



Discernment

So that you may be able to discern what is best. *Phil. 1:10*

Peacemaking

■ The 20th century's symbol of war was the atomic bomb. In the 21st century, it may well turn out to be the machete.

Nsabimana Johnson, a member of the Tutsi tribe in the East African nation of Burundi, had turned his life over to Jesus when he was a young man. But then civil war came in 1993, and Johnson's parents and relatives were killed by Hutus, a rival ethnic group. The next year, Hutus in neighboring Rwanda killed at least 500,000 people, mostly Tutsis. Many of the victims were cut down with machetes inside of churches.

"I was full of hatred against every Hutu person," Johnson said. "I didn't want to talk again with a Hutu or be reconciled with them."

Yet Johnson remained active in church, all the while carrying his burden of hatred. Eventually, he attended a retreat sponsored by the Minnesota-based Rouner Center for Reconciliation and supported by evangelical broadcaster Trans World Radio. At the retreat, he came face to face with Hutu Christians. Guided by counselors, Johnson and the Hutus prayed, studied the Bible together, and began to see one another as real people.

"By the Word of God and by the Holy Spirit, I was touched in my heart. I knew that if I didn't forgive those who had killed my family, I would never be free and happy in my life." He stood and sought forgiveness for his hatred.

"Now, I am free," he added, "and I love everybody without discrimination."

"I knew that if I didn't forgive those who had killed my family, I would never be free and happy in my life."

On the other side of Africa, meanwhile, Sierra Leone's civil war has become a foretaste of hell. Although the fighting officially ended in July, 1999, atrocities continue. The United Nations places the country at the bottom of its 174-country Human Development Index, and with good reason. Half of Sierra Leone's people have been displaced, and the country has the world's worst child mortality rate. Perhaps as many as 3,000 people have had limbs randomly hacked off.

In one camp for amputees, Moktar, a member of the Muslim majority, heard from Christians about Jesus' command to forgive those who persecute you. Moktar decided that he would forgive those who had sliced off his right arm and ear. Then he met the man who tied him down, along with the one who did the cutting. Their consciences stricken, they offered to pay Moktar for his losses. Moktar refused. Instead of perpetuating the cycle of violence and vengeance, however, he simply forgave them. Clive Calver, president of World Relief, stated, "Now Moktar wants to find the Jesus who has given him that strength."

The same Jesus who said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God," purchased our peace with God by His blood. What are we, who call ourselves God's children, willing to do to make peace with our fellow human beings?

Stan Guthrie, editor of Discernment

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Evangelicals in Northern Ireland

Learning to Lead on the Path of Peace

By Mary Cagney

“Perhaps the most difficult issue in Northern Ireland is the attempt to forgive and reconcile Protestants and Catholics when each has suffered terrible atrocities at the hands of the other.”

■ “The British army came at three this morning and ploughed the bottom of the field near the church. They put up a number of rows of barbed wire. They put a barrier on the road from the church to the Catholic Garvaghy Road, consisting of two big 20-foot metal containers with barbed wire on top,” describes Church of Ireland Protestant rector John Pickering. The scene at Drumcree, Northern Ireland, in July seemed more a battle scene from World War II than a peaceful rural setting for a church service.

The conflict in Drumcree is symbolic of the conflict between the Catholic and Protestant sections of the Northern Irish community. To be Catholic is to be Republican is to be Nationalist is to want a united Ireland. To be Protestant is to be British is to be Unionist is to be Loyalist is to want British government in Northern Ireland. However, both Protestants and Catholics have had to compromise, with the Catholic/Nationalist community gaining more political representation under the Good Friday Peace Agreement in 1998.

Challenges of Peacemaking

With 3,600 people killed in the last 30 years, both sides must overcome a legacy of violence. The biggest challenge, however, will be to learn to live together after so much violence.

The peace process has challenged both sides to rethink their ideologies and to develop the concepts of forgiveness and reconciliation as they apply to the situation in Northern Ireland. Some religious leaders in both communities have been enabled to do this by considering the writings of intellectuals such as Stanley Hauerwas, Hannah Arendt, Donald Shriver, and Miroslav Volf.

Emerging from this cauldron of violence and soul searching are new perspectives on healing the

wounds of a very divided society. The painful lessons learned in Northern Ireland could have important applications in the healing and reconciliation of communities suffering ethnic and religious conflict worldwide.

Much of the rethinking of ideologies in Northern Ireland has been developed by a section of the evangelical community. Evangelicals comprise 12 to 18 per cent of the population. Evangelical commitment in Northern Ireland, however, had become synonymous with the Unionist and British identity. Political and cultural divisions in the evangelical community were defended at the expense of biblical values.

Cultural Identity and Dangerous Purity

In 1988, a group of 200 evangelical pastors and leaders challenged the old paradigms and made a public stand against sectarianism in the evangelical community. They issued a statement, “For God and His Glory Alone,” in contrast to “For God and Ulster,” the traditional slogan of Unionist or pro-British Protestants. The statement emphasized that “it is idolatrous to equate God with any one culture or political ideal.”

However, ethnic identity need not be obliterated by a Christian identity. In fact, one of the group’s members, Derek Poole, argues that Christian identity “is incarnational and is rooted in the time, place, and people with whom we live” but that “Christian identity’s values and social ethics are shaped by the life of Christ.”

Apart from its contribution on Christian identity, ECONI (Evangelicals Concerned for Northern Ireland) has also tackled other issues, such as the theology of separatism in Northern Ireland. Protestant separatist theology in Northern Ireland is based on 2 Corinthians 6:17-18 “Therefore come out from among them and be separate.”

This theology, according to Bishop Harold Millar, writing in a 1998 issue of ECONI’s magazine, “engenders a perverted or false holiness that

separates Protestant from Catholic.” Millar quotes Yale theologian Volf, who argues that sin emerges in the pursuit of false purity. Millar terms this “dangerous purity.”

Impact of ECONI

In essence, ECONI has begun to chart a new path for evangelicals in Northern Ireland confronting the old ideas of sectarianism and cultural identity.

Belfast Presbyterian minister Ken Newell says, “Before ECONI emerged most evangelicals . . . would have been uncritically anti-Catholic and pro-unionist. They selected passages from the Bible that supported their point of view but issues such as ‘justice,’ ‘dialogue and listening,’ ‘peace-making,’ and ‘building-community’ were not on the evangelical agenda.”

In contrast, Newell thinks, “Today ECONI, in my opinion, . . . is more willing to ask serious questions of its own Protestant/Unionist tradition rather than simply parrot the old clichés, and more willing to expose itself to the rigorous critique which the Word of God makes of our churches, our political allegiances, our cultural organizations (e.g. Orange Order), and our negative attitudes towards those who worship God in a different way and make political choices that are different from our own.”

Forgiving the Unforgivable

Perhaps the most difficult issue in Northern Ireland is the attempt to forgive and reconcile Protestants and Catholics when each has suffered terrible atrocities at the hands of the other.

Hauerwas, professor of theological ethics at Duke University Divinity School, argued in a lecture to ECONI in 1998 that there could be no healing of the wounds of history if the murders perpetrated by Catholics and Protestants alike are forgotten. Christians, he argued, are required to confess and remember their sins, but they are also required to remember the sins of those who have sinned against us. Any reconciliation that does not require such a remembering cannot be the reconciliation made possible by the cross of Christ.

But reconciliation and forgiveness are difficult in societies like Northern Ireland, which remembers Protestant King William III’s 1690 victory over Catholics every year during the Protestant Orange

Order parades on July 12. History intrudes into the present in Northern Ireland, and the past cries out for vengeance. People are willing to kill as well as to be killed in honor of their ancestors. How can reconciliation happen in this context?

The God of Jesus, according to Hauerwas, interrupts the logic of violence and desire for vengeance by forgiving those who crucified His Son. In Volf’s words, “By placing unattended rage before God, we place our unjust enemy and our own vengeful self face to face with a God who loves and does justice.”

On a pragmatic level, ECONI Director Poole thinks that the churches in Northern Ireland are now beginning to accommodate the pain of the victims of violence. “There can be no social renewal without this public grief and acknowledgement of pain,” he says. “In telling their story (and remembering the past) the victims are not looking for revenge but are just validating their pain.”

Icons of Grace

Those who forgive despite great personal suffering become, in the words of Belfast Presbyterian minister Newell, “icons of grace.” In contrast to the icons of aggression and sectarianism, these icons of grace symbolize peace and forgiveness.

These icons have had an enormous impact. Methodist Gordon Wilson, whose daughter Marie was killed in the Enniskellen bombing, spoke words of forgiveness that were broadcast around the world. He traveled around Ireland speaking of the need for forgiveness and reconciliation.

The parents of Michael McGoldrick, shot in 1996, are other icons of grace. McGoldrick had just graduated from Queen’s University, Belfast, had a young family, and was working as a taxi driver. He was shot near Portradow by Loyalist gunmen.

At McGoldrick’s funeral, his dad said to the TV cameras and to his son’s murderers, “I forgive you, my wife forgives you. . . .” The McGoldricks now speak regularly with Catholics and Protestants, urging an end to violence.

Speaking of the effect of such forgiveness, Newell says, “Whenever Protestants and Catholics speak of forgiveness to each other, it has a powerful, cleansing effect which breaks through suspicion and generates a whole new set of positive attitudes.”



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Political Forgiveness

Many Christian traditions tend to remove forgiveness from the public sphere and confine it to a private transaction between the individual and God. In essence, the political and social realms of forgiveness are abandoned.

However, there has been a renewed interest in political and societal or collective forgiveness emerging from the works of two writers, Arendt, a secular Jewish political theorist, and Shriver, former president of Union Theological Seminary.

Arendt noted the political importance of forgiveness. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt writes, “Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would as it were be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover, we would remain the victims of its consequences forever.” Arendt argues that only forgiveness can release us from “this predicament of irreversibility.”

True forgiveness in Arendt’s view is achieved in community. “It is something people do for each other and with each other, and at a certain point for free. It is history working itself out as grace.”

A definition of forgiveness in a political context is proposed by Shriver “as an act that joins moral truth, forbearance, empathy and commitment to repair a fractured human relation.”

Shriver then examines how forgiveness can work itself out in politics. He says that political forgiveness begins with a collective memory which makes a moral judgment. He also believes that forgiveness is genuinely possible only if the injustice of the wrong and injury done is remembered.

Second, Shriver argues that forgiveness in politics does not require us to forsake the just punishment of the offenders. Third, “hatred must give way to empathy, to a knowledge of the humanity of the other.” Finally, forgiveness seeks the renewal of human relationship. This new form of relationship implies a form of co-existence but not necessarily reconciliation.

However, Shriver’s joining of forgiveness with justice may prove problematic in situations similar to Northern Ireland. Restitution cannot be offered to a victim if a loved one is lying in the grave. The only “restitution” that can be offered in many situations is the confession of the offender’s sin. Shriver’s view of

forgiveness does not set aside or qualify claims of restitution or punishment. This is also a departure from the biblical concept of forgiveness, which involves the cancellation of debts. It does not portray forgiveness solely as an instrument of justice.

Nevertheless, Shriver’s insights could have an important impact in Northern Ireland. One of the most important attempts to apply Shriver’s insights to the situation in Northern Ireland was the series of colloquia held at the Woodstock Theological Center at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., in 1996 and 1997.

In 1997, at Woodstock, Newell spoke about the visit of Roman Catholic Bishop Cahal Daly to Newell’s church in Belfast. Newell had invited Daly to visit on November 26, 1995. Ian Paisley targeted the event, and about 200 of Paisley’s members were protesting outside the church. Eight protesters had to be escorted outside of the church by the police. Daly told the Presbyterian congregation, “As, I, a Catholic pastor, address this mainly Protestant congregation and recall the atrocities which we now name by the place where they happened, such as Shankill Road, Darkley, Enniskillen. . . ; and as I reflect that the perpetrators of these atrocities, though they would not listen to the pleas of their bishops or priests or follow the teachings of their church, . . . I can only humbly ask forgiveness from you for such deeds.”

Daly was also a participant at Woodstock and concluded his lecture by emphasizing that it was vital for Christians to take the lead in changing attitudes, healing memories, and repenting of past wrongs. “Extirpating hatred and vengeance is a matter of both spiritual salvation and the survival of democracy.” He also noted that pleas for pardon and expressions of forgiveness alone are not sufficient. The movement toward reconciliation, Daly thought, would only come when individuals have amended their lives and various structures and institutions were changed to prevent the kinds of situations in which injustice has occurred.

The Uncertain Future

Perhaps the most challenging task for people in Northern Ireland will be to put forgiveness into

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Insights from Political Theologies

By Bruce L. Fields

■ In the search for and implementation of justice, Liberation and Black Theologies see the problem of injustice as a pervasive force, penetrating to the core of both individuals and human institutions such as corporations, government, and even churches. Injustice is difficult to identify at times because it can be hidden behind policy and other rationalizations. Because of their common concern for deconstructing unjust systems in all frameworks, these and other theological systems can be included under the designation of “Political Theologies.”

Three Characteristics

A political theology has three essential characteristics. First, there is an aversion to a “privatized faith,” a faith inculcating a relationship with God that is noncritical from a socio-cultural perspective through ignorance, design, or both. It is a faith personally internalized, but with little motivation for challenging the status quo.

Second, a political theology regenerates biblical and theological terminology. I deliberately use the term “regenerates” because it captures the ideas of continuity and discontinuity. In any one term there is a continuity of meaning informed by tradition, but there are also some elements of discontinuity in that the definition adopted moves deliberately toward critical assessment of the status quo and is thus regenerative. “Kingdom of God,” for example, could maintain a more future fulfillment motif as in 1 Corinthians 15:24: *“Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power.”* The nearness of the kingdom, however, as in Matthew 4:17: *“Heal the sick who are there and tell them, ‘the Kingdom of God is near you,’”* can be interpreted as a call to social, political, and economic confrontation to facilitate kingdom-like justice in all areas of life.

“People are moved to take greater responsibility for changing their world because theology, properly formulated, provides the vision and motivation to effect needed changes.”

Third, a political theology calls for the development of a theological system that provides both an agenda for the infusion of justice into all aspects of a given social environment and, perhaps even more important, a theological construct that instills hope. In the great faith chapter of Hebrews 11, hope is inextricably linked to faith, i.e. belief, or trust: *“Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of*

what we do not see” (v. 1). The faith/hope relationship has a focus, God and the promises of God. Hope, within the framework of liberative theology, is the commitment to see the temporal against the backdrop of eternity, thus envisioning the temporal continually transformed into the goal of the eternal God. The goal is not a mere futuristic fulfillment; it is the actualization of a new world in time and space. People are moved to take greater responsibility for changing their world because theology, properly formulated, provides the vision and motivation to effect needed changes. We can see these pervasive changes as infusing justice into all

realms of human existence.

Liberative Theologies

I believe that disciplines such as Liberation and Black Theology challenge the church to consider the meaning and significance of justice. They are right, first of all, to call attention to the systemic nature of injustice. With a pervasive presence in our sociocultural milieu, injustice can be exercised with much rationale against a person or people on the basis of race, sex, or class. A second contribution they make is to see theology and the church as instrumental in effecting social change. This does not



Bruce Fields says supporters of liberative theologies must not overlook the reality of human depravity.



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involve adopting a "social gospel" at the expense of maintaining orthodoxy; it simply means that theological reflection can contribute to a call for and the implementation of justice. Related to this, the third contribution is the call for something in addition to an individualistic faith. The believer should certainly cultivate a living relationship with God through Jesus Christ, but this same believer should consider wholeheartedly what Micah 6: 8 means in light of the needs of the day: "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." This needed consideration has much to contribute to a proper view of justice: It is essentially the demonstration of holiness in relationship with other human beings who are created in the image of God (Gen 1:26-27).

Three Concerns

This God-focused definition leads me to the first of three concerns with such systems.

1. How is justice to be defined and how should it be manifested? In a dialogue with his friend Evodius, believed to be recorded in his *On the Free Choice of the Will*, Augustine argues something that cuts to the heart of the issue, namely the definition and resultant implementation of justice:

I am sure you see also that there is nothing just or legitimate in temporal law save what men have derived from the eternal law. For if the people we have been speaking of at one time bestowed honours justly and at another time unjustly, the change in question belongs to the temporal sphere, but the judgment as to justice or injustice is derived

from the eternal sphere in which it is abidingly just that a serious-minded people should bestow honours, and a fickle people should not (1,6,15).

There remains a need to be in line with a transcendent standard of justice that is available in Holy Scripture. A community may battle with hermeneutics, but contact, nevertheless, must be maintained.

2. This same Scripture provides ongoing awareness of a problem insufficiently discussed in much of Liberation and Black Theology. That problem is simply human depravity, or the pervasive nature of sin in all human beings. The building of justice in the fabric of a given setting will eventually be dramatically affected by this fundamental characteristic. Without such consideration, we would not be equipped as a justice-motivated community to spot our own expressions of injustice.

3. The third concern is the view of the nature of the church and, subsequently, the view of the mission of the church. It is first and foremost the community of the redeemed who are purchased by the blood of Christ (Acts 20:28). The ministry, therefore, must be tempered by the heavenly perspective: "But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Phil. 3:20). The work of social, political, and economic justice cannot be the only focus of the church. The network of ministries needed to make disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ must be the focus (Matt. 28:19).

Apart from these, and admittedly other, safeguards, it is conceivable that after all the work of seeking and actualizing justice in our society, the liberators may find themselves simply assuming the position of oppressor.

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practice in their day to day lives. Joe Campbell of Belfast's mediation network believes that Northern Ireland "has a long way to go in peacebuilding because of the hurt, anguish, and pain of the victims of violence." Campbell recounted a recent incident in a small town in Northern Ireland during a visit by a man who was conducting a review of policing

in Northern Ireland. The man made a statement about reconciliation.

A woman stood up and said, "It's a lot easier for you to talk about reconciliation—you live in London." She pointed to another man in the meeting. "That man killed my son 10 years ago; I've got to learn to live with that."

Violence and the Atonement

By Richard J. Mouw

■ It has become a fairly common practice in recent years for scholars to criticize traditional Christian doctrines for the ways in which they purportedly promote and reinforce unhealthy human practices. The classical Christian formulations concerning the atoning work of Christ have come in for special attention. Specifically, some suggest that the story of a divine Father punishing His Son on the Cross features imagery that promotes violent relationships among human beings.

First, we need to be clear that the things the critics of Christian orthodoxy claim to find in the “subtexts” of Christian teachings are often very bad. And, second, there can be no denying that the actual record of the Christian community is not pure with regard to such problems. Christians have in fact often been on the wrong side of important moral issues. We owe it to our critics to admit our sins and to explore seriously any ways in which we have misused Christian teachings.

Just War Spirituality

The need to listen carefully to our critics is nowhere more obvious to me than in our Christian dealings with the topic of violence. While I have always found a thoroughgoing pacifism to have some moral attraction, my basic convictions on the subject have been consistently formed and expressed within a Just War perspective. It is especially important to pay close attention to issues of moral character, a focus that clearly comes to the fore as we think about the very urgent question of what it means for us to address the crisis of our increasingly violent culture.

I have regularly drawn my inspiration on this topic from John Calvin. In his comments in the *Institutes* about the use of military violence, he links Just War considerations to underlying issues of spirituality. When civic leaders are planning military actions, Calvin says,

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it is the duty of all magistrates here to guard particularly against giving vent to their passions even in the slightest degree. Rather, if they have to punish, let them not be carried away with headlong anger, or be seized with hatred, or burn with implacable severity. Let them also (as Augustine says) have pity on the common nature in the one whose special fault they are punishing. Or, if they must arm themselves against the enemy, that is, the armed robber, let them not lightly seek occasion to do so; indeed, let them not accept the occasion when offered, unless they are driven to it by extreme necessity ... [And] let them not allow themselves to be swayed by any private affection, but be led by concern for the people alone.

Otherwise, they very wickedly abuse their power, which has been given them not for their own advantage, but for the benefit and service of others.

To put it in simple terms, we must look honestly at our own sinful capacity for self-deception, and we must reflect deeply on the humanness of the people toward whom our violent remedies would be directed. We tend to exalt our own motives and to devalue the humanity of our opponents. In Calvin's scheme, the Just War doctrine must also serve as, we might say, an instrument of spiritual formation.

In Augustine's letter to Marcellinus, to which Calvin is referring, Augustine warns that in punishing evildoers, rulers run the risk of defeating their external enemies only to be destroyed by “the enemy within” as they pursue their violent campaigns with “depraved and distorted hearts.” To avoid



Richard Mouw says that we must honestly look at our own capacity to deceive ourselves and to devalue our opponents' humanity.

these consequences, we must cultivate “those kindly feelings which keep us from returning evil for evil.” If we can manage to do so, “even war will not be waged without kindness, and it will be easier for a society whose peace is based on piety and justice to take thought for the conquered.”

We live in a culture in which the currents of violence run very deep. It is convenient for us to call for more regulation and control of those whom we can most easily identify as the perpetrators of lawlessness and abuse. But no effective Christian critique of our violent culture can ignore “the enemy within.”

But Augustine and Calvin are also known for their insistence that the only effective cure for the depravity that afflicts us as individual human beings is the personal appropriation, by the power of the Holy Spirit, of the atoning work of Jesus Christ. Thus, they take it for granted that a proper grasp of what the atonement is about will serve to curb violence, and not to reinforce a tendency toward violent activity.

“Promoting” Violence?

No writer has been more straightforward in rejecting Christian atonement doctrine because of what it allegedly reinforces in human relations than the feminist theologian Joanne Carlson Brown. “Christianity,” she insists, “is an abusive theology that glorifies suffering,” and if the Christian faith can be transformed into a force for genuine human liberation, “it must itself be liberated from this theology. We must do away with the atonement, this idea of a blood sin upon the whole human race that can be washed away only by the blood of the lamb.” The “blood-thirsty God” who presently “controls the whole Christian tradition” rules over a pervasively patriarchal system. “We do not need to be saved by Jesus’ death from some original sin. We need to be liberated from this abusive patriarchy.”

It is certainly true that the evangelical way of understanding the work of the Cross has implications for our perspectives on violence, and that popular evangelicalism has often encouraged violent

practices in a way that has been shaped by the evangelical way of thinking about God’s dealings with humankind. I do want to suggest, however, that it does not follow from these concessions that the evangelical views about the atonement as such promote violence and abuse.

Because of their conviction about the moral value of what God has created, Calvin and other defenders of the Just War perspective have insisted that violence is permissible only within certain clearly defined moral limits. Calvin’s advice to magistrates—quoted above—can also be addressed, say, to

parents, spouses and siblings. In our family relationships, too, we ought not to “be carried away with headlong anger, or be seized with hatred, or burn with implacable severity”; here, too—in our relationships with our own kinfolk—we should cultivate “pity on the common [human] nature in the one” whom we may be tempted to attack, either physically or verbally.

It is also interesting to think about how the notion of moral restrictions on violence applies to the atonement itself. To the degree that the transaction that took place on the Cross does con-

tain some element of violence, we should expect that it, too, would fit within the moral limits associated with these guidelines for the proper use of violence. Thus, in sending Jesus to the Cross, God is engaging in a “last resort” remedy for the ravages of human depravity; the punishment is proportionate to the end being sought, and so on. Furthermore, God is not being carried away by the kinds of illicit passions against which Calvin warns. There seems to be nothing here, then, that would “promote” the kind of gratuitous abusive behavior that is associated with, for example, domestic violence.

Christ’s Suffering

What about the apparently violent-abusive themes that seem to be associated with a picture of the atonement in which notions like divine wrath and satisfaction figure prominently? Doesn’t such a view feature punishment as an essential element in the

“Augustine warns that in punishing evildoers, rulers run the risk of defeating their external enemies only to be destroyed by ‘the enemy within.’ ”

atoning work of Christ? Take, for example, the way the case is made in the 16th century Heidelberg Catechism. The requirements of divine justice are such, the Catechism states, “that sin, which is committed against the most high majesty of God, be also punished with extreme, that is, with everlasting punishment both of body and soul.” But—the argument proceeds—because we humans “daily increase our guilt” we cannot satisfy these requirements by our own efforts, to say nothing of bearing the burden of divine wrath on behalf of others. This could only be accomplished by the Lord Jesus, the incarnate God who “by the power of his Godhead” was able to “bear, in his manhood, the burden of God’s wrath, and so obtain for and restore to us righteousness and life.”

The satisfaction theory appears to require a kind of violence that the Father inflicts upon the Son. Strictly speaking, however, the theologians who propound the satisfaction view of the atonement do not typically use the word “violence.” The standard terminology used to describe what Christ suffered on the Cross is punishment and wrath. How are we to understand this notion that Christ experienced the wrath of God, suffering punishment on our behalf?

Experiencing Wrath

When contemporary critics accuse satisfaction theory as featuring “divine child abuse,” they assume a picture of God the Father somehow directly inflicting pain on the Son. The actual descriptions given of the nature of Christ’s suffering in satisfaction theology, however, do not focus primarily on the physical pain He experienced on the Cross as being the primary feature of the redemptive transaction. Jan Rohls emphasizes this fact in his recent study of Reformed confessions. In the Geneva Catechism, Rohls observes, Christ’s “substitution for us lies not just in the fact that he died for us,” but in the fact that “he was condemned to death.” The important thing is that “Christ takes on himself the curse that lies upon human beings,” that he experienced “an accursed death.” Thus the Geneva Catechism’s declaration that “he hanged on a tree to take our curse upon Himself and acquit us of it” (Gal. 3:13). In His condemnation by “an earthly judge” we are “acquitted before the throne of the celestial Judge.”

These formulations, then, locate the redemptive significance of Christ’s suffering, not so much in pain that can be thought of as being actively inflicted upon Him by the Father, but rather in His profound experience as the innocent one of the cursedness of being abandoned by God on behalf of those who do deserve that abandonment. Thus the greatest redemptively significant agony that He experienced on the Cross, on this view, is when He cried out in utter forlornness, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34)

Divine Agency

In his fascinating study of how the sacrificial rituals of ancient religions are motivated by the desire to solve the problem of violence, René Girard makes it clear that he doesn’t think any person can believe in the literal efficacy of religious sacrifice. But Girard does insist that these “primitive” religionists were onto something. In the ritual sacrifice, Girard argues, people “fed” their “bad violence” to the gods, thereby allowing it to be transformed by the gods into “stability and fecundity.” While we cannot enter into this worldview today, says Girard, if we choose to ignore its “mythic” power we will simply “persist in disregarding the power of violence in human societies.”

Those of us who believe in the efficacy of Christ’s substitutionary sacrifice are certainly not compelled to endorse all that is associated with the “primitive” practices that Girard describes. But we can see those rituals as pointing in some profound way to the one true Sacrifice that occurred at Calvary. The problem of human violence can only be solved by having our violence “taken up” into the life of the Triune God, to be transformed there into something good that is then given back to us as a gift.

Charles Wesley’s wonderful lines point to the mystery of this divine single-mindedness:

*Amazing love! How can it be
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?*

In the death on the Cross, God also took our violent impulses upon Himself, mysteriously absorbing them into His very being in order to transform them into the power of reconciling love; and then He offers that love back to us as a gift of sovereign grace.



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The Whole Armor of God

By Cheryl Sanders

■ *Finally, be strong in the Lord, and in the strength (author: or “the power”) of His might. Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the full armor of God, so that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand firm, therefore, having girded*

your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the gospel of peace. In addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one, and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. —Ephesians 6:10-17.

In the opening verse of this passage, Paul says, “be strong in the power of God’s might.” To be strong means to make powerful inwardly. In this sense, power is the ability to do something, to say something, to be something. The power referred to is the authority (or permission) to use the ability you have. Might is best interpreted as effectiveness, not just having ability or authority, but having effect, making an influence, making a difference, bringing about change.

It is God’s purpose from the foundation of the world that we should receive power to make us effective agents of change in the world. And so Paul exhorts us to put on the whole armor of God—the spiritual weapons and defenses God has given us—as we exercise power with ability, with authority, and with effectiveness.

Through the Prison Bars

Paul wrote this letter from prison, and I can imagine him peeking through the prison bars and gazing upon a Roman soldier, seeing all the equipment and weapons of the soldier, armed to represent the power of Rome.

Perhaps Paul saw a shadow of the armor of God as Isaiah represented it.

Therefore justice is far from us, and righteousness does not overtake us. We hope for light, but behold darkness, for brightness, but we walk in gloom. We grope along the wall like blind men, we grope like those who have no eyes, we stumble at midday and the twilight among those who are vigorous, we are like dead men. All of us growl like bears and moan sadly like doves. We hope for justice, but there is none. For salvation, but it is far from us. For our transgressions are multiplied before You, and our sins testify against us. For our transgressions are with us, and we know our iniquities. Transgressing and denying the Lord, and turning away from our God, speaking oppression and revolt, conceiving and in uttering from the heart lying words, justice is turned back. And righteousness stands far away. For truth has stumbled in the street, and uprightness cannot enter. Yes, truth is lacking, and he who turns aside from evil makes himself a prey. Now the Lord saw, and it was displeasing in His sight that there was no justice. And He saw that there was no man, and was astonished that there was no one to intercede. Then His own arm brought salvation to Him, and His righteousness upheld Him. He put on righteousness like a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on His head. And He put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped Himself with zeal as a mantle. —Isaiah 59:9-17.



Cheryl Sanders says we must lay down our weapons of hatred and hypocrisy and put on the whole armor of God.

All the weapons and equipment that Paul speaks of in Ephesians chapter 6 are the weapons Isaiah speaks of, that God prepared for Himself, and put on Himself, and provided for those who pursue just causes. But the weapons are not instruments of physical violence, but rather are effects of God's own might, which provides protection in the fight against invisible powers which cause tribulations, temptations, and suffering. Victory and salvation share the same root in the Hebrew. Righteousness seems to have both a dynamic, crusading sense and its more static meaning of integrity. So God's armor in Isaiah 59 illuminates Ephesians 6:13 and following. It is what God uses, and not only what God gives, to bring about salvation: godly zeal governed by godly justice.

If you want to have power, if you want to be effective in your work for God, if you want to have authority to receive all God has for you, if you want to have ability to do and say and to be what God wants you to become, then you must put on the whole armor of God—not a piece here and a piece there, but the whole thing—every weapon, every gift. And if more Christians would do what Paul has said, we would have the ability and the authority to be effective in reclaiming our families, our communities, for God.

Forsaking Our Denial

In March, Pope John Paul II led the Roman Catholic Church in an unprecedented act of confession and repentance, asking God's forgiveness for 2,000 years of sins, including sins against people of other faiths, sins against racial and ethnic groups, even sins against women. Many of the acts alluded to by the pope were acts of direct violence—for example, the Crusades. Others were acts of complicity and complacency, of Christians maintaining silence in the face of unspeakable cruelties and injustice, such as occurred during the Holocaust.

Not long ago, the Southern Baptists offered an apology for the sins of racism and slavery in

America. Some churches make such confessions of social sins almost routine in their liturgies and litanies. But it remains to be seen how the acts of confession and of worship will translate into acts of forgiveness and reconciliation in the world, in relation to those persons, those groups who have been wronged. It is good and necessary to confess our sins before God, even our social sins. But we need to make restitution, to foster reconciliation.

How do you help Christian brothers and sisters emerge from behind the stone wall of denial of sin and wrongdoing? Clearly, Paul's words provide a straightforward solution for the Christian church. We need to put on the whole armor of God, recognizing how that armor relates to God's agenda for the world.

Putting on the Whole Armor

Can we lay down our weapons of hatred and hypocrisy, racism, and resentment and put on the whole armor of God? Can we take up the belt of truth, once we are willing to lay aside denial? Can we set aside injustice and unfairness and take up the breastplate of righteousness? Let our feet be covered with the gospel of peace, because we have changed our mind about militarism and violence to resolve conflict?

We can set aside fear and take up the shield of faith. We can put on the helmet of salvation, and we can grip the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

This is the armor God has given to the church, to equip us to take a stand against evil in this world—not harming, hurting, and humiliating people, but bringing them salvation and wholeness. What a horrible legacy we have in the Christian church when the gospel gets wedded with exploitation, oppression, and violence, sometimes done in the name of Christ. The whole armor of God is offered to each and every one of us to bring about peace, justice, reconciliation to a world that desperately needs to hear the gospel preached and lived in those terms.

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Cheryl Sanders is professor of Christian ethics at Howard University School of Divinity. She is senior pastor of the Third Street Church of God in Washington, D.C. She presented these remarks as part of the CACE conference on “Christianity and Violence” during a chapel service at Wheaton College on March 17, 2000.

Coming Events

More Gratitude

■ This issue of *Discernment* has been sponsored by the James S. Kemper Foundation (Dr. Thomas Hellie, executive director). The foundation has been a faithful supporter of ethics education at Wheaton for many years, and we are grateful.

Upcoming Issues

■ The next volume year of *Discernment* will be devoted to the theme, "The Ethical Challenges of Globalization." The first issue will contain a report on the annual Penner debate, held September 13, featuring Dr. Ron Sider and Mr. Michael Novak.

Calendar

■ You are invited to our October 23 public forum on "Jubilee 2000: Our Debt to the Debtors." Featuring Dan Driscoll-Shaw, the national coordinator of Jubilee 2000, this session will overview the plan for international debt relief. The program also includes a panel discussion on the ethics of debt reduction.

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