

What About Peter? A Response to “The Gospel or a Glock?”

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I

As a former police officer in Ontario, I find that the description of policing in “The Gospel or a Glock? Mennonites and the Police” (*CGR* Spring 2007) is not the policing of which I am aware. I will extend some grace to the article, since it is written from an American perspective and there are certainly differences between our countries; even so, the brush with which all officers are painted is much too broad.

My response to the article is centered on the example of the AMBS students’ reaction to “Peter,” the drug addict. Rather than being an example of an alternative way of dealing with the issue, I suggest the students actually created their own police service and stopped being the church. As readers will recall, Peter visited the AMBS campus asking for money for various reasons. The students responded as the church to Peter; they offered him money, a place to stay at times, and food. They soon found out that he was a drug addict and the money was going to support his addiction. As a result, they held a meeting and decided that Peter’s presence on campus was not desired. They determined, without Peter’s input in the decision-making process, to enact a “law” for what was proper behavior. The students had become “the state.” There is no mention that Peter behaved badly during his visits, but his duping the students could not be tolerated. A “law” had to be enacted and enforced.

Did the students in this case not perform the same function as provincial, state, or national legislatures? Our legislatures, rightly and sometimes wrongly, observe a situation that they believe cannot continue and enact laws to deal with it, seeing this to be in the best interests of the whole society. Once laws are enacted, there must be some agency to ensure compliance with laws deemed for the common good.

The AMBS students’ law was to inform Peter he was not to continue in the activity that he, but not the student body, felt was fine. And they

dispatched their “police” to enforce the law. Further, these police would enact this law every time Peter was on campus. The two students were police because they were sent for the specific purpose of enforcing compliance with the student law. Why do I make this assertion? Consider: Why were two males sent instead of two females? Or perhaps two of the older children of students? I think the reasons are obvious: to ensure compliance with the law and to ensure the safety of those who approached Peter.

In Ontario, police officers are taught that the first use of force option is their very presence. The moment an officer appears in uniform, s/he is exerting a force. This is not taken lightly. In the vast majority of cases, the uniform assists in keeping situations from turning violent. In the AMBS case, the two male student “officers” would be exerting this same type of force in their dealings with Peter, and it would be sanctioned by “the state,” i.e., the student body.

We are told that once Peter was informed of the state’s law, he left without any difficulties. Great, wonderful! In policing, this is what occurs in the vast majority of situations. But what if Peter had become violent? To what extent were the student officers to defend themselves? Had the state come up with the limits of defense for the two? Would they exert force, and restrain Peter? If they did, would they not have behaved like any other police officer? But what if restraint was not enough, and they actually physically pushed Peter to try to disengage from the situation? What if he had fallen and hit his head as a result of the force applied, and died? This scenario could have happened. The means of Peter’s death should not matter, but any altercation has the possibility of injury or death; so, according to Andy Alexis-Baker, should the two students not be excommunicated from the church prior to this occurring?

Surely, the student officers and the state understood the potentially dangerous situation they placed themselves in, and realized that it could rapidly have escalated to the point where a physical force might have been applied – perhaps not via a gun. But regardless of the means, life is very fragile and Peter or the student officers could have died. I suggest both the students and the state understood this reality, because two male students were sent. Unfortunately, we can have all kinds of good intentions for how we will react when in danger, but we do not know for sure until we are in that

situation. It is the professional police officers' training that is supposed to help to keep them from over-reacting, regardless of the dangerous situation in which they may find themselves.

In the example of Peter, two important themes have been shown. First, as human beings there is a natural propensity to: (1) group together and make laws to govern the behavior of those within and those who come in contact with the group; and (2) create a system which applies force so that those laws can be enforced. Secondly, in the way Peter was dealt with, I suggest that it was prior to finding out his true intentions that the AMBS group was acting like the true church. They were providing food and shelter to someone in need. After they had found out Peter's intentions, it appears these efforts were stopped and instead rules were enacted. There was no mention of offers that students would go with him to get help or that he was still welcome to come and receive food and shelter, and no mention of helping him to know Jesus.

II

Jesus clearly lays out in Scripture that we are called to a radical love. We are called to love our heavenly Father. We are called to love our neighbor. And we are called to love our enemies. "The Gospel or a Glock?" seems to view the police as enemies of all that is good and right. But a question can be asked of the article: Where is the love shown to the police officers, even if they are viewed as the enemy? I worry that the article does little to help forward the cause of radical love that Jesus calls us to. A side has been chosen, and it obviously is not the police. I suggest that the moment you choose a side, you cease being a peacemaker. Rather than bridging the gap between two sides, you merely serve to widen it. All groups, even the apparently vulnerable ones, hold some power and can use it for good or for evil. For example, while it is true that police hold a great deal of power, so do the homeless. The homeless hold power whenever anyone fears them and, unfortunately, many citizens, rightly or wrongly, enter a state of fear when being approached by them or passing by them. You do not become a peacemaker by choosing either the police or the homeless or the community, but by opening up streams of dialogue and understanding within each group.

But you must be part of each group to be able to do this.

I am afraid that Alexis-Baker has learned nothing from the centuries of pain and division that have occurred in the Anabaptist community by the use of excommunication. I would suggest that Matt. 18:15-20, rather than being a call for the separation of the offending individual from the church, is actually a call for radical forgiveness and reconciliation. Jesus is speaking to his disciples when he says, “Treat them like you would a pagan or a tax collector.” How have the disciples seen Jesus treat pagans and tax collectors? They have seen him commend both a centurion (a pagan) for having a greater faith than anyone in Israel (Matt. 8:5-13) and a Canaanite woman (a pagan) for having great faith (Matt. 15:21-29). They had seen Jesus accept a tax collector as part of his closest band of disciples (Matt. 9:9-13). I suggest that this portion of Scripture is not a call to ban but to embrace and love even harder those with whom we have difficulty, and leave it to the Holy Spirit to convict and change those we believe are in the wrong. However, sometimes in praying and loving those we believe are in the wrong we find ourselves being nudged and sometimes shaken by the Holy Spirit for our own attitudes, wrongs, and lack of love and forgiveness.

What does radical love for police officers by Mennonites look like? The first step is to accurately understand the nature of both the job and the vast majority of persons who do the job. It is difficult for anyone to understand another’s position or job without walking a mile in their shoes, so to speak. I suggest that “The Gospel or a Glock?” takes the worst examples of policing and trumpets them (plus some examples I would definitely not call policing) as the norm. This would be similar to my suggesting that all advocates for the poor and disenfranchised are represented by those seen on the news using slingshots to fire ball-bearings at police officers during demonstrations.

The second step is to pray for the officers. Pray that they will not be overcome by fears and anxieties that can cause situations to fly out of control; that they would learn about Jesus and practice radical love in their profession; that they would have the courage to follow Jesus in all situations and, if ordered to do something the Holy Spirit nudges them not to do, to be prepared to give up their livelihood. Finally, pray for them because many are willing to show true love by laying down their lives for the sake of a

stranger, let alone the sake of a brother, sister, or friend (9/11 showed how many of them were willing).

The third step is to pray for ourselves. We must have open ears and open hearts to hear what the Holy Spirit is prompting us to do to show radical love, and then the courage to follow through on what the Holy Spirit shows us.

Whether one is writing an academic paper or patrolling a beat, all followers of Jesus Christ are called to radically love all those around them, not just those of their choosing. Unfortunately, “The Gospel or a Glock?” fails to show this radical love and instead uses words that hurt. As a former police officer, I found the words about excommunicating police to be hurtful. But then they were only words – and not a gun.

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