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Peacemakers from the start.

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John E. Toews

The Jesus Way in the Early Church

What just about drove the people from the synagogue crazy was the way his face looked like the face of an angel. They were already in a sweat over the great wonders and signs which Stephen did among the people, and whenever they'd tried to argue with him he'd beaten them hands down. So they'd arranged for false witnesses and had brought Stephen before the Jerusalem council. Stephen's defense was little more than a quick run-down of Jewish history, but his audience took issue with the punchline. They "ground their teeth against him," dragged him out of the city, and pelted him with rocks till he died. As the stones struck, Stephen first asked, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he knelt down and prayed for his murderers, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

Jesus taught peace. The Old Testament taught peace. What happened to Jesus' teaching and example in the lives of his earliest followers, all of whom were Jewish students of the Old Testament? Did the disciple community founded by Jesus continue in his way or did it go in a different direction?

If the early church abandoned the Jesus way, then later generations of Christians could say that the Jesus way was too

idealistic. But if the early church faithfully followed the way of Jesus, then Jesus' ethic is confirmed by those who were closest to him.

Resurrection and Pentecost

The early church saw itself as the disciple community of Jesus. It got this understanding from the resurrection of Jesus and the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

The crucifixion raised questions about Jesus and his way. God answered all these questions in the resurrection. The resurrection meant that God put his stamp of approval on Jesus as Messiah and Lord. God made the crucified one Lord and Savior, Example and Leader.

The resurrection also meant Jesus was present in the life of his people. The community of disciples formed before the crucifixion could go on in the confidence that its leader and founder was indeed God's Messiah.

Pentecost made the reality of the resurrection even clearer. The risen Christ gave his people the gift of the Messianic Spirit which God's people had awaited for many centuries. Now they experienced what the resurrection meant, i.e., Jesus was Lord. He also was present among his people through his Spirit to give them what they needed to continue his mission in the world.

A missionary community from the start

The resurrection and Pentecost defined the church as the Jesus people in the world. This meant that the church was entrusted with the mission of the Kingdom of God which Jesus proclaimed. The church carried the Kingdom banner by proclaiming Jesus as Messiah and Lord.

In other words, the resurrection and Pentecost meant that the church was a missionary community from the start. It was a community proclaiming Jesus as Lord and calling people to enter the Kingdom community by accepting Jesus as Lord. It proclaimed salvation by faith and invited people to live the Jesus way as part of the church.

The church became the public display of the Jesus way. As Jesus people, the church is a visible community of God's people living in the world by the Jesus way. It is a minority community because it is for converted people only.

It is important to understand that in the Bible, peacemaking starts with the church. Biblical peacemaking is a project of the whole kingdom community. It is not just the stance of heroic individuals.

Jesus calls into being a new people, called the church, which is to embody the Jesus way on earth. It does so in the power of Jesus' resurrection and present Spirit and in anticipation of Jesus' ultimate reign over the entire universe.

SHAPE OF THE CHURCH'S PEACEMAKING

How does the church demonstrate the Jesus way in the world? What does the church's peacemaking look like? Here are several characteristics of the church's peacemaking style.

The church taught peacemaking

The church passed on the Jesus word about loving the enemy. In the earliest manuals of the church which were used to instruct new converts in the Jesus way, Jesus' command to love the enemy was placed in second position immediately after the beatitudes.

1 Thessalonians 5:15, Romans 12:14, 17-20 and 1 Peter 3:9 all teach Christians not to pay back evil for evil, but instead encourage positive action toward the enemy: "pursue good" in 1 Thessalonians; "bless," "be at peace with," and "feed" in Romans; "bless" in 1 Peter. The language and thought in each text is similar, which suggests that they all had Jesus' teaching in mind. The emphasis in each passage is on the positive action recommended.

The motive for loving the enemy is the salvation of God. In Romans the command is grounded in the mercies of God which Christians are to reflect, while in 1 Peter the reason is "you were called to this in order that you might inherit a blessing." Christian faith that does not express itself in love for the enemy is denied the blessing of God.

The command to love the enemy was a hard one for the early church. The enemy was no longer the oppressor of Jewish national dreams, but the unbelieving persecutor of Christians—the hostile family members or neighbors and local officials who treated the members of the church badly.

The command seemed unjust. The enemy who scorned God and mistreated God's people did not deserve blessing, the Christians tended to think. To give their backing to this hard command, both Peter and Paul supported the teaching of Jesus with quotations from the Old Testament. The love command summed up the Old Testament for Paul and Peter just as it did for Jesus. And the love command expresses itself in loving the enemy, in feeding, in doing good toward and in blessing the persecutors and opponents of the church.

The Christian is not just passive in the face of evil and violence. Rather, he or she is an active peacemaker who overcomes evil by deeds of love and kindness.

The church imitated Jesus

When the letters of the New Testament talk about discipleship, they talk about imitating Christ. Check, for example, Romans 6:6-11 and 15:1-7; Galatians 2:20; Colossians 1:24 and 2:12-3.1; Philippians 2:3-14 and 3:10ff.; 2 Corinthians 4:10 and 8:7-9; Ephesians 5:25-28; 1 Peter 2:20ff.; 1 John 2:6.

These texts make it clear that the Christian is to follow Christ in his expression of love, sacrifice, giving, death and resurrection. The follower of Jesus is a servant, not a boss; a forgiver, not a hothead. Christians are to love and serve each other as Christ loved and served them. Christians also are to suffer willingly rather than inflict suffering.

In other words, the disciple style in the world is the style of the cross. The disciple's reward for the cross is the resurrection just as it was for Jesus. Again, the church is a peacemaking community within itself and in its relation to the world.

A community of reconciled enemies

Baptism into Christ changes all relationships, states Galatians 3:27ff. It breaks down the walls between Greek and Jew, slave and free, and male and female in Christ. These three pairs identify the three deepest divisions of ancient society. Such divisions have no place, Paul asserts, in the thought and practice of those who are united with Christ.

Here as in 1 Corinthians 12:12ff. and Colossians 3:9-11 Paul states that baptism into Christ reconciles. Baptism into the Christian church destroys the barriers that separate people in the world. Within the Jesus community former enemies are reconciled—they live in peace as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Paul makes a similar point in Ephesians 2:11ff. Christ creates an alternative society, the church. He is praised in verses 14-18 for bringing two enemy peoples together. The peace Christ brings is peace in society—it reconciles enemy people into a new community. The oneness Christ creates disrupts all popular ways of thinking and relating because it is a brand new way of being together in the world. Paul calls this new reality “the new man” and “the house of God,” and in 5:23-32 he identifies this new man as the church.

Notice how this new public reality is described as an act of creation. It is not a remodeled old reality, but something new which God creates. If you compare this creation account with the creation story in Genesis you will notice something interesting. In Genesis man is the last creature created. Here the new man is created first.

The church is the “first fruits”—the first pick of the coming harvest—of God’s creation in Christ. The rest of creation waits for the liberation and reconciliation which is to come to the world through the church as it demonstrates the Jesus way.

Paul uses the word “peace” four times in Romans 14-15 (14:17, 19; 15:13, 33). There is conflict in the churches at Rome over questions of food and ethnic background. Paul exhorts the members of the church to live in peace by welcoming different kinds of people and by giving up personal rights so that other Christians can grow.

The point Paul makes is that the church is to be a peacemaking

community within itself. Christ has removed the hatred that normally divides people, he has modeled self-giving love for others, and he is creating a new kind of peacemaking people in the world.

Jesus is Lord

The early church distinguished itself by a lifestyle that did not conform to the way most people lived. It showed this nonconformist style most clearly by rejecting Caesar's way—asserting oneself and making oneself a god. Caesar's way symbolized the values of pagan Roman society. The early Christians chose Jesus as Lord rather than Caesar. They rejected the most fundamental symbol of their society. The price for their stance often was death.

The early church was courageously nonconformist because it believed that Christ had defeated and triumphed over "the principalities and powers." Paul used the word "powers" for civil authorities, but by "principalities and powers" Paul mainly meant the spiritual powers that stood behind and acted through the civil governments. They are supernatural and demonic powers who control the universe and society.

These powers, Paul says, acted together to defeat Christ. Christ submitted himself to them and defeated them in death and triumphed over them in the resurrection. Paul describes this triumph in different ways—Christ abolished the slavery of the powers, he disarmed the powers, he made a public example of them—but the different words mean the same thing: Christ has broken the reign of the powers and has set the believer free from their grasp (see Romans 8:38; Ephesians 3:10 and 6:12; Colossians 1:16 and 2:25).

One of the confessions that the early Christians used together was "Jesus is Lord." By that they meant that he was Lord of the world because he had defeated the powers which formerly controlled the world. Christians were free to obey Christ rather than Caesar. Therefore, they weren't afraid to die for nonconformity. Christ had defeated death. The state's ultimate means of social control, the death penalty, had lost its meaning. Jesus had robbed the state of the power of force by his own death and resurrection.

Unafraid of the government, the early Christians were liberated to live the Jesus way. That meant nonconformity in the world—Jesus' way rather than Caesar's way.

THE MESSAGE OF ROMANS 13

If you have followed the discussion this far, there is one text you might want to ask, What about Romans 13? Does Paul not teach Christians to obey the state, including the state's demand to use force and violence in the defense or advance of its rights?

Few Scripture passages have been as misunderstood and misused as Paul's comments in Romans 13. From the time of the Roman Emperor Constantine in the early fourth century to the present, this text has been understood by most Christians as a call to obey the demands of the state. The government, it has been argued, has been ordained by God.

This understanding has been challenged in our time by the crisis of Nazism. The German Church's cooperation with Hitler during World War II has led many Christians to study this passage in detail once more. Now a different interpretation of Romans 13 is gaining wide acceptance among Bible teachers and church leaders.

Nonresistance toward the government

Romans 13 is part of a larger passage which starts with Paul's exhortation in 12:1ff.: "be not conformed...so that you may discern the will of God."

The more specific passage is about leaving vengeance to God while practicing suffering love (12:14ff.). Christians are not to repay evil with evil, but are to live in peace and out of a love which will not hurt the neighbor.

In 49 A.D. the Emperor Claudius forced all Jews out of Rome for political activity which the Roman government viewed as dangerous. When the Jews were allowed to come back five years later, they returned to the city in anger. Many Jews, including Jewish Christians, wanted to revolt against Rome.

Paul, writing to the churches in Rome only six months to two years following the return of Jews to the city, sensed the situation was so explosive that he addressed it in his letter. The focus of his comments was that Christians should be nonresistant in their stance toward the government.

Secondly, Paul defines the government as “the powers” (13:1). That term refers to both the civil authorities and the spiritual powers behind them. This understanding of government leads Paul to a mixed attitude toward it. On the one hand, it has a positive role. On the other hand, it is a temporary institution. Therefore, Christians must be critical of the state, while obeying it as long as it remains within its bounds.

Thirdly, Paul does not say in verses 1 and 2 that God ordained the powers that be. The Greek word here means to put them in order. God did not ordain or bless the powers. He simply orders them—he brings them into line with his purposes. Paul’s message to Christians tempted with revolutionary action is, “be subordinate, because the state is ordered by God.”

Fourthly, the job of government, according to verses 3-7, is to reward good and evil according to their merits. Not everything a government does or asks of its citizens is good. Paul states that the activity of government can be tested. Does it consistently reward good and evil according to their merits?

Measure the claims of Caesar

Verse 7 points clearly to this kind of testing. This verse is probably the earliest commentary on Jesus’ words in Mark 12:17: “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” Paul says that Caesar is to be given back the coins stamped with his image, but earlier (12:1ff.) he stated that we are to give to God that which is stamped by his image—our whole lives.

Paul goes on to list what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God: taxes, custom and honor to Caesar, but “fear” only to God. So the command “to render to all what is due them” does not mean “render to the state everything asked.” The task of the state is limited

to governing justly. The duty of the Christian is limited to taxes and honor.

Paul wants to see Christians test or “discern” the ethics of the government. The “render to each his due” of verse 7 is defined in verse 8 as “nothing is due to anyone except love.” *The claims of Caesar are to be measured by the claims of love.* Love, in turn, is defined in verse 10 as that which does no harm.

Fifthly, the obligation to the state which is demanded in verse 1 does not mean obedience in the strict sense. Paul avoids using the three normal Greek words for obedience. These words mean a complete bending of one’s will to the desires or demands of another. Instead Paul uses a word that means “to be subordinate to” or “to stand under.”

Stand under government; obey God

Paul calls Christians to be subordinate, but not to be obedient. The Christian who refuses to do what the government commands, but remains under its authority, is being subordinate even though he is not obeying. Subordination involves a serious and responsible disobedience whenever obedience to the government would involve disobeying God. It makes room for obedience to God rather than men where the two claims to loyalty are in conflict.

Finally, the sword in Romans 13 is not the sword of battle or execution, but the smaller dagger carried by Roman authorities as the symbol of their civil authority. Romans 13, therefore, does not call the Christian to use the sword, but rather to recognize the state’s authority to reward good and evil according to their merits.

Romans 13 does not say whether it is acceptable or not for the government to use force. Rather it calls Christians to a nonconformist and nonresistant stance in the world. Christians are not to take up arms for or against the government.

This nonresistant understanding of Romans 13 was practiced in the life of the early church for the first 300 years of church history. The early church understood itself as a peacemaking community in its relation to the government until the time of Constantine in the early fourth century.

Victory of the Warrior Lamb

The final book of the New Testament, Revelation, paints a colorful picture of Christian peacemaking. The church is being persecuted. Some Christians are despairing; others think it is time to join the Zealots and fight the injustices of Roman rule.

The risen Christ appears and says, “do not be afraid...” (1:17). Why? Because Christ is the Victor. He is the Lion who triumphs over all enemies, all kings, all principalities and powers.

But then the surprise. The Lion is really “a Lamb with the marks of slaughter on him” (5:6). In scenes that are filled with holy war images from the Old Testament, Jesus is presented as a warrior who is different. He does battle with the principalities and powers, not human beings. He defeats and disarms the powers by suffering and death. Christ the Warrior of God wins by being killed, not by killing. God raises him, subjects all things to him and enthrones him as King of kings and Lord of lords.

The church is called to suffer with the Warrior Lamb, not to fight for him or any of the kings of the earth. The role of the Christian is to wait patiently and to suffer faithfully for the final victory of the battle the Warrior Lamb won at Calvary. The Christian makes peace by suffering with his or her Lord because he or she knows the Warrior Lamb triumphed in self-giving love.

Reverse fighting

The early church followed Jesus’ plan for a new way of togetherness. That way determines the church’s inner life and its relationship to the world. On the inside it means the church teaches and imitates Jesus in his way of reconciliation in place of hostility and fighting, his way of servanthood in place of lordship. On the outside, in relating to the world, the church is nonconformist, nonresistant and a peacemaker.

The New Testament way of peacemaking means the church rejects violence in all relationships—within the disciple community, between the disciple community and the world, and between members of the

disciple community and individuals in the world. But the church does more than reject. *It replaces violence with a way of love, servanthood and peacemaking.*

Christ and his people are peacemakers. They fight, but it is “reverse fighting.” They fight by loving, giving and dying—never by violence and killing.

Jesus is the way to life and the way to live. Jesus demonstrates a new way of living before God in the world. The church is the present display of the Jesus way in the world. The Jesus way is love and peacemaking.