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Is God Nonviolent? A Mennonite Symposium

Denver, Colorado, November 2001

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Foreword

The theme of this issue has pertinence that it didn't possess quite so fully when we were first planning it. As we go to press, the "shock and awe" campaign in Iraq has concluded, the bombs have been dropped, the true casualties may never be known. Protests at home and abroad took place, to no discernable effect. Supporters of nonviolence are variously saddened, angered, and perplexed, even as they seek to cling ever more firmly to their cherished fundamental beliefs and values.

Against this backdrop, we find ourselves raising a complex and heavily-freighted question that goes to the heart of those beliefs and values: Is God Nonviolent?

The very phrasing of the question may strike you as theologically gauche, inelegant, or worse. But we invite you to stay with us for this in-depth exploration of "the character of God in relation to violence and pacifism." Examine the articles and responses on the theme carefully. You are bound to gain fresh insights into views that oppose — or support — your own position. (You may also wish to refer to our Spring 2002 issue, which addressed the post 9/11 era under the theme, "Responding to Terrorism: Is Nonviolence Possible?")

The material for our present theme arose out of a symposium of Mennonite scholars who met in Denver, Colorado in 2001. The symposium papers — five presentations plus three responses — are introduced by event organizers Ray Gingerich and Ted Grimsrud, who also offer an analysis of the overall "shape" of the conversation.

One of the symposium respondents has the distinction of appearing twice in this issue. Tom Yoder Neufeld contributes a separate article closely related to the main theme, titled "Resistance and Nonresistance: The Two Legs of a Biblical Peace Stance." In this piece, originally given as the 2002 Schrag Lecture at Messiah College, he argues that both resistance and nonresistance are "necessary and required components" of that stance. (In a response to be published in our next issue, Mary Schertz will contend that Yoder Neufeld's article "opens up new possibilities for faithful biblical witness and authentic Christian living in the situations of violence, injustice and injury with which we are confronted in our homes, our congregations, and our world.")

Outside the main theme of this issue — at least in a technical sense — is Gordon Zerbe’s article, “The Politics of Paul: His Supposed Social Conservatism and the Impact of Postcolonial Readings.” The author contends that for all the evident tensions in Paul’s writings, the Apostle’s rhetoric is “amenable to — even demands — an emancipatory reading.” Readers will make their own connections between this article and other items contained here.

That this edition of the *Review* comes out not only in the shadow of war but also in the Easter season adds point and poignancy to the poems by Dallas Wiebe that grace our pages. These works by the Cincinnati-based poet focus our attention, most appropriately now, on death, and on resurrection.

As always, reviews on a variety of recently published books round out the issue.

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Our Spring 2003 number will take “Future Issues in Anabaptist-Mennonite Scholarship” as its theme. It will feature a dozen papers presented at a graduate student conference held in Toronto, Ontario in conjunction with the AAR meetings of November 2002. Readers will be impressed with the range, diversity, and depth of the work by young scholars that we will be publishing. Equally intriguing, we modestly observe from our privileged perspective, are the themes of subsequent issues of *CGR* that are now in the planning stages.

Christ is Risen!

Stephen A. Jones, *Managing Editor*
C. Arnold Snyder, *Academic Editor*

Is God Nonviolent?

A Mennonite Symposium at the AAR/SBL Convention Denver, Colorado, November 2001

PREFACE

There was a time within recent memory when Mennonite life was sustained on the basis of a certain Mennonite cultural ethos. But our cultural sociology no longer sufficiently orients our faith commitments. Today, if Mennonites are to retain a pacifist way of life and be a pacifist presence in our violent societies, we will need to develop theological foundations to undergird us. A thoroughgoing theology of nonviolence is today not a luxury. It is a necessity.

A major element of this theological challenge is the question of the character of God in relation to violence and pacifism. In an attempt to address this challenge, a number of us participated in a symposium at the American Academy of Religion and Society of Biblical Literature convention held in Denver, Colorado in November 2001. Five panelists were asked to prepare short statements with the intent of raising issues more than providing definitive answers. These five statements appear below. Three respondents who attended the Denver meeting were then asked to write short essays addressing some of the issues raised there. To complete the symposium, two of the event's planners have contributed a short statement suggesting some themes for future conversation.

These essays reflect a great deal of diversity within the Mennonite theological community though they do not even closely represent the entire spectrum of Mennonite theologians. Though we think Tom Yoder Neufeld's use in his essay of the metaphor of "*deep* fault lines" running within the community of Mennonite theologians and biblical scholars may be a bit overstated, it does alert us to the importance of that diversity in a Mennonite, pacifist context and the need to take note of our differences. Fault lines may cause our social psyche to quiver. However, theological fault lines, like geophysical fault lines, are a long time in the making. To ignore them is to place our lives and our society in peril. To expose them and carefully study them is

a first step in finding the resources to work with the reality they present. To bring to our attention certain dangers that already exist can be a special challenge to carry on further conversations and to build bridges across those fault lines — bridges that are functionally constructed to advance peace and God’s kingdom and to resist crumbling when tremors seem for a moment to open wide the fault.

We offer these short essays as an effort to foster conversation and awareness of the diversity in our community, and, hopefully, to foster the strengthening of our faith communities as we learn both from our differences and from our shared convictions.

Ray Gingerich and Ted Grimsrud

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Is God Nonviolent?

Duane K. Friesen

I propose to respond to the question by stating six theses and giving only a brief rationale for each of them.

Thesis 1. Given the transcendence of God and the awareness of our limits as humans, we begin with humility. I must confess that I approach the question with a great deal of skepticism and even cynicism. My unreflective, emotional response to it is twofold: (1) I don't know; and (2) After September 11, I would like to declare a moratorium on all God-talk, given the wide variety of claims about God to legitimate human political programs and ideological agendas. How do we know that our claim to know God is anything more than an idol? Is the claim of some pacifists that God is nonviolent anything more than another attempt to legitimate one more ideology to give divine sanction to a humanly constructed ethical position? God is not a pacifist any more than God is a capitalist or socialist. Such attributions to God, in my judgment, confuse humanly constructed ethical positions with God. The words from the Book of Job come to my mind: "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?" (Job 38:2)

Thesis 2. We need to place the question of God's nonviolence within a rich and varied metaphorical language: words like power, creativity, liberation, justice, love, grace, forgiveness, anger, judgment, sorrow, anguish, and others. The word "God" functions for us as an inclusive way of poetically expressing the wonder and mystery of the entire cosmos, and the deepest longings and concerns of humans within the cosmos. To speak of God as "nonviolent" is thus one metaphor among others that expresses our yearning for what we value deeply. To speak of God as nonviolent expresses our deep desire that in the face of violence we encounter at the deepest level of being a "cosmic companionship," to use a phrase from Martin L. King, Jr.

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Thesis 3. We must distinguish metaphors like the wrath, anger, and judgment of God from the violence of God. When we speak of the love of God, our language surely must include the anger and judgment of God against human folly and sin. Otherwise we will have a sentimental, romanticized, and domesticated God. It would be a God powerless to enable humans to confront the world as we experience it. A concept of God that does not include within it the capacity for anger and judgment would simply reinforce a human sentimentality, timidity, and passivity in the face of evil. But all of these words — anger, wrath, judgment — should not be reduced to violence. The intent of a violent act is to violate, to harm, and to destroy life. I would rather think of God’s wrath and judgment as life giving, ultimately aimed at saving and reconciling, overcoming evil with the power of “tough” love.

Thesis 4. We need to deconstruct the numerous ways in which an appeal to God’s violence is a mask to conceal human ideological commitments. The legitimation of violence is deep and pervasive in all the major world religions, though there are exceptions in the teaching of the Buddha and early Christianity before Constantine. The ancient mythologies of Babylonia and Greece honored tribal war gods. The virtues of the warrior are glorified in the Zen Buddhist traditions of Japan and the Bhagavad Gita of India. Both the Hebrew Bible and the Qur’an have strong holy war traditions. The Exodus celebrates God as a warrior when the Egyptians drown in the Red Sea. The pacifism of the Anabaptists makes room for a violent God to punish the wicked. Hans Hut believed in a “provisional and suffering pacifism which, while accepting the daily cross including even death, stressed the eventual compensation or vindication in the quite bloody eschatological warfare of the saints.”¹ The difference between Hut and modern-day terrorists is that Hut did not call his followers to carry out God’s eschatological war in the present historical time. Mark Juergensmeyer in his book, *Terror in the Mind of God*, asserts that “what makes religious violence particularly savage and relentless is that its perpetrators have placed such religious images of divine struggle — cosmic war — in the service of worldly political battles.”² In naming September 11 as an “attack on America,” on the good in America by the forces of evil, Americans too come close to the abyss of a quasi-religious justification of cosmic violence in the name of worldly political ends.

God as a warrior is a central image in the Hebrew Bible. Millard Lind and John H. Yoder seek to claim these texts for the pacifist tradition by emphasizing “trust” in God who fights for us, not in us who fight for God. However, I do not find Lind’s or Yoder’s position compelling. Consider the Egyptians or the Canaanites who are destroyed by this warrior God because they do not belong to God’s people. If we deconstruct these texts, do not they simply reflect an idolatrous commitment to one people at the expense of another, a projection of the human desire for vengeance onto God?

The most dangerous views are those which call on God to legitimate a cosmic apocalyptic battle of good versus evil. Both in Islamic fundamentalism, as well as in some of the language of President Bush, who views America in a battle of good versus evil, “God” legitimates the unleashing of powerful destructive power. In this worldview we need to “destroy the world of evil” in order to save the world. This salvation myth is based on a dangerous illusion. It masks the evil in ourselves, by projecting evil on the “other” and then calling on God to destroy that evil.

Thesis 5. There is a built-in judgment in the historical process in which violence plays a role in the providential ordering of God. Let’s reflect on Jesus’ statement in Matt. 26:52 — “All who take up the sword will perish by the sword.” Pacifists usually quote this statement to argue against violence. However, on the one hand, the statement suggests that violence does check violence; if you take up violence, you will be destroyed by violence. We can even say that within the historical process violent force can achieve some limited good, or prevent an even greater evil. Hitler’s Third Reich does come to an end. On the other hand, the very processes which check violence with violence sow the seeds for further violence. Hitler is not possible without World War I, the “war to end wars.” Hitler is made possible by the humiliation Germany experienced as a result of the settlement of World War I, and we need to think of World War I and World War II as simply two phases of the same war. The cycle of violence is perpetuated, even when some relative good is accomplished.

Christians have viewed the role of violence in the providential ordering of history in a variety of ways. Let me briefly elaborate three:

(a) The majority position is that we humans should cooperate with such violence, and call on a God of justice to legitimate our limited goals within an imperfect historical process. The “just war” tradition of moral reasoning reflects such a view of history. In this view a text like Romans 13 can be used to support human cooperation with God to protect the good and punish the evil. Humans can cooperate with God to secure the “best possible” future within an imperfect historical process. Violence in this view is to be distinguished from vengeance, and is limited by principles such as just cause, non-combatant immunity, proportionality, and last resort.

Whereas just war theory does provide helpful criteria to evaluate public policy, the problem is with the view of God that undergirds it. By developing common rational criteria that everyone can use to assess public policy, this position minimizes the centrality of an embodied Christ as the key to how the cycle of violence is transformed.

(b) A second view is that, although God uses the sword to order history providentially to protect the good and punish the evil, followers of Christ have another revelation of God in Christ. They are called to follow Christ’s way of nonviolent love. This view is reflected in the Schleithem Confession of Faith, which places Christian pacifism within the perfection of Christ alongside the sword of the worldly magistrate outside the perfection of Christ. God providentially orders history through the sword of government. This is similar to the argument of Paul in Romans 13.

(c) A third view is developed by Miroslav Volf in *Exclusion and Embrace*.³ His view is somewhat similar to the Anabaptist position of Schleithem but also quite different. Volf argues that he can urge his Croatian brothers and sisters to follow Christ’s way of nonviolence toward the enemy only if they can count on God’s wrath and judgment to secure justice. Volf has an eschatological hope in a God on a “white horse” who will ultimately destroy evil through violent force and set things right. We can be nonviolent now, because we can count on God to bring judgment on our enemies some day.

Volf’s view is inconsistent with the Trinitarian view of God he has argued for throughout his book, a view of God grounded in the sacrificial love of God revealed in Christ. The ultimate appeal to violence as the only way in which evil can ultimately be defeated undermines Volf’s argument that the way of the cross and forgiveness is the only way in which the escalating cycle

of violence can be broken in history. Volf finally relies on a *deus ex machina*, a miraculous intervention of God at the end of history, to set things right. There are numerous problems with this view of God's agency which I simply do not have space here to elaborate.⁴

Thesis 6. The alternative to human cooperation with the providential ordering of history by participating in violence (just war), or looking to government to order history through force (Schleithem), or counting on a God on a white horse to set things right (Volf) is to imagine and act in the light of an alternative hope for history. This view is grounded in the conviction that there is an inherent connection of means and ends, that the means we use are the ends in the making.⁵ To put it theologically, in Christ we see the inherent connection of cross and resurrection. The only way to "secure" an alternative future is to trust in another way, to take the risk of creative nonviolence, disclosed in Jesus Christ. Here we see the possibility of a break in the deterministic cycle of violence. This is what it means to believe in the resurrection. It is a vision of the self-emptying God. It is a God who risks everything and, instead of killing in order to save us, dies that we might live.

The church is called to have faith in this God and, based on this faith, to imagine an alternative nonviolent politics. Faith is grounded in a vision, the hope we have in the future and how we get there. Faith without politics, though, is dead. Our ongoing task is to translate this vision into a program of living and action that addresses a world of violence and injustice. This requires imagination, courage, and readiness to acknowledge that we do not have all the answers. Faith and politics are also integrally linked for those who believe in using violence in the providential ordering of history. Both those who believe we should seek justice through the "last resort" of armed force and those who believe lasting justice can only be accomplished by nonviolence ultimately rely on an "eschatology" of some vision about the future and how we get there. Both traditions involve faith visions about how to "secure" a future in which justice is more likely to be achieved. The major difference is that we have invested little imagination and resources in the development of nonviolent alternatives.

Even when nonviolence has been tried and been successful, it remains

largely invisible in our history books.⁶ Both positions cannot guarantee success. Despite the claim that “violence works” and nonviolence “does not work,” in fact violence often fails to achieve its goals while nonviolence has often been quite successful. But both positions must avoid making exaggerated claims. There are conflicts where there is no available human solution. When societies have been addicted to hatred and violence for so long, we may not be able to avoid tragic violence and suffering. For persons who get lung cancer from smoking all their lives, there is no immediate solution that can save them from death. If we invest all our resources in trying to find “last resort” interventions (like radiation or chemotherapy), we will still fail. We cannot prevent tragedy and the judgment built into the historical process that is a consequence of violence.

In conclusion, my claim is that God does not command violence, nor does God legitimate violence, including the necessity of violence by government. However, in a universe of free moral agents, a law of judgment is built into the historical process in which violence can sometimes achieve a relative good, even while it continues to perpetuate the cycle of violence.

Ultimately a Christian vision of life, however, is based on the conviction that history is graced by God; forgiveness is possible. In Christ we have a foretaste of the way God’s sovereign power works in history, a vision of the nonviolent cross as the way the cycle of violence is broken and God’s victory over evil is accomplished. This is the foundation for our work as Christians, and the church is the primary community where we embody this vision. Within this theological framework, however, we can and must take the risk to develop an alternative politics of nonviolence, searching for ways to make nonviolence work in a world of violence.

Is God Nonviolent?

Ted Grimsrud

Is God nonviolent? My short answer is that I *believe* God is. But the evidence is ambiguous. That is, people from opposing points of view cite data from just about every area of consideration to support their views. The debates continue without decisive proof being forthcoming. We get mixed messages just about everywhere we look, as nearly as I can tell. Let's think in terms of the standard sources for theology: scripture, history or tradition, and present experience.

Scripture. On the one hand, the Bible seems clearly to present God as directly involved in violent acts as well as commanding some human beings to commit violence against others. The evidence is so well known and so massive that we really don't need to say much about it. If we draw our conclusions from the perspectives of many specific biblical references read in isolation, we have to say that the God of the Bible is violent. If we go from the particular to the general, from individual stories of violence to general conclusions, and give equal weight to all these individual stories, then we have to conclude that the Bible clearly teaches that God is violent.

This is the God who brought the overwhelming flood down upon Noah's generation, who rained fire and brimstone upon Sodom and Gomorrah, who brought death to all of Egypt's young children, who massacred hundreds of Hebrews when they idolized golden calves, who ordered the massacre of every man, woman, and child in various areas of Canaan in the time of Joshua — and I could go on. If I were to do so it would likely become clear that I was proving too much. That is, this violence of God in the Bible becomes too much to believe. Several years ago I had an extraordinarily bright student who was troubled with the pacifism he was hearing articulated at our school. So he decided to embark upon a study proving that God is violent. He began with Genesis, and by the time he reached Joshua he was undergoing a major crisis

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of faith. The God of the Bible was so violent that he lost his faith in that God.

We need to recognize that the biblical materials contain other evidence.⁷ The God of the Genesis one creation account — in contrast to other gods — does not create in the context of violence but in peace. The God of the story of Hebrew people, from the calling of Abraham and Sarah on down through the exile and beyond is a God in many ways who barks more than bites. The God of the actual story is a God mostly characterized by patience and persevering love, a God whose saving intentions toward the Hebrews find expression, time after time, in acts of unearned love and mercy. One gets the impression from the story that God has determined to work *within* the framework of historical processes, bringing salvation ultimately through mercy, not through coercive power. Certainly, this is how God is shown in the life and teaching of Jesus and the first Christians: the merciful father of the wayward son in Jesus' parable, the one who brings rain on the just and unjust alike, the one who — in Paul's words — loves us even while we are God's enemies.

The ambiguity of the Bible's portrayal of God in relation to violence can be seen in a paradigmatic way in the Book of Revelation. One way of reading that book, focusing first of all on the specifics, concludes that Revelation portrays God as profoundly violent. Another way, focusing more on the book's overall message, concludes that Revelation actually portrays a God who through persevering love ends up healing even God's enemies — the kings of the earth, the nations.

Tradition. Christian tradition continues this ambiguity. Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin portray God as having a dark, violent side. Not surprisingly, such theologians also accepted the Constantinian accommodation that accepts as appropriate that Christians at times are called upon to imitate God's retributive style of justice.

Yet there have always been dissenters. These minority voices have in various ways witnessed to the lack of perfect consensus in the Christian tradition. Many of these voices have been silenced (often violently, in the name of God), labeled heretical, dismissed as irrelevant and worse. But they keep springing up, in large part because they can draw pretty directly on Jesus' life and teaching as the basis of critiquing the pro-violence viewpoint.

If we see upper-case-T tradition as authoritative and normative for

our present understandings of God, we would probably be bound to conclude that God is violent. But if we look at the *entire* tradition, we must recognize some ambiguity, and if we look at the *consequences* of traditional beliefs about God, we have even more cause to see ambiguity in the Christian legacy. Many Christians may indeed have understood that God is violent, but that understanding has fostered behavior that has *undercut* the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Stephen Toulmin argues that we find in the sixteenth-century wars among Christians (all fought in the name of a violent God) the roots of modern atheism, as Enlightenment philosophers turned away from faith and toward autonomous reason.⁸

Another consequence of the Christian tradition's portrayal of God as violent, according to Timothy Gorringer's powerful book, *God's Just Vengeance*,⁹ is that we can see a direct connection between traditional theologies of God and the soul-destroying and self-defeating criminal justice practices in present-day America.¹⁰

So, history and tradition are also ambiguous, depending upon how one weighs the evidence.

Experience. Present-day experience also offers ambiguous evidence. If we include our perceptions of nature under this rubric, we easily find evidence of this ambiguity. The evolutionary psychology/sociobiology perspective popularized by writers such as Edward O. Wilson tends to assume that nature is inherently violent.¹¹ Most of those holding such a view are atheists, but many Christians are sympathetic to the understandings of the sociobiologists and use them as evidence for the creator also being violent.

On the other hand, anthropologist Ashley Montagu argues that human beings and the other-than-human world are not violent by nature.¹² And international scientists issued "The Seville Statement on Violence" in 1986 that states, among other things, that "it is scientifically incorrect" to say "that we have inherited a tendency to make war from our animal ancestors . . . that war or any other violent behavior is genetically programmed into our human nature . . . that in the course of human evolution there has been a selection for aggressive behavior more than for other kinds of behavior . . . that humans have a 'violent brain.'"¹³

It appears that we cannot draw evidence from the realm of nature or of human experience to prove that God is violent or that God is not violent. This is true as well, as we have seen, of scripture and Christian tradition. We can debate all we want, but will probably never find resolution simply based on these three central sources of theological and ethical guidance. Nonetheless, we do not actually *live* as if all we have are uncertainty and ambiguity. We *do* make choices, and they are *theological* choices. To use violence, I believe, is ultimately to assume that it is God's will that we do so. On the other hand, truly to reject the use of violence is to make certain assumptions about the nature of the universe and, hence, about the nature of God.

Vision. So, which view of God should we affirm? I suggest that we need to add a fourth source along with scripture, tradition, and experience. This source I will call "vision" — though we could also call it "eschatology" or "teleology" or "purpose." By "vision" I mean our convictions about both where we are going and what we believe we are called to do. We must ask, What concept of God best fits with our vision for our lives? Where is it that we believe we are meant to go, and what kind of concept of God will help get us there? What kind of understanding of God do we need to be whole, peaceable people?

My conviction is that we *need* to understand God as a God who seeks healing, not retribution. We *need* to understand God as a God who defeats evil not through redemptive violence but through persevering love. We *need* to understand God as a God who empowers us to respond to our enemies with love and not with hostility. Understanding God in this way is *necessary* for us to have the clarity and focus that will foster our living genuinely peaceable lives. These "needs" might be pipe dreams if the universe *clearly* went the other way. For Christians, these "needs" might even be heretical if the Bible *clearly* went the other way. But they do not.

As Christians, we confess Jesus as our normative revelation of God. This confession apparently means different things to different people. Some theologians argue that our Trinitarian confession of three *distinct* members means we ought not move from the revelation of God in Jesus to drawing conclusions about "God the Creator."¹⁴ However, following John Howard Yoder, I want to argue that only by understanding Jesus as revelatory of God

can we be protected from making God a projection of human power politics.¹⁵ And following Gordon Kaufman, I want to claim that what makes Christian understandings of God distinctive is to understand Christ as paradigm for God. Kaufman writes, “The ultimate mystery, as it bears on us humans, is to be construed in terms of what here becomes visible. . . . To worship the God-revealed-in-Christ — the God defined and constructed with Jesus and the new order of human relationships surrounding him as the model — is to worship the true God.”¹⁶

This is to say that, although even in the story of Jesus we find some ambiguity regarding God and nonviolence, the direction that Jesus pulls us is toward a view of reality that reveals nonviolence to be with the grain of universe. So, we are not simply whistling in the dark when we say that what we need most is a vision of a nonviolent God — this *is* what will best foster the flourishing of life. And this vision is not simply pie-in-the-sky. It is possible to understand such a vision as coherent with the vision we are given in the life and teaching of Jesus and in the community that arose around him.

Our conviction that God is nonviolent is therefore not arbitrary, nor does it impose extra-biblical thinking onto the Bible. It simply affirms that we read Scripture and life through the lens of Jesus’ life and teaching. With his way as central, the ambiguity of some of the biblical materials, of the message of Christian tradition, and of present-day experience fades away. Not that we do not still get mixed messages. Rather, we have an interpretive key allowing us to see the consistent nonviolence of God being expressed amidst these mixed signals of history and present experience. This key comes to us from Jesus, and it gains clarity when we realize that Jesus teaches us what it is that we are meant to be (and will become).

Is God Nonviolent?

Gordon D. Kaufman

The question posed for our reflection here is whether we who consider ourselves to be Christian pacifists, committed to nonviolence, should also think of God as absolutely nonviolent. None of us has direct access to God, as we do to most of the objects about which we often speak — chairs and tables, other persons, trees and flowers and the ground beneath us, the sun and moon and stars in the skies above, great cities like Denver or New York, and so on. Moreover, there is no single consistent picture of God in the Bible or in the many versions of Christian faith that have appeared through the centuries.

In the Bible God is (as we all know) depicted both as a ferocious, arbitrary, bloodthirsty warrior who demands total destruction of his enemies (I use the male pronoun here deliberately), which are the enemies of Israel and the churches as well; and also as merciful and loving, seeking to rescue all humans from the mess they have made of life, and as requiring love and mercy and nonviolence — or even nonresistance — of us humans, in our dealings with those who seek to destroy us. Some of the biblical writers were quite as well aware as any modern agnostics that we humans are never in a position to check our claims about God directly: as is stated twice quite straightforwardly, for example, in the Johannine writings (John 1:18; 1 John 4:12), “No one has ever seen God.” God is ultimately mystery to us, and none of us is in a position to state who or what God really is. But each of us can present our own understanding of God, what we mean by that word, and why we take that position.

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I

Our discussion here could easily become a debate about which *anthropomorphisms* we prefer to use when characterizing God: Is God to be thought of as basically a great and powerful warrior, fighting battles against the evils in human life? Or should God be thought of primarily as forgiving and merciful, like a loving father caring for his prodigal children? Obviously, both of these biblical images are drawn from common human experience. Neither should, therefore, be attributed to God without careful thought about the justification for using such human metaphors, and then working out the sense in which these particular anthropomorphisms might be appropriate. God is not a human being, and we become involved in human self-idolatry if we hold to an understanding of God largely based on our image of, for example, the human self.

In the traditions collected in the Bible, however, God is frequently characterized in human-like terms of this sort. God is depicted as an actor or agent who has created humans as a sculptor takes clay and makes a beautiful work of art (Gen. 2), and is described as like a king or a poet who speaks a powerful word and thereby brings new reality into being (Gen. 1); God is thought of as having plans for the future of humankind, plans that will surely be carried through as history unfolds; and so on. All of these images are constructed of metaphors drawn directly out of everyday human life and then projected — often quite uncritically — onto the divine being as proper ways to characterize God.

Christian thinking about and faith in God have been deeply shaped by these and many other such images. We do not need to deplore this utterly: it is through these anthropomorphisms that God becomes humanly appealing to us. But in our *theological reflection*, when we are seeking to think carefully and precisely about what we mean when we use the word “God,” we must move with great care in our employment of such metaphors or we will end up with a conception of God largely constructed in our own human image.

Awareness of these sorts of limitations in our speaking and thinking of God goes back in the Bible at least to Second Isaiah, who makes the point with dramatic (anthropomorphic) images of his own:

Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand
and marked off the heavens with a span,
enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure,
and weighed the . . . hills in a balance? . . .
Even the nations are like a drop from a bucket, . . .
they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness.
To whom then will you liken God,
or what likeness compare with him? . . .
It is he who sits above the circle of the earth,
and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers . . .

To whom then will you compare me,
or who is my equal? says the Holy One (40:12, 15a, 17b, 18, 22a, 25).
I am the first, and I am the last.
My hand laid the foundation of the earth,
and my right hand spread out the heavens (48:12b-13).
I am God, and there is no one like me (46:9b).

Here the incomparability of God is driven home by metaphors reminding us that God is the creator of the world, and is thus of an entirely different order of reality than anything in all creation. Throughout Jewish, Christian, and Muslim history God has been seen — most fundamentally — as this absolutely unique reality, the Creator of the universe. But Isaiah failed to notice that despite his claim that God is utterly unlike everything else — “the first and the last,” the source of all that exists — he has in fact described God as a mighty agent or person, one who acts, a being which in this respect is *similar to us humans*, and thus is really not incomparable at all. The tension of this sort of anthropomorphic thinking with the idea that God is utterly incomparable with everything else gives rise to profound theological problems, such as the topic we are considering today.

II

This topic has itself been formulated in anthropomorphic terms. When we speak of an act of violence or taking up a nonviolent stance, we are thinking and talking almost always about particular sorts of acts and attitudes of human beings, though we also occasionally use the word “violence” in speaking of certain natural forces, e.g., a “violent” tornado. It is with reference to agents, however — willful human beings — that the notions of violence and nonviolence have their original and basic moral meanings. Does it illuminate our theological understanding when we use meanings of this sort to characterize God and God’s actions, or does this only confuse us further? I will argue that the problems these particular meanings pose dissolve away if we reformulate our basic conception of God in a nonanthropomorphic way and think of God as *creativity* rather than as *the Creator*.

Given the constraints of time, I cannot spell out all the reasons for making this change in our thinking, but I will mention one important consideration.¹⁷ The traditional idea of God as the Creator of the world (as is well known) stands in sharp tension with the understanding of the origins of the universe and of life widely accepted in scientific (as well as many other) circles today. Let us consider one aspect of this tension a bit. According to current scientific thinking the evolutionary process had to reach a high degree of complexity before such qualities as consciousness, voluntary actions, moral responsibility, and the like could come into being; and that took many billions of years. Personal agential beings like us humans did not exist, and *could not have existed*, before billions of years of cosmic evolution of a very specific sort, and then further billions of years of biological evolution also of a very specific sort, had transpired. This means that the notion of a person-like creator-God *at the beginning of things* really cannot be thought in connection with modern evolutionary theory. In my view, however, this does not mean that if we accept an evolutionary account of the origins and development of the universe, we must give up the notion of God as the foundation of all else. For although this implies we should cease thinking of God anthropomorphically as *the creator*, good reasons to employ the notion of *creativity* (a descendant of the biblical idea of creation) in our thinking of God remain available to us.

In contrast to the notion of a creator, the idea of creativity — the coming into being through time of the previously nonexistent, the new, the novel — continues to be plausible today: indeed, it is bound up with the very idea that our cosmos is an *evolutionary* one in which new orders of reality come into being in the course of increasingly complex temporal developments. Creativity, in this modern evolutionary sense, remains profoundly mysterious; and the coming into being of the truly new and novel — the totally unexpected, the unforeseeable — suggests a movement *beyond* all specifiable causes and conditions (a movement that really cannot be accounted for); it seems to involve, thus, a kind of coming into being “from nothing,” *creatio ex nihilo* (as the ancient phrase has it). “In each quantum jump,” as Holmes Rolston put it, “there is a little more of what was not there before, . . . where before there was nothing of that kind.”¹⁸ “Creativity” is thus a name for what is a profound mystery to us humans, a name that identifies a feature central to cosmic and biological evolution.

Thinking of God as *creativity* draws us into a deeper sensitivity to God-as-mystery than did our religious traditions with their talk of God as *the Creator*. This earlier concept seems to imply that we know there is a cosmic person-like, agent-like being behind and before the world in which we find ourselves. But if we think of God as creativity we are not driven to postulate any such anthropomorphic being either behind the world or in the world. What we do see and know is that new and novel realities come into being in the course of temporal developments — in the physical cosmos, in the evolutionary development of life, in human social and cultural history. It is this mystery of ongoing creativity, I suggest, that today can quite properly be considered as the ultimate point of reference in terms of which all else is to be understood, that in terms of which human life should therefore be basically oriented, that which today we should regard as God.

III

Let us return now (very briefly) to our question, Is God nonviolent? What are we to make of the fact that the physical world, as we today understand it, simply could not have been brought into being without the exercise of massive

physical forces, including violent events of many different sorts — exploding stars, cosmic “black holes” that swallow up everything in their vicinity, on planet Earth volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, floods, and so on, nature “red in tooth and claw” — all of which continue today? This violence, it would seem, is deeply connected with the creativity manifest in the world, but there is no reason (according to evolutionary theory) to think of this as the deliberate expression of a self-conscious violent will — the problem we are discussing here today, a problem that arises when we think of God’s creativity in the traditional anthropomorphic way. Rather, we should see all of this as the creative beginnings and underpinnings of a remarkable process in our universe that has eventuated in the creation of life, and then much later in the creation of agents capable of self-conscious action and of making moral judgments about such matters as violence and nonviolence.

The creativity at work in our universe — in the course of bringing us *humans* into being — has brought us to a point where we can entertain the possibility of living in a moral order that is nonviolent, can deliberately choose to work at bringing about such an order, and can train ourselves and our children to live and act in nonviolent ways (however unlikely the realization of such a dream may be). In the processes through which our humanness was created, activity, attitudes, and behavior of the sort we call *loving* emerged and came into focus; and in our human corner of the universe capacities and needs for agape-love gradually became important and prized (at least in some quarters). So in and through our specifically *human* interrelation with creativity — with God — loving, caring attitudes and activities have become a significant feature of life; nonviolent agape-love was created as God and humankind interacted in the evolution of life on planet Earth. This development, quite unlike what occurred in the interrelations of creativity (God) with many other spheres of the cosmic order, is — at least in the judgment of those who count ourselves as Christian pacifists — of great significance.

Why and how have Christians (as well as others) come to such convictions about love and nonviolence? Here (in conclusion) I shall refer again to the Johannine texts with which I began. In the Fourth Gospel after the writer points out that “No one has ever seen God,” he goes on to say, “the only Son who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known.” And what is it that is made known through Christ about the divine creativity? In 1

John 4, just before the text about God never having been seen, the writer points out that “love is from God [i.e., from creativity]; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God . . . , for God is love” (4:7, 8b). And he goes on to say — after reminding us that “No one has ever seen God” — that “if we love one another, God [loving creativity] lives in us, and his love is perfected in us” (4:12). Christians are those who have become especially aware that agape-love is one of the most precious gifts of the divine creativity to humankind, and some Christians have come to believe that this nonviolent love can itself be creative of a new future for humans, and should thus be made the center of life.

Is God Nonviolent?

Paul Keim

I consider myself a pacifist, committed to nonviolent transformation of injustice in our encounters with evil in the world, both personal and systemic. But I don't know that I am an absolute pacifist, since physical force used to restrain another human being, short of killing, may be called for in some situations. I have never been put in the position of having this tested. I know enough about myself, however, to believe that I carry the potential for violence within me. I have experienced levels of fear and of anger that have shown me this part of myself.

I am also aware that I am a killer of animals. Not that I administer the coup de grace myself much these days. But I depend on others to do so. I benefit from the taking of those lives. And though the meat dishes prepared for me can be heavenly, I have not thought of this killing as a violation of my convictions about the sanctity of life. I have pacifist friends whose convictions have led them to vegetarianism. They have helped to sensitize me to the rather arbitrary categories into which even pacifists group living things, into life that may be taken and life that may not be taken.

I'm not sure such a pacifist conviction by itself says or means very much. Aren't most people practical, if not principled, pacifists most of the time? Not just out of fear of reprisal, or because of the deterrent threat of criminal prosecution, but because that is the way most people want to live. So in terms of nonviolence, most of the time we principled pacifists are no different than our non-pacifist neighbors. It is in times of open conflict, which almost always represents a breakdown in human interaction over a longer period of time, that principled pacifism as we have come to understand it becomes an "issue."

My commitment to peace is correlated to the depiction of God's character as revealed in God's mighty acts in history and interpreted over generations

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by members of a community of faith, a people of the book. I have tried to choose my words carefully here, especially “correlated to the depiction.” I have tried not to prejudice the nature of the correlation at this point. Nor am I comfortable making absolute historical or metaphysical claims about the Bible. But it does suggest that my commitment to peace is related to another, parallel commitment, to the scriptures. In my pacifist confession, the Bible represents a necessary, though perhaps not sufficient, point of reference for the community of faith’s theological reflections on the character of God and the nature of human experience.

When we open that book, those writings, that story, the record of theological reflection lovingly preserved and passed on to us, we see the following.

Yahweh is a warrior. It’s right there in the text: *YHWH ‘ish milchamah*, “Yahweh is a man of war” (Exodus 15). The name “Yahweh” is very likely the verbal vestige of the sentence, “God, the one who brings into being the hosts (i.e., army) of Israel.” That God is apparently no pacifist.

Yahweh is a warrior — but not a very good one, at least in human terms. He doesn’t let the human hosts do much of the fighting. When they do, their role is downplayed. Most of his “battles” are directed against his own people. I do not understand “Yahweh is a warrior” to mean that Yahweh is a military commander. Nor that Yahweh fights by upholding, sustaining, and empowering the military hosts of Yahweh’s people to fight the human enemies of those people in any conventional sense. The event from which the victory song of Yahweh is sung depicts no violent encounter of human antagonists. Yahweh “fights” through forces of nature.

Could this be another one of those cases in which the actual historical event in which humans fought and killed each other was theologized long after the fact to depict Yahweh as the sole combatant? Perhaps, but if even that were so (I am by no means conceding that point; it’s a very old poem as far as we can tell, perhaps roughly contemporaneous with the events it celebrates), the Exodus is remembered in this way by the community and becomes a key theological paradigm of God as a deliverer of God’s people, one essentially not in need of earthly hosts. To say Yahweh is a warrior is to say, in the parlance of biblical theology, that Yahweh is a deliverer. Yahweh’s desire is for

the dignity and sacredness of human life. Those powers that would put us in bondage, whether from without or within, Yahweh is committed to removing, defeating, transforming.

It is because Yahweh is a warrior that we can be peacemakers.

Without a transcendent arbiter of justice, we would be dependent on brutes, gangs, committees, bureaucracies, kings, and heads of state (in descending order of brutality) for the maintenance of social order. It is because we can leave vengeance to God that we are able to work at reconciliation. Human institutions of justice and punishment must be focused on human behavior; God looks at the heart. Such a perspective does not release us from responsibility to bind up the wounds of those in need here and now. It does not free us from our obligation to perceive and name and fight (oops, “resist”) the presence of evil and injustice in the world.

I want to believe in a God who is nonviolent. This is my understanding of what the incarnational aspect of Jesus’ life and teachings means. Why do I want to believe this? Perhaps because I want God on my side, on our side. Perhaps because Harry Huebner has convinced me that divine-human-moral-discontinuity-pacifism is no longer tenable.¹⁹ We are blessed with sight and, occasionally, insight. We know we have the propensity to see only what we want to see rather than what is; to remember, in vivid detail, what we would prefer to have happened rather than what happened. It may be easier to falsify God’s acts in history than it is to deceive ourselves about God’s character. I believe in a God who, because of love and a healing strategy for creation, is constrained in the way God acts in the world. Any depictions of God’s acts in conflict with these constraints must be understood as false.

I want to believe in a God in whose image you and I were created. Now this can mean many things, not all of them pleasant to ponder. But compelling possibilities include a God of pathos — one who knows what suffering means and how it feels. One who has experienced loss. One who needs me, needs us. I want to believe in a God who knows anger, not pique, exasperation, annoyance, but knock-down, drag out, red-faced, slam-the-door, irrational indignation. A God who feels, deeply. A God more Homeric than Platonic (if we need a Greek analogy). A God who looks a lot like — Yahweh.

We need a God who is not like us. The remaking of god in our own

image is surely the world's second oldest profession. It is in fact a reification of ourselves and our communities. It can be a successful strategy for building social coherence and group identity; it can help to sustain a community during times of adversity. But even so-called "pagan" religions develop deifications of the "other," the "outsider," and the "troublemaker" which play a role in the agitation of stasis, often to the benefit of the human community. Ea, the trickster god of the Mesopotamian pantheon, thwarts the will of the first generation of static gods and saves Atrahasis, the Noah figure, and thereby the human community. We need a God who challenges our complacent, self-serving view of the world and our place in it. We need a God who forces us to see the world from the other's point of view.

I agree with Waldemar Janzen that the Anabaptist neglect of the Old Testament as a source of legitimate theological reflection has left its heirs with an impoverished theology of a whole range of crucial issues (creation: land, place, nature, sexuality, medicine; society: politics and government, law and justice, human rights, liberation; society: economics, business, work, recreation; family: children before baptism, children outside the church).²⁰ Becoming more effective peacemakers will depend in part on a continuing Anabaptist recovery of the Hebrew Bible.

The Bible and a Theology of Peace. And so I correlate my convictions with a particular reading of the biblical texts, one that relies on a correlation between the depictions of God's actions in history found in those texts and the very nature of God. Those depictions are not unambiguous. The meganarrative of the canon, especially within the Hebrew Bible, shows plot and character development. The community of faith shows awareness that certain things were required or allowed in the past. But not now. Our ancestors came from beyond the river and worshiped other deities — but no more. We used to worship on the high places and the Yahweh shrines, sometimes with Yahweh's consort; now we worship Yahweh alone in Jerusalem. Yahweh used to rule us directly, then there were kings and kingdoms. We used to have an independent state, and a glorious house for Yahweh. Now we're in exile, back beyond the river. We used to be in exile, now we have returned. We used to be slaves, or own slaves, but no more. We used to fight and kill our enemies. Now we don't.

The great theological confessions of the Bible concerning Yahweh's character are found in places like Deuteronomy 6: God is one; we should love Yahweh (covenant loyalty language), and we should love our neighbor (solidarity language). Yahweh is *'ish milchamah* – a warrior, but also *go'el*, a redeemer. This latter metaphor is based on the social practice of the redeemer of blood from the days of clan justice, but transformed theologically into the redeemer whose ways are worked out in the redemption of the lost and the healing of the community. We see it also in Isaiah 6, where the seraphim cry loudly: "Holy, holy, holy. The whole earth is full of Yahweh's glory." Holiness and glory. Are these divine characteristics capable of imitation by humans?

Our common confession, that Jesus' life and teachings are the clearest expression of divine character and purpose for the world that we know, should be taken as an interpretive lens in which the stories of God's mighty acts and the manifestation of God's character in history, in law, in wisdom, in praise, can be better understood. Neither for Jesus himself, nor for the early church, was such a radical understanding of the significance of the Christ event self-evident. The Old Testament remained the Torah for Jesus and for early Christians. What comes to be called the New Covenant or Testament is not intended to supersede the Old but to make explicit its fulfillment in Jesus. This eschatological perspective has, by the way, proven to be much delayed.

Affirming our gradual awareness of God's will for the human community in the areas of gender (it takes males and females to constitute humans created in God's image), slavery, and warfare, we should take more seriously how we live in the world in ways that convince more people that nonviolent transformation is God's will for the world. I think this means that our peace witness should be more mission-minded.

The popular justifications for violent retaliation, say in response to the September 11 bombings, have little to do with Yahweh as a warrior, or with the character of God as a zealous god of wrath judging the wicked. They are motivated by other convictions, namely *raison d'état* and civil religion. They are propped up by a selective proof-texting of almost comical proportions (e.g., Jesus's use of the whip to cleanse the temple as a "type" of violent response that ultimately legitimates the bombing of Afghanistan). But in an interesting way, even that little vignette of Jesus with the whip, or the story of the zapping of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5), raises the issue of a God of

pathos who knows righteous indignation, has authority to separate the sheep from the goats (even if only at the last trump), and controls the destinies of humans and the rest of creation.

It seems somewhat ironic in light of the fact that virtually since the middle-second century of the common era, it has been the Jews who have lived as defenseless pariahs within eastern and western states. Cycles of pogroms and massacres over a millennium, eventually capped off by the trauma of the holocaust, revived and empowered a new Jewish nationalism that has accepted all the theocratic prerogatives of state power backed by violence. A return to David, and to Jeroboam, Ahab, and Manasseh.

Furthermore, the experience of Jewish suffering and passive resistance, as well as the existence of a Jewish peace fellowship and Jewish pacifism, suggest that biblical pacifism is possible even outside of an explicitly Christian context. The character and will of God shows through in the Hebrew scriptures in ways that Jews have instinctively and principally followed throughout the centuries. For the most part, when oppressed they did not strike back; when killed they did not retaliate. Unlike the Christian leaders of the West, Jewish leadership emphasized God's sovereignty and the hope of deliverance for those who remain faithful. False messiahs appeared from time to time, but until the rise of nationalistic Zionism (a development completely understandable in modern terms, no matter how disastrous its outcome), the explicit use of human violence to defend the beleaguered community remained a gentile, Christian way of finding deliverance.

What we often overlook in the debate about faithful versus effective nonviolence is the modern corollary to redemptive transformation. When God's character is expressed in terms of a negative — “nonviolent” — we may easily overlook the call for active, vigorous action in the world to alleviate suffering, to protect the dignity of human life in the face of daily humiliations and degradations, to stand in the breach, and to say “No, over my dead body, no.” For this the example of Jesus is less useful than other parts of the canon. Jesus gives us a model of suffering love, of forgiveness and redemption. There is less clarity there about engaging the powers, of utilizing the force of one's convictions not just for long-suffering but for transformation.

Mennonite history can testify to the fact that the simple eschewing of violence, i.e., the reduction of the “gospel of peace” to the rejection of violence,

is no guarantee that a heart or a culture of shalom is produced. Our forms of violence may not leave visible scars, but our communities are full of scarred individuals and families nonetheless. God is not a pacifist, perhaps in part because nonviolence itself can be a reductionistic facet of the gospel of peace and reconciliation.

We do not find peace by simply rejecting violence. Rather we participate in the making of peace through the active empowerment of all human creative capacities. A gospel of peace reduced to nonviolence reminds me of the messengers sent out to confront the furiously driving Jehu: *he-shalom?* they ask, mimicking their cowering kings. *he-shalom?* “Is everything OK? Can’t we all just get along?” Jehu’s response is appropriate: “What do you know about shalom? Get behind me” (2 Kings 9:17-19).

I have found it necessary to give up the idea, or at least complicate it beyond recognition, that there is a direct causal relationship between the Bible and our theology of peace. Yes, I read *The Politics of Jesus* as a college student and was moved by the notion that here, in not exactly laypeople’s terms, was a brilliant statement of what I felt deep inside and had no good words for, or only clichés. Reading that book did not make me a pacifist or convert me to the gospel of peace. What it essentially affirmed was the teaching I had received from my parents and my church, that the way of Jesus (reflecting the way of the God of the Bible) is the way of the cross, a way that rejects violent retaliation. The Vietnam War was providing ample evidence at the same time of the ineffectiveness of violence and war. The civil rights movement was adding powerful images of the practical possibilities of nonviolent resistance as an effective strategy for social change.

But, again ironically, *The Politics of Jesus* also made it easier for me to accept Jesus, if not God the Father, as the tribal deity of peace-loving Anabaptist types. God likes us, specially, because we don’t kill people. God loves us, and therefore God tests us. All is not sweetness and light, but that only proves that we are special. We are separate from the world. And besides, God’s word says things like “thou shalt not kill” and “resist not the evil one,” and “turn the other cheek,” and other things that we pay less attention to. Having been pushed to the margins of society by civil authorities, and then deciding that we liked it there, we needed a god of the hinterlands, a god of the steppes.

Finally, some reflections on a pedagogy of peacemaking. The central issue for contemporary peacemakers is not the precise theological correlation between our commitment to nonviolence and our views of the Bible and theological reflection, but in utilizing our convictions about peacemaking, whatever their immediate motivation and source, into a viable religious culture that can sustain the community's relationship to state power structures from generation to generation. It comes down to the question of whether or not we have here in America, in Canada, in Germany/Switzerland, in Indonesia, Ethiopia — a lasting city, an essential identity, an orientation to the world. As long as the state is able to define our sense of self, to claim our primary loyalties and the loyalties of our children, we will not be people of peace, no matter how nonviolent.

Will we be able to do what our ancestors did more or less successfully for almost 500 years? Will we be able to pass on to the next generation a conviction and a practice of peacemaking? Though often based on a much less sophisticated understanding of the Bible, and facing much greater threats from the societies in which they lived, generations of peace-seeking Anabaptist-Mennonite and Brethren, Quakers, and others lived out an alternative community. What will we need to remain faithful to this legacy in our time, in the contexts in which we now live? I suspect that a pacifist god will not be nearly as significant a factor in this endeavor as, say, a prophetic consciousness, a corporate hermeneutic, evangelical courage, sectarian energy, and radical, eschatological hope.

Is God Nonviolent?

Mary H. Schertz

Certainly the events of September 11 and its aftermath have colored the way we think about whether God is nonviolent. A conversation that had largely taken place in a few settings, such as Peace Theology conferences and perhaps an adventuresome high school Sunday School class or two has become broader and much more popular in its focus. My congregation was just beginning our fall Bible study, this year on Isaiah 1-39, when the crashes in New York, Washington, and the fields of Pennsylvania took place. Our pastors elected to stay with our Bible study the Sunday afterward instead of planning a special service. They told us that as they talked among themselves, they kept coming back to Isaiah, intuiting that these texts might serve us well in this crisis.

As a result, my experience of that national tragedy will be forever linked with Isaiah 1-39. Are the events of September 11 the judgment of God on US militarism and consumerism? Did God will these tragedies? While my congregation was far from assuming, as did Jerry Falwell, that particular groups of people can be blamed for God's wrath being visited upon us, nevertheless we did ask the question and entertain the notion that these events might be a word from the Lord.

The question is, of course, what we attribute to the activity of God and what we do not. A second question is whether God's participation in our collective lives is passive and permissive or active and creative. Where we draw lines can be debated endlessly. Nevertheless, the fundamental question becomes one of faith: Do we see God active in the world at all? If the answer to that question is "yes," then we are probably conceding, however we may nuance or qualify the language of our concession, that to some degree the God who is active in the world is sometimes active in what appear to us to be violent ways. Not only is it our reading of the biblical text but also our experience that leads us to the conclusion that the God of love active in the world is also

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the God of judgment.

God as judge, and I would also include Jesus, or at least the exalted Christ, as judge are not popular notions. Our parent generation no doubt overdosed on judgment themes and in reacting correctively we have likely overreacted. But the biblical perspective is clear that the God who loves us as individuals and as peoples is also the one who ultimately judges our decisions and actions. While judgment is not necessarily violent, such is our human nature that we almost always perceive those judgments that fall against us and ours as violent. In that sense, God, and the resurrected Jesus, are violent.

Having said that, however, let me proceed to some of those nuances and qualifications of this concession. There are certain leanings or characteristics of God's righteous judgment that can be defined. One is that while God may be acting in a violent event such as the crashes of September 11, that judgment is not personal. I am not saying that God does not judge individuals, but that individual judgment is not the issue in this case. It may make sense to say, in the spirit of Isaiah and other biblical prophets, including Jesus, that the events of September 11 are a judgment upon this country's reliance on militarism and consumerism and on the reality that we are big and powerful enough to turn a deaf ear on global concerns for poverty, the environment, and political and economic oppression.

What we dare not say, and what is in fact not true, is that this catastrophe is a judgment on the lives, innocent or not, that were lost that day. More than likely there were people who died in the World Trade Center towers who were saints. Just as likely there were people among that unfortunate crowd who were not and never would be recognized as saints. But the merit or lack thereof in those particular lives is not what God was judging that day. Neither American individualism nor Mennonite separatism is very compatible with these biblical notions of God's judgment. To recognize that we are a collective, to recognize our essential solidarity, to accept that we are judged not only on our individual decisions and actions but also on our collective decisions and actions goes against the grain of much of our culture and much of our ecclesiology.²¹

To deal honestly with God's judgment requires that we acknowledge and mourn the random and arbitrary tragedy. There was likely a reason the WTC was the target of the attack and not, say, the Sears tower in Chicago.

But that reason had nothing to do with God's judgment on the people working in the towers in New York. Those losses we can only mourn. Furthermore, we can be sure that our mourning is shared by God, that for every tear that runs down our faces, there are many more tears running down the face of God.

A second statement we can make about God's judgment is that it is impartial. If this event is God's judgment on our national idols, then this judgment falls just as surely on the ones who planned and implemented that event. From a biblical perspective, the instruments of God's wrath are as liable to God's judgment as those against whom that wrath is originally directed. Cyrus might be the anointed one of God but he also comes under the judgment of God.

Of course, this biblical insight also works in the other direction as well. Our retaliation against Osama bin Laden and his followers might well be an expression of God's wrath ignited against bin Laden's own false gods of violence, fanaticism, and the exploitation of children. But our resorting to the additional violence of war as bombs rain down on Afghanistan and we turn a deaf ear to global protest just as surely falls under God's judgment as do the actions of the pilots who drove the hijacked airliners into the World Trade Center. In both cases, human beings are relying on something or someone other than God, and that decision invites the wrath of God.

A third statement we can make about God's judgment from a biblical perspective is that in many instances we carry out our own judgment upon ourselves. The parable of the great banquet in Luke 14 is one that we often sentimentalize or romanticize. We tend to focus on the inclusion of the poor, maimed, blind, and lame. That emphasis is not unwarranted in the larger context of Luke. Certainly that litany, the poor, maimed, blind, and lame, captures the essence of Jesus' compassion as Luke portrays him, even though in this parable they are very much an afterthought and included mainly to make a point. Last minute substitutions are rarely an honor.

That point, however poorly it may preach, has much less to do with the inclusion of the marginal and much more to do with the self-exclusion, or judgment, of the invited guests. As the parable unfolds, it is the invited guests' unified and last minute decision not to attend that kindles the master's wrath. The very improbability of all these guests finding themselves unable to attend

just when the food is finally ready implies some corporate decision, some amount of collaboration in the sabotage of the banquet. The result is predictable: the master is angry and fills his banquet hall with the bystanders and homeless, not so much for the purpose of including them but so there is no longer any room for any of the invited guests.

The biblical perspective, found in both testaments in our canon, is the simple truth that those who live destructively often bring about or contribute to their own destruction. To live by the sword is to die by the sword. Vengeance is God's prerogative alone; taking up the vengeance of God, taking matters into our hands, seeing ourselves in effect as those who are called by God to set things straight, is to assume God's role and to place ourselves and our nation squarely under the judgment of the God who calls us as human beings to live under the lordship of the living Christ.

A fourth and final thing to say about the judgment of God is that the incarnation of Jesus Christ, profoundly revelatory of God's character and profoundly effective in its impact on the possibilities of redemption for humankind, did not effectively limit God's ability to be God or transcend God's prerogative to act in ways that confound human reasoning. Jesus is a model for us, not God. The life and death of Jesus and most of all God's raising him does, however, sign and seal the most important truth about God, something that has been evident in the canon all along. That is: the essential character and actions of God are not rooted in violence. God's mercy, God's love, is the essential root of the divine will.

The testaments fully unite in the faith that God's mercy surpasses God's wrath. God's wrath has had, and always will have, the purpose of bringing earth's people into the circle of God's love. The people of God are not to take God's judgment in their own hands. That seems to me to be at the heart of the problem. The definition of sin, although it takes different shapes in different times and cultures, usually has to do with usurping or trying to usurp God's prerogative. When we try to make things come out right according to our own eyes, we risk becoming violent and thus incurring the wrath of God.

Our God is a jealous God. The only way out of this dilemma is the love of God powerfully expressed in blood of the covenant, and then in the blood of the cross of Jesus. In that sense, God is nonviolent.

Response 1

Peter C. Blum

Imagine a panel of five Mennonite academics addressing the question, Is God Nonviolent? Imagine, further, that such a panel took place only weeks after September 11, 2001. What would be most striking about such a panel to a Mennonite observer? That all respondents are in some clear way committed to pacifism/nonviolence is no surprise. Neither is it surprising, for Mennonites at the beginning of the twenty-first century, that the responses are quite diverse in other ways, even in terms of whether their answers seem to be more affirmative or more negative. However, there are ways in which the responses should strike us as significant for marking subtle changes in the current of Mennonite intellectual life.

I use that phrase, “Mennonite intellectual life,” to refer to elements of Mennonite culture that are still less than a century old. Their history can be seen as beginning in the early to middle twentieth century, when a number of Mennonites began pursuing doctoral studies in theological and social science disciplines, and when several Mennonite groups began accepting and administering seminary-level education. In short, I refer to the decline of a certain distrust of critical reflection and a growing acceptance of higher education and its associated cultures.²² Originally worked out at what seemed different rates (popularly and somewhat accurately perceived as more conservative in the “Old” Mennonite and Mennonite Brethren cases and more liberal in the “GC” case), these currents increasingly flowed together during the latter half of the century, leading first to a cooperative seminary, and finally to the current organizational merger of the “MC” and “GC” groups. Whatever the earlier differences between putatively separate streams, the subsequent intellectual ferment is appropriately considered as a single tradition. Against the background of that still very young tradition I wish to point out three ways in which the thinking of its contemporary representatives on this panel seems especially striking.

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First, it is striking how “epistemological” issues have risen to the surface. Though most overtly present in the remarks by Duane Friesen and Gordon Kaufman, such issues haunt the thinking of all of the presenters. Though by no means absent from Mennonite thought, say, in the 1940s, they are much closer to the surface now, often rupturing it and becoming a focus. How do we know whether God is nonviolent? Is there something wrong with formulating the question in this way? How do we know *anything* about God? What is the status of a truth-claim about God? To what extent can we qualify our dogmatic (in the technical theological sense) formulations in appropriate humility without making them into something significantly less than convictions? Even as various panelists remain committed to the epistemic authority of the Hebrew and Greek scriptures, there is a deep recognition of the complex issues surrounding their contemporary translation, interpretation, and application.

Second, it is striking how at sea we are when we think about *agency*, whether divine or human. This could be considered a more “ontological” set of issues. As Mennonites, we are not used to worrying explicitly about problems of theological discourse that routinely occupied Catholic (and Jewish and Islamic) thinkers of the middle ages. God is a person in the same way that I am a person, correct? The larger Christian tradition replies: Yes and no. It is becoming much clearer, I would suggest, that our anti-theological tendencies (e.g., viewing most medieval theological debates as akin to the proverbial “How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?”) are giving way to a recognition that supposedly theoretical questions may have much more practical import than we have assumed. To those who gathered in Denver to hear the original presentations by the panelists, who had seen video images of the two massive towers of the World Trade Center crumbling, and who had heard their neighbors crying for justice (meaning retaliation), the question “Is God Nonviolent?” was no longer abstract and academic.

And there is more here than the problem of whether we can compare divine agency with human agency. Much is known about human beings, thanks to the natural and social sciences. But very little is known about human *agency*, about what it means to say that a human being *acts* (as opposed to “behaves”).²³ Agency is the mysterious way in which an individual can be more than a node in a causal nexus. Agency is the way in which the individual can be the actor that somehow “owns” action, the actor who *decides* to jump to her or his death as opposed to falling because of gravity. Agency is the sense in which I

am not simply a thing. In Heideggerian language agency is *Da-Sein*, it is being “held out into the nothing”; it is being no-thing.²⁴ Closer examination of the issues that arise here will be unavoidable, insofar as we must face those related to divine agency.²⁵

Third, it is striking that many of us continue in practice to subordinate both epistemological and ontological reflection to an insistently *ethical* vision of the Christian gospel. Whatever else it might mean to be followers of Jesus Christ, it means that we are enabled to differ radically from “the world” in our way of being toward each other, and toward others, in a manner normatively embodied in Jesus of Nazareth. In pointing this out among North American Mennonites at the beginning of the twenty-first century, I would expect two common responses, both of which are misleading, I would claim. On the one hand, we might find our enduring ethical emphasis to be so deeply taken for granted that it has become dangerously banal. We’ve heard this many times, after all. *Nachfolge* is what the Anabaptist Vision is all about. Isn’t this precisely where we are most tempted by complacent pride in our humility? On the other hand, we might wonder if our emphasis on ethical discipleship is more of a liability than an asset. Recent discussion surrounding the so-called “spiritual poverty” of the Anabaptist Vision has explicitly raised this question in connection with our allergies to what we condescendingly call “pietism.”²⁶ Neither of these two responses is very wide of the mark; they both stir nests of issues that we should not ignore.

But to say that there is something here that lies very near the center of the Anabaptist stream of Christian reflection is not to deny any of this. An observer who is most interested in Truth (propositions that one can possess as property and perhaps can wield as weapons) will be disappointed by the lack of answers here to what seems a straightforward question. Is God nonviolent or not? We hope so. We don’t have a clearly agreed upon way to decide. This can be read as the influence of a nefarious academic relativism, but I would insist on another possible reading. Insofar as we know less, it becomes clearer that we must follow-after. We worship a God beyond the God we name, but we follow that God as embodied in Jesus of Nazareth, who loved his enemies and refused the violence of the powers. Though we may not always know what we believe, we still often seem to know in whom we trust.

Response 2

Elaine Swartzentruber

So, is God nonviolent or not? Why is it that we ask ourselves and our theologians to answer this question? Are we looking for irrefutable proof that our theological and political stance of nonviolence is, in the end, the right Christian position? Are we wanting, as Paul Keim suggests, to have God on our side, particularly as our side has less and less political and social appeal in North America?

Perhaps. But if we are looking for such irrefutable proof, we won't find it in this collection of essays from Mennonite scholars, all of whom confess the normativity of nonviolence for Christian discipleship without requiring absolute conviction that God, Godself, is indeed nonviolent. As these writers remind us, the most honest answer about the absolute nature of God is always, "I don't know." What we believe and articulate about God usually tells us more about ourselves than about an objective transcendent reality. As we've all learned from Gordon Kaufman, naming God is an exercise in naming our own deepest desires and hopes that through imaginative reason transcend the limits of time and space. To speak of God is to speak of what we believe or imagine to be real, even while we confess the limits of our knowledge about God. How we name or imagine God matters, in part, because it names or imagines a preferred vision of the world set right (eschatology) and of appropriate behavior toward that world (ethics).

When we seek an answer to God's nonviolence (or not) we're asking after what kind of world we wish to live in and what kind of reality we wish to affirm. To ponder the nonviolence of God points to a deep longing and desire for the end of violence and the pain that violence brings to our world. It is a naming of our desire for abundant life — *everyone 'neath their own vine and figtree, living in peace and unafraid*. Such a longing requires us to recall the constitutive role of imagination and vision as both source and warrant for

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theological reflection and ethical directive.

Duane Friesen makes this point well in his sixth thesis, in which he offers us an alternative to the Just War, the Schleithem, and the “God on a white horse” perspectives on the possibilities of nonviolence. Friesen asks us to imagine what kind of world we want to live in and how we might get to it. Always remember to connect means and ends. Violence might get us somewhere, but it begets more violence. Nonviolence might get us somewhere else. What might it beget? Friesen rightly challenges the church to develop an alternative politics of nonviolence and to find practical ways to make nonviolence work in a world of violence. Here Friesen joins Keim’s persistently nagging voice calling us to move beyond limiting imagination and vision to pretty dreams of quiet in the land of peace to “a prophetic consciousness, a corporate hermeneutic, evangelical courage, sectarian energy, and radical, eschatological hope” (32).

Such an active imagination and such a bold hope for realistic and pragmatic nonviolence are not merely the visions of good (though perhaps too idealistic) people. This vision and this hope is deeply grounded in and warranted by the story that we embrace in making theologically imaginative claims to the Christian faith. Ted Grimsrud makes this point well. Pointing us to the ambiguity about violence and nonviolence in the usual sources of theological reflection — scripture, tradition, and experience — Grimsrud relies on imaginative reason to ask us what we need to make the world a better place. Grounding his vision in the norm in the life and teachings of Jesus, he finds an interpretive key that allows him to “see the consistent nonviolence of God being expressed amidst these mixed signals of history and present experience” (17). The norm of Jesus’ way convinces Grimsrud that whatever the nature of God in Godself may or may not be, when God became human, Jesus was the human that God became. And from Jesus, both from what he taught and what he did, we have a vision of active, audacious nonviolence. When God became human, that human rejected violence and we humans must do likewise.

Mary Schertz also appeals to Jesus as the pragmatic model for our human lives and does so in a way that emphasizes the raising of Jesus as the final sign and seal of God’s mercy and God’s love, trumping God’s violence and judgment found in that mixed bag of scripture, tradition, and experience. Her focus on the resurrection is an important one, often forgotten in discussions

of violence and non-violence. Apparently God approves of what Jesus did to the point that his life and death have inaugurated a new heaven and a new earth — that very vision of abundant life and fig trees. Schertz presses her point too far, however, when she claims that the resurrection might allow us to posit that God Godself is indeed nonviolent. When we see God acting in seemingly violent ways, it is to draw “earth’s people into the circle of God’s love,” she says (36). She immediately notes that such loving violence is God’s prerogative and not a command to humans.

More troubling than differentiating between God’s ethic and human ethic is the vision inherent in Schertz’s lovingly violent God. If “God” is the naming of the deepest longings and desires of a community, what kind of community longs for the equation of violence and love? Do I want to be part of a community that believes that God would use violence to draw the people of the earth into the circle of God’s love? If our preferred vision of the world is the one we believe initiated by the new creation of nonviolence and abundance in the resurrection, why are we equating violence with love, even in our theological constructs? This smacks of Friesen’s critique of the “God on a white horse” and is deeply problematic to the claims that Schertz herself makes for the normativity of nonviolence evidenced by the resurrection.

Along with the grounding of a vision of non-violence in Jesus’ way, a final norm of Christian nonviolence might be culled out from Schertz’s essay, particularly her footnoted interchange with J. Denny Weaver concerning social location. This norm might be termed a norm of “solidarity” and be warranted by the Hebraic understanding of *Shekinah* and/or Christian understandings of incarnation and the Holy Spirit (among others!). It is a norm of standing with, particularly standing with the suffering, and is well expressed by the story of Hagar, the experience of African American women, and the Womanist theology to which Weaver referred in his comment. This norm bears more elucidation in the context of Schertz’s essay and the solidarity which she posits in it.

In elucidating her thoughts on the causes of the September 11 terrorist attacks, Schertz calls us as wealthy Americans to an uncomfortable solidarity of complicity with the circumstances of massive global injustice, self-serving foreign policy, and incessant violence that form the context of the attacks and continue to wreak havoc and misery around the world. This call to solidarity must be taken very seriously if we are to take personally the call to a politics

of nonviolence. We must acknowledge that we, even the most pacifistic and visionary among us, participate in massive violence every day. Violence that actively destroys the earth and her creatures. Any claims to nonviolence, whether practical or theological, do nothing to thwart this violence unless they are accompanied with concrete political, social, and economic action resisting and counteracting it. Even so, we are people of unclean lips and must stand in solidarity to be convicted by a judgmental God who cannot and will not tolerate the violence we perpetrate.

But this solidarity of complicity is not the only kind of solidarity that might serve as norm for a radically visionary and practical nonviolence. For while Schertz is clearly correct in calling us to acknowledge complicity, she is not correct in claiming that God's judgment is impartial. She seems to recognize this when admitting that God sometimes seems to act in violent ways in scripture, history, and experience. We must ask what that apparent violence of God accomplishes and what, according to those who understood such violence to be God-initiated, it means. For if the Biblical witness of violence and the paradigmatic example of Jesus' nonviolence tell us anything, it is that God's favor and God's judgment are extraordinarily partisan. This is what I, and apparently Weaver, have learned from liberation theologies of all kinds. God's favor always goes to the weak, the poor, the last, and the least. God's judgment always goes to the strong, the rich, the first, and the most.

"We" may all share responsibility for the world's violence, but we must not erase the importance of social location. Solidarity of complicity does not mean that we all share the same kind of responsibility or judgment. I, a white, upper middle class university professor, have a different kind of judgment vested upon me than does the homeless man I pass in my car on my way from a fulfilling, satisfying job to my comfortable oil-heated, centrally air-conditioned home. He and I are both part of the "we" of this nation, but the parts that we play and the benefits that we reap are vastly different. Our complicity is also vastly different, and the judgment of September 11 on our lives and our beings is vastly different.

So too, must our visions of nonviolence be grounded in a norm of solidarity. I do share a solidarity of complicity with the violence in our world and I must acknowledge that, repent of it, and strive for something else. That something else should be a solidarity with the least as an active, audacious

vision of abundant life for everyone beneath their own vine and fig tree. The view from under another's vine and fig tree is not the view from mine.

An investment in this kind of solidarity requires me always to acknowledge social location and the difference it makes. It requires me to be as partial as I imagine my God to be. Surely Schertz knows this, probably better than the other writers in this collection. I find it illuminating that she alone was challenged on the issue of social location; no one asked any of the white men on the panel to account for difference in their papers. Of course, none of the other papers so pointedly accused its audience of complicity with the forces of evil and violence in the world either.

Nonetheless, Schertz's failure to announce solidarity with the least in a posture of active nonviolence as the logical next step from a solidarity of complicity is unfortunate. Complicity with the rich ought really to lead to solidarity with the poor. Recognizing how my own view from beneath a very nice vine and fig tree is protected by an unacknowledged wall of social, political, economic, and physical violence, i.e., "the sword," ought to cause me to find other vines and fig trees, particularly those where the sword isn't so nicely hidden behind hedges of privilege. It is the vision of the safety and shalom of those other vines and fig trees that a solidarity with the least calls us to. Perhaps Schertz's open possibility of a lovingly violent God has clouded the picture. If God's violent judgment can equal God's love, we are oddly left without ground to stand on to work actively against violence and we can only acknowledge our complicity with it. How are we to know what is violence for violence's sake and what is violence drawing the people of the earth into the circle of God's love, that is, God's judgment? It matters where we stand to view the violence. And if we stand in solidarity with the least, perhaps all violence looks like violence, and God's love looks like something else altogether. Perhaps in solidarity with the least we might imagine an active and bold nonviolence that brings about the hope of the resurrection rather than the despair of the cross.

Or so I imagine it.

Response 3

Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld

When I first heard this panel address the question of whether God is nonviolent, I was struck by how deep the fault lines run not between Mennonites and the rest of the Christian community, but *within* the community of Mennonite theologians and biblical scholars. That sense has not diminished in reading these contributions.

No one in this guild argues much any more about whether we should be pacifist, nor about whether this implies an activist stance; that has become a defining characteristic of a Mennonite peace stance. It is shared by a large and growing number outside Mennonite circles. Gone are the days of withdrawal and quietism. I applaud that without qualification. The fault lines appear, rather, at the much more fundamental level of how we view God, or even more fundamentally, what we mean with “god.” In my view the diversity within the small Mennonite community of theological scholarship is far greater than what separates us from others within the wider ecumene, as illustrated quite well by these panelists.

The most important point of divergence is surely how “God” or “god” is understood and spoken about. Paul Keim and Mary Schertz approach the question of “how” God is by wrestling with the biblical witness. How God is with respect to violence and nonviolence is found by listening attentively, if sometimes restlessly, to the complicated and tension-filled “story” the Bible tells. The question of the “how” is given urgency not least because the “who” is already given and assented to in faith. The Bible is read as a record of the self-disclosure of God, however much refracted through the witness of the biblical writers and the communities in which their writings emerged and were preserved. For all the clarity of what is disclosed of God, much “mystery” remains. Even so, Keim and Schertz appear to begin with the conviction that God’s ways as rehearsed in Scripture are evidence of God’s self-disclosure. It

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is for that reason that Schertz summons the courage to ask the politically incorrect question whether the judgment of God is present in the events of September 11 — an event that gave special urgency to the topic the panel was asked to address. That is why as a pacifist Keim is compelled to struggle with, and not dismiss, the biblical depiction of Yahweh as warrior.

Gordon Kaufman addresses the question very differently. Despite his certainty that “none of us is in a position to state who or what God really is,” he would nevertheless have us reconceive of “God” (or “god”?) as “creativity” rather than as a loving creator. Evolution and process rather than agency become the operative categories in which “what we call God” is construed. Why would such a reconceptualization of “God” (or “god”) undergird nonviolence, given that we are repeatedly witness to the ways in which conflict and violence as often as not outstrip peaceableness in creativity? I find here a remarkable mix of certainties. One is that “God” is unknowable, the other that we can construe “God” in ways that shape a nonviolent life. Is the second certainty purchased with the former? That is, since there is no normative self-disclosure of God as revealed in Scripture — no “self” to take the initiative to self-disclose — we are left to construct our nonviolent “God” as we deem necessary for the creation of a culture of nonviolence.

In less stark fashion, Duane Friesen’s and Ted Grimsrud’s contributions raise these same questions. Both insist on the unknowability of God. At the same time, they insist on nonviolence as a characteristic of God. As Friesen’s second thesis has it, we call God “nonviolent,” because “God” is the way we “poetically” express our wonder at the mystery of the cosmos and our “deepest longings and concerns.” Necessarily, then, for those for whom “nonviolence” is such a deep yearning, God is nonviolent. While insisting that we need a god who acts in history, Grimsrud finds little clarity on whether God is nonviolent in either scripture, tradition, or experience, all of which he sees as marked by ambiguity. But because we “need” a nonviolent God, and cannot unambiguously derive such a god from the sources just listed, we are left, as I read Grimsrud, essentially to envision such a god. Thus Grimsrud would add “vision” to scripture, tradition, and experience. Echoing Kaufman and Friesen, Grimsrud believes he has found the source of such a vision in Jesus.

I cannot help shake the sense that nonviolence has hermeneutical priority in each of these three reconstructions of “what we call God” (Friesen). This

raises the question as to whether God is really necessary for peace. More carefully put, “God” seems to be the construal “we” (those who [still] talk this way?) “need” in order to give our commitment to peacemaking normative force. How is this different from the idolatry Friesen quite rightly sees lurking just behind the curtain (see his Thesis #1)? How is Grimsrud’s “vision” different from an ideological commitment to nonviolence, a “necessary” conviction that nonviolence is “with the grain of the universe,” quoting John Howard Yoder?

I may have misunderstood and misrepresented the panelists. If so, I regret that deeply. Such misunderstanding may nevertheless spur us all to greater clarity. If I did not, then I would urge a serious reexamination of a stance which speaks of “God” or “god” as language, however “poetic,” for something other than the agent of liberation, judgment, liberation, and peace revealed in the Bible. At the cost of oversimplification, we do “need” God, but we do not need “God,” even if such a god conforms to our ideologically informed notions of nonviolence (this is a warning I hear in Keim’s presentation). Not only do we not need such a god, but we should be suspicious of all such construals as idolatrous. What makes them idolatrous is not that they are violent, but that they are self-consciously and deliberately creations — however nonviolent.

Some of the panelists may feel such statements only mark me out as foolishly naive about the fact that I have simply shown my own construction of “God” to be that of a god who is not constructed but who constructs, who is not invented but who invents. Perhaps so. I am reminded of Paul’s words in 2 Cor. 12:11: “I have been a fool. You forced me to it!” So let me speak as a fool. I cannot shake the sense that it is essential to faith in the god of the Bible that this god has precisely *not* been constructed as idols are (for whatever noble objectives, including nonviolence). True, our understanding of this self-disclosing god may be impaired by cultural and personal blinders, sin, and just plain stupidity. In my reading of the Bible, “God” is not simply another way to speak of our deepest human longings and yearnings. The god of the Bible is one who does not easily conform to our conceptual frameworks, but one who slips out of our conceptual control again and again, yet shown in the biblical revelation (I occasionally prefer that word to “story”) to be infinitely trustworthy, ingenious at reconciliation, inventive in the practice of justice, and finally and

decisively restoring of all of creation. All of that necessarily implies agency. Such love requires a lover. Such love is fierce (judgment — see Schertz; this is more than cause and effect, as I read Friesen), shockingly inventive (gospel), and victoriously decisive (consummation). Not much is left, in my view, when these are recast as processes in the way the cosmos is unfolding, least of all when they become synonymous with human yearning and initiative.

The importance of this for understanding what peacemaking means is enormous. Courageous and self-sacrificial peacemaking, the kind that might even lead to the cross, presupposes trust in such an agent of liberation, vindication, and restoration. The surety of resurrection is the premise to a peaceable activism marked by *Gelassenheit*. The endlessly loving patience we call “nonresistance” presupposes that there is a God whose patience, mercy, and grace is emulated and participated in. But it is the gracious mercy of a God who has intruded and will again intrude, who will at God’s own time bring peace about in a conclusive way. I simply see no way to ground a biblically informed peaceableness in anything other than an eschatological disposition informed by the events of divine intervention in the past. Hope does not reside in the efficacy of nonviolence, but in the God who makes its practice possible, and indeed necessary. Easter is not the creative potential of nonviolence to break the cycle of nonviolence, as I understand Friesen to suggest (Thesis 6). Easter is the powerful intrusive act of God that raised the executed Jesus. Easter anticipates the coming conclusive intrusion of God to bring about the new creation. Our peacemaking may anticipate that intervention. It may even participate in it, as I have argued repeatedly over the years. More importantly, however, its practice rests on trust in that God of Easter. Easter is decidedly not a cipher for the success of human initiatives, however nonviolent. Easter is about God’s “violence” against death and destruction (e.g., 1 Cor. 15; Eph. 1).

Neither Kaufman nor Friesen wish to think of God in such agential terms. Kaufman explicitly, and Friesen most clearly in his rejection of Miroslav Volf. Friesen rejects what he calls Volf’s *deus ex machina* as an “ultimate appeal to violence.” Volf would agree with Paul Keim, who insists that “it is because we can leave vengeance to God that we are able to work at reconciliation.” But then, on the very last page of his *Exclusion and Embrace*, Volf loses his nerve in trusting in that intrusive deity, allowing that in a truly

violent world human violence may be necessary. That, and not his belief in a divine agent who guarantees peace in the end, is Volf's problem.

I fear that to abandon this hastily and inadequately sketched set of convictions leaves us ultimately with an ideological commitment to nonviolence which may not survive the test of a violent and rebellious reality. Far more resilient, I suspect, is a dogged faithful obedience to the way of Jesus premised on trust and hope in a God who will, in God's own ways and in God's own time, bring peace. That God's people are implicated in that divine peace project is absolutely clear to me. Even so, the question of whether God's ways are always consistent with what we are called to live out should be answered only very carefully. Of course, if "God" is the word we use for our own best insights and visions, then we can actually dispense with the question. Then the only really important question is whether we, individually and corporately, are nonviolent, and whether that makes sense in our world. We should then not ask whether God is nonviolent, but simply carry on a more direct discussion with each other on whether nonviolence is the best way to go about solving human problems. That is a critically important question, but it is very different from asking whether God is nonviolent, if "God" is informed by the biblical witness. The panel has illustrated that we do not know how to talk about that question, since we do not appear to agree on what "God" or "god" means. Our vocabularies intersect frequently, but even when they do, it is not clear that they mean sufficiently the same thing to make for intelligibility.

To conclude, questions of whether the God of the Bible is violent or not, or whether judgment and wrath should be equated with violence, and what implications that has for human violence and nonviolence, are one species of question. A very different and much more fundamental one is about what is meant by "God." The panel was attempting to engage two different species of question at the same time. Because the fault lines are so deep on the second, the panelists could not really engage each other on the first. What finally gives me hope in this troubling discussion is not that we will find the skill as scholars to persuade each other — as much as we must remain committed to engaging each other with attentiveness and respect, but that the *deus ex machina* continually takes the initiative to come out of hiding to those who seek God with all their heart (Jer. 29:12-14). That we are such a community of seekers I have no doubt.

Is God Nonviolent? The Shape of the Conversation

Ray Gingerich and Ted Grimsrud

In convening our colloquium, we hoped primarily for an airing of key issues in the process of reflecting theologically on matters related to God and violence. We are happy and grateful for the papers we received. Many issues have indeed been aired; we hope this is only a beginning. In this concluding essay we identify what we see to be issues that need ongoing conversation.

(1) As we take up the task of doing theology, does starting with a commitment to nonviolence *distort* our view of God, or does it rather provide the key properly to understand God? All of our writers clearly share deep pacifist convictions; yet several question whether such convictions might not play the role of fostering misunderstanding, of creating a picture of God that is simply our own projection.

We wonder, though, if one is clear about one's pacifist values why one would find it necessary to equivocate concerning the importance of those values at the foundational level of our theology — specifically our perceptions of God. We also wonder what concerns lie behind such equivocation. Maybe, as Tom Yoder Neufeld points out, “no one in this [Mennonite/Anabaptist] guild argues much any more about whether we should be pacifist,” but in our wider culture we are still a tiny, oft-criticized minority — as was made clear post 9/11. Do we still worry about how a thoroughgoing peace theology will be received beyond “our guild”?

All of us surely agree that our talk about God is metaphorical; our *theology* is a human construct. Yet several writers also express concern about creating an idol of a nonviolent God in the sense, apparently, of constructing views of God that may be simply wish-fulfillment. Do they mean to say that all our theologizing is bound to be idolatrous? Or are they implying that certain notions of God (e.g., “Yahweh is a warrior”) are *not* human constructs and therefore not idolatrous?

Perhaps the best way to *avoid* making our God-concepts idolatrous is to make sure that they never become the justification for violence toward other human beings. That is, understanding God as nonviolent may actually be the best approach for constructing theology that is as non-idolatrous as possible. We believe the nonviolent way of Jesus best protects us from the self-assertion that allows us to accept values as ultimate that require taking others' lives.

(2) What is the role of the Bible in answering the question about God and nonviolence? How do we understand God's self-disclosure (revelation) to operate in relation to our theologizing?

We see two general tendencies in relation to the issue of scripture. One tendency argues that the Bible as a whole provides basic data for determining our answer to the question and that we are bound to accept the biblical view concerning God and violence. The other tendency focuses more on one specific aspect of scripture (the story of Jesus) as providing the interpretive key for understanding the rest of scripture (as well as reality outside of scripture).

While we find it difficult to see how the Bible as a whole unequivocally supports pacifism, we also are uncomfortable with Paul Keim's skepticism "that there is a direct causal relationship between the Bible and our theology of peace." We follow John Howard Yoder in asserting that our peace theology at its strongest will be based squarely on the biblical story of Jesus and on Jesus' way of reading the Old Testament — and that this approach, properly understood, does not at all minimize the witness of the Old Testament but to the contrary provides the best grid for appropriating the fundamentally peaceable message of the *entire* Bible. But the Bible's support for pacifism does not rest on the sum total of individual texts so much as the reading of it as a whole with Jesus and the prophets as the interpretive key.

All of our writers accept that revelation is an active component for peace theology, but they understand the nature of that revelation somewhat differently. From one perspective, revelation seems to be communication that comes from God outside of historical processes and is accessible to human beings in some sort of objective, transcendent form. From other perspectives, revelation is understood to be God communicating in the midst of history. In this view, revelation is never separate from human limitations and interpretations.

Part of what seems to be at stake with this point concerning revelation is whether we must base our position concerning violence/nonviolence and

God on a harmony of *all* the biblical perspectives or whether we must make choices about which perspectives to give priority.

(3) We see in a number of the writers a kind of residual “two-kingdom” theology that needs to be more openly discussed. By two-kingdom theology we mean the view that Mennonite pacifists firmly stand within our pacifist community while also recognizing the necessity of a counter-force (including violence) that is essential to sustain the broader society in relative order and peace.

When we talk of “God’s prerogative” to take vengeance on wrongdoers (Mary Schertz), of God’s appropriate capacity for “anger, wrath, and judgment” (Duane Friesen), of “Yahweh as warrior” (Keim), and yet assert that these are not appropriate stances for pacifist Christians, are we not edging toward a type of two-kingdom thought? How can we accept that God may act violently without our imitating God thus, and at the same time not posit a kind of division of reality into distinct spheres?

Elaine Swartzentruber raises the question in a quite direct way. What does it mean to be saying (with Schertz) that God may use violence to draw people into the circle of God’s love? This view that God may use violence for the sake of love (and that we may not) may help us take a stance against human violence, but it seems to do so at the cost of a consistent view of the nature of reality such that peace is actually at the heart of God.

(4) Though all the writers clearly agree that the way of Jesus provides the normative basis for pacifist ethics, they do not agree on how closely this affirmation should connect with our view of God. Peter Blum states that though we are of necessity limited in what we can say with confidence about God, we can be clear about our call to follow Jesus in loving enemies and refusing the violence of the powers.

However, we wonder whether this clarity (in the present) will be sustainable without a clearer theological rationale. Our current generation of Mennonite/Anabaptist pacifists is still drawing on the recent past of face-to-face pacifist communities where the rejection of violence followed from by-and-large nonreflective social practices. These traditional, stable, non-professionalized, largely rural, ethnic communities are rapidly passing from

the scene, and future Mennonite/Anabaptist pacifists are going to be increasingly dependent upon more self-conscious theological awareness of the roots of their peace convictions. Hence, we believe that to reflect more carefully on our images of God is an important part of our current theological task.

The reticence most writers express to speak definitively about God and nonviolence reflects admirable humility and self-awareness of human limitations. Yet, to sustain the peace convictions we all share, will we not at some point have to take responsibility to articulate self-conscious peace theology that bases pacifism firmly on the nature of God and the nature of reality?

(5) Gordon Kaufman's powerful argument challenges us to face the question of the relationship between our understanding of Jesus and our understanding of nature. He argues that events in nature, especially the "massive physical forces" and "nature 'red in tooth and claw,'" that have led to the emergence of creativity in the evolution of life, are not properly thought of as "violent" in the sense of being acts "of a self-conscious violent will." Rather, the evolutionary process has been a matter of divine participation over long periods of time for the sake of bringing into being levels of consciousness that have engendered nonviolent agape-love.

Kaufman is not arguing that nature in all its manifestations is pacifist, but he does seem to be saying that the Christian understanding he affirms recognizes a coherence between the dynamics of evolution and the emergence of clarity among (some) human beings that agape-love as seen in Jesus is the fullest revelation of the character of both the universe and God.

How do we connect our convictions about Jesus and the way of peace with our understandings of the natural world? Some Christians believe that the way of Jesus, while normative, is not coherent with the dynamics of evolution in nature. We are, in this view, called to go "against nature" by taking up the cross of suffering love in an inherently violent world. This view is left with a profound challenge in coherently holding together these peace convictions with a view of God, the Creator of a *non-peaceable* world.

On the other hand, Kaufman's argument seems to allow for an alternative view that recognizes the involvement of the God of Jesus Christ in the very dynamics of the universe itself, perceived now in the fruits of the evolutionary process. Kaufman counts himself as a Christian who believes "that this

nonviolent love can itself be creative of a new future for humans, and should thus be made the center of life.”

These various issues — and many more that arise in these essays — indicate that the task of doing peace theology requires much more than mere biblical exegesis. Our diversity in the Mennonite theological community must not cause us to overlook the profound commonalities we share. The challenge is to utilize our diversity to strengthen and deepen our shared witness to the way of peace.

Notes

- ¹ George Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 226.
- ² Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 146.
- ³ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Explanation of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).
- ⁴ See the argument in my book, *Artists, Citizens, Philosophers: Seeking the Peace of the City* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2000), 102-103.
- ⁵ Gandhi is noted for his emphasis on the inherent connection of ends and means. Gandhi's views are explained well by Joan Bondurant, *The Conquest of Violence: The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965).
- ⁶ James C. Juhnke and Carol M. Hunter correct this fundamental gap in the writing of United States history in *The Missing Peace: The Search for Nonviolent Alternatives in American History* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2001).
- ⁷ See Ted Grimsrud, *God's Healing Strategy: An Introduction to the Main Themes of the Bible* (Telford, PA: Pandora Press US, 2000) for an attempt to show that the overall message of the Bible supports nonviolence.
- ⁸ Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (New York: The Free Press, 1990).
- ⁹ Timothy Gorringer, *God's Just Vengeance: Crime, Violence, and the Rhetoric of Salvation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
- ¹⁰ See also Ted Grimsrud and Howard Zehr, "Rethinking God, Justice, and the Treatment of Offenders" *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation* 34.3-4 (Spring 2002): 235-55.
- ¹¹ See Edward O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (New York: Random House, 1998).
- ¹² Ashley Montagu, *The Nature of Human Aggression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).
- ¹³ Cited in Alfie Kohn, *The Brighter Side of Human Nature* (New York: Basic Books, 1990), 269-70.
- ¹⁴ See A. James Reimer, "God is Love but not a Pacifist," in *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2001), 486-92.
- ¹⁵ This is one of Yoder's main arguments in *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,

1972). See, for example, pages 134 and 232 for summary statements.

¹⁶ Gordon D. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 388.

¹⁷ For those who would like to see fuller discussion, I suggest looking at chapter 22 of my book, *In Face of Mystery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993) and also my article in the June 2001 issue of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 69: 411-27, entitled "On Thinking of God as Serendipitous Creativity."

¹⁸ Holmes Rolston III, *Genes, Genesis and God: Values and Their Origins in Natural and Human History* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 144.

¹⁹ Harry Huebner, "Christian Pacifism and the Character of God," in Harry Huebner, ed., *The Church as Theological Community: Essays in Honour of David Schroeder* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1990), 247-72.

²⁰ Waldemar Janzen, "A Canonical Rethinking of the Anabaptist-Mennonite New Testament Orientation," in Harry Huebner, ed., *The Church as Theological Community: Essays in Honour of David Schroeder* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1990), 90-112.

²¹ During the discussion period that followed the panel's presentations, J. Denny Weaver raised the issue of social location, citing womanist theologians who assume that God is on their side as a comforter in contrast to the guilt and self-blame that he heard from me [Mary Schertz]. I think that the issue of social location is important, but it can sometimes be used as a "stopper." In this case, Weaver was more likely projecting his own social location onto me than hearing me from mine. In asking what it means to be part of a nation that God may be judging, I was not assuming that I did anything to merit that judgment. Nevertheless I am a member of this nation, despite that fact that I am neither in agreement with nor responsible for many of its stances. That issue, I submit, matters to all of us, no matter what our social location.

²² Numerous recent works, especially by Mennonite historians, would provide warrant for the admittedly sweeping generalizations that I [Peter Blum] am presenting. For one "MC" example that I have found especially enlightening, see Albert Keim's wonderful biography of Harold S. Bender (Herald Press, 1998).

²³ Here I rely on the well-known distinction between (mere) behavior and (meaningful) action, most closely associated in social theory with Max Weber. I do not intend, however, to limit the conceptualization of the distinction to Weber's own discussions thereof.

²⁴ Cf. Martin Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?" pp. 89-110 in *Basic Writings*, ed. D. F. Krell (Harper San Francisco, 1993). By "Heideggerian tradition" I do not mean thinkers who specifically consider themselves "followers" of Heidegger. Rather, I mean a fairly wide array of influential thinkers whose ways of approaching human agency remain "Heideggerian" in this sense (e.g., Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida).

²⁵ These comments are obviously only a superficial gesture. I hope to address this particular set of issues in another context in the near future.

²⁶ The discussion was originally sparked by Stephen F. Dintaman's article, "The Spiritual Poverty of the Anabaptist Vision," *The Conrad Grebel Review* (Spring 1992): 205-208.

Resistance and Nonresistance: The Two Legs of a Biblical Peace Stance

Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld

Introduction

The topic for this 2002 Schrag Lecture was decided well before that fateful day on September 11, 2001. Since then all consideration of peace issues has taken on a razor-sharp edge. Even if it is not always obvious, the preparation of this lecture has been deeply affected by that violent interruption of “life as usual.” It is forcing us now to ask the most fundamental of questions: Who are we? Whose are we? What is our calling at this hour?

I hope to participate in answering these questions by focusing on two apparently contradictory ways of relating to violence, injustice, and injury in our world: resistance and nonresistance. The one fights, the other gives in; the one “does something,” the other “does nothing.” Where “resistance” connotes an active, even aggressive stance, “nonresistance” suggests passive acquiescence.

We should not be surprised, perhaps, that “nonresistance” has largely fallen out of fashion, most especially among those committed to peacemaking, or, as we increasingly say, peacebuilding. Nonresistance seems to fit better with a separate, rural life, uninvolved in the affairs of society — the world of *die Stillen im Lande* (“the quiet in the land”). Resistance, on the other hand, is often paired with other terms such as “nonviolent resistance” or “tax resistance”; it is at home in the world of activist peacemaking.

The meaning of this terminology is not self-evident, however. “Resistance” has often been associated with violent efforts to rid a country of occupation, as happened in France during the German occupation, or as

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presently in Palestine. “Nonresistance” too means different things to different people, as I discovered when I read that “nonresistance” is an old doctrine of the Church of England. This turns out to mean not that true Anglicans turn the other cheek, but that they will not resist the will of the monarch. In this case nonresistance becomes a stance of compliance with the will of the state. In contrast, “nonresistance” carried strong activist overtones during the anti-slavery struggles of the time of the U.S. civil war, referring to what today we might well call “resistance.”¹

“Nonresistance” has been until recently the term of choice among churches of the Anabaptist tradition for whom retaliation and going to war goes against the express teachings of Jesus in Matt. 5:39: “You shall not resist evil” (or “the evil one”). Nonresistance was very sharply distinguished from pacifism, which was viewed sometimes as an optimistic ideology, radically underestimating the nature of sin and evil, at other times as coercion under the guise of peaceableness, as Gandhi and M. L. King Jr. were interpreted.² Many today continue to view activism, especially civil disobedience, as exactly the kind of resistance to authority Romans 13 explicitly forbids.

At the present time, however, most Anabaptists committed to active peacemaking find it difficult to think in terms other than resistance. “Nonresistance” is no longer intelligible, and its premise largely forgotten. This represents nothing less than a sea change. One reason for this change is positive, namely the fruitful pairing of peace with justice.³ Greater awareness of the nature and roots of injustice, violence, poverty, and racism as not only personal but systemic has brought about an urgent desire to address concrete brokenness and injury, and the conditions of injustice and violence which bring them about. Today it is not enough for peacemakers to stay out of trouble; they need to look for trouble! The Christian Peacemaker Team’s slogan is wonderfully suggestive: “*Getting in the way.*” It combines following the way of Jesus with getting in the way of evil, discipleship with obstruction and resistance.⁴

This shift in the culture of peace has produced a wonderfully rich and diverse inventory of resistance: from organizing, lobbying, and demonstrating, to sometimes costly civil disobedience; from application of restorative justice as an alternative to punishment and incarceration, to attempts to mediate large scale international conflicts; from efforts to stem the trade of small arms to

analysis and critique of militarism; from Sunday School curricula focused on peacemaking to full-fledged peace studies programs — surely, in my view, a sign of the Spirit’s empowering presence among us.

Admittedly, sometimes such “resistance” has been informed not so much by the gospel as by a “peace and justice” agenda shared by those who are not believers in Christ. This becomes a problem if we who are *in the church* are able to articulate our peace stance with no *necessary* connection to Christ. There is then only a short distance to ignorance or forgetfulness of the moorings and the roots of peace in the Christ whose body we are. Having said that, for those who have *not* forgotten the roots to find collaborators in the work of peace beyond the borders of the church is a bright sign of God’s peaceable presence in our world.

It is not my task here to engage in a sociological or historical analysis of how we got to this point. I will for present purposes leave that to others.⁵ I intend, rather, to reflect on what I believe to be the biblical vision of peacemaking. I do so not only because it is my field as a student and teacher of Bible, but more importantly, because the Bible is — or should be! — the arena in which we struggle for common understanding of what Christ calls us to. For the sons and daughters of God, peacemaking is at the end of the day not a matter of tradition, denomination, or political ideology. It is a matter of gospel, period. Our stance as peacemakers must be recovered as the necessary and required stance of all who have experienced the grace of God, who have been given new life in Christ as sons and daughters of God.⁶

I am quite aware that many questions will be raised, and many more left unanswered, in this presentation. That is so only in very small measure due to the limits of a public lecture. More importantly, very deep and profound questions will continue to attend all of our attempts to get it right. The task of articulating a biblical understanding of peace in a world of violence and oppression can only be undertaken with humility and the desire for the Holy Spirit’s illuminating presence. And all articulations must be tentative, even as we can be sure of the rock-like certainty of God’s peaceableness and the non-negotiability of our call to peacemaking. It is with such a disposition that I wish to attempt the modest task of sketching out how both resistance and nonresistance are necessary and required components of a biblical peace stance.

Two Biblical Paradigms: Resistance and Nonresistance

There are in the Bible two narrative paradigms, or two story lines, which relate to our topic.

Resistance

First, there is the rich story line of resistance to evil. Throughout this story, and in myriad ways, God intervenes in the affairs of rebellious humanity, as attentive creator, as loyal protector, and as “divine warrior,” resisting rebellion, responding with fury to the callousness of the rich and powerful, and bringing liberation to the oppressed. In this story we hear the wails and laments of slaves being worked to death, of the tearful murmurings of exiles and refugees, but also the sounds of chains being snapped, armies defeated, and the wild fury of the divine warrior raining down the thunderbolts of judgment on those who would defile creation and those who inhabit it.⁷ All this pales, however, in comparison to the drama of Easter and the anticipated full appearing of the Lord’s Messiah, coming as the victorious lamb — or is he the lion? — to claim his bride and lead her to the wedding feast of the new creation.⁸

The story of resistance spans *both* testaments. Not only is God depicted as a victorious warrior, so is his messiah. As the writers of the New Testament know well, this Jesus, who was born into a world of oppression, who was tortured and executed for his resistance to that oppression, was raised to life, and now holds power! The resistance continues! Watch out, world: “Here comes the judge!”⁹

Contemporary peace theology is sometimes ill at ease with this dimension of the biblical portrait of Jesus, rooted as it appears to be in the so-called “myth of redemptive violence,” a phrase recently made popular by Walter Wink.¹⁰ Themes of judgment are thus often relegated to the Old Testament. That will not do, however. To remove this combative, confrontative dimension from the portrait of Jesus is to remove an essential dimension of what it means to confess him to be Lord and Messiah.

Everywhere in the New Testament the conviction is present that divine resistance to sin, oppression, political and demonic, is not only real but is indeed an essential element in the foundation of our hope. To give but a few

examples: Paul's word of reassurance at the end of his letter to the Romans comes to mind: "The God of peace will shortly crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you!" (Rom. 16:20, NRSV). The Lord's prayer is finally nothing other than a plea for God to bring heaven down to earth. The conflictual nature of that is signified in the plea: "And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one!" (Matt. 6:13, NRSV). Nowhere is the descent of heaven onto the earth characterized more conflictually than in the Apocalypse of John (see here the "wrath of the Lamb" in chap. 6, giving way finally to the descent of the heavenly Jerusalem onto the earth in chaps. 21 and 22).

In the end, no single aspect of the biblical story is more dramatic evidence of this than Easter: Easter is God's power revealed. Easter is God's defeat of death itself. As Eph. 1:19-23 reminds us, it represents nothing less than the subjugation of the powers to the risen Messiah. Recall that stinging taunt of victory Paul recites in his great chapter on the resurrection in 1 Cor. 15:55:

Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?

Nonresistant Christians have rehearsed this story line of struggle, resistance, and victory as an inextricable part of the biblical story as well. Indeed, it is precisely because God is so forcefully resistant that the people of God can be nonresistant. Overcome evil with good, and leave vengeance to God, Paul tells the Romans in Rom. 12:14-21, quoting Deut. 32:35, the great psalm celebrating God as warrior. Unquestionably, evil must be and will be resisted. It is only a question of whose prerogative it is to do so. Millard Lind considers Exodus 14:13-14 to be paradigmatic for a people of God called to peaceableness:¹¹

Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the LORD will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.

As important and as deeply rooted in the biblical text and story as this insight is, *by itself* this way of stating the matter is decidedly *not* adequate to capture what is expected of us as sons and daughters of God, as the body of Christ. If we read the Bible as a whole, we soon see that not only is *God* the divine warrior, not only has the *Messiah* come as the agent of divine resistance to sin, disease, demonic possession, economic exploitation, and social ostracism, but those whom Christ has drawn into his body are themselves implicated in that messianic project of resistance to evil. To be simply bystanders in the resistance to evil is a betrayal of the biblical portrait of the people of God as constituted in Christ.

Let me illustrate with a few examples: Jesus sends out his followers to participate in the messianic task of offering peace and bringing down the forces of evil (e.g., Matt. 10; Luke 10). In sending them out Jesus says: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword!” (Matt. 10:34, NRSV). The similarity between the mission of Jesus and that given to his disciples is no coincidence.

Or look at Paul: he repeatedly calls his motley groups of believers “the body of the Messiah” (e.g., Rom. 12:4-5; 1 Cor. 12:12-27; Eph. 1:23; 4:12, 16; 5:23, 30). Serving usually to help us get along with each other or to appreciate the diversity of gifts among us, the phrase “the body of Christ” is in fact nothing less than an explosive image of divine agency. No Jew could have mistaken being the “body of the Messiah” as anything other than a summons to participation in resistance and liberation. In Rom. 13:12, 14 Paul calls on “the saints” to “put on the Messiah” and to don “the weapons of light.” In 1 Thess. 5:5 he calls on “sons of the light” and “sons of the day” to put on God’s armor, thereby implicating them in the struggle against the imperial forces of *Pax et Securitas* — “Peace and Security” (5:3).¹² Eph. 6:10-20 presents us with the fullest picture of the saints in armor. The call to resistance begins with the well-known words:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against — resist! — the strategies of the devil.

“Leave it to God!” is, then, not the full story. Obviously the line between divine and human agency has become severely smudged in the New Testament.¹³

Are we not playing with fire? Have we not seen the dangerous potential of such ideas and language again and again in the history of the church, whether we have in mind the crusades waged a millennium ago, or the ugly experiment of Anabaptists at Münster half a millennium ago, or presently the so-called “war on terrorism” and the conflict in the Middle East? There is indeed something terribly dangerous about soldiers sure that *God* has enlisted them.

However, as much as we might want to slap “Handle with extreme care!” stickers all over this biblical material, we must take courage to acknowledge that the Bible not only unabashedly depicts God as a powerful resister to evil, but just as unabashedly implicates the people of God in that resistance. To restate the point made earlier more bluntly: *Not to resist is to betray the high calling of the “sons and daughters of God.”*

Nonresistance

But there is also another narrative strand in the biblical drama. In this story we see not armies but slaves and refugees, not David leading his armies, but Josiah in chains being led into exile. We see not a powerful and wise Solomon but a confused and obstinate Job, not the confident stride of the wealthy and respected, but the shuffle of the poor and vulnerable falling victim to the rich and powerful (e.g., Isa. 59; Wis. Sol. 2). In this story line we encounter not the militant Messiah but the Suffering Servant (Isa. 53); not the one who rules the nations with a rod of iron (Ps. 2:9; Rev. 12:5; 19:15), but the one who will not bend even a reed (Isa. 42:3; Matt. 12:20); not the one who crucifies the enemies of God, but the one who for those very enemies goes to the cross himself. Finally, we see not members of the Messiah’s body wielding weapons in the right hand and the left, but suffering as Christ did, going with him like a scapegoat “outside the camp” (Heb. 13:11-13), “completing what is still lacking of his sufferings” (Col. 1:24).

This is the story of *nonresistance*. While its roots go back to the very beginnings of Israelite faith, with an endless stream of episodes to cement it into memory and culture, the specific vocabulary comes to us from the Sermon on the Mount:

You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer.
(Matt. 5:38-39)

We can quibble over the best translation of that text.¹⁴ Is it “Do not resist evil,” thereby increasing the ambience of passivity? Alternatively, should we take it to mean only “Do not resist violently?”¹⁵ Or, as is possible on strictly grammatical grounds, should we render the phrase “Do not resist by means of evil,”¹⁶ bringing the emphasis in line with Paul’s admonition in Rom. 12: “Do not overcome evil with evil, but be victorious over evil with good.”

Much commends these alternative translations, especially in light of Jesus’ obviously subversive illustrations of such “nonresistance.” Offering the other cheek to the insulter, taking off even one’s undergarments, and offering a second mile to the occupying soldier, are decidedly not examples of passivity. They are audacious and provocative acts, so much so that they might well invite further suffering. It is hard *not* to see them as a form of resistance.

I am somewhat restless about this way of translating or interpreting the text, even if I have repeatedly done so myself and will continue to do so. Jesus’ examples clearly do not imply passivity. And Walter Wink is right to have alerted us to the subversive and initiatory dimensions of those examples. But if we restrict ourselves to that interpretation, most especially as eager, impatient activists and resisters, we will miss how this text fits into the story line of nonresistance, and thus also miss an essential element in the biblical understanding of peace and peacemaking.¹⁷

This is an unusually complex matter. In the biblical story, nonresistance is intimately related to suffering. If the Inuit have many words for snow, the Bible knows of various kinds of suffering. One is the suffering of those who experience the judgment of God as a consequence of *their own* violence and rebellion, *their own* ethical callousness and injustice. The suffering people of God have always done well to ask themselves first not How do we get even? or Why did you [God] let this happen?¹⁸ They should begin rather with What got us here? Is it something we did? Why do they hate us? And they ask such hard and courageous questions nonresistantly, with a true openness to hearing a painful answer. The stance of nonresistance requires humility and openness.¹⁹ To discover that suffering is a consequence of my or our own sin

invites — no, demands! — defencelessness, the hard work of recognition, repentance, and reconciliation.

But not all suffering is God's judgment. There is the suffering of those who fall victim to the violence and injustice of others. Just as we see the suffering of those enslaved by demons of state and spirit in the Bible, calling out for divine deliverance: "How long, O Lord?" (Rev. 6:10). We do not even have to go back far in history. A litany of such suffering in our own lifetime could go on for hours: Rwanda, Chechnya, Bosnia, Kosovo, North Korea, Afghanistan, Zimbabwe, Colombia, Palestine, Israel — to list only a few of the recent bywords for the suffering of innocents.²⁰ This is the suffering of the millions who died in Nazi furnaces, or the millions more who lived out their final days freezing and hungry in the Soviet Gulag. This is the suffering of the peoples who were here when our forebears came to these lands, and who are still today struggling to find a space within their old home. It is the suffering of those brought here in chains as slaves, who continue to bear the marks of others' sin. It is the suffering of those who huddle with their children in women's shelters in our cities, who stand with other homeless in this rich land jostling in the soup kitchen lines of our downtown churches. It is the suffering of those who died and those who were left behind on September 11, 2001. Is it not obscene to speak of nonresistance in face of such suffering?

Here we are surely on holy ground. A great mystery engulfs such suffering and God's relation to it. In theology it is called the problem of theodicy. In the language of the title of Rabbi Kushner's famous book: Why do bad things happen to good people? We dare not speak glibly, as did Job's friends, in the face of such suffering. We dare not minimize it, or explain it, unless we are open to having the explanation implicate us. What we do know is that the biblical story line makes clear that the groans of these sufferers do reach God's ears — ultimately harsh news to the unjust and the callous, but great news for sufferers. They can count on God to address their plight — even if after death! Easter — *their* Easter! — is God's final answer to their pleas for vindication. For sufferers to believe that takes an enormously resilient faith. To live (and die!) by it requires much more yet.²¹

Let me briefly step out of the story line of nonresistance, while also anticipating the next point, to suggest that one form of God's attentiveness to the suffering of the innocent is the alertness of his sons and daughters to the

suffering of their fellow human beings, their hunger to see justice and peace brought about, and their dogged engagement in making it so.

The Bible knows yet another facet of suffering, that of those who are “stiff-necked for righteousness’ sake,” if I can put it that way. This is the suffering of those for whom Jesus’ beatitudes for the meek, the hungry, and persecuted in Matt. 5:3-12 and Luke 6:20-23 are words not only of reassurance but of prediction. With his “blessings” Jesus summons his hungry, meek, but stubborn peacemakers to persecution and nonresistance.

Why? Not simply to warn them of the regrettable consequences of faithfulness, and at the same time to reassure them of their ultimate reward. Nonresistance is not simply trust in the God who will in the end bring down the mighty and raise the downtrodden. It is that, most assuredly. True, in one sense nonresistants are to “take it” because God does not. They are to respond with nonresistance because “vengeance belongs to God,” as Paul reminds his readers in Rom. 12:19, quoting that great war hymn of Deut. 32. It is that theme, as I said earlier, which underlies the belief in the resurrection of the dead. Easter is martyr theology: Easter is God’s last laugh over the tormentors of the righteous. The beatitudes can be read as an anticipation of that great reversal. Much more important, however, is another dimension of Jesus’ call to meek, hungry, persecuted peacemaking. Jesus invites his followers to a suffering nonresistance because, fully understood, nonresistance is *itself* a divine response to evil, sin, violence, and oppression, to be imitated by those who would be sons and daughters of God.

To appreciate how central this point is to the core of the gospel requires that we look closely at who such sufferers are in this strand of the biblical story. Stated simply, they are those who stubbornly — that is what I mean with “stiff-necked for righteousness’ sake” — and lovingly do the will of God in an evil world, who refuse to adjust their behaviors to the demands of the moment, except as faith, love, and hope require. I think of Isaiah’s Servant, of Jesus and his best-known followers Peter, James, and Paul, of Anabaptists who knew what their baptism would bring. We could make a long list of such courageous followers of Jesus, even if we know them to be a rather rare and special breed.

Also in much of the biblical story such folk are extremely rare moral and spiritual heroes — “saints,” we call them.²² Something remarkable

happens, however, when we get to the New Testament. Suddenly “saints” are everywhere — Jews *and Gentiles*, men *and women*, free *and slaves*. Most importantly, and of central significance for peace theology, is that the “righteous holy ones” turn out to be not moral and spiritual heroes but forgiven sinners, reconciled enemies of God (Rom. 5), restored rejects (1 Peter), befriended outsiders (Eph. 2), those to whom God has given birth all over again (John 3; 1 Peter 1, 2).

Here is the relevant point: vis-à-vis such “sons and daughters of disobedience” (Eph. 2:1-3) God is scandalously patient and loving, holding out the gift of forgiveness and restoration. There is indeed “a wideness in God’s mercy . . . which is broader than the measures of the mind” (in the words of Frederick W. Faber, 1854). Upon such sinners an enemy-loving God shines the sun and makes it rain (Matt. 5:43-48). It turns out that God’s sometimes infuriating patience is *not*, contrary to all appearances, a sign that God does not care about creation and its vulnerable inhabitants, but that God *does* care!²³

With the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. (2 Pet. 3:8-9)

But you are merciful to all, for you can do all things, and you overlook people’s sins, so that they may repent. For you love all things that exist, and detest none of the things that you have made, for you would not have made anything if you had hated it. . . . You spare all things, for they are yours, O Lord, you who love the living. (Wis. Sol. 11:23-26)²⁴

And now the important inference regarding nonresistance: to those who have been so graced by a patiently loving God comes the call to have the mind of Christ “who emptied himself and took on the form of a slave” (Phil. 2), to imitate God in being kind, forgiving, and gracious (Eph. 4:32-5:2), to love their enemies just as their divine parent loved them while they were still enemies (Matt. 5:43-48; Rom. 5:6, 8, 10). As Matthew has reminded us, sun and rain

are daily enactments of God's baffling patience, daily evidence of a parent's wastefully loving, hopeful waiting for the errant child to return (Luke 15:11-32). Such patience is not cool or stoic. It is not the heroism of the self-controlled. It is the passionate burning love of one who loves enough to wait, and wait, and wait yet again.

Such nonresistance, such loving patience, makes the history of salvation a terribly fragile and vulnerable process. God's patient grace is constantly mistaken for impunity, trivialized by being taken for granted, even by those who should know better.²⁵ Even such insolence will not deter God from sitting patiently, watching the horizon for signs of returning daughters and sons. God's loving patience more than God's wrath is a measure of his power and sovereignty.²⁶ As Jesus son of Sirach puts it so wonderfully: "Let us fall into the hands of the Lord, . . . for equal to his majesty is his mercy" (Sirach/Ecclesiasticus 2:18).

There can be no doubt that we have arrived at the very core of the gospel. It is at this core, where God's love and human rebellion meet, that we hear Jesus' summons to nonresistance. In imitation of their divine parent, God's daughters and sons are to be patient with their enemies, to the point of terrible, sometimes incomprehensible, vulnerability. The Anabaptists knew this well, and loved to quote Paul's famous words:

But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. (2 Cor. 4:7-11)

Nonresistance is thus a fundamentally evangelical and indeed evangelistic stance. It is the patient offer of a restored relationship with God and fellow human beings. Anything less is not yet the imitation of God. Anything less is not yet the *love* of enemies. Who is in a better position to know this viscerally

than those conscious of the work of grace in their own lives, who have come to know God personally as a patient and stubborn lover of enemies?

We need to loop back briefly. In an important sense, I have overstressed the difference between the suffering of the innocent and the “chosen” suffering of nonresistant “saints.” Sometimes, when grace is most lavish and prodigal, something remarkable, even miraculous, takes place. The suffering of the innocent is transformed from the devastation of victimization into an act of grace, the offer of a new beginning. The victim becomes the liberator! The cross is the most profound instance of this transformation: the flagrant miscarriage of justice, the torture and execution of an innocent man, transformed by a love that defies understanding (Eph. 3:18) into an offer of reconciliation and new creation. The cross becomes the power of God for salvation (1 Cor. 1:17-31; cf. Isa. 53). Nonresistance is nothing less than participation in that terribly vulnerable yet powerful miracle of transformation, where love of enemy transforms suffering into the offer of salvation.²⁷

It is a great miracle when such an offer comes from those who are the vulnerable in our world (1 Cor. 1:18-31). How much greater yet the miracle if those who have easy access to enormous military and economic might were to take the road of nonresistance! Unimaginable! But no less so than that the sovereign creator of the universe would make the torture and assassination of his Beloved his own means of reconciliation with those very same torturers and assassins.

Crazy, isn't it? Yes, it is. But it is a craziness that constitutes the very heart of the gospel. It is a craziness never more apparent, never more relevant, and never more easily betrayed than when we face our own enemies. If the first story line leads to the conclusion that the sons and daughters of God *must resist*, this strand in the biblical story leads to an equally unambiguous conclusion: If you want to be a son or daughter of God, you *must not resist*.

The Two Story Lines Combined

What should we then be? Resistant or nonresistant? We appear to have been left with some hard choices. One might abandon the Bible as inconsistent and self-contradictory. I take it that few are consciously willing to take that road,

even if much of Christian culture has largely done so with respect to how we deal with injustice, injury, oppression, and violence. Or, we might feel we are forced to choose between resistance and nonresistance. That too is not an option without great cost to our full adherence to the scriptures, even if many of us are apparently prepared to pay that price.

We should not give in to these choices. The two story lines are in fact intertwined — inextricably so. Victorious struggle and vulnerable suffering sit cheek to jowl, nowhere more so than in the way Jesus' story is told in gospels and letters. Jesus is the king who chooses to forego the perks of kingship; he is for all that no less king. He is the liberator who dies at the hands of the oppressors; he is for all that no less liberator. He who has a claim on divinity empties himself to the point of slavery and death, and *thereby* wins the crown. The one who made all, falls victim to all, and thereby offers life to all. In the act of laying down his life, he who is himself peace, murders hostility (Eph. 2:14-16). A remarkable and strangely unstable and irony-laden mixture of signals, but one essential to understanding the ways of God.

This strange irony also marks the life of the followers of this strange Messiah. It is as a weak, vulnerable, even pathetic apostle that Paul “wields weapons strong enough to defeat the strongholds” (2 Cor. 10:4; cf. v. 10). Paul has come to know that it is through the weak and the foolish that God defeats the strong (1 Cor. 1:26-31; 2 Cor. 12:9, 10). It is by “enduring,” that is, by not betraying their loyalty to the lamb, that the martyrs “conquer” (Rev. 2 and 3). It is the same God who in his Messiah and that Messiah's body renders himself so fearfully vulnerable to the violence of his creatures, who snatches life from the jaws of death. For God and for us Good Friday and Easter go together, *necessarily!* Just so, nonresistance and resistance go together, *necessarily!*

As important as it is to see resistance and nonresistance inextricably intertwined, it is equally important not simply to collapse them into each other. There is value in keeping both polarities alive in our minds, for the following reasons.

First, when severed from the story line of resistance or when chosen so as to exclude the other, nonresistance becomes too easily driven not by the creativity and hope of love so much as by ideology. It can, on one hand, become far too optimistic a theory or strategy of social change. We need to

be honest: as often as not, nonresistance does not “work.” Jesus and the Anabaptists knew this well enough to predict suffering for those who love their enemies.

Or, on the other hand, nonresistance is allowed to become passive disengagement, a withdrawal from the world of suffering, brokenness, and violence. It no longer feels intense anger at injustice (Eph. 5:25). Without anger at injustice there is no love either for the victims or for the perpetrators of injustice. Nonresistance is then also no longer a hopeful, creative, and evangelistic patience within a disposition of fierce resistance to evil, but a disdainful turning away from those imprisoned by violence and terror, either as victims or perpetrators. It is, in short, a form of hatred.

Second, and just as truly, when severed from nonresistance and its narrative matrix in the Scripture, resistance can quickly become triumphalistic and even violent (either physically, psychologically, or spiritually). It forgets that the struggle is finally not against “blood and flesh” (Eph. 6:12). It forgets that our resistance is to engage the powers at the highest levels of hostility and opposition, and that the most profound attack on the powers is through the patient practice of faithful and hopeful love (1 Thess. 5); it forgets the power of weakness. It forgets, finally, to trust the God of Easter, trusting instead in the brilliance of its own strategems.

When severed from each other, or when one leg of the biblical stance is chosen at the expense of the other, then neither resistance nor nonresistance is any longer “messianic.” Messianic resisters strategize hard on how to take the struggle against evil to the highest levels (Eph. 6:10-20), but they know that their resistance is never stronger, more powerful, or more Spirit-driven, than when their resistance is enveloped by Jesus-like patience.

This patience is never more loving than when it is wedded to the persistent offer of reconciliation — friendship with God and with each other. There can be no greater and more profound form of resistance. That is what it means to be “armed” with faith, love, and hope (1 Thess. 5:8), the weapons of justice (Rom. 6:13) and light (Rom. 13:12), that is, the full armor of God (Eph. 6:10-20).

Implications for Peacemaking

How then should we walk as those called to both resistance and nonresistance? Time does not permit me to offer more than a few comments.

Nonresistance

I will not say much about the practicalities of nonresistance because, by its very nature, it is less about strategy than disposition, impulses, and reflexes, less about specific decisions than about character. In Paul's words:

We boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. (Rom. 5:3-5)

If strategy is less important than character, the most urgent question becomes: How do we become the kind of persons and communities who have such a hopeful patient character, who behave nonresistantly? The first answer must surely be by letting God flood our hearts with love, as Paul puts it in the text from Romans. At the root of our peacemaking lies the experience individually and corporately of God's grace, forgiveness, and transforming love for us.²⁸ But in order to create the kind of character for patient resistance we need to learn to rehearse that experience of grace to ourselves and each other in a way that has immediate implications for how we behave in a world of violence, war, and injustice. Our experience of grace needs to find its complement in our offer of grace to our enemies.

We need, second, more persistently to plumb the depths and ferret out the implications of the gospel. Through immersing ourselves in the Bible and in the central convictions of the Christian faith we need to "learn Christ, the truth that is in Jesus," as Eph. 4:20-21 has it. We need to learn the stories and songs of our faith so that they find an echo in our impulses and reflexes when threatened and injured, or when seeing the violence and hurt in our world. We

need to learn the gospel in such a way that it forges a peaceable culture of evangelistically patient, nonresistant, resistance.

Or should I say “relearn” the gospel? To learn the gospel is not easy today, since its vocabulary has been kidnapped by a culture that loves its form and language but denies its power and its relevance to the world of injustice and violence (to borrow the phrasing of 2 Tim. 3:4). We are, of course, not the first to have to recover the gospel in a world where its forms and language are all-pervasive but where it is not allowed to challenge the culture of security, might, and privilege. The Anabaptists of the sixteenth century found themselves in precisely such a context. We are heirs to their faithfulness. Like them we have no option but to reclaim the gospel from the clutches of our culture of violence through prayer, study of the Bible, reflection on the gospel and how it connects to our world, and openness to be enlivened and empowered by God’s Spirit to love our world, most specifically our enemies.²⁹

We will not do this alone. Character is forged in community. We will learn nonresistance in a culture whose ethos is shaped by the gospel. We call that culture the “church”; Paul called it “the body of Christ.” It is a community in which the habits of discipleship are forged in the shared experience of grace, both the forgiving and the empowering kinds. The body of Christ is a community where divine patience is modeled and imprinted on our corporate and individual psyches. Churches need to become places where Christ’s peace is experienced *together*, given voice *together*, lived out *together*. Then, when times of testing come, we will know who we are and we will act “in character.” We will behave in keeping with our identity as the body of the one who went to the cross in order to bring about a new humanity, reconciled with each other and with God. In the words of Ephesians, we will “walk worthy of our calling” (4:1), with songs of gratitude on our lips (5:18-21).

Resistance

The culture we call the “body of the Messiah” is not only a culture of nonresistance, however. It is no less a culture of resistance. Perhaps I should have started there. After all, “the times of testing” I just mentioned will sometimes come *because* of our resistance. Nonresistance will thus frequently be the required response of those who have stirred up holy trouble to begin with.³⁰

I cannot begin to name or list, let alone imagine, the diversity of species of resistance such a culture might produce. Thanks be to God for the massive cloud of martyrs from biblical times to the present who have been pointing the way. Some forms of creative resistance today are perhaps less confrontation than, for example, an offer of alternatives to retaliation and punitive justice as a response to injury or the offer of skills at rebuilding broken relationships, large and small. They are for all that no less resistance to that which threatens God's creation, even if they are finding a ready hearing in the broader culture. Other forms of resistance are more confrontative, ranging from public witness, civil disobedience, accompanying those who are suffering, and advocating in the public sphere, to speaking unwelcome truth to power. Such resistance will often be fuelled by anger at injustice and oppression. Such anger is of God (Eph. 4:26-27³¹). When tethered to the open, vulnerable, and loving patience we call nonresistance, these forms of resistance are the energetic practices of divine love midst the conditions of enmity and hostility.

But what if, inspired by Eph. 6:10-20, we added to this inventory of resistance also evangelism and struggle with power at the highest — or should I say “lowest?” — levels of hostility?

For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. (Eph. 6:12)

Is this not what we today call “spiritual warfare?” Yes and no. It is not obvious that this term captures how the spiritual and the concrete social dimensions of enmity were understood in relation to each other by New Testament writers. In the first century, for example, no one would have mistaken Jesus' confronting of the demonic hoard called “Legion” as “only” spiritual (Mark 5:1-43 par.). What name would that army of occupation carry today? And, as 1 Cor. 2:8 illustrates, no one would have mistaken Paul's words about “the powers” as only “spiritual.”³² Similarly, they would not have been able to talk about what we today call economic and military domination, social and systemic injustice, physical and systemic violence as “only” social, ethical, or political. The distinction between the demonic and

what we call social and military oppression is a modern and misleading distinction.

We must ask: Do those who today resist war and violence see the connection to the Bible's call to resist the devil and his lackeys? Conversely, do the many more who are committed to "spiritual warfare" view the "war on terrorism" in demonic terms? I don't mean thereby only those who flew their planes into the twin towers and the Pentagon, but most especially the response taking place in our name, often even under intense pressure by those who cloak their demands for vengeance in the vocabulary of Christianity. To resist the retaliatory culture that wants to know nothing of its own culpability in a world of violence is nothing less than spiritual warfare.

To be sure, we must be wary of demonizing our world. There is indeed much for which we must be grateful, which we must cherish, protect, and nurture. We do well not to disparage the many ways in which our societies have moved in the direction of the Kingdom of God. We should be thankful for ways the witness and prodding of the church has born fruit. We should also humbly acknowledge with grace and gratitude the ways in which the church has been prodded by the larger society in the direction of faithfulness.³³ But the urgency of the moment requires some risking of overstatement on my part and something less than balance in accounting for our culture. I fear that too many churches and too many Christians have allowed the shock of these last months to drive them further into the anesthetizing embrace of a culture of privilege and power, with the predictable reflexes of self-defense and angry retaliation. I fear the church is falling short of its messianic calling to speak truth, words both of judgment and grace: good news — gospel. I say "anesthetizing" because it is not clear that most Christians are awake enough to know something is amiss.

Truth-speaking is a form of resistance. Early Quakers recognized that when they spoke of "speaking truth to power." Should we be surprised that the very first item of armor in the panoply of Eph. 6 is "truth" (6:14)? Truth-speaking requires staring unblinkingly at the reality of our and others' individual and corporate sin and naming it for what it is. Yes, we must speak truth about the harrowing effects of terror. But we must speak truth also about the blindness of seeing terror only in what threatens us, and not in how we threaten our world; about the harrowing effects of deliberately having no memory, except

when it serves our present designs (our airwaves are full of recollections of Pearl Harbor but are silent about Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which were nothing if not deliberate acts of terror on civilian populations on a scale hitherto unmatched).

But truth informed by the gospel is not only the truth *about* our and our world's sin; it is *much more* the truth *for* our world, truth about God's love for a despoiled creation in urgent need of mending, truth about God's love for those spoiling it. We do not yet resist sufficiently if we are not offering truth *for* our world, if we do not have a word of hope and reconciliation *for* our world.³⁴ The truth is given to us first and foremost not by political analysis, but by the gospel.³⁵ Speaking truth is to name reality as God sees it.

But how does God see the world? The over-familiar words of John 3 need to be rediscovered as a most highly concentrated distillation of God's love for creation and its inhabitants.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. (John 3:16-17)

To view the world as God does means viewing it with the eyes of love. Such eyes do not close in the face of injustice and violence, even if sight is sometimes smudged by tears of rage and disappointment. But such eyes are also always wide open for opportunities to announce the good news of peace.³⁶ The good news of forgiveness, reconciliation, and new creation in Christ is the greatest assault on the powers of evil, who do not well tolerate the interruption of the cycles of violence and counter-violence. That is surely why the footwear of the gospel of peace is the third item of equipment for the struggle against the powers in Eph. 6:15, immediately following the belt of truth and the breastplate of justice. *The very highest form of resistance is evangelism!*

To say that makes us immediately aware of how anemic evangelism has become. Much of what today passes for evangelism is offering immunity and a private insurance policy, all-the-while stoking the fires of hatred and suspicion of the other. At the center of this "gospel" is the desire to benefit

from God's love for enemies (us), but without wanting to imitate God vis-à-vis our own enemies. There can be no greater heresy.³⁷ If evangelism does not awaken us from the deep slumber of imperial fantasies and callousness regarding our enemies, it is not yet the gospel of peace Christ preached, lived, and died for (Eph. 2:13-18). If evangelism does not call us out of a culture of enmity and greed, it is not yet the good news of the Christ who said no to the promise of plenty, security, and power.³⁸ If evangelism does not call persons to nonresistant resistance and resistant nonresistance it is not yet an invitation to follow Jesus.

In the end, resistance to evil must begin at home (1 Peter 4:17). It begins *not* by attacking the "other," be that the "terrorists" or our own governments and their compliant subjects. It begins, rather, by our own nonresistance to the overwhelming wealth of God's mercy and love (Eph. 2:4), and letting that love and grace infect us with a hunger (Matt 5:6) to offer precisely this surprise of grace to our broken world. It means coming to experience the power of God which raised Christ from the dead, and with him also us, as we have just celebrated this Easter (Eph. 1:17-2:10). Easter — the power of God to transform even the greatest tragedy imaginable into a forceful demonstration of life-giving power. Easter — proof positive that there is hope even for a church too often asleep. It is to us, after all, that the words in Eph. 5:14 are directed:

*"Sleeper, awake!
Rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you."*

I cannot imagine a more fitting a way to conclude this lecture, or of combining peace, holiness, and evangelism which inform this lecture and the agenda of the Sider Institute for Anabaptist, Pietist, and Wesleyan Studies, than to end with an exhortation from the letter to the Hebrews:

Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.

*Pursue peace with everyone,
and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.
See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God!*
(Heb. 12:12-15)

Notes

¹ E.g., The New England Nonresistance Society, which William Lloyd Garrison together with others founded in 1838.

² E.g., Guy F. Hershberger, *War, Peace, and Nonresistance* (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1944). See Rodney Sawatsky's 1973 M.A. thesis at Minnesota, *The Influence of Fundamentalism on Mennonite Nonresistance, 1908-1944*, 125-79.

³ See, e.g., Perry Yoder's *Shalom: The Bible's Word for Salvation, Justice, and Peace*. Napanee, IN: Evangel Press, 1999 (orig. 1987); this emphasis was given major impetus by John Howard Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus*, notably his linking of Jesus' teachings and actions with the biblical Jubilee (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972, 2nd ed. 1994; 60-75). From a Church of the Brethren perspective, see Dale W. Brown, *Biblical Pacifism: A Peace Church Perspective* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press, 1986). This shift from nonresistance to justice as the centre of peacemaking has been charted by Ervin Stutzman in his 1993 doctoral thesis at Temple University: "From nonresistance to peace and justice: Mennonite peace rhetoric, 1951-1991."

⁴ An older generation of Anabaptist leaders was already pushing in this direction half a century ago. See, e.g., J. Lawrence Burkholder's 1958 Princeton doctoral thesis "The problem of social responsibility from the perspective of the Mennonite Church," a stance rearticulated in "Nonresistance, Nonviolent Resistance, and Power," in John Richard Burkholder and Calvin Redekop, eds., *Kingdom, Cross and Community: Essays on Mennonite Themes in Honor of Guy F. Hershberger* (Scottsdale, PA/Kitchener, ON: Herald Press, 1976), 131-37; Gordon Kaufman's 1956 *Concern* article "Nonresistance and Responsibility," reprinted in *Nonresistance and Responsibility and Other Mennonite Essays* (IMS Study Series 5; Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1979), 63-81; John Howard Yoder's *The Christian Witness to the State* (first written in the late 1950s, it was published as IMS Study Series 3; Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1964, republished by Herald Press in 2002), argues for a stance of prodding and advocacy ("witness") that remembers that the state is not the church while pushing the state as far as a "fallen" institution can be pushed in the direction of the Kingdom of God.

⁵ There have been numerous attempts to provide both a historical narrative and a taxonomy of peace theology and practice, besides the two efforts by Sawatsky and Stutzman already mentioned. See, e.g., Leo Driedger and Donald B. Kraybill, *Mennonite Peacemaking: from Quietism to Activism* (Scottsdale, PA/Kitchener, ON: Herald Press, 1994); John Richard Burkholder and Barbara Nelson Gingerich, eds., *Mennonite Peace Theology: A Panorama of Types* (Akron, PA: Mennonite Central Committee Peace Office, 1991). For shorter treatments, see, e.g., Dale W. Brown, "Nonresistance and Nonviolent Resistance: Tensions and

Accommodations,” *Brethren Life and Thought* 39 (1994): 180-89; Donald R. Fitzkee, “An Anabaptist Peace Ethic for a New Century,” *Brethren Life and Thought* 39 (1994): 190-202; Beulah Stauffer Hostetler, “Nonresistance and Social Responsibility: Mennonites and Mainline Peace Emphasis, ca. 1950 to 1985,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 64.1 (1990); Glenn A. Robitaille, “The Sermon on the Mount and the Doctrine of Nonresistance,” *Brethren in Christ History and Life* 20 (1997): 272-90; Tom Yoder Neufeld, “Varieties of Contemporary Mennonite Peace Witness: From Passivism to Pacifism, from Nonresistance to Resistance,” *The Conrad Grebel Review* 10 (1992): 243-57. For an outsider’s account see Marc Gopin, *Between Eden and Armageddon: The Future of World Religions, Violence, and Peacemaking* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2000), 139-66.

⁶ However true it might be that this emphasis has taken root in certain church traditions such as Anabaptism, it must never be valued or defended as a particular distinctive of such traditions. If so, it will and should die.

⁷ Besides my own investigations in *Put on the Armour of God! The Divine Warrior from Isaiah to Ephesians* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), and in *Ephesians* (Believers Church Bible Commentary; Scottdale, PA/Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2002), 290-316, others within the Anabaptist circle of scholars have wrestled with this feature of the biblical witness to God: e.g., Theodore Hiebert, *God of My Victory: the Ancient Hymn in Habakkuk 3* (HSM 38; Atlanta: Scholars, 1986); Millard C. Lind, *Yahweh is a Warrior: The Theology of Warfare in Ancient Israel* (Scottdale, PA/ Kitchener, ON: Herald Press, 1980); Ben C. Ollenburger, *Zion, the City of the Great King: A Theological Symbol of the Jerusalem Cult* (JSOTSup 41; Sheffield: JSOT, 1987); Devon Wiens, “Holy War Theology in the New Testament and its Relationship to the Eschatological Day of the Lord Tradition,” Ph.D. diss., University of Southern California, 1967. The continuing uneasiness around this matter is reflected in the post-September 11 discussion entitled “Is God Nonviolent?” at the AAR/SBL Annual Meeting in Denver in November 2001 and presented in this issue of *The Conrad Grebel Review*.

⁸ I look forward to the work of Messiah College’s Prof. John Yeatts on Revelation in the Believers Church Bible Commentary (forthcoming).

⁹ Especially dramatic are 2 Thess. 1:5-10; 2:7,8; Rev 19.

¹⁰ See the many influential works of Walter Wink, most notably *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 13-31 and *passim*. The question of how Jesus relates to violence relates not only to his actions and teachings but to the meaning of atonement, understandings of the eschaton, etc. See, e.g., the essays by Mennonite scholars engaging the work of René Girard on scapegoating and the Bible: Willard M. Swartley, ed. *Violence Renounced: René Girard, Biblical Studies, and Peacemaking* (Studies in Peace and Scripture, Vol. 4, IMS; Telford, PA: Pandora Press U.S./Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2000); see also J. Denny Weaver’s *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001).

¹¹ Miller premises his peace stance on God being a warrior. His argument fits well the long history of biblical rationale for nonresistance as “leaving it to God.”

¹² See Klaus Wengst, *Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ* (Trans. John Bowden; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 87; see my work on 1 Thess. 5:1-11 in *Put on the Armour*, 73-93.

¹³ A measure of this “smudging” is found when we pay attention to the pedigree of this image

from 1 Thess. 5 and Eph. 6. In Isaiah 59 God is said to have seen a society torn apart by lies and violence, where peace has been driven off the road, justice has been banished, and truth has stumbled in the market place (and this before anyone had heard of Enron). And so God himself puts on armor and intervenes precisely because no one else has! (Isa. 59:16) Exactly this image of a furious God is taken up in 1 Thess. 5 and Eph. 6. For full discussion see my *Put on the Armour of God!*, and a briefer discussion in *Ephesians*, 307-16.

¹⁴ For an excellent discussion of options and the scholarly literature, see Dorothy Jean Weaver, "Transforming Nonresistance: From *Lex Talionis* to 'Do No Resist the Evil One,'" in Willard M. Swartley, ed., *The Love of Enemy and Nonretaliation in the New Testament* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 32-36.

¹⁵ Walter Wink has repeatedly argued strongly for this rendering. Cf. "Neither Passivity nor Violence: Jesus' Third Way" (Matt. 5:38-42 par.), in Swartley, *Love of Enemy and Nonretaliation*, 113-17; see also idem, *Engaging the Powers*, 175-93.

¹⁶ This has not found a wide following. But see John Ferguson, *The Politics of Love: The New Testament and Non-Violent Revolution* (Nyack, NY: Fellowship Publications, 1979), 4-5. Those issues of translation and interpretation do not change the fact that the term "nonresistance" derives from this text.

¹⁷ Not only does Wink interpret these texts exclusively as modes of resistance, he *must* do so, given his theology. As we will see, nonresistance presupposes a God who can be counted on to vindicate those who "take it." That is ultimately what Easter signifies. It is for such a conception of God that Wink, as I understand his "panentheistic" or "integral" world view, quite clearly has no room (e.g., *Engaging*, 3-10, 327 n.12).

¹⁸ Isaiah 58-59 is a very instructive early parallel to our contemporary bewilderment as to our suffering.

¹⁹ Notice the prominence of this theme of openness and vulnerability in that most conflicted of Paul's writings, 2 Corinthians (see esp. chaps. 6 and 7). I'm more than a little aware that the question, What did I do to bring this on me?, is potentially terribly damaging. The poor are poor not because they have brought judgment on themselves; they are poor often because of the injustice of others, or of the "system." Even so, in many circumstances the question Is it something we did? is appropriate and can be the beginning of repentance and change. See the trenchant words in Lamentations 3, where "giving one's cheek to the smiter" (v. 30) is set into a context of being open to the judgment of God while waiting "quietly for the salvation of the Lord" (v. 26).

²⁰ To use the word "innocent" here is not meant to claim purity on the part of the sufferers, only to indicate that their suffering is in no way their own doing. Cf. Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996), 79-85.

²¹ Evelyn Wilcock's *Pacifism and the Jews* (Lansdown, Stroud, UK: 1994) is an eloquent testimony to how deeply such reliance on God is embedded in Jewish spiritual culture, and how significant it was in shaping the response of Jews to the Holocaust.

²² In Jewish tradition these are the Patriarchs, Joseph, Mordechai, Daniel, and the *tzadikim* of Jewish history. We would add to those already named the long line of Christian martyrs.

²³ I am not prepared to follow Lee Griffith all the way to exhausting the meaning of God's wrath as relentless love that disrespects the insolence of rebellious humanity, but his words

capture some of the necessary connection between God's wrath and God's burning love. I quote from his important contribution to the search for a biblically grounded theology of peace: "It is upon the least lovable people that God heaps the burning coals of love (Romans 12:20-21). [...] God's wrath, God's judgment, God's "No" is spoken only for the sake of God's "Yes." [...] 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." *The War on Terrorism and the Terror of God* (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2002), 184-85. See also Christopher D. Marshall, *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment* (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2001), 169: "Even God's vengeance [...] must be suffused with enemy-love." See the whole chapter on "Vengeance is Mine: Divine and Human Punishment in the New Testament," 145-99.

²⁴ See Yoder Neufeld, "Power, Love, and Creation: The Mercy of the Divine Warrior in the Wisdom of Solomon," in Ted Grimsrud and Loren L. Johns, eds., *Peace and Justice Shall Embrace: Power and Theopolitics in the Bible* (Millard Lind Festschrift; Telford, PA: Pandora Press US, 1999), 174-91.

²⁵ A prime example close to home is the Protestant understanding of salvation premised on faith *over against* "works," a fatal antipathy based on a fundamental misreading of Paul; see Rom. 6.

²⁶ Wis. 12:15-18

²⁷ In Mexico's province of Chiapas there is an indigenous community of Catholics, known as the Abejas ("bees"). Because of their deep Christian faith they are equally deeply committed to nonviolence. In the late 1990s, they were living under threat of both the military and the paramilitaries. Fearing imminent attack, their faith led them to seek refuge in their church. It did no good, we might well say. On Monday, December 22, 1997, 45 of them, mostly women and children, were mercilessly massacred. This is the terrible suffering I spoke of earlier — the suffering of the vulnerable and the innocent at the hands of violent oppressors. What was their response? To lose faith? No. To join the guerillas? No. To request armed protection? No. Rather, to pray and to witness to the God of justice and peace, but to do so by holding out a hand offering the gift of reconciliation. Christian Peacemakers have until recently accompanied them in their witness, learning first not how horrific is victimization of the weak and the innocent, but how miraculously powerful is the witness of those who know themselves to be sons and daughters of God, members of the body of the Messiah.

²⁸ This is a matter of some controversy in contemporary Anabaptist discussion, as illustrated by the vigorous exchange at the Elizabethtown College conference (1994), entitled "Whither the Anabaptist Vision? New Directions for a New Century." Several of the articles are published in vol. 69 (1995) of the *Mennonite Quarterly Review*. Most relevant to my point are Levi Miller, "A Reconstruction of Evangelical Anabaptism," 295-306; Stephen F. Dintaman, "The Pastoral Significance of the Anabaptist Vision," 307-22; (cf. his "The Spiritual Poverty of the Anabaptist Vision," *Gospel Herald* 23, February 1993, 1-3); Ted Koontz, "Grace to You and Peace: Nonresistance as Piety," 354-68.

²⁹ See Arnold Snyder's important ongoing work on the spirituality and theology of the Anabaptists; see his essay on the role of the Bible in shaping a courageous culture of resistance and nonresistance: "General Introduction" in *Biblical Concordance of the Swiss Brethren, 1540*, trans. Gilbert Fast and Galen A. Peters. Anabaptist Texts in Translation (Kitchener, ON:

Pandora Press; copublished by Herald Press, 2002, vii-xx). Stanley Hauerwas forcefully reminds Anabaptists of the importance of the church as a culture shaped by the gospel. As a counter culture of “resident aliens” the church fulfills its mission (see, e.g., “Which Church? Which Future? Whither the Anabaptist Vision?,” *Brethren Life and Thought* 39, 1994: 141-52. Brethren in Christ folks would not appreciate his hostility to pietism, however.

³⁰ Larry Miller (Executive Secretary of Mennonite World Conference) has drawn attention to this “location” of nonresistance in his University of Strasbourg doctoral thesis on nonresistance on 1 Peter, available only in French. Nonresistance is the required stance of those who resist with respect to the consequences of their resistance. John Howard Yoder makes much the same point in his chapter “Let Every Soul be Subject: Romans 13 and the Authority of the State,” in *Politics of Jesus*, 193-211.

³¹ See my *Ephesians*, 211-13, 221-22, 224-25.

³² John Howard Yoder’s chapter on “Christ and Power” in *Politics of Jesus*, 134-61, has been particularly influential. He was heavily dependent on the earlier work of, among others, Hendrikus Berkhof, whose work he translated as *Christ and the Powers* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1962). Most influential recently are the many volumes of Walter Wink, best known of which is *Engaging the Powers*. See essay on “Powers” in my *Ephesians*, 353-59. Marva J. Dawn has published her 2000 Schaff Lectures at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary as *Powers, Weakness, and the Tabernacling of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), in which she explores the relationship between (ostensible) weakness and resistance to the powers in ways that touch on the mix of resistance and nonresistance I am attempting to explore in this lecture.

³³ We might think, to name only one example, of the way society has pushed the church on issues of power and sexual abuse. We should see in that the disciplining work of the Holy Spirit.

³⁴ For a profound probing of the fierceness (“terror”) of God’s love, see Griffith, *War on Terrorism*.

³⁵ Making much the same point in the 2002 Bechtel Lectures at Conrad Grebel University College, Stanley Hauerwas quoted Dietrich Bonhoeffer as saying, “Only truth can save us now!” What Bonhoeffer meant by that is a clear, unabashed articulation of the gospel. (These lectures appeared in the Fall 2002 issue of *The Conrad Grebel Review*. –Editor)

³⁶ In the first of the Schrag lectures given as a chapel talk on the day this lecture was delivered, I made mention of the “Preacher of Buchenwald,” German Lutheran pastor Paul Schneider, who became the first of the pastors to be martyred at the Buchenwald concentration camp by Hitler in 1939. Until he was finally silenced through torture and lethal injection, he would hoist himself to the window of his small torture cell in the gate house of the concentration camp Buchenwald and call out to the thousands of prisoners assembled for role call, exhorting those facing death with words of life. His Easter “sermon” is remembered this way, “*Hier wird gefoltert und gemordet! Jesus sagt, Ich bin die Auferstehung und das Leben!*” (“They are torturing and murdering here! Jesus says: I am the resurrection and the life!”) What makes his sermon such a poignant example of resistance is not only that he “named” without flinching the reality he and his fellow prisoners were experiencing, but much more his confident announcement into the factory of death the even greater and ultimately more determining truth, the good news of Easter, of life in Christ.

³⁷ Jesus made this point crystal clear with his troubling parable of the Merciless Servant in Matt 18:23-35.

³⁸ Matt. 4: 1-11.

The Politics of Paul: His Supposed Social Conservatism and the Impact of Postcolonial Readings

Gordon Zerbe

“Only this: ensure that your politics (Gk., *politeuesthe*) be worthy of the saving news (*euangelion*) of the Messiah.” (*Phil. 1:27a*)

“But our political identity (Gk., *politeuma*) resides in heaven.” (*Phil. 3:20a*)

“The problem with Paul is that he never renounced his Roman citizenship.” With this assertive interjection, a student effectively interrupted a seminar I was leading at the Ecumenical Theological Seminary in Baguio City, Philippines in 1997. The sharp remark came near the end of my opening lecture, surveying issues pertaining to Paul’s apparent social conservatism in regard to gender, economics, politics, and class.

What followed were a few moments of silence which seemed like an eternity. In the back of my mind, thoughts raced: (1) Do I immediately raise the historical question about whether or not Paul was really a Roman citizen, a datum claimed only by the author of Luke-Acts, Paul’s hagiographical biographer some thirty to forty years after his death, and doubted by some biblical scholars?¹ (2) Do I confess right away that, while masquerading as a benign Canadian, I am actually a citizen of “the world’s only remaining superpower,” the self-reference that Americans are fond of?² But to what end? My Filipino colleagues had already reminded me plenty enough that Canada, as a member of the G-7, was among the group of “imperialist

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countries” complicit in the newer, and more subtle and insidious form of colonialism, market globalization. The irony was huge — one of those rare occasions when I had to place myself in Paul’s shoes. As the course proceeded, impassioned engagement emerged among many participants, who were inclined to disregard, demote, or reject Paul’s legacy, particularly in respect to his social and political perspective.

Back in the so-called first world, where we have the luxury of theorizing about things which others experience as immediate struggles, it became possible to put a label on the kind of critique my student employed, evident not only in his identifying Paul’s perspective as a problem but also in identifying it in connection with an attitude toward empire, namely, postcolonialism. The term “postcolonialism” emerged in the mid-1980s when, as Arif Dirlik quips, “Third World intellectuals . . . arrived in First World academe,”³ especially in the fertile territory of the emerging discipline and polemics of “cultural studies.” The term itself has been subject to considerable debate; in general it is used to describe, not a historical period or epoch, but either a condition and subject position, or a critical discourse.⁴ The explicit use of postcolonial (or “decolonizing”) criticism within biblical studies can be seen in recent publications and programs devoted both to methodological perspectives⁵ and to substantive interpretation.⁶

Briefly, postcolonial discursive criticism, despite its variety,⁷ addresses the overlapping issues of empire, race and ethnicity, diaspora, marginality, and hybridity. It aims to: (1) deconstruct the texts, interpretations, ideologies, labels, forms of knowledge, symbolic practices, and definitions of the situation authored by the dominant groups, and to unmask the way they legitimize and reinscribe colonial interests; (2) treat once-colonized “others” as historical subjects, giving people of all subordinated groups their voices back, and taking seriously and celebrating new identities and hybridity (rejecting “binarisms”); and (3) be emancipatory by linking, through varied discursive interventions, the experiences of diverse so-called “others,” potentially brokering new alliances, and (in a field such as biblical studies) by rehabilitating various foundational texts through re-readings relevant to postcolonial interests. As R. S. Sugirtharajah puts it:

Postcoloniality is a critical enterprise aimed at unmaking the link between ideas and power which lies behind Western texts, theories, and learning. . . . [It] is not about the territorial ejection of

imperial powers or about learning, Caliban-like, the art of cursing the evils of empire. . . . It is a discursive resistance to imperialism, imperial ideologies, and imperial attitudes and to their continual reincarnations in such wide fields as politics, economics, history, and theological and biblical studies. Resistance is not simply a reaction to colonial practices, but an alternative way of perceiving and restructuring society.⁸

Postcolonialism shares with postmodernism a reaction against both universal enlightenment reason and the belief in objective textual interpretation and truth; but it sees postmodernism as essentially Eurocentric, as lacking a theory of resistance and a transformative agenda due to its detached attitudes, and as skeptical of any grand narrative, including liberation as a emancipatory metastory. Postcolonialism sees itself in continuity with earlier liberationist interrogations, whether informed by nationalist or Marxist paradigms, but calls into question their use of Western master narratives that perpetuate a Eurocentrism.⁹

What, then, of Paul? Primarily a rhetorician and not a systematician, Paul wrote letters as “instruments of his apostolic praxis.”¹⁰ Yet, the quest to find an underlying coherent thought system in Paul has continued, despite the complexity and tensions (even contradictions) within the rhetoric of his letters, even as the quest has confounded interpreters.¹¹ But the tensions remain. So, on the one hand, Paul is interpreted as championing the socio-political status quo, perceived either as its rightful guardian or savior, or as the one to blame for repression in the name of Christianity. Others continue to see Paul as one whose vision of a transformed world, and of an alternative community now emerging in the corrupted world, motivates liberating, world-transforming action.

Between the cultural and theological tensions undoubtedly residing within the historical person himself, between Paul the visionary and Paul the pragmatic pastor, Paul’s restrictive, cautionary, and conservative words seem most apparent, and have been preached most loudly.¹² Indeed Paul’s words are more easily used and manipulated by systems of domination than any other parts of the New Testament, perhaps of the Bible. While social conservatives have held up Paul’s advice as warrant to maintain the current social order, and while some rest content in merely explaining his social conservatism, still others have decried what they see as his “limited application” or “failure of nerve,”

suggesting that Paul's own theology should have led him to more radical steps in the real world.¹³ Not surprisingly, Paul's apparent and assumed social conservatism has led many interpreters in situations of domination to reject, demote, or disregard his legacy in this area.¹⁴

In contrast to these interpreters, still others have argued that Paul's texts reveal a posture more liberating and radical than often thought, albeit one that focuses on the emergence of an "alternative society" or "communities of resistance" in anticipation of God's final transformation. For instance, Neil Elliott has argued that it is Christian interpretation that has both depoliticized and then repoliticized Paul.¹⁵ It has depoliticized Paul's gospel, by mystifying his understanding of the cross and resurrection, losing sight of its rejection of all imperial rule outside of God's, and leaving merely a gospel of private, spiritual salvation. Prevailing interpretation, Elliott argues, has then repoliticized Paul's gospel both as a weapon against Judaism, and as essentially pro-Roman ideology, by making Romans 13 the canonical center of his political perspective (and by misreading his comments on slavery and women), so that Paul has for centuries been in the service of death. Precursors of this alternative reading include the works of Klaus Wengst¹⁶ and Dieter Georgi.¹⁷ More recent examples can be found in works edited by Richard Horsley.^{18, 19}

In contrast to the received interpretation of Paul, which assumes that he was largely pro-Roman in perspective,²⁰ and which typically reads the imperial situation itself as providing the favorable and necessary context for the emergence of Christianity,²¹ these interpreters have suggested that Paul should be read as far more critical, challenging, and antagonistic toward the Roman empire, perhaps even as fundamentally anti-Roman or anti-imperial, which in turn would explain, among other things, his execution (most likely on the grounds of treason).

What, then, are the main lines of evidence for such a reading of Paul's political perspective? Paul's critical stance with regard to the Roman empire is evident from three lines of evidence: (1) the underlying millenarian script in his letters; (2) the use of politically loaded words to describe liberation and deliverance (salvation), the Messiah, and the Messiah's community; (3) Paul's own experience of arrest, imprisonment, torture, and eventually execution at the hands of the Roman *imperium*.²² As a final topic (4) we will revisit Romans 13 in the light of those three lines of evidence, and will try to make some sense

of the tension that emerges. It will become clear, I hope, that it is best not to start with Romans 13 when trying to understand Paul's overall political perspective.²³

The Underlying Millenarian Script

Undergirding all extant and authentic²⁴ Pauline texts and his entire life's work is a comprehensive millenarian script, one that comes to explicit expression from time to time, that is often evident implicitly but never far from the surface.²⁵ I deliberately use the term "millenarian" (or "millennial"), instead of "apocalyptic" for three reasons: (1) It points to the broader cultural phenomenon of millennialism as usually entailing a variety of modes of reaction and resistance to imperial, colonial, and cultural domination across time and place.²⁶ Indeed, "millennialism" or "millenarianism" are the preferred terms for the anthropological study of similar phenomena of world-transforming mythologies, while derived from the reference in the book of Revelation to an idyllic future 1000 years, a "millennium," of the Messiah's reign on earth. To that end, using "millennialism" links biblical and Pauline millennialism with millennialism throughout history, at least analogically, while sometimes causally. (2) It highlights the strange, scandalous nature of Paul's framework and language relative to that of the educated western academy and theology. Millennialism is, usually by definition, assumed to be irrational, irresponsible, and escapist. Christians have become accustomed to the notion of a "crucified Messiah," which Paul thought to be the big unintelligible scandal; but in our time, I think it is the millennial moorings of New Testament writings, if truly understood, that constitute the true scandal for those who would seek to follow Messiah Jesus. (3) The term "millenarian" heightens the potential political valence of this sort of mythology. This is not to say that all millenarian movements are necessarily politically engaged in some sense.²⁷ Though millenarian movements are often treated as irrational, irresponsible, or escapist, forms of Christian millennialism in the Philippines, for instance, have certainly energized (and continue to energize) pockets of resistance, first to Spanish and then American colonial domination for over 150 years.²⁸ Similarly, a new reading of Jewish apocalypticism in the first century C.E. suggests its close connection to historical

action.²⁹ The scandal of millennialism for us is perhaps not so much a matter of its intelligibility but of our own social and political location.

So, then, what is this underlying script of Paul?³⁰ It is the story of God's sovereign, imperial faithfulness from creation to re-creation, whereby God will soon triumph throughout creation, signaled by the resurrection of the Messiah, himself victimized by the powers of darkness and death, embodied by the empire (1 Cor. 2:6-8). Whereas the creation was created good, it has suffered the entry of mysterious, created, yet rebellious powers which oppress God's creation. Among these disparate powers Paul includes, for instance, Error, Death, Law, Satan, Rulers, Authorities; but beginning with and through the Messiah, God is in the process of reclaiming all creation for God. Paul's script expresses this through the notion of the "age to come" versus the "age that now stands," a dualism that is at the same time cosmic (God vs. Satan, and their respective forces), anthropological (each individual embodies the tension), historical (the dualism has a *telos*, goal), and epistemological (God's wisdom vs. worldly wisdom). In Paul's understanding, his own generation is on the verge of a cataclysmic world transformation (e.g., 1 Cor. 10:10; 1 Cor. 7:26, 29, 31), which emerges by what Judith Kovaks has aptly called "God's war of liberation."³¹ This framework provides much of the foundation of Paul's ethics, including, for example, that of non-retaliation. As Krister Stendahl has remarked, explaining Paul's perspective, "Why walk around with a little shotgun when the atomic blast is imminent?"³²

The meaning of the "powers" in Paul has been the subject of considerable debate; complicating the problem is that his language in this area is not univocal. It is clear, however, that the "powers" are not primarily or exclusively spiritual and heavenly.³³ Rather, as Walter Wink suggests, they are visible and invisible, representing the interiority and exteriority of human structures and institutions, both personal and social in character.³⁴ While some texts imply that they are benign and redeemable, arranged under God's ultimate lordship (e.g., Phil. 3:21), other texts indicate that the powers, who are responsible for the unjust death of the Messiah, are paradoxically thereby also unmasked by that death (Col. 2:15) and will be both conquered and destroyed (1 Cor. 2:6-8; 15:21-28).³⁵

A crucial text for understanding Paul's millennial and political perspective is 1 Cor. 2:6-8, part of a broader section (1:18-2:16), which parodies aspects

of the social and political order,³⁶ and which shames “the pretentious elite questing after power, wealth, wisdom, noble birth, and honorific public office.”³⁷

Yet among the mature (lit. “perfect”) we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers (*archontes*) of this age, who are doomed to perish. But we speak God’s wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. (1 Cor. 2:6-8, NRSV)

While some exegetes claim that the “rulers” here are essentially demonic powers,³⁸ others claim that the reference is primarily to earthly political rulers (or the imperial system), as elsewhere in the NT,³⁹ and still others argue that it is paradoxically to both cosmic (mythological) and earthly powers.⁴⁰ Paul’s language is abrupt and elliptical; but in the context of his rhetoric, readers could not have missed thinking about the doom of the Roman imperial system at some level. Reference to the powers in 1 Cor. comes to a climax in 15:24-28, where Paul asserts that all of the enemies and powers of this age will be destroyed: at “the end” the Messiah will “reign” (*basileuein*) and hand the kingdom (*basileia*) to God, “after he has destroyed every rule (*arch*) and every authority (*exousia*) and power (*dynamis*),” so that “God may be all things in all things (or, among all people).” While the final “enemy” is Death, readers again must have also considered the political implications of the rhetoric.

Since the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah, then, the world is at the edge of the new age. Throughout the history of Christendom, the death of Jesus has been mystified,⁴¹ robbed of its political dimensions as an act of faithful solidarity in the face of imperial terror against God’s power of good. Granted, Paul’s language about the death of the Messiah too is not univocal. He carries on the tradition handed on to him that Jesus’ death was an atoning sacrifice dealing with the problem of Error (residing in and having mastery over each person).⁴² But even more significantly Paul also presents Jesus’ death in all of its raw, accursed (e.g., Gal. 3:13) victimization, seeing the cross as an unmasking of the powers and its imperial terror, an act of solidarity with the lowly, and as a disruption (*skandalon*) in the scheme of things.⁴³ The resurrection of Jesus is for Paul final proof of the imminent

defeat of the powers, proof of the dawning of the new age. And the imminent return of Jesus will accomplish the final defeat (expressed sometimes in military terms) of all powers and Satanic corruption, so that “God will be all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28). Paul describes the goal of history with images of the supreme, imperial, and cosmic reign by God and God’s Messiah.⁴⁴

But someone might say: Isn’t the apolitical character of Paul’s rhetoric confirmed by his symbolization of final salvation as transcendent, heavenly, personal, and spiritual? The response is that all these adjectives are inadequate. There are indeed a few places where Paul’s comments seem to imply a final salvation that is spiritual and heavenly.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, Paul’s millennialism is not fundamentally world-ending or world-denying but world-transforming; it is far more terrestrially next-worldly than vertically other-worldly. It does not envision the goal as disembodied individual immortality but as corporate re-embodiment⁴⁶ in the context of a restored creation (Rom. 8:18-25). Final salvation does not entail the departure of the righteous from earth to heaven, but an ultimate merging of earth and heaven, so that God’s imperial reign (now supreme only in heaven) will be universal. “Heaven,” actually a rather rare in word in Paul’s writings when compared with the rest of the NT,⁴⁷ is the source of deliverance,⁴⁸ and the place where salvation is now reserved,⁴⁹ until the time when it emerges with a renovated earth,⁵⁰ but it is not itself the final destination. Quite apart from being interested in the spatial landscape of final salvation, Paul describes it much more in social and political terms: for instance, as God’s universal reign following an embattled victory;⁵¹ as implying the relational solidarity of believers with Messiah Jesus;⁵² as a realization of peace, justice, and true joy;⁵³ and as the immediate participation in God’s splendor (glory).⁵⁴

The millennial moorings of Paul’s vocabulary also shape his understanding of the corporate body of believers now united with the Messiah. As J. C. Beker put it:

Because the church has an eschatological horizon and is the proleptic manifestation of the kingdom of God in history, it is the beach-head of the new creation and the sign of the new age in the old world that is “passing away” (1 Cor. 7:31). . . . The vocation of the church is not self-preservation for eternal life but service to the created world in the sure hope of the world’s transformation at the

time of God's final triumph. The last judgment is not only a judgment on the world outside the church but also a judgment that will assess the church's faithfulness to its mission in the world (cf. Rom. 14:10; 2 Cor. 5:11; cf. also 1 Pet. 4:17).⁵⁵

Moreover, this community is pictured as participating in the final battle of God's triumph.⁵⁶ But as its attire and weaponry for war, Paul identifies "faith," "love," "hope," and "justice/righteousness" (1 Thess. 5:8; 2 Cor. 6:7; Rom. 6:13; cf. Eph. 6:15). As Tom Yoder Neufeld suggests, Paul has democratized and pacified the holy war imagery of Israel.⁵⁷ As for methods in the cosmic war, Paul advises: "Do not be conquered by evil, but conquer evil with good" (Rom. 12:21),⁵⁸ and observes: "for the weapons of our warfare are not fleshly but are powerful in God to destroy strongholds" (2 Cor. 10:4).⁵⁹ This language implies not a conforming function in relation to the current socio-political structures, but a critical function (cf. Rom. 12:1-2; Gal. 1:4). Apart from tacitly endorsing actual military conduct, it actually precludes it.⁶⁰

Use of Politically Loaded Terms to Describe Deliverance, the Messiah, and the Messiah's Community

In connection with this basic millennial script, scholars have recently identified particular texts in which there appear parodies or challenges of imperial claims and ideologies. An example is 1 Thess. 5:3, where Paul parodies Roman imperial rhetoric while announcing doom, presumably on the prevailing power structures (which are tied to the community's distress; cf. 1:6-2:2; 3:3): "When they say, 'Peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them."⁶¹ Other examples are texts in which terms of explicit political identity or connotation are applied to the community of the Messiah: the implicitly alternative "[political] assembly (*ekklisia*) of God" in Thessalonica is exhorted "to lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into *his own* kingdom (*basileia*) and glory" (1 Thess. 2:12); the "consecrated" and "faithful ones" in Colossae are reminded that God "has delivered us from the authority (*exousia*) of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom (*basileia*) of the son of his love" (Col. 1:13); and the "consecrated ones" in Philippi are advised that their "politics" (*politeuesthe*) be worthy of the saving news (*euangelion*) of the Messiah" (Phil. 1:27), and

that their true “political identity (*politeuma*) resides in heaven” (Phil. 3:20).⁶² These texts indicate that for Paul the civic and political authorities have, at minimum, only a penultimate character, if not that their reality is fundamentally subverted.⁶³ The political connotations of such terms as *ekklisia* and *euangelion* have also been highlighted. Paul’s usage of *ekklisia* is linked to the language of political assemblies of Hellenistic city-states and the corporate identity of Israel’s past,⁶⁴ and that of *euangelion* (gospel, good news) finds its closest counterpart usage in the rhetoric proclaiming the deliverance brought by the imperial order.⁶⁵

Numerous titles of honor applied to the Messiah also appear to have significant political connotations, and some seem to directly challenge titles ascribed to the emperor. These include: *Christos* (Messiah, a title, not a name), *Kyrios* (Lord), and *Soter* (Deliverer, one time).⁶⁶ Commenting on Paul’s remark in Phil. 3:20 that from heaven (where their political identity resides) believers “await the Savior, the Lord Jesus, the Messiah,” N. T. Wright remarks:

These are Caesar-titles. The whole verse says: Jesus is Lord, and Caesar isn’t. Caesar’s empire, of which Philippi is the colonial outpost, is the parody; Jesus’ empire, of which the Philippian church is a colonial outpost, is the reality.⁶⁷

Corresponding to this is the ascription of enthronement imagery, which directly rivals that of Hellenistic rulers and the Roman *imperium*, for instance in Phil. 2:5-11:

Messiah Jesus
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not count equality with God (*isa theos*) a thing to be grasped. . .
Therefore God has highly exalted him
and bestowed on him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and
on earth and under the earth. . . (Phil. 2:5, 9-10)

Read against honorific discourse of the ruler cults in the Greek East, features of this hymn (e.g., *isa theos*) appear as an ironic appropriation of terms central to the Greco-Roman patronage and imperial system.⁶⁸ In addition, it is argued that Paul’s rhetoric of *fides Messiah*, literally *pistis Christou* (faithfulness of

the Messiah), in reference to his bringing deliverance, is meant to rival the Roman rhetoric of *fides Augustus*.⁶⁹ In this connection, Paul's references to the *parousia* ("coming") of the Lord Messiah⁷⁰ mimic the formalized Roman references to the royal *adventus* of the emperor in deliverance, judgment, and celebration.⁷¹

Other claims of implicit anti-imperial rhetoric have been made for all of 1 Cor. as an argument for the realization of an alternative society over against the Roman patronage system;⁷² for the opening chapter of Romans, read as a "defiant indictment of the rampant injustice and impiety of the Roman 'golden age,'" and "a direct challenge to the ritual and ceremony of empire";⁷³ and even for Paul's work in collecting a fund from the relatively more wealthy urbanites of Macedonia and Greece for the poor of Jerusalem.⁷⁴ Finally, Paul's attempts to preclude the use of civic courts for settling disputes within the Messiah's community illustrate a rather negative view of the civic judicial system:⁷⁵

Does a brother . . . dare go to law before the unjust [civic courts] instead of the consecrated ones (*hagioi*, saints)? Do you not know that the consecrated ones will judge the world (*kosmos*)? Do you not know that we are to judge angels? (1 Cor. 6:1-3)

Paul's Own Experience of Arrest, Torture, Imprisonment, and Execution at the Hands of Roman and Civic Authorities

Paul's own experience of arrest, torture, and imprisonment seems to confirm a critical posture toward the empire, while contradicting the presentation in Luke-Acts of the Roman authorities as the great protectors of the persecuted believers, a theme that seems intended to improve either the reputation of early Christians in the eyes of the Romans or the reputation of Rome in the eyes of Christians. Some scholars have thus even doubted the veracity of the repeated Lukan claim to Paul's Roman citizenship (Acts 16:37-38; 21:39; 22:25-29; 23:27). Paul's testimony is to having received torture at the hands of both Jewish authorities (2 Cor. 11:24, 26; cf. Gal. 5:11; 6:12) and Gentile authorities (2 Cor. 11:25-26, "three times beaten with rods"; cf. 11:32-33).

Paul was imprisoned by the Roman or provincial authorities at least four times: (1) probably Ephesus (Phil. 1:13; cf. 2 Cor. 1:8), the likely setting of Philippians, Philemon, and Colossians (if authentic); (2) in Philippi (see 1 Thess. 2:2 and Acts 16:23);⁷⁶ (3) Jerusalem and then Caesarea (Acts 21:27-26:32); and (4) Rome (Acts 28), where he was probably executed (cf. 1 Clement).

Paul claims as an honor the fact that he has been imprisoned, tortured, and near death (see 2 Cor. 1:8; cf. 4:16-5:5) far more than rival apostles of Jesus (2 Cor. 11:23; cf. “prisons,” 2 Cor. 6:5). Moreover, he thinks that it is important that he is imprisoned in particular as one who proclaims the gospel of the Messiah (Phil. 1:7, 12-17). Further, he presents his experiences as “a paradigm for . . . his communities generally” (Phil. 1:29-30; 1 Thess. 1:6; 2:14).⁷⁷ For Paul, no human tribunal can be feared (Rom. 8:33-34). Klaus Wengst reasons that Paul’s flogging, imprisonment, and execution do not invalidate the possibility of Roman citizenship, especially since the extra-judicial torture even of Roman citizens is known to historians (e.g., Josephus, *War*, II, 306-8). Even so, Paul’s experiences do mean (1) that Roman citizenship probably meant nothing to Paul (e.g., he preferred not to identify with the elite, but deliberately chose a loss of status),⁷⁸ and/or (2) that it meant nothing to the Romans. Wengst contends that Paul “did not have these experiences because he had committed some illegalities in the moral and legal sense but because as a Christian [sic]⁷⁹ his loyalty was suspect and because he continued to propagate being Christian, which was evidently felt to be a disturbance of the public order.”⁸⁰ Once Paul’s millennial ideology was decoded, it’s not hard to understand an execution on the grounds of treason. Paul had already pictured his execution in sacerdotal ways, as a participation in the path of the Messiah (Phil. 2:17; 2 Cor. 1:3-7; 2:14-16; cf. Col. 1:24).

Romans 13 and the Monumental Contradiction

What, then, do we make of Romans 13? We seem to be left with a monumental contradiction. The Roman authorities themselves are seemingly exalted, albeit as “ordered” under God’s ultimate sovereignty, and the text seems to teach an almost blind obedience to them through the imposition of an apparently absolutist

subordination scheme:

Let every person be subject to the prevailing authorities (*exousiai*), for there is no authority (*exousia*) except from God, and those that exist have been ordered (*tassomai*) by God. So that the one who resists/revolts (*antitassomai*) against the authority (*exousia*, i.e., *imperium*), resists/revolts against the arrangement (*diatagē*) of God; and the ones who revolt (*anthistemi*) will incur judgment upon themselves. The rulers (*archontes*) are not a terror to good conduct but to bad. . . . The authority (*exousia*) is God's minister (*diakonos*) for your good . . . to execute wrath on the evildoer. (Rom. 13:1-4)⁸¹

Whereas Rom. 12:19-20 presented God's sole prerogative for justice ("wrath"), now in Rom. 13 the Roman *imperium* is presented as "God's minister" for the maintenance of order and justice. Whereas elsewhere Paul parodies the Roman *imperium* and predicts its doom, here its legitimacy is apparently certified using the commonplaces of Jewish and Hellenistic political rhetoric.

Most contemporary interpreters have rejected the notion that Paul here presents a formal theory of the state, usable for creating Christian dogma, whether legitimizing all prevailing political authorities or framing the basis for an ideal Christian political authority. While some argue that the point of Rom. 13 is to highlight God's supreme authority (implicitly subverting that of Rome), others admit that "Paul's ideological defense of the state [is] difficult to understand, especially his appeal for subjection to the state and his way of describing the state and its officials in the traditional laudatory language of Hellenistic politics."⁸² At most, expressed here is "the conventional prophetic-apocalyptic affirmation that God disposes the rise and fall of empires and gives the power of the sword into the hands of the ruler,"⁸³ without necessarily implying divine approval of the rulers' actions or of their fundamental legitimacy.

Those who wish to "rescue" Paul's more radical stance toward the authorities, as expressed elsewhere, highlight the situational and historical nature of the rhetoric, and the alienation of Jesus-followers from any corridor of imperial power. Explanations offered are that Paul was simply seeking (1) to preempt violent revolution among some who had joined the ranks of Messiah's community (and had not understood the nature of its "warfare of love"), (2)

to preclude further repercussions against the Roman Jesus-believing community (either the Gentile majority, the threatened Jewish minority, or both), (3) to rehabilitate Paul's own reputation within the Gentile-dominated community as being fully loyal to Rome,⁸⁴ or (4) to ensure that Paul's missionary plans, namely to make Rome as a base of operations for a campaign in Spain, are not thwarted.⁸⁵ Paul appears to apply the ethic of non-retaliation and peace (Rom. 12:13-14, 17-21) to a politically volatile situation. As some argue, the text is essentially an exhortation for caution and its warrants are auxiliary.⁸⁶ A similar tension between practical exhortation and theological warrant can be seen in 1 Cor. 11, where Paul calls the Corinthian community to be cautious with respect to scruples for women's head attire, exhorting women to cover their heads in worship, but introduces warrants which promote a hierarchical scheme in the cosmos and whose result is legitimized Christian misogyny through the eras: "the head of every man is Messiah, the head of a women is her husband, and the head of Messiah is God. . . . The man is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man. For man was not made from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man" (1 Cor. 11:3,7-9).

For some Christian interpreters who still seek to take Paul's voice seriously, Rom. 13 is only meaningful in the context of a broader biblical dialogue, for example, alongside Rev. 13, written forty years later, in which the Roman *imperium* is presented as the embodiment of the Great Dragon, Satan. Just as one would not go first to 1 Cor. 7 to deduce a Christian theology of marriage, so also one might not go first or exclusively to Rom. 13 for a Christian approach to the political authorities, let alone for a theory of the state itself.

Other interpreters are more inclined to challenge both Paul's rhetoric and its ideological underpinnings. While applauding the new anti-imperial or anti-Roman reading of Paul (as explicated especially by Horsley and Elliott), some on the liberationist side still see difficulties. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, for instance, decries the implicit identification with Paul in these readings and the privileging of "the authorial master-voice of Paul," valorizing Paul's rhetoric over (against) the pluriform voices in the first-century assemblies of Jesus-believers. In particular she finds little comfort in finding an anti-imperial Paul while overlooking Paul's own "politics of 'othering'" within the community

itself, evident for instance in his vilifying rival missionaries and teachers, in silencing the voices of those who would differ with him, particularly women (e.g., Corinthian women prophets), and in his re-inscribing of hegemonic subordination schemes within the alternative community itself.⁸⁷ Accordingly, this interpretive approach sees little (and perhaps misleading) value in any attempt to “rescue” the political discourse of Rom. 13, since it also “revalorizes” and “reinscribes Paul’s rhetorics of subordination.”⁸⁸

Conclusions

What, then, might be some conclusions? (1) Texts within the Pauline corpus display considerable tension, ambivalence, even contradiction on the topic of Paul and politics. For instance, we seem to find two perspectives on the “powers”: on the one hand, they are to be redeemed and reconciled; on the other, they are to be conquered and destroyed. Undoubtedly, this, tension reflects to a large degree the situational character of Paul’s instrumental rhetoric. At the same time, it may be construed as a consequence of Paul’s own ambivalence and internal tension. On one side, some texts seem to indicate that he is caught up in the imperial system, lauding its benefits, and unwittingly using and legitimizing its themes and subordinationist ideology. On the other, Paul appears far more critical of the imperial powers than often granted by interpreters; and his rhetoric is certainly not apolitical.

A similar tension can be seen in Paul’s perspectives on gender and social order (slavery). While Paul understandably perpetuated the endemic patriarchy of his day, clear examples show his language contrasts to the usual gender moralists, and indicate his practice includes numerous women in his network of leaders. One explanation of this paradox is the interplay between “charisma” and “order” evident in his assemblies.⁸⁹ Perhaps Paul’s political perspective is fraught with a similar dynamic.⁹⁰ J. C. Beker, for instance, explains the tension using the language of the play between his apocalyptic “passion” and practical “sobriety.”⁹¹ One could also point to Paul’s own hybridized cultural identity and status inconsistency as explanations.

(2) Given the variety of Paul’s rhetoric, and the fundamental primacy of Paul’s millennial horizon, Rom. 13 cannot (should not) function as the hermeneutical center or sole text for assessing Paul’s political perspective; 1

Cor. 2:6-8 and 15:24-28 could equally well be identified as a hermeneutical starting points.

(3) Paul's practical political vision focuses on the emergence of an alternative society, local communities of character and resistance in anticipation of God's coming triumph, and not on extending the "ecclesial revolution" to society at large.⁹² Yet, even here one can complain that Paul's manifesto of a new humanity in which old distinctions based on gender, class, and ethnicity are subverted (esp. Gal. 3:26-28), is not applied consistently or comprehensively.⁹³ Paul, it seems, was uncompromising on the matter of ending *distinctions* based on ethnicity (not on ending *differences*), but was compromising when it came to applying the ending of distinctions based on gender and social class/status. He made steps in the latter areas, but chose the first as his main arena of battle. The legacy of the church after Paul was to go back on even the small strides made by Paul in those areas.

(4) Given the diversity of Paul's rhetoric, multiple readings of his political perspective will remain. One might say that some readings should be given greater validity, based on whether the interpretation is in harmony with the overall biblical drama of God's reclamation of all creation toward peace and justice (e.g., Rom. 14:17), that is, to the extent that they are emancipatory. While some subordinationist and "othering" texts may not be easily rescued, the overall direction of Paul's rhetoric, in my opinion, is still amenable to — even demands — an emancipatory reading. In contexts in which Paul's authorial voice is venerated, it will be natural to highlight Paul's anti-imperial perspective, somewhat against the grain of received interpretations. On the other hand, in contexts where readers are open to placing Paul in broader dialogue with other voices in the Christian canon and in the emerging Christian assemblies (and otherwise silenced), it will be appropriate to highlight how Paul *both* reinscribes *and* challenges imperial and subordinationist schemes.

Notes

¹ For references, see e.g., H. D. Betz, "Paul," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:187.

² For a recent discussion that eerily came just before September 11, see Lewis A. Lapham, "The American Rome: On the Theory of Virtuous Empire," *Harper's Magazine* (August 2001), 31-38.

³ Arif Dirlik, "The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism," *Critical Inquiry* 20/1 (1994): 329.

⁴ E.g., R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Asian Biblical Hermeneutics and Postcolonialism: Contesting the Interpretations* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1998), 3-28; Ankie Hoogvelt, *Globalization and the Postcolonial World: The New Political Economy of Development* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 153-61.

⁵ E.g., R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Postcolonial Bible, The Bible and Postcolonialism 1* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998); Fernando Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies: A View from the Margins* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2000); R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial, and Postcolonial Encounters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

⁶ Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalis Press, 2000). Note also the forthcoming *Postcolonial Bible Commentary*, edited by R. S. Sugirtharajah, and the new consultation within the Society of Biblical Studies, New Testament Studies and Postcolonial Studies, chaired by Fernando Segovia and Stephen Moore.

⁷ R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Asian Biblical Hermeneutics*, 15, remarks: "It must be stressed that it is not a homogenous project, but a hermeneutical salmagundi, consisting of extremely varied methods, materials, historical entanglements, geographical locations, political affiliations, cultural identities, and economic predicaments."

⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 15-16. Thus to treat postcolonialism as a subspecies of Eurocentric postmodernism is to engage in intellectual imperialism.

¹⁰ Neil Elliott, *Liberating Paul: The Justice of God and the Politics of the Apostle* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994), 74-75, 83-84.

¹¹ E.g., Paul W. Meyer, "Pauline Theology: A Proposal for a Pause in Its Pursuit," in *Pauline Theology, Vol. IV: Looking Back, Pressing On*, ed. E. Elizabeth Johnson and David M. Hay (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 140-60.

¹² E.g., Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Cor. 7:17-24; 11:2-16; 14:34-35; Col. 3:18-4:1.

¹³ For a brief review, see Elliott, *Liberating Paul*, 37-40.

¹⁴ See, e.g., Sugirtharajah, *Asian Biblical Hermeneutics*, 20: "Paul, a genuine immigrant by current political standards, gives the impression in his writings that he has been fully co-opted into the imperial system. An example occurs in Romans 13, in which he reinscribes colonial values by asserting that God and history are on the side of the Roman Empire. The sensible thing for Christians, Paul writes, is to live peaceably with the colonial administration and to work within its framework, rather than to revolt. The almighty Roman power was hardly questioned in his epistles, except in teleological terms. Occasionally he censures the evils of the Empire, but offers no political strategy or practical solution for its liquidation." For North American feminist responses, see n. 87.

¹⁵ Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994.

¹⁶ Klaus Wengst, *Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ*, trans. J. Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), esp. 79-89; see also his *Humility: Solidarity of the Humiliated*, trans. J. Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

¹⁷ Dieter Georgi, *Theocracy in Paul's Praxis and Theology*, trans. D. Green (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991).

¹⁸ Richard Horsley, ed., *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997).

¹⁹ Richard Horsley, *Paul and Politics: Ekklēsia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation: Essays in Honor of Krister Stendahl* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000).

²⁰ E.g., H. D. Betz, "Paul," 187.

²¹ In textbook after textbook, the great virtues of the Pax Romana, along with the imperial conquests of Alexander, are celebrated as providing the fertile ground for the spread of the gospel, as if the gospel of the cross really needed such power structures in order to thrive. For an alternative reading of the Roman empire, see, e.g., Wengst, *Pax Romana*, 7-54; Horsley, *Paul and Empire*, 10-137.

²² The Latin term "command," used to refer to the Roman state and its "sovereignty" and "authority."

²³ Thus also O. Cullmann, *The State in the New Testament* (New York: Scribner's, 1956), 50-70.

²⁴ In addition to the letters deemed "undisputed" by biblical scholars, I tend to treat Colossians also as an "authentic" letter of Paul. Once Paul is taken out of a dogmatic straitjacket, or freed from the assumption of absolute logical consistency (e.g., Romans 6 vs. Col. 3) and from the demand to have his ethics cleaned up (Col. 3:18-4:1; cf. 1 Cor. 7, 11), and treated as a rhetorician, the arguments against the authenticity of Colossians become less convincing. The linguistic and stylistic arguments themselves are not decisive, and the more spatially framed millenarianism of Colossians is not absolutely incompatible with that of the undisputed letters. In this essay I address the perspective of Paul as he is available to historical reconstruction, as opposed to the Paul of the canon, or the Paul of history, canon, and legend.

²⁵ See J. C. Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980).

²⁶ For a helpful typology, see Bryan Wilson, *Magic and the Millennium: A Sociological Study of Religious Movements of Protest among Tribal and Third-World Peoples* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973).

²⁷ Fiorenza, "Paul and the Politics of Interpretation," in *Paul and Politics*, 55, refers to both the critical and the conforming function that is potential with millennial ideology.

²⁸ Reynaldo Ileto, *Pasyon and Revolution: Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1840-1910* (Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1979).

²⁹ Richard Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Resistance in Roman Palestine* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 121-45; Elliott, *Liberating Paul*, 141-80.

³⁰ See esp. the thesis of J. C. Beker, *Paul the Apostle*; for an application of Paul's apocalyptic heritage to his anti-imperial perspective, see R. Horsley, "Rhetoric and Empire — and 1 Corinthians," in *Paul and Politics*, 93-102.

³¹ Judith Kovaks, "The Archons, the Spirit, and the Death of Christ: Do We Really Need the Hypothesis of Gnostic Opponents to Explain 1 Cor. 2:6-16?" in *Apocalyptic in the New Testament: Essays in Honor of J. Louis Martyn*, eds. J. Marcus and M. Soards, JSNT Supplements 24 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), 224.

³² Krister Stendahl, "Hate, Non-retaliation, and Love: 1QS x, 17-20 and Rom. 12:19-21," *Harvard*

Theological Review 55 (1962): 345. For a discussion of whether Paul's ethic of non-retaliation is merely an apocalyptic restraint, or also tied to the values of love and reconciliation, see Gordon Zerbe, "Paul's Ethic of Non-retaliation and Peace," in *The Love of Enemy and Nonretaliation in the New Testament*, ed. W. Swartley (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 177-222.

³³ Contra, e.g., J. D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 104-10.

³⁴ Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 65-85.

³⁵ Discomfort with this last theme is evident among interpreters. It is de-emphasized by Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 59-63; and these last two texts are also absent in the discussion of the "powers" by John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 135-62.

³⁶ Georgi, *Theocracy*, 52-57.

³⁷ Richard Horsley, "1 Corinthians: A Case Study of Paul's Assembly as an Alternative Society," in *Paul and Empire*, 244.

³⁸ E.g., G. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 103-104.

³⁹ E.g., R. Horsley, "1 Corinthians," 244.

⁴⁰ Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 40-45; Cullmann, *The State*, 62-64; cf. Elliott, *Liberating Paul*, 110-13, who interprets the powers in terms of the "mythic symbolism of Jewish apocalypses," such that Pilate's individuality is seemingly dissolved. While not referring to a specific, official miscarriage of justice, the phrase still refers to the cosmic powers who stand behind the earthly actors. "We should marvel, not that Paul can speak of his 'word of the cross' without specifically identifying Pilate, but that his indictment goes beyond Pilate to include all the powers of heaven and earth together that stand hostile to God" (113). Paul refuses to demonize a particular individual, but rather invites discernment to see how the powers are embodied.

⁴¹ See esp. Elliott, *Liberating Paul*, 105-31.

⁴² For texts and scholarly discussion, see Elliott, *Liberating Paul*, 254, n. 55.

⁴³ On the notion of cross as God's burlesque, in the treatment of the phrase *skandalon tou staurou* (scandal of the cross), see Georgi, *Theocracy*, 46-51.

⁴⁴ Rom. 8:18-39; 15:12; 16:20; 1 Cor. 2:6-8; 6:2-3; 15:23-29; Phil. 1:27-30; 2:9-11; 3:20-21; Gal. 1:4; 1 Thess. 4:13-5:11.

⁴⁵ E.g., 1 Thess. 4:13-18: "caught up in the clouds," "meet the Lord in the air"; 2 Cor. 4:16-5:10, longing for the building from God, eternal in the heavens; Phil. 3:20, "our citizenship is in heaven"; Phil. 1:23-26, longing to depart and be with Messiah; Col. 1:5: "hope stored up in heaven"; Col. 1:12: to share in "the inheritance of the saints in light"; 1 Cor. 15:50: "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God"; 1 Cor. 15:19: pitied if only for this life to have hoped in Messiah. Cf. the notions of "immortality", 2 Cor. 5:4; and physical transformation — 1 Cor. 15:20-28; Phil. 3:21; Rom. 8:23.

⁴⁶ See esp. Rom. 8:29.

⁴⁷ Occurring a mere 11 times in the undisputed letters, 16 times if Colossians is included, compared with 273 in the entire New Testament.

⁴⁸ E.g., Rom. 1:18; 2 Cor. 5:2; 1 Thess. 1:10; 4:16; cf. Rom. 11:26 (Zion as heavenly Zion).

⁴⁹ Phil. 3:20; Col. 1:5; cf. Gal. 4:26 (the Jerusalem above). See the comments on Phil. 3:20 by Andrew Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet*, SNTS Monograph Series 43 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 193, 63: “It is not, as has often been thought, that heaven as such is the homeland of Christians to which they, as perpetual foreigners on earth, must strive to return, but rather that since their Lord is in heaven, their life is to be governed by the heavenly commonwealth.” “Paul often conceives of objects and events normally associated with the end-time as existing already in heaven (e.g., the Jerusalem above in Galatians 4:26).”

⁵⁰ E.g., Rom. 8:18-25.

⁵¹ E.g., 1 Cor. 15:20-28; 35-57; 1 Thess. 4:16 (trumpet imagery); Rom. 8:18-25, 37; 11:25-26, 32, 36; 15:12; 16:20; Phil. 1:27-28; 2:9-11; as the “day” (1 Cor. 1:8; Phil. 2:16) and as involving judgment, destruction and wrath (1 Thess. 1:10; 5:1-11; Phil. 1:27-30; 3:17-21; Rom. 1:18; 2:5-16; 1 Cor. 4:5). Cf. the promise that believers are “given all things”, Rom. 8:32; “inherit the cosmos”, Rom. 4:13; judge the cosmos and angels, 1 Cor. 6:2-3; on the judgment of believers, cf. Rom. 14:10-12; 1 Cor. 4:4-5; 11:27-32; 2 Cor. 5:10.

⁵² 1 Thess. 4:13-18; Phil. 1:23-26; Rom. 8:39; Col. 1:12-13; 3:3; Gal. 2:19-20; 1 Cor. 13:10-12.

⁵³ Rom. 14:17.

⁵⁴ “Glory,” “glorification”: e.g., Rom. 8:17, 30; 2 Cor. 4:17; Phil. 4:20; Col. 3:3; language of “life” and “age-like life” — Rom. 8:13; Gal. 6:7. On the use of “glory” in Paul, see Carey C. Newman, *Paul’s Glory-Christology: Tradition and Rhetoric* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992).

⁵⁵ Beker, *Paul the Apostle*, 313.

⁵⁶ E.g., Rom. 13:11-14; cf. Paul’s reference to fellow “soldiers”: Phil. 2:25; Philemon 2.

⁵⁷ Thomas Yoder Neufeld, *‘Put on the Armour of God’: The Divine Warrior from Isaiah to Ephesians* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).

⁵⁸ See also Rom. 13:11-14; 2 Cor. 10:3-4 for warfare imagery and Rom. 8:32, 37 for conquest imagery. Cf. Eph. 6:10-20.

⁵⁹ In this text, the divine warfare is directed against the community itself (2 Cor. 10:5-6, 8; 13:10), as often in prophetic holy war texts of Israel.

⁶⁰ Compare the assertion (without argument) by M. Desjardins, *Peace, Violence and the New Testament*, The Biblical Seminar 46 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 82: “the military metaphors so loved by Paul are not his attempts to ‘spiritualize’ what he considered unworthy of Christianity; rather, they reflect his recognition of the importance and worth of the military — or at least his acceptance of it.”

⁶¹ See H. Koester, “Imperial Ideology and Paul’s Eschatology in 1 Thessalonians,” in *Paul and Empire*, 158-66.

⁶² See above, n. 49, and the remarks on Phil. 3:20 by Fiorenza, “Paul and the Politics of Interpretation,” 55: “The ‘*politeuma* in heaven’ has usually been understood in dualistic terms as ‘pie in the sky’ or as otherworldly spiritualized reality that has nothing to do with the reality and politics of the earthly Roman Empire. However, if one understands ‘otherworldliness’ and ‘heaven’ not as negation of humanness and creation, but as the site of G*d’s justice and well-being that is traditionally called ‘salvation,’ then one can conceptualize the Divine *politeuma* as the theological location from where a radical critique of oppressive ‘earthly’ structures becomes possible.”

⁶³ Also on the notion that the Messianic can never legitimate the political order but can only

relativize and ultimately replace it, see the remarks by Jewish philosopher Jacob Taubes, *Die Politische Theologie des Paulus*, ed. Aleida Assmann and Jan Assmann (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1993), 178-80.

⁶⁴ E.g., Beker, *Paul*, 313-17; Georgi, *Theocracy*, 57-58.

⁶⁵ Georgi, *Theocracy*, 83; see also N. T. Wright, "Paul's Gospel and Caesar's Empire," in *Paul and Politics*, 164-65.

⁶⁶ See esp. Wright, "Paul's Gospel and Caesar's Empire," 166-70, 173.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁶⁸ Erik Heen, "Phil 2:6-11 and Resistance to Local Rule: The Use of *isa the* in the Civic and Christian Cult," paper presented to the Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting, Nashville, TN, 2000. Abstract in *Society of Biblical Literature 2000 Abstracts* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 106. For another example of a possibly politically charged hymn to the Messiah, see Rom. 1:3-4.

⁶⁹ Georgi, *Theocracy*, 36-44, 83-84. See Gal. 2:16, 20; 3:22; Rom. 3:22, 26; Phil. 3:9.

⁷⁰ Notably in 1 Cor. 15:23; 1 Thess. 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23.

⁷¹ For references, see, e.g., W. Bauer, W. Arndt, F. Gingrich, and F. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), s.v. *parousia*.

⁷² R. Horsley, "1 Corinthians: A Case Study of Paul's Assembly as an Alternative Society," in *Paul and Empire*, 242-52; "Rhetoric and Empire — and 1 Corinthians," in *Paul and Politics*, 72-102; Georgi, *Theocracy*, 52-60.

⁷³ Neil Elliott, "Paul and the Politics of Empire: Problems and Prospects," in *Paul and Politics*, 37-39.

⁷⁴ Sze-kar Wan, "Collection for the Saints as an Anticolonial Act: Implications of Paul's Ethnic Reconstruction," in *Paul and Politics*, 191-215. Noted is Paul's rejection of vertical Roman patronal structures and his emphasis on the new Messianic, eschatological universalism.

⁷⁵ Especially highlighted by O. Cullmann (*The State in the New Testament*, 60-62) as providing a counterpart to Paul's positive remarks about the authorities in Romans 13.

⁷⁶ In 1 Thess. 2:2 Paul refers to his flogging (Acts 16:20-24) as "maltreatment."

⁷⁷ See esp. Wengst, *Pax Romana*, 76.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 75; on Paul's deliberate move down the social ladder, see Elliott, *Liberating Paul*, 57-66.

⁷⁹ To use the term "Christian" at this stage of the emergence of Christianity is anachronistic.

⁸⁰ Wengst, *Pax Romana*, 75.

⁸¹ Author's translation. Deciding on the translation of this text itself is notoriously difficult, and politically charged: are the readers invited to "be subordinate" or to "be subject" (*hypotassomai*); are the authorities "ordered/arranged" or "ordained/instituted" (*tassomai*, <*taxis*; *diatag*, <*diatassomai*) by God; are the readers called not to "resist" generally or not to "revolt" (*antitassomai*; *anthist mi*) in some more specific sense?

⁸² Beker, *Paul*, 326.

⁸³ Elliott, *Liberating Paul*, 224. Cf. Isa. 44:2-8; 45:1-7 (Cyrus as God's "anointed"); Jer. 25:9; 27:6; 43:10 (Nebuchadrezzar as God's "servant"); Dan. 2:37.

⁸⁴ Wengst, *Pax Romana*, 82.

⁸⁵ See esp. Neil Elliott, "Romans 13:1-7 in the Context of Imperial Propaganda," in *Paul and Empire*, 184-204.

⁸⁶ E.g., Jan Botha, *Subject to Whose Authority? Multiple Readings of Romans 13* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 219-26.

⁸⁷ Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Paul and the Politics of Interpretation," in *Paul and Politics*, 40-57. For classic works on recovering the voices of the silenced in first-century Christianity, see esp. E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983); Antoinette Clark Wire, *The Corinthian Women Prophets: A Reconstruction through Paul's Rhetoric* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990); for more critical analyses of Paul, see also Elizabeth Castelli, *Imitating Paul: A Discourse of Power* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991); Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, *Community and Authority: The Rhetoric of Obedience in the Pauline Tradition* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998).

⁸⁸ Fiorenza, "Paul and the Politics of Interpretation," 53.

⁸⁹ That is, the leadership roles for numerous women in Paul's circles (e.g., Rom. 16) can be explained in terms of the expression of "charisma," the giftedness of the assemblies which is not distributed by gender and which interrupts prevailing patriarchal norms for ordering communities. In Colossians, however, it appears that the concern for "order" (*taxis*, 2:6; cf. 3:18-4:1) overtakes the democratizing role of charisma. Other texts expressing explicit concern for communal "order" are 1 Cor. 14:40 (*taxis*), 1 Cor. 7:35 (*eusch'mon*, decorum, good form), 1 Cor. 14:33 and 2 Cor. 12:20 (vs. *akatastasia*, disorder), and 1 Thess. 5:14 (vs. the *ataktoi*, disorderly, out of rank, insubordinate). Georgi (*Theocracy*, 60-61) claims, however, on the basis of 1 Cor. 14:33, that Paul plainly distinguishes between "peace" and "order," favoring the former over against contemporary ideology.

⁹⁰ See also the argument that Paul's remarks on the Jewish Torah are fundamentally incoherent: Heikki Räisänen, *Paul and the Law* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).

⁹¹ J. C. Beker, *The Triumph of God: The Essence of Paul's Thought* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1990), 35-36.

⁹² For a discussion of this, see esp. Beker, *Paul the Apostle*, 325-27.

⁹³ E.g., Beker, *Paul the Apostle*, 322.

Literary Refractions

On September 25, 2000, Dallas Wiebe underwent heart surgery. “What seemed to me a kind of interesting result of the surgery,” he wrote afterwards, “was that the scar on my chest was shaped like a cross. To be sure, the crosspiece was faint and was kind of lost among the hair on my chest when it grew back. Nonetheless, it all seemed to announce itself as a subject for poetry.” What follows includes a selection taken from Wiebe’s suite of post-surgery poems focused on the cross.

The poems featured here will be incorporated into two manuscripts Dallas Wiebe is working on — one dealing with old age and dying, one dedicated to Dallas’s wife Virginia, who passed away after a brief illness on April 19, 2002. Readers of *The Conrad Grebel Review* will recall Wiebe’s essay “Love in Old Age,” published in the fall 1999 issue. There he wrote: “It’s this dependency that occurs between a husband and a wife that fascinates me. Call it ‘love,’ call it ‘loyalty,’ call it ‘trust,’ call it ‘stupidity.’ Call it whatever you want. One thing is certain; it’s more than love. It is something far beyond that. It’s something far more important and more powerful than love.” The poem “Yea, Though I Walk” included here was written for Virginia Wiebe; it is from a volume to be called “No Love, No Sorrow.”

Hildi Froese Tiessen, *Literary Editor*

Dallas Wiebe, professor emeritus at the University of Cincinnati, has published six books, including two novels (most recently, Our Asian Journey, MLR Editions Canada, 1997), three volumes of short stories, and one chapbook of poetry. He was founding editor of The Cincinnati Poetry Review (1975-1994). It was in that role that he became aware of other Mennonite writers in the United States: Jeff Gundy, Jean Janzen, and Julia Kasdorf, for example. Wiebe has won the Aga Khan Fiction Award from The Paris Review and the prestigious Pushcart Prize.

My Pectoral Cross

It's not much of a cross
but it will have to do.
The surgeon who cracked my chest
didn't have a lot of choice
as to how to close the wound.
The sternum and the ribs
determined his design
When he sewed me shut
and said, "Voilà."
My primary care physician
once told me I have a "soft heart."
And I do for doctors
who cut us up.
I have a soft heart
for the knives that slit and slice,
for the hands that fondle and peel
our internal organs,
for the machines
that let us live again
after a short death.
The Giacometti cross fills my chest
and draws the skin into it.
The cross swells and contracts
with my breath.
The cross rides out in advance
of all my going and coming.
I bear my cross alone and gladly.
Thin and lined with dead blood,
it blesses me under my shirt.
No one would know my pectoral cross was there
if my stumbling and falling
didn't mark my path
towards the first Crucifixion.

At the Foot of the Cross

They sat on the rocky ground
and sang above the pain in their legs and rumps.
They sang about Spring and flowers,
fields of grain and showers of rain.
They talked of his triumphal entry,
of angry priests and Roman spears.
They worried for the children at home
and food for the Sabbath.
What else could they do
in the long day
from the crown of thorns to Golgotha?
When he said, "Father, forgive them,"
they looked for forgiveness
and wondered what he meant.
When he told a thief
that he'd be in Paradise that day,
how could they know what he said?
When he whispered, "Behold a son and behold a mother,"
what were they to gather
as they looked at each other?
When he cried out in Greek,
what were they to consider
without a translation?
When he mentioned thirst,
what could they offer
when they had no water?
When he said, "It is finished,"
what could they do
but get up
and go home to supper?
When he commended his spirit to God,
what could they do
but leave him to another?

After the long moments of listening
they wandered to their houses
and tried to remember what he had said.
After the long hours of pain,
they washed themselves
and left him to a different Joseph.
After the long day of singing, gossiping and sweating,
they hid inside their daily selves
and waited for the earth to disappear.

At Easter

What is that breeze
that comes from Calvary?
What is that soft wind
that comes from the north,
the east, the south and the west?
What is that derelict air
that filters down to us?
It is the air that carries
the clamor of the Romans and the priests.
It is the gentle wind that carries
the gossip at the foot of the cross.
It is the breeze that carries
the timid whispering from the top.
It's springtime in Jerusalem.
The summer is coming in.
It is time for harvesting and good food.
It's the time of hot days and chilled nights.
It's the time of palm branches
and the shedding of cloaks.
It's the time of crowing cocks.
The breeze soothes the holy mount.
It washes the citizens in comfort.
It makes them smile at men on donkeys.
What is that breeze that never ceases?
It is the breath
that comes from Golgotha.
It arrives upon your fears.
It tells you more
than you want to know.
It rings in your ears.

Yea, Though I Walk

For Virginia M. Wiebe (1929-2002)

In the valley of the shadow
the road to the pit
is deep and invisible.

In the valley of the shadow
there is no air and no wind,
there are no clouds and no sky.

In the valley of the shadow
you wander,
hands before your breast,
feet groping over rocks.

The emptiness in the valley
is filled with you
and your sober mind.

It is filled with your unspoken words
and your unfeeling skin.

It is filled with unheard-of sounds
and your senseless eyes.

It is filled
with the residue of your thinking
and your grim words.

The shadow in the valley
is there without sun.

The shadow in the valley
is there without reflection.

The shadow in the valley
is there because of you.

It is the shadow of the cross
that covers your stumbling
and that sanctifies the darkness.

In the holy shade
there are no questions
because there are no answers.

There is only you, the shadow
and the cross.

Raise High the Crossbeams, Carpenters

The view from the top of a cross is endless.
The view from the foot of a cross is uplifting.
The view from now is blank.
No wonder the sun is spent.
No wonder our days drift away.
No wonder the night comes on triumphant.
Who will resurrect the cross
 if not you and you and you?
Who will scan the scenery of salvation
 if not you and you and you?
Who will scatter the blood and water
 from the wound
 if not you and you and you?
Touch the wood.
Feel its warmth.
Caress its splinters.
You will fall for its message.
You will hear its vibrations.
You will blink at its radiations.
Nail the crossbeam to the shaft.
Nail your Savior to the cross.
Nail yourself to his feet.
Raise high the crossbeam
 when the earth quakes
 and the thunder crackles,
 when the birds flee and the winds cavort,
 when the sky opens
 and the lightning comes down.
Maybe then you will see the light.
Maybe then you will know the way.
Maybe then you will kneel and see
 that the nails are loose,
 that the body is irrelevant,
 that the everlasting light
 is in your eyes.

Michael A. King. *Fractured Dance: Gadamer and a Mennonite Conflict over Homosexuality*. Pandora Press US, 2001. C. Norman Kraus, ed. *To Continue the Dialogue: Biblical Interpretation and Homosexuality*. Pandora Press US, 2001.

These books by Mennonite contributors add nuance and perspective more than argumentation to the continuing discussion about homosexuality in the Mennonite church. Each seeks to foster greater understanding across the divide this issue has produced.

Fractured Dance deals not with homosexuality *per se*, but with talking about homosexuality. In 1997, the Franconia Mennonite Conference held cluster group conversations about how to respond to the Germantown Mennonite Church's position on homosexuality. Germantown accepted into membership practicing gays and lesbians, contradicting Franconia's official stance. For his doctoral dissertation, Michael King analyzed transcripts of these conversations using the insights of German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer. He wanted to test Gadamer's theory that persons in conflict share a deep commonality that can enable them to hear and understand each other.

The book is the fruit of King's research, and moves on two levels. One is a description of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. Some stretches are theoretical, technical and likely to be tedious for non-specialists. But with persistence, one can find a fascinating analysis of how communication succeeds or fails that is applicable to more conflicts than homosexuality. The second level reads easier, and reports on Franconia's conversations about how to respond to Germantown. King reproduces and analyzes portions of the cluster group transcripts. The range of viewpoints and feelings participants expressed will be recognizable by anyone involved in the homosexuality discussion. King notes that pacifism had no discernable impact on the conversations.

King's guiding metaphor is a dance, since dancing consists of different partners and movements cooperating to produce a complete effect. In their conversations, Franconia and Germantown attempted to dance, but the dance fractured and ultimately failed when Germantown was expelled. King's analysis of the Franconia process may assist congregations and conferences presently engaged in the homosexuality discussion to better understand whether and why they are gracefully dancing, fracturing their movements, or sitting at opposite ends of the ballroom.

To Continue the Dialogue, which ranges more widely than its subtitle suggests, is a symposium of 15 essays and 8 responses, the majority by present or former teachers and administrators in Mennonite church-related institutions. According to editor C. Norman Kraus, the volume is appearing now “because the data are not all in [on the biblical and cultural issues surrounding homosexuality], and because human lives and well-being are at stake” (14).

Part One groups seven essays under the heading, “The Need for Continuing Dialogue.” Why is more dialogue needed? Because, asserts Kraus in “The ‘H’ Words: *Heremetics and Homosexuality*,” the church has not clarified the principles of biblical interpretation that operate beneath the surface of the discussion. And more dialogue is needed, says Marcus Smucker, because people are hurting. His “Psychological Dynamics: Being Gay or Lesbian” emerges out of his experience as a counsellor and father of a lesbian daughter.

More dialogue is also needed because dialogue in the Mennonite church has sometimes become short-circuited. “The Story of the Listening Committee” narrates the activity of the eight-person Listening Committee appointed by the former General Conference and Mennonite Church general boards after the adoption of the Saskatoon and Purdue sexuality statements of 1986 and 1987. While its mandate was “to encourage and help dialogue” between various perspectives on homosexuality, the committee’s recommendations for further study were first withheld from the wider church, then quashed.

Part Two deals with “Framing the Theological Questions.” Asking “Why Does the Bible Divide Us?”, Donald Blosser replies, “Because some read it with attention to critical issues of text, context, and culture and some do not.” He surveys the few biblical texts on homosexuality and maintains they do not speak to the specific question of covenanted, monogamous homosexual unions. Ted Grimsrud summarizes “Six Perspectives on the Homosexuality Controversy” and extrapolates four key hermeneutical issues at the heart of the divide. Mark Thiessen Nation explores why this subject is so emotionally charged and identifies points of agreement between “exclusivists” and “inclusivists.” Kraus pleads for awareness that biblical culture is vastly different from modern culture, and that seeking the Bible’s guidance on today’s questions must take that chasm into account.

In the meantime, argue other contributors, we must show tolerance, understanding, and acceptance of our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters who love Christ and wish to be part of his body. Those who differ must learn

to listen to each other. Paul M. Lederach passionately urges churches to “Welcome one another, as Christ has welcomed you.” Reta H. Finger suggestively applies Rom. 14-15 to the impasse between liberals and conservatives, inclusivists and exclusivists. Carolyn Schrock Shenk insists that we are “Commanded to Keep Wrestling and Wrestling and Wrestling.”

Two respondents’ reflections illustrate the challenge yet more dialogue poses. Charging that the symposium effectively casts doubt on whether homosexuality is sin, Richard Schowalter admonishes, “Let’s Not Continue the Dialogue.” At the other extreme, Donald and Elsie Steelberg critique the volume for not adequately reflecting the gay and lesbian voice. Contributors agree that there will be no consensus anytime soon on acceptability of same-sex unions in the Mennonite church. For Ted Grimsrud, the issue is not a win-lose argument but “a puzzle to solve, in which case we all have a contribution to make” (207), while A. James Reimer observes that “We’re into the long haul here” (177).

Both books will be of interest to those not yet exhausted by the puzzle and dedicated to the long haul.

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Thomas F. Foust, George R. Hunsberger, J. Andrew Kirk, and Werner Ustorf, eds. *A Scandalous Prophet: The Way of Mission after Newbigin*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

In James E. Lesslie Newbigin, the twentieth-century Christian church had a bishop-theologian whose legacy as prominent missionary and ecumenical leader was complemented by an equally celebrated legacy as missiological thinker. As a missionary to India, Newbigin ranged from village evangelist to overseer of the Church of South India at Madurai and Ramnad (and, later, Madras). As its general secretary, he led the International Missionary Council into the fold of the World Council of Churches. Beginning in 1974, his “retirement” to Birmingham in central England consisted of stints as professor of ecumenics and theology of mission at Selly Oaks Colleges, moderator of the General Assembly of the United Reformed Church, and pastor of an inner city church.

His engagement with the secular West, which he regarded as much a cross-cultural mission field as India, brought him to still wider prominence. Key to his message was a critique of the epistemological underpinnings of modernity and postmodernity.

A Scandalous Prophet is the record of a 1998 conference in Birmingham, England called “After Newbigin.” (Newbigin died in 1998.) The conference theme, mirrored by the volume’s subtitle, “the Way of Mission after Newbigin,” gives the reader a better idea of what to expect than the main title on the book’s cover. Although the collection honors the man, Newbigin himself is mostly a backdrop to the book’s real focus: a pageant of ideas about the future of the church in mission.

Overall, readers will find this volume engaging and intellectually invigorating. That does not mean, however, that they will not find some views a stretch. I found myself reacting with responses that ranged from delight to disapproval. I could imagine Newbigin itching to debate some of the characterizations of his thought and some of the views expressed. But the conference planners were not interested in merely hearing an echo of Newbigin. They tried to shape an event that would “avoid the domestication of Newbigin by preventing his memory from being snatched by what might be called ‘Newbiginologists.’” Accordingly, the contributors represent an array of backgrounds, disciplines, and attitudes towards the mission. The book concludes with three summation articles and an ample bibliography that is, by itself, almost worth the purchase price.

In what sense the editors think of Newbigin as “scandalous” is unclear. Perhaps they had in mind his notion of the “Christian” West as a mission field (though that has by now gained much acceptance). Or maybe they were thinking of his critique that the church has gone too far in substituting savors of modernity for the deeper realities of the kingdom. Moreover, the book is not really about Newbigin, as the title suggests, but about the future of the Newbigin agenda.

Stimulating as this book is, one comes away saddened that, as conference participant Jenny Taylor put it, “the deeper ‘truth’ questions which Newbigin cared enough to articulate at every level and at every opportunity have lost their most valiant champion.”

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Redekop, Benjamin W. and Calvin W. Redekop, eds. *Power, Authority, and the Anabaptist Tradition*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.

To speak or write of power, without contextualizing it, is irrelevant. It remains merely academic. Thus, discussion of the Redekops' book must take into consideration the current Anabaptist context.

Mennonites have traditionally imposed upon ourselves the illusion that we have successfully “banned to the margins” (15) secular power and concerns regarding power. Because we have not been sufficiently concerned with power, our naïve assumptions have allowed it to be misused. Whether we care to say it or not, claims Calvin Redekop, “there is an inherent asymmetry of power in human relationships” (190). Once we admit this, we can no longer overlook the abuses of power that have crept into our communities, our institutions, and our families. Current crises facing the North American Mennonite Church might be understood in a new light, if we were to openly examine the power dynamics at work in bringing them about.

A refreshing aspect of book is the contributions which discuss power in the actual experiences of Anabaptists in sixteenth-century Europe, in nineteenth and early twentieth-century Russia, and in a late twentieth-century American Amish community. These are in addition to the theoretical discussions one might expect — the philosophical, theological, historical, and sociological. Max Weber's definition of power is a thread which shapes many of the contributions.

“Social control,” as one form of power described by Stephen Ainsley, is a theme discussed in at least three essays. Joel Hartman gives form to both this concept and that of power imbalance between genders in the sad tale of an Amish community which faced the accidental introduction into the community of the HIV virus. The Bishop socially controlled the community under “the deceptive cover of tradition” (116). In the end, it was more important to continue the “existence of a strong, viable sense of community,” than to save the life of one of its female members. The “significant inequality” between the genders meant that the woman in question was treated as a “mere element in the environment rather than as [a] participating actor.” Decisions were made regarding her life and how others would respond to her by the men who had the “authority to define the meaning of the situation in which they would act” (133).

The gender-power imbalance has been a theme through most of Anabaptist history. It has been male leaders, not the “Mennonite posture of

sola scriptura,” who have defined our theology and community life (167). As women call for a “true sharing of power” between men and women as equals, many churches react with fear (160). But, even if power is to be equally shared, caution Dorothy Yoder-Nyce and Linda Nyce, the only way to avoid repeating patterns of coercion and force is to be “up front” about power (166).

Understandably, we might be reluctant to be “up front” about the Mennonite chapter in Russia. There is much to be ashamed of in the history of how Mennonites manipulated theology and used it as a tool of domination. “Eventually,” write Jacob Lowen and Wesley Prieb, “both church and colony leadership worked hand in glove to protect their turf” (102). While Loewen and Prieb give a bold-faced account of atrocities, there are others, notes Lydia Harder, who “have written an ideal Anabaptist history while ignoring many of the actual Anabaptists” (93). Ironically, one of the authorities to whom she turns in her otherwise well-argued essay on Mennonite theological development is John Howard Yoder. His theological contributions were certainly “revolutionary” and his strong call for “obedience to Christ’s lordship, is expressed in the language of servanthood” (89). However, his life demonstrated poor judgment regarding the use of power. Because Harder’s essay is written from a feminist perspective, one must ask why the personal is not political in this case.

Perhaps it is because Yoder is one of our “Cultural Elites” (143) — those who have shaped our Mennonite way of thinking. Stephen Ainlay challenges us to consider who the cultural and power elite are today, and “what system of power-knowledge currently dominates Mennonite life” (153). To put his questions into our current context, we might turn to the recent Mennonite Publishing House fiasco. The power elite determined the knowledge-system necessary for running this publishing enterprise was “church” knowledge. There was no power struggle. Business experts among us were simply not consulted, because the dominant understanding was that this venture was a way of “being the church,” not a business.

The larger Mennonite church dominant understanding — sometimes articulated, sometimes not — of not “giving Mennonite leadership too much say” (154), suggests Ainlay, may be one of the contributing factors to another crisis facing the Mennonite Church in North America: the dearth of leaders. Certainly, there is the lure of new opportunities to work outside the church. Just as significant, however, is the fact that being a leader in a church is not

appealing; these leaders are “practically powerless in terms of the authority and leadership functions that would enable them to carry out their mandate” (154). This, combined with volunteers unwilling to let go of power and congregations treating pastors carelessly, has meant many able leaders choose to exercise their gifts elsewhere.

Although several academic perspectives are represented in this collection, it is only the voices of academics, two of whom have either missionary or pastoral experience, which are included. Where are the voices of church agency leaders, business leaders, non-profit leaders, professionals, and even the politicians among us? Also of concern are introductory and concluding claims that “[l]ittle overt discussion of power in Anabaptist writings exists, hence I [Calvin Redekop] feel emboldened to take this step” (217). The writings of J. Lawrence Burkholder and Rodney Sawatsky are two examples to the contrary. In addition, two consultations titled, “Consultation on Power and Authority in the Mennonite Church, I and II,” were held in Kitchener and Waterloo, Ontario in 1997 and 1998. Calvin Redekop was invited to attend both and did participate in the second one, where he led a workshop. In fairness, Redekop’s final endnote refers briefly to one aspect of the 1997 Consultation. It is surprising that no reference was made to the fact that the proceedings of the 1998 Consultation were published as a special issue of *The Conrad Grebel Review* (Winter 1999). (The proceedings of the first Consultation were made available through MEDA.) Participants from across North America included leaders in church institutions, business, various professions, education, politics, and the non-profit sectors, as well as academics, missionaries, and pastors. The discussion was contextualized as people shared from their experiences regarding dilemmas they faced and how their theology and church helped them — or did not help them — discern what stance to take. There was a call for more on-going open discussion on power and what it means to “be the church.”

Although the topic of power and authority has appeal beyond both academics and Mennonites, because the Redekops’ book is focused on the Anabaptist tradition, readership will probably be somewhat limited. This text could, however, make an excellent addition to a senior-level college course in sociology, religion, or philosophy — and, yes, business — at an Anabaptist-affiliated college. As well, it would be thought-provoking reading for seminary students.

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Richard J. Mouw. *He Shines in All That's Fair: Culture and Common Grace*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001.

Reading *He Shines in All That's Fair* as a Mennonite was like being a guest at a friend's family reunion. I recognized many names and broad strokes of the family's story, but I'm not part of the family. In 2000 Mouw gave the Henry J. Stob lectures for his family at Calvin College and Theological Seminary; they form the chapters of this book. He explores the question, "What is it that Christians can assume they have in common with people who have not experienced the saving grace that draws a sinner into a restored relationship with God?"(3). How his Reformed family has answered that question shaped how they related to societies in which they lived. In the face of post-modernism and North American cultural diversity Mouw believes this question needs reconsideration.

The first three chapters outline the issues of common grace theology as they surfaced in the early years of the twentieth century. Increasingly assimilated into North American culture, Dutch Calvinists discovered more commonalities with their neighbors than they thought theologically possible. The debate pivoted around the nature of saving grace for the elect and of common grace for humankind. Does God care only about the elect? Or does God care about the non-elect? If so, how? Mouw recognizes the significant theological difference between the elect and the non-elect in God's ultimate purpose, but contends that God cares about and delights in the deeds of truth, beauty, and goodness performed by the non-elect. However, common grace is not saving grace.

Chapter four, not included in the Stob lectures, plumbs the supralapsarian and infralapsarian arguments at play in the theology of common grace. Believing that before creation God chose "a certain number of persons to redemption in Christ . . ." (55), supralapsarians see the elect and the non-elect sharing nothing in common theologically. Infralapsarians believe God decreed the elect and the reprobate after the fall. From this a common grace theology based on shared human qualities (e.g., rationality) emerged. The issue of God's complexity of purpose lies at the center of this debate. Is God's only purpose for creation to bring the elect into glory, as supralapsarians believe? Or, does God pursue multiple purposes that include bringing the elect to glory and caring for the non-elect? Mouw takes the infralapsarian position.

Chapters five and six return to the lectures. Mouw explores the implications of a renewed common grace theology that takes a sociological form with ethical implications. He invites his Reformed family to a new engagement in common grace ministries for the good of society. In his view societal withdrawal is not an option. However, he first calls Christian communities to be communities that “serve as a sign of faithfulness in the larger world” (79). He advocates a cautious solidarity with society, accompanied by practices of discernment, within Christian communities to support or oppose aspects of public life that conflict with biblical understandings.

As an outsider to the Reformed family several points perplexed me: (1) Mouw set out “to articulate a biblical perspective for Christian involvement in public life in our contemporary context.” However, he uses classical Reformed theological statements and the work of various theologians to examine the questions he raises. Biblical references are scant, and only 1 Peter 2:11-17 and 3:15-16 are examined in his argument. Does this satisfy Reformed criteria for the articulation of a biblical perspective? As a Mennonite I was not persuaded. (2) Do the terms “non-elect,” “reprobate,” “unregenerate,” “unredeemed,” and “unchristians” consistently identify the same subset of people? Similarly, are “the elect” and “Christians” an identical group? I could not discern the motivation for using these designations interchangeably. (3) At two points Mouw claims the work of the Holy Spirit as a way to extend his arguments about common grace, but he does not develop this line of thought.

Mennonites operate from a common grace theology. But, theologically, what do we claim to have in common with people who have not experienced the saving grace that draws them into relationship with God? As we reassess our practices of service and mission in our congregations from a missional perspective, we would do well to examine the questions Mouw presents, and to state our own answers.

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