



*A Farewell To Mars: An Evangelical Pastor's Journey Toward the Biblical Gospel of Peace*, Brian Zahnd, Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2014, 208pp.

[NOTE: The copy of the book used for review was an e-book and hence there are no page numbers.]

This is an outstanding read.

The author, senior pastor of a large evangelical church in St. Joseph Missouri in his “Prelude” wishes the book well, one that just willed itself to be written, especially in light of the arrival of the author’s three grandchildren. Near the end of the book, Zahnd in fact states:

For years I had ignored this mural of peace in the Denver airport. I simply had not seen it. Just like I had for years ignored the gospel of peace in my life and preaching. I simply had not seen it. I was blind. But I’m beginning to see, at last I am waking up—waking up just in time to try and make a difference for the world of my children’s children. I suppose it is for them I have written this book.

Zahnd begins with confession of his worst sin: on January 16, 1991, he ordered pizza and with a group of friends watched the start of the Gulf War on TV, like a prize fight, which indeed it was. He writes: “America is always right in war— I’d known that all of my life. Like many Americans, I had grown up believing that war was both inevitable in life and compatible with Christianity.” But fifteen years later, “while I was in prayer, for no apparent reason this whole scene from a decade and half earlier played back in my mind. I had forgotten all about it. But there it was, played back in my memory like an incriminating surveillance video. Then I heard God whisper, ‘That was your worst sin.’ ” The book under review is consequently “the story of how I left the paradigms of nationalism, militarism, and violence as a legitimate means of shaping the world to embrace the radical alternative of the gospel of peace.”

The author not only believes in Jesus in an “orthodox” way, he believes in Jesus’ ideas in a “radical” way. For that is who Jesus is, when it comes to the political: *radical*. When we fail at embracing Jesus’ political ideas, we inevitably recruit him in support of the (national) *status quo*. The author claims this has plagued the church since the fourth century. The church forever (almost) has separated Jesus from his ideas.

Regardless, claims Zahn, Easter changed everything! We may consequently change everything (about how we think about violence). The author did!

God is not opposed to nations, but God is opposed to empire. Why? Because Jesus alone is Lord (Emperor), and his “Empire” is the Kingdom of God that alone rules.

In Chapter 2, Zahnd contrasts the private personal salvation gospel with Jesus’ politics. He works with the idea, drawing on Jewish scholar Emil Fackenheim’s book *To Mend The World* of “*tikkun olam*—“repairing the world.” *Tikkun olam* is the idea that although the world is broken, it is not beyond repair— that it’s God’s intention to work through humanity in order to repair his creation.” Fackenheim talks of a 614<sup>th</sup> commandment in the Torah: “Thou shalt not give Hitler any posthumous victories.” The author calls us to “A Christian understanding of *tikkun olam*

[which] is that God is restoring all things through Jesus Christ.” He adds several Scripture references where this is precisely the claim. He critiques by contrast what many Christians “embrace [namely] a faulty, half-baked, doom-oriented, hyperviolent eschatology, popularized in Christian fiction (of all things!), that envisions God as saving parts of people for a nonspatial, nontemporal existence in a Platonic “heaven” while kicking his own good creation into the garbage can!”

Zahnd calls us to deny Cain as founder of civilization (based on murder) by being our brother’s keeper. Human civilization is ever founded on murder; God’s kingdom on love (of neighbour/enemy).

Then Zahnd writes:

As the heirs of the Western tradition that has been shaped religiously, culturally, and ethically by Christianity, we may be oblivious to what should be obvious (like a fish unaware of water). It may be that we are so immersed in the influence of Christ that we fail to recognize it. So I propose a thought experiment.

He goes on in a convincing way to describe what David Bentley Hart in *Atheist Delusions* points out, whom he cites:

It is simply the case that we distant children of the pagans would not be able to believe in any of these things [human rights, compassion, etc.]— they would never have occurred to us— had our ancestors not once believed that God is love, that charity is the foundation of all virtues, that all of us are equal before the eyes of God, that to fail to feed the hungry or care for the suffering is to sin against Christ, and that Christ laid down his life for the least of his brethren (pp. 32 – 33).

In Chapter 3, through his father a judge, the author introduces us to this concept: “the majority is almost always wrong.” It is also a Kierkegaardian and a Girardian concept, but above all, a Jesus perception. Kierkegaard said succinctly, “The crowd *is* untruth.” Crowds and their will are consequently dangerous. Such crowds “can be as spontaneous as the Rwandan genocide or as systematic as the Nazi’s Final Solution.” But “Jesus does not lead his people to join an angry crowd. Jesus never leads anything other than a gentle and peaceable minority.” The author states: “Once we realize God’s government is given as a gift, we never again need to fight, harm, or kill for any other government.” Civilization kills scapegoats. We learn through Christ another way: “The Jesus way of producing peace is based in mercy and forgiveness, not blame and retribution.”

In Chapter 4 we learn that it is hard to believe in Jesus. There is another confession. In the response to 9/11, at a city-wide prayer time, Zahn failed to point to the way of Jesus. Rather, he prayed a war prayer. So what is hard about believing in Jesus? “What’s hard is to believe in Jesus as a political theologian.”

Zahnd explains further:

From Cain onward, a world defined by war organized itself around groupthink hostility and sanctioned the violence that flows from it. Whether it was agriculturists against nomads, Egyptians against Kushites, Babylonians against Hittites, Greeks

against Persians, Trojans against Spartans, Jews against Romans—the world had been arranged around shared hatred and collective murder.

In Chapter 4, Zahnd imagines that Jesus gives a Sermon on the Mount speech to Congress. “And when Jesus concluded his speech with a prophecy of the inevitable fall of the house that would not act upon his words (Matt. 7: 26– 27), what would Congress do? Nothing. They would not act. They could not act. To act on Jesus’s words would undo their system. The Sermon on the Mount doesn’t work in Cain’s system— no matter how noble or sophisticated. In the end, the US Congress would no more adopt the policies Jesus set out in the Sermon on the Mount than they were adopted by the Jewish Sanhedrin or the Roman Senate.”

But Zahnd confesses to having preached war sermons – and no one ever challenged him! It is easier he learned to rally Jesus followers around hating enemies rather than loving them and offering forgiveness. He concludes the chapter: “Believing in a war-waging Messiah is easy. Believing in the Prince of Peace is hard.”

In Chapter 5, he reflects on the word “freedom”. He chooses as text John 8, and shows how Jesus is utterly opposed to any following of him that involves violence as a political form of power. For Jesus, freedom is liberation from sin— especially the particular sin of collective killing.” Zahnd pursues this convincingly. He also explains that Abraham put down the knife in relation to Isaac, just as we are meant to imitate him in refusing violence. He argues this likewise convincingly, stating that “Abraham is also the father of the abolition of human sacrifice.” That trajectory then in Hosea, whom Jesus quoted, ends sacrifice altogether. So “The freedom that comes from God is not power to kill, but the choice to love.” Zahnd sums up:

But we can hardly bear to hear that freedom can never be achieved by killing our enemies. It flies in the face of everything we’ve been taught to honor and cherish. Jesus knows that most of the time, most people cannot bear to be told that killing in the name of freedom is just another word for being a slave to systemic sin! (At this point some readers are quite likely to close this book and never open it again ... but I hope you will press on.)

Zahnd says near the end of the chapter: “Violence in the name of freedom always circles back to hell.”

Chapter 6 deals with “the things that make for peace”. But “Pacifism is not a popular position in America, and especially not among patriotic evangelicals who have ardently sought to amalgamate the American state and the Christian faith into one hybrid entity.” Zahnd takes the Civil War to illustrate what was lacking in making for peace. He writes: “What had gone wrong? Millions had accepted Jesus [in the pre-War decade] and shouted hosanna, but they did not know the things that make for peace.”

Zahnd draws a stark lesson:

When we don’t know the things that make for peace, we can barrel down the highway to hell, all the while singing about how much we love Jesus and how wonderful it is to be saved. This should disturb us. How can it be that generations of religiously observant people can say all the right things about Jesus and still be on

the wrong road? How can we know the things that make for a good church service but not know the things that make for peace?

What makes for peace are the two greatest commandments, of which love of neighbour validates love of God. And the Golden Rule is the narrow gate of Matthew 7.

Chapter 7 talks about amongst other things salvation. “*What is salvation?* I finally concluded that this is the best answer: *Salvation is the kingdom of God*. This stands in stark contrast to all other forms of government. Zahnd writes in the American context: “To even suggest that Jesus doesn’t necessarily endorse every aspect of Jeffersonian democracy and laissez-faire capitalism is enough to get you burned at the stake (hopefully only in a metaphorical sense).”

The problem with this “chaplaincy view” is to discount the Kingdom already begun in favour of the Kingdom still to come in the future. Zahnd does some amazing exegeting around the Son of Man teaching to say “Jesus saw himself as the Son of Man who would receive dominion over the nations and liberate the world from the tyranny of military empires.” At the time of his Ascension! For:

Jesus was condemned to death by both Caiaphas and Pilate for the same reason—he claimed to be a king. Not a “spiritual king” over a “spiritual kingdom” but a real king over a political kingdom—but a very different kind of political kingdom. It is a kingdom that you have to be born again to even perceive, as Jesus told Nicodemus. And as Jesus told Pilate, his kingdom would not come from the world system of empires. The kingdom of the Son of Man would not be based upon the coercive power of the beasts Messiah.

So “Luke hopes we will connect the dots and recognize that in his death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus has inaugurated the reign of Daniel’s Son of Man over all peoples, nations, and languages. Which is exactly the gospel that the apostles preached throughout the book of Acts!” This is not a gospel of (only) personal salvation, but of salvation as the Kingdom of God inaugurated already in Jesus. Hence, Zahnd believes that the Sheep and Goats passage of Matthew 25 is primarily with reference to nations, not to individuals. In the parable, “Jesus has his own right and left!”, which is the only politics worthy of pursuit by Jesus followers. Zahnd asks:

But what does it mean to belong to the true “religious right”? What does it mean to be a “sheep” nation judged to be on the right side of Jesus and blessed by God? It means to be a nation that cares for the poor, cares for the sick, welcomes the immigrant, and practices humane treatment of its prisoners.

There is a stark divide: “Babylon and New Jerusalem seek the same thing, but they go about it in completely different ways— one is beastly, the other is lamblike.” Zahnd write simply:

So politically I call for my nation to prioritize caring for the poor, the sick, the immigrant, and the imprisoned, and to renounce an ambition to dominate the world economically or militarily. I do this in the name of Jesus.

Chapter 8 is the same title as the book. “In Roman political theory Mars was the bringer of peace— peace by war. The euphemistic peace that was the tyranny of the Pax Romana was the achievement of an empire that venerated war and worshipped Mars.” Is there such worship

today? Yes. The author and his wife visited the Air Force Academy Cadet Chapel in Colorado Springs and there discovered the worship of Mars with the “cross” inverted into a sword!

Zahnd writes:

What is its message? Is it intended to communicate to the worshipper that as Christians we are willing to lay down our lives and die by the sword of our enemy in imitation of our Lord? Of course not! It means just the opposite. It is intended to communicate to the worshipper that Christ himself blesses the weapons we wield and the wars we wage. The symbolic message is this: following Christ and waging war are completely compatible. Or perhaps even this: the sword saves the world. Good guys killing bad guys redeems the world. Eliminating evil people can eliminate evil. But it’s all a lie. A terrible, pernicious lie. A satanic lie. It is the unmaking of the cross. It’s a faith undone.

As to so much pop eschatology:

End-time prophecy experts keep trying to force the same mistake on us in our day. We should refuse. I am a conscientious objector to the doom-obsessed, hyperviolent, war-must-come, pillage-the-Bible-for-the-worst-we-can-find eschatology of Hal Lindsey and his tribe.

Zahnd asserts further that “War, as a legitimate means of shaping the world, died with Christ on Good Friday.”

Chapter 9, entitled “Us and Them” is terse: “There is no them; there is only us.”

The book bristles with the message of peace. For anyone finding his or her way on this matter, the book is highly recommended! For all others who want to think (again) the gospel of peace, the book is a delightful guide.