

Just War, Just Deserts, Just Hell

By Wayne Northey

There is an arresting statement about God in I John 4:8: *Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.* “God is love” is an essentialist statement about God: who God is in God’s essence.

There is also an arresting call to Christians in Ephesians 5:1 & 2: *Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children*² *and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*

The family trait of a Christ-follower is *love*: God’s essence is *love*; so should Christ-followers’ essence be *love*. “Following God’s example” means being “imitators of God” (in the original), who is at the core “*love*”.

What does this love look like?

What it *does not* look like is the kind of “justice” practised by the Pharisees. Translations often use the term “righteousness” for the Greek word *dikaiosune*, that above all is a relational word, and thus best translated as “justice”. “Relational” that is: towards God (theological), towards oneself (psychological), towards others (sociological), towards the creation (ecological), towards the cosmos (cosmological). Matthew 5:20 states: *For I tell you that unless your righteousness [justice] surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.*

What love *does* look like is seen throughout the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 – 7, and the Sermon on the Plain in Luke 6. In a word: “love” looks like *justice*. Which as we’ve seen is God’s essence and should be that of all who aspire to imitate God through the atonement effected by Christ.

This moves us into the realm of the Two Greatest Commandments. Here is Matthew’s rendition (Chapter 22:36 – 40): *“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”*

³⁷ *Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”*^[a] ³⁸ *This is the first and greatest commandment.* ³⁹ *And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’*^[b] ⁴⁰ *All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”*

But this is the admonition of the writer of Ephesians 5:1 & 2: *live a life of love*. And incidentally, Jesus’ call in the Two Greatest Commandments is the hermeneutical “overacceptance” of the entire sweep of Scripture theologically towards the essentialist revelation of God as *love*. (“Overacceptance” in the theatre “indicates an improvised reframing of the action of a drama in light of a larger story one wants to tell (Samuel Wells in *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (2004), p. 65).”) The larger biblical story wanted to be told is: *God is love*. And God’s followers should fully imitate that love too.

There is a kind of inexorable Gospel logic that moves from love of neighbour as litmus test of love of God to love of enemies as litmus test of love of neighbour to *enemy-love as litmus test of love of God*.

In fact, this is precisely part of where Jesus takes one in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:43 – 48):

⁴³ “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor^[a] and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. ⁴⁶ If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? ⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Verse 48 takes us again to imitation. “Being perfect” means being fully mature in our faith, which means fully evidencing love towards neighbour and enemy alike.

Furthermore, “love” is a biblical action term that means embrace of neighbour and enemy. Paul in Romans captures the essence of such love in action again with reference to the enemy, again with reference to the atonement and to God whose essence is love in action:

⁶ You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

⁹ Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him! ¹⁰ For if, while we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! ¹¹ Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Reconciliation is multivariate and our quintessential ministry call. Again it is Paul who lays it out:

¹⁶ So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come:^[a] The old has gone, the new is here! ¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹ that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God. ²¹ God made him who had no sin to be sin^[b] for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Summing up the flow of thought thus far are the following points:

- God is love – it is God’s essence
- All Jesus-followers are to imitate God’s atonement and essence by living a life of love

- “Justice” is the mark of God’s love, how we relate to: God, self, others, the creation, the cosmos
- The Two Greatest Commandments that “overaccept” the entire sweep of God’s revelation are direct calls to love
- The litmus test of love of God is love of neighbour; the litmus test of love of neighbour is love of enemy; failure to love one’s enemy is ultimately failure to love God. Enemy love means active embrace and inclusion of neighbour and enemy
- The atonement is God’s (through Christ) supreme demonstration of enemy love that reconciles us to God, providing a model to imitate religiously
- The “new creation” that has come is reconciliation embraced as central Christian ministry in relation to all enmities in their multivariate forms as indicated above.

Now I find this all simply overwhelming...

Overwhelming because this is not how I have predominantly experienced church. Nor is it how the church universal has mainly shown its face to the world. A quote is pertinent, from Richard Hays’ *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (1996), p. 343:

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. (By comparison, our problems with sexual sin are trivial.) This indictment applies alike to liberation theologies that justify violence against oppressors and to establishment Christianity that continues to play chaplain to the military-industrial complex, citing just war theory and advocating the defense of a particular nation as though that were somehow a Christian value.

Rather than indict the church in detail, far too easily done, I would rather turn to three considerations of applied justice, and let the reader discern the church’s track record from his or her experience, from his or her understanding of history. Each of these considerations is of the church’s record in response to three categories of enemies. In light of the above, how has the church fared, how is the church faring? You the reader may decide, and also ponder how to respond to these three categories of enemies.

Just War

There are Indian, Greek and Roman antecedents to this application of this category of justice to war, but the great Christian theorist who introduced “Just War” to the Christian West, was Saint Augustine. (Though the East never agreed that Augustine should be considered a saint.) Nine hundred years later, Thomas Aquinas took up Augustine’s support of just war, and developed three conditions for such war. There are seven conditions in its modern expression:

- Legitimate authority
- Just cause
- Proportionality and the recourse to war
- Last resort

- Proportionality and the conduct of war
- Noncombatant immunity
- peacemaking

It is not the purpose of this article to discuss just war. Just war as presented by Augustine and Aquinas dealt with the church's (state's) international enemies. Both argued for the legitimate destruction of enemies. Though the argument always related to the state's enemies.

For the individual Christian under the rule of a government engaged even in an immoral war, Augustine admonished that Christians, "by divine edict [according to one way of interpreting Romans 13:1 – 6], have no choice but to subject themselves to their political masters and [should] seek to ensure that they execute their war-fighting duty as justly as possible."

This is where "massively faithless" strikes home. What is Christian behaviour in response to war that is "as justly as possible"? From the above survey of Scripture, it is hard to accept the premise of Augustine or Aquinas, and "massive" numbers of others in the Christian traditions: namely that one may/must legitimately destroy one's enemies in war. One may not and be Christian seems ineluctable from Scripture. Perhaps the church is coming round to this view again in the twenty-first century that was dominant in the first and until the era of Constantine: that the church like Peter needed, in Jesus' words, to "Put your sword away!" (John 18:11) Tertullian said this command of Jesus thereby disarmed the church for ever. *If only*, one might sorrowfully add.

The finest study on peace in the New Testament this writer knows is Willard Swartley's *Covenant of Peace: The Missing Peace in New Testament Theology and Ethics* (2009). Such a study needs to become the new church's normative understanding over against what has been in Richard Hays' terms, "massive faithlessness". Hays writes:

Only when the church renounces the way of violence will people see what the Gospel means, because then they will see the way of Jesus reenacted in the church (*ibid*).

Just Deserts

The second category of enemy to consider is the church's (state's) domestic enemy, the criminal. Almost ever since Saint Anselm developed the classical satisfaction theory of the atonement in the 11th century, the Western church has dominantly supported a violent, retributive response to the state's domestic enemies. The Reformation tweaked the theory, developing further along similar lines a "penal substitution" view of the atonement. The finest book tracing the impact of these developments is by Timothy Gorrige: *God's Just Vengeance: Crime, violence and the rhetoric of salvation* (1996). We read:

For the Church Fathers, it is the devil who – illegitimately – insists on the payment of the debt incurred by humankind. Anselm inverts this. Now it is God who, legitimately, exacts the payment of debt... In both Old and New Testaments an indebted person could be 'redeemed' by the payment of his or her debt. Jesus, following Deuteronomy, insists on the cancelling of debt as a fundamental aspect of Christian practice. Anselm, however, makes God the

one who *insists* on debt. The debt humanity has incurred must be paid with human blood. The God who rejected sacrifice now demands it... From the start sacrifice and satisfaction run together... The God who liberates from law is now, in Anselm, understood as hypostasised, personified law... What remains... is a mysticism of pain which promises redemption to those who pay in blood. In this move a most fundamental inversion of the gospel is achieved, which prepares the way for the validation of criminal law as the instrument of God's justice instead of what it is in the gospel, an alienating construction which is at best a tragic necessity.

The penal consequences of this doctrine were grim indeed. As it entered the cultural bloodstream, was imaged in crucifixions, painted over church chancels, recited at each celebration of the Eucharist, or hymned, so it created its own structure of affect one in which earthly punishment was demanded because God himself had demanded the death of his Son (pp. 102 & 103).

By the birth of the modern prison in the late eighteenth century, and persisting to the present, what emerged was a penal system dedicated to a “mysticism of pain” - *with no redemption*. Punishment and retribution were the hallmarks.

Brad Jersak's and Michael Hardin's edited work *Stricken By God?: Nonviolent Identification & The Victory of Christ* (2009) is a profound rethinking of the extremely violent atonement theories developed by Saint Anselm and Reformation theologians. New Testament theologian Christopher Marshall's two books *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime and Punishment* (2001), and *Compassionate Justice: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue with Two Gospel Parables on Law, Crime, and Restorative Justice* (2012) rethink profoundly the notions of violent punitive and retributive justice in favour of nonviolent *restorative justice*.

Justice in response to the state's domestic enemies is ever restorative at the end of the day, never punitive/retributive.

Just Hell

The third kind of “enemy” has been uniquely the church's, by theologians' perception: the “unbeliever” for whom there is but one response: *just hell of eternal conscious punishment*. Saint Augustine again played a dominant role in the establishment of this doctrine in the West. One author writes:

Quite validly, [Augustine] asks if eternal punishment [is] just for those who[se] sins are limited to time. But this is his answer:

“But eternal punishment seems hard and unjust to human perceptions, because in the weakness of our mortal condition there is wanting that highest and purest wisdom by which it can be perceived how great a wickedness was committed in that first transgression.” (Book 12)

This is unacceptable reasoning, quite devoid of grace, built upon a severe doctrine of original sin, and resorting to the “It's a mystery” line reserved for times when supposedly watertight arguments could break apart (“Eternal Punishment in Augustine's *The City of God*”, Nic Paton,

<https://soundandsilence.wordpress.com/2009/01/13/eternal-punishment-in-augustine%e2%80%99s-the-city-of-god/>, (2009), last accessed August 30, 2015).

Brad Jersak's *Her Gates Will Never Be Shut: Hope, Hell, and the New Jerusalem* (2010) is an excellent counter to Augustine's and the West's dominant view of hell as a place of eternal conscious torment.

In some ways, this justice view of hell underscores the other two: if God will punish God's enemies eternally, then we humans may punish the state's international and domestic enemies temporally. "Give 'em hell, Harry" became a slogan during one of President Harry Truman's election campaigns. The reality was, Truman unleashed the "hell" of mass murder of innocents, like a predecessor, King Herod, on August 6 and again August 9, 1945, over Hiroshima and Nagasaki that saw at least 120,000 victims instantly immolated, and multiplied tens of thousands of human victims of nuclear fallout subsequently impacted, quite apart from the massive destructive ecological fallout. Truman was a Sunday School teacher, who was blithely following a long line and lineage of Christian embracers of a doctrine of hell as eternal conscious torment. Truman just hastened those victims' sure destiny, according to his theology, according to dominant Western theology: just hell of eternal conscious torment.

Conclusion

These three views of a just response to the church's/state's enemies have produced arguably/indisputably a massive legacy of unbelief and rejection of Christian faith, one perhaps greater than all the collective catch of would-be "fishers of men" in the entire history of the church. This apart from the legacy of massive destruction of untold millions of destroyed enemies. Hays' use of the term "massively faithless" seems to this writer overwhelmingly justified. What do you the reader think?

A final question imposes: What will we do in response?