ that reaches even into the depths of Hell.

III. Conclusion

I feel a personal sadness in critiquing Larry Dixon's study. For years I held off on reviewing his book. On p. 178 (1986), Dixon wrote:

A former missionary friend, who has since moved away from the traditional doctrine of hell, said to me that 'God's *penultimate* word is *wrath*, but His *ultimate* word is *love*.'

I am that "former missionary friend". We served together doing evangelism in West Berlin from 1972 to 1974²⁸. The author's rejoinder to my statement was: "We would have to disagree (p. 178)". "We" did disagree at the time he was writing his book when I visited him; we disagreed after he gave me Chapter Five to read in manuscript form; we still disagreed in subsequent correspondence. He has since regrettably ceased all correspondence with me.

The most comprehensive English-language study on the history and theology of capital punishment states:

As is evident, the problem being addressed extends far beyond the issue of capital punishment as such, since this practice is symptomatic and only one piece of the much larger puzzle, the puzzle of accounting for the oxymoronic phenomenon of 'Christian violence' (Megivern, 1997).

Whether war, hell, or capital punishment/just deserts²⁹, the Church has been massively faithless, overwhelmingly committed to exception-clause footnote theology in its violent attribution to God of horrific bloodthirstiness worthy alone of the Evil One.

May God have mercy on us all. (*He in fact does!*)

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²⁸ As alluded to, I subsequently wrote a lengthy coming-of-age novel in response to that experience, *Chrysalis Crucible* (2015, <https://waynenorthey.com/chrysalis-crucible/>, last accessed November 15, 2017), that explores the themes of faith, sexuality and violence/nonviolence with hell as reprised subtheme (especially as final fallback for why do evangelism). Not surprisingly, I treat hell seen in Dixon's way as *significant perversion of the Gospel, a grotesque horror-theology worthy of the absolute worst of human depravity, indeed, of the Devil himself (in traditional theological concepts)*.

²⁹ I wrote a paper on these themes here: <https://waynenorthey.com/just-war-just-deserts-just-hell/>

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