***A Conundrum and the Kingdom of God*: Sardis Community Church, October 19, 2008**

Introduction

A Canadian evangelical theological student, suspicious of Karl Barth's neoorthodoxy, once asked him: "What do you think of reason?" Barth, the "Mount Everest" theologian of the twentieth century whose *Church Dogmatics* alone is fourteen massive volumes long, sharply retorted: "I use it!"

Eleventh century theologian St. Anselm of Canterbury coined the phrase, "*Credo ut intelligam*" – I believe in order to understand. That approach underlies all knowledge, all epistemologies – how we know what we know. All knowledge in fact begins in a realm of *irrationality* in this sense: we assume several givens about life before reason kicks in. That goes at once for the most raving atheist and the most ardent Christian. Both in fact are persons of faith.

In biblical faith, part of the conscious assumptions, the presuppositions, the prior faith commitments, is to Scripture as Sure Guide. "*Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path* (Ps 119:105).", Scripture self-attests, and Christians affirm. But after that prior faith commitment, it is full throttle on use of reason (with a huge dose of imagination) in understanding the text.

While there are problems to be sure about that faith avowal, once made, we're only halfway home. We still have to figure out what the text actually *says*. It was W. C. Fields who read the Bible, he explained facetiously, "looking for the loopholes". Few of us are quite so candid. All of us are complicit at times in such an approach.

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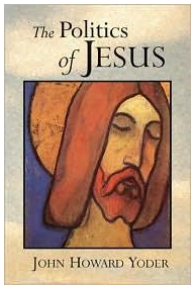


I grew up in a biblical tradition that claimed to take Jesus and the biblical text seriously. It was therefore a huge shock to me when I first attended Regent College in the fall of 1974, and took in Clark Pinnock's inter-term three-week course entitled, "The Politics of Jesus". He had lifted that title straight from a book published two years earlier by Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder. I was of the mind until that point that, in the words of Regent College's then vice-principal, Dr. William Martin, "There are no politics in the Bible". He said that to me with reference to Pinnock's semester course he taught the next fall by that same title. Dr. Martin like me was from that faith tradition that church a historian dubbed "quintessential fundamentalist", that until 30 years ago at least was almost purely a-political, centrally pietist and otherworldly in its *understanding* of God and mission, though practice on the mission field back then often transcended the disconnect to neighbour and created order.

Though I had "accepted Christ as Saviour" at the tender age of four, as I always told in giving my testimony, though I was baptized at 12 and studied the Bible religiously from that day onwards, making copious notes for years and winning the approbation of the elders in my church and our missionaries, I was still in for the shock of my life until then

when I first sat down for that three-week course of Dr. Pinnock, January, 1975. On principle I refused to read Yoder's text, though it was the only one assigned, and we had to hand in a report on it. I passed the course somehow, but felt rather furious at the "strange Gospel" Pinnock was peddling and many embraced that wet January over three decades ago.

But Pinnock, and, I eventually conceded, Yoder, hooked me, and took me through two conversions. In the thirty plus years since I arrived an eager young theologue at Regent College, most pietistic traditions have undergone what I call my first post-Christian "conversion" experience: they became not only convinced that the Bible is about politics, in the United States their current representatives comprise the greatest block of supporters for President Bush (and Senators McCain and Palin) and the Republican party. Evangelicals, largely of pietistic origin, have discovered politics in the Bible.

And this is of course that to which our Psalm 24 text refers, that starts out: *The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it;…* So there is something called "God's politics" since God superintends the world and everything that goes on in it. To that most evangelicals now say a hearty Amen! But not so many say yet Amen to what constituted my second conversion, as illustrated in the Matt. 5:38 – 48 text.

We've just come through an election in Canada where numerous contenders are born again Bible-believing Evangelical Christians. South of the border, all contenders are such, except Senator Joseph Biden, a committed Roman Catholic. Tony Blair, until recently British Prime Minister, was also an Evangelical leader. Evangelicals have indeed discovered politics. When it comes to exercise of state violence however, I still ask the question, *Just what politics have the majority of Evangelicals discovered?*

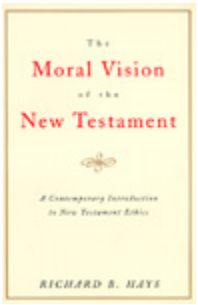
I wish my fellow Evangelicals would also discover that *the biblical way of doing politics was the counterintuitive way of the nonviolent cross.*

So I come to my theme this morning: I find in response to Scripture, and in response to the experience of war and crime, a fundamental conundrum about *violence*, given my second conversion experience. My sermon title is: **"A Conundrum and the Kingdom of God"**.

Violence and Scripture

The conundrum is violence in Scripture, and how we Christians respond. Help me reason this out, in the spirit of Karl Barth, who, bluntly *uses reason!*

I'll reference two recent publications, ten years apart, for this, and mainly the first.



➢ Richard Hays, an American New Testament theologian, has written the premier contemporary study on New Testament ethics. The massive tome is entitled *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community,*

Cross, New Creation. After spending the first few hundred pages meticulously presenting *how* to read the New Testament to excavate its ethics, he supplies several case studies to demonstrate the method. One is the issue of violence. In a chapter entitled "Violence in Defense of Justice", Hays leaves no exegetical task unturned in sifting through the entire New Testament for its witness concerning violence. He begins with Matthew's Gospel, in particular the Sermon on the Mount. He writes:

- The point is that the community of Jesus' disciples is summoned to the task of showing forth the character of God in the world. That character is nowhere more decisively manifest than in the practice of loving enemies (5:44—45), a practice incompatible with killing them.[32] Those who are peacemakers are to be called "sons of God" (5:9) because, like God, they love their enemies (5:45, cf. 5:48).[33] Thus, the church's embodiment of nonviolence is—according to the Sermon on the Mount—its indispensable witness to the gospel (p. 329).

Then, under the title "Synthesis: Violence in Canonical Context", he gives an overview of the entire sweep of the New Testament:

- Our exegetical illustration of Matthew 5:38—48 has led to the conclusion that the passage teaches a norm of nonviolent love of enemies… Do the other texts in the canon reinforce the Sermon on the Mount's teaching on nonviolence, or do they provide other options that might allow or require Christians to take up the sword?

  When the question is posed this way, the immediate result—as [Karl] Barth observed[34]— is to underscore how impressively univocal [single-voiced] is the testimony of the New Testament writers on this point (p. 329)…

- Hays then takes us on a tour of all the relevant passages buttressing this reading, concluding: "Thus, from Matthew to Revelation we find a consistent witness against violence and a calling to the community to follow the example of Jesus in *accepting* suffering rather than *inflicting* it (p. 332)."

Then Hays asks the one question most frequently posed in response to his summary of the New Testament: What about the Old Testament witness? He responds:

- Taken on its own terms, the Old Testament obviously validates the legitimacy of armed violence by the people of God under some circumstances. This is the point at which one of the methodological guidelines proposed in Part III must come into play: the New Testament's witness is finally normative. If irreconcilable tensions exist between the moral vision of the New Testament and that of particular Old Testament texts, the New Testament vision trumps the Old Testament (p.336)…

He adds:

- The vocation of nonviolence is not exclusively an option for exceptionally saintly individuals, nor is it a matter of individual conscience; it is fundamental to the church's identity and *raison d'être* [reason for existence]... The church is called to live as a city set on a hill, a city that lives in light of another wisdom, as a sign of God's coming kingdom… [I]f

we ask the larger question about the vocation of the community, the New Testament witness comes clearly into focus: the community is called to the work of reconciliation and—as a part of that vocation—suffering even in the face of great injustice. (p. 337).

A little later, he speaks to the issue of *realpolitik*: or how *practical* is this, Mr. Yoder?:

- If we fail to read the New Testament texts on violence through the lens *of new creation,* we will fall into one of two opposing errors: either we will fall into a foolish utopianism that expects an evil world to receive our nice gestures with friendly smiles, or we will despair of the possibility of living under the "unrealistic" standards exemplified by Jesus. But if we do read the texts through the lens of new *creation,* we will see that the church is called to stand as God's sign of promise in a dark world. Once we see that, our way, however difficult, will be clear (pp. 338 & 339).

Hays notes further:

- The story of Jesus' exemplary renunciation of violence is in turn reflected in stories such as the death of Stephen and in the exhortation of Peter that believers should follow "in his steps." Nowhere does the New Testament provide any positive model of Jesus or his followers employing violence in defense of justice. (In this respect the New Testament is quite remarkable within the world's literature.) (pp. 339 & 340)

And again, in direct response to *realpolitik*:

- The truth about reality is disclosed in the cross: God's power is disclosed in weakness. Thus, all who are granted to see the truth through Jesus Christ will perceive the world through the lenses of the Beatitudes and the strange narrative of the Apocalypse, in which the King of kings and Lord of lords is the slaughtered Lamb. The power of violence is the illusory power of the Beast, which is unmasked by the faithful testimony of the saints (p. 340)…

The nonviolence of the Cross, Hays argues, is ultimate *realpolitik*.

Finally, under the title, "OTHER AUTHORITIES", Hays writes:

- This is the place where New Testament ethics confronts a profound methodological challenge on the question of violence, because the tension is so severe between the unambiguous witness of the New Testament canon and the apparently countervailing forces of *tradition, reason,* and *experience* (p. 341).

In consideration of each of these three "countervailing forces", the writer carefully nudges us back towards the New Testament text as normative.

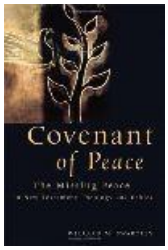
Hays' final words in the chapter, under the title, "Living the Text: The Church As Community of Peace", are:

> One reason that the world finds the New Testament's message of peacemaking and love of enemies incredible is that the church is so massively faithless. On the question of violence, the church is deeply compromised and committed to nationalism, violence, and idolatry. (pp. 343 & 344).

I discussed Hays at such length, since I wanted to put the case home that there is *no biblical warrant for supporting Christian resort to violence at the personal level, or in support of the state's doing our dirty work for us through war against our international enemies such as the Taliban in Afghanistan, or retributive violence and capital punishment against our domestic enemies such as violent youth offenders and gang members.*

There is, on the contrary, one New Testament response to our enemies that Jesus gives: "*Love your enemies*". In Luke's Gospel, the passage goes on, picked up by Saint Paul in Romans 13, and just like the Matt. 5 passage read this morning, "*Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also… Do to others as you would have them do to you* (Luke 6:27 – 31)." Where are W.C. Fields' loopholes in that? Where are the exception clauses anywhere else in the New Testament? And to put the point home, Jesus caps it off with a reprise: "*But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful* (Luke 6:35 – 36)." Negative and positive reciprocity – payback! – are both rejected by Jesus.

- Richard Hays writes of the second book I shall mention, *Covenant of Peace* by Mennonite theologian Willard Swartley, thus:



[T]his volume is something much more [than] just an overgrown dictionary article on *eirene* [peace] in the New Testament, *it is nothing less than a comprehensive theology of the New Testament presenting peace as the heart of the gospel message and the ground of the New Testament's unity* ("The heart of the gospel", Richard Hays, *The Christian Century*, May 01, 2007, http://www.christiancentury.org/article.lasso?id=3329).

So the conundrum is: *Why?* Why has majority Christian practice overwhelmingly been pro-violence? Dr. Ellis, a former Templeton Religion Prize winner and cosmologist, at a Trinity Western University lecture a few years ago, in response to that very question posed by me, said: "Because it is just too hard otherwise."

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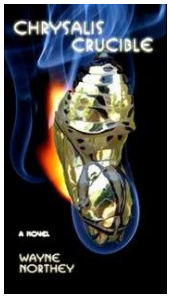

A character in my novel, *Chrysalis Crucible*, says:
My conclusion from simple observation is: Evangelicals routinely practise an under-your-breath ideologized "footnote theology" that reads repeatedly, "Except our enemies", when quoting John 3:16 and all other similar New Testament ethical teachings. How could Billy Graham *tell* the North Vietnamese that God loves them, when he

fully blesses his own country in *doing* the exact opposite; when Billy Graham is still praying with the President for victory in the War – which means massive carnage and widespread wanton destruction? When he apparently wills the utter inversion of *everything Gospel* in treatment of neighbour, enemy and creation?

My novel is dedicated in part to exploring the fact that the Western Christian tradition has been indeed *massively faithless* (according to Richard Hays) in following Christ's nonviolent way of the Cross. I'll pursue this more in our Sunday School class.

My conundrum is, reprised: *How can Christians committed to the Prince of Peace, to Kingdom Come, and to the authority of Scripture do violence to and destroy their enemies, criminal or international, and support the State to do the same?*

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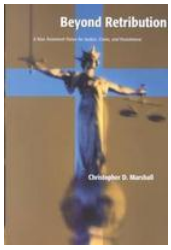

The finest book in English on a Christian response to crime is *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment* (Christopher D. Marshall, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001).

Beyond Retribution is a stirring instance of rereading the Judeo-Christian founding texts to provide a basis, not for continued scapegoating violence in the Western secular state (however with many trappings of a bygone religious era still intact in a secular setting![1]), but for a profound redirection of traditional interpretation of those texts away from violence, "beyond retribution", towards, biblically, *shalom*, reconciliation and forgiveness.[2]

Marshall writes, "My premise is that the first Christians experienced in Christ and lived out in their faith communities an understanding of justice as a power that heals, restores, and reconciles rather than hurts, punishes, and kills, and that this reality ought to shape and direct a Christian contribution to the criminal justice debate today (p. 33)."

He writes further: "The logic of the cross actually confounds the principle of retributive justice, for salvation is achieved not by the offender compensating for his crimes by suffering, but by the victim, the one offended against, suffering vicariously on behalf of the offended - a radical inversion of the *lex talionis* [law of retaliation] (pp. 65 & 66)." He sees ultimately Jesus as embodiment of God's justice, and his way as non-retaliation.

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[1] In *Scapegoats, the Bible, and Criminal Justice: Interacting with René Girard* (1993), Vern Redekop asks: "Is it possible that what we call a criminal justice system is really a scapegoat mechanism (Redekop, p. 1)?" His response is: "In a secular democratic society, nothing is as sacred as the law code and the justice system which enforces it. The buildings in which laws are made are the most elaborate and the courts in which decisions are made about points of law are the most stately. Formality, uniforms, and respect surround the agents of law (*ibid*, p. 16)." He concludes: "It is possible to think of the criminal justice system as one gigantic scapegoat mechanism for society (p. 33).", and illustrates convincingly.

[2] A similar orientation is found in the publication of *The Spiritual Roots of Restorative Justice* (Hadley, 2001), to which this reviewer co-contributed the chapter on Christianity. It is germane to point out however that the impetus for this publication was the already established tradition from the Christian faith community of rereading its sacred texts in a nonsacrificial way, in the direction of Restorative Justice.

Conclusion: "*I desire mercy, not sacrifice*"

In 1986 I was asked to participate in a public forum on the death penalty organized by a community college. The forum was not in a Christian context. I gave my talk as part of a panel of four to speak to the issue. The disclaimer was that of course I was only giving *a* Christian view. When the question time came, a man stood up right away with a question for "*Mr. Northey*". He began by quoting Matt. 23:23 in the KJV: "... ye... have omitted the weightier matters of the law, ***JUDGMENT!!!***" He thundered out that last word with all the gusto he could muster. Then he proceeded with a diatribe against me and my kind for having neglected the law precisely in this way in my opposing the death penalty. His strongest accusation was that I was not, as I had claimed, an Evangelical, rather a Liberal of the worst kind, who could not see or accept the plain teaching of Scripture.

When he finished, the moderator asked if I wished to respond. I indicated, as I tried to lock eyes with him, that it would perhaps be better if the two of us talked the issue over more at the end of the evening. If he had stayed (hi instead immediately disappeared) I would have raised with him the following: *First*, he was quoting from the KJV where the Greek word, *krisis* used can have that connotation of condemnation and judgment. But it can also mean "justice" especially with reference to divine justice. In fact, most other translations use the word "justice". By this time (Chapter 23) in the Matthew text, we know from Jesus that the Pharisees are a highly self-righteous, judgmental lot. It is a little hard to believe that Jesus would be challenging them on their failure to show condemnation and judgment! *Second*, the text is misused if a huge exclamation mark is placed after the word, "judgment". In the KJV, the text says actually: "*ye... have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy and faith.*" There is already a hint of a continuum or even a parallelism here that argues against the sense of this statement to mean "judgment" in the abjectly negative way my accuser meant it. Jesus is quoting from Micah 6:8, which often is considered the high water expression of Old Testament spirituality. Here is what the passage says in the KJV:

> *He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?*

The passage follows a specific disavowal of mountains of sacrifice, in favour of *"justice, mercy, and faithfulness*". It precedes God's castigating his people for their failure to treat others justly, compassionately, mercifully, caringly. Twice already in Matthew's Gospel (9:13, 12:7), Jesus says explicitly: "*I desire mercy, not sacrifice*" with reference to God's way, God's "face". The Gospel is nothing if it is not about a dismantling of the very scapegoating mechanism to be found in all cultures and all times that lead in fact to putting Jesus upon the Cross! The Gospel is nothing, in other words, if it is not about denying ultimate punishment in favour of mercy! *Third*, one could not therefore have chosen a better passage to put the point home that true spirituality sees a face of God that is simply opposite to the face showed that night by such an angry diatribe, one of severe punishment. It is a face that rather (Matt. 5:45) "…*causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good*", that (Luke 6:35) is "*kind to the ungrateful and wicked*", that says (Ezek 33:11) " '*As surely as I live, ... I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they*

turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?' "

I can only add: *Amen!*