

**Theological Existence Today:
Identity Politics and the Gospel**

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“I am the way, and the truth, and the life: no one comes to the Father, but by me.’ (John 14:6.) ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. . . . I am the door; if anyone enters by me, he will be saved.’

Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death. We reject the false doctrine, as though the church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from and besides this one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God’s revelation.”

~ The Barmen Declaration

The thesis of this essay that Progressive/Liberal Protestant¹ ‘Christians’ must eschew all retaliatory violence if they claim Jesus as Lord, applies *mutatis mutandis* to the Evangelical tradition.² For 30 years I have challenged the theological model of that tradition in nine books and numerous essays. These books have been lauded by notable Progressive Christian leaders. This is the first essay where I have examined the Progressive Christian view. It should not be supposed that I am an Evangelical except in the Barthian sense.

This essay raises a theological question. This question arises in the sphere of the ‘ecclesia’ as the conversation around which it began: a discussion of the character and message of Jesus of Nazareth. Now, the examination of a tradition does not *eo ipso* entail rejection of that tradition, nor does it imply that there are not significant race issues plaguing American Christianity. The author is well aware that certain readers will remain unaware of these authorial ‘recognitions’ and may misread both the intentionality of the author and the thread of the argument. However, if there is to be real conversation and not just one-sided intellectual colonization, this issue, among others, must be addressed within the sphere of the ‘ecclesia.’ In the church there is one Lord and external voices (‘natural theologies’) have no authority here.

Followers of Jesus are in a unique position to blaze a trail through the American culture wars. The conversation cannot be one sided; listening must be done by all, healing nurtured by all, and faithful

¹ This essay only engages Protestantism in the United States.

² Germane to this essay is the problem known as the ‘curse of Ham’ which originated in late antique and early medieval Jewish circles, and formed a crucial argument for slavery in America among conservative Southern Christians. It is this destructive interpretation which is still taught in Sunday Schools in Conservative Protestant churches. I recall ‘learning’ it when I became an Evangelical Fundamentalist in 1975. A decent historical survey can be found at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Curse_of_Ham.

witness to Jesus lived by all, Evangelical and Liberal/Progressive. As I have watched this conversation develop, I know of some who listen carefully on all 'sides.' Listening is crucial in order for the pain of the present to be exorcized. It is the manner by which the Christian fundamentalist deals with their pain in relation to the Gospel and the Lord they claim that is addressed here. As Denny Moon said, "sin is the destructive way we handle our pain." If the Liberal/Progressive wishes to know why their message falls on deaf ears to their 'other' Christian members of the Body of Christ, rather than excoriating the 'other' as blind, they might look to the way that discourse is conducted by the vocal minority within their movement which causes alienation. This is a difficult topic to address in the sphere of the ecclesia, dangerous to navigate and fraught with both peril...and promise.

American Protestant Christianity is at a crossroads. In all its forms, conservative and liberal, Evangelical and liberal/progressive, an old question looms large and, by and large, the solution that is being arrived at is the exact same position of Jerusalem Christianity and its identity politics, a politics the Apostle Paul observed and critiqued as the most significant issue facing early Christianity. Identity politics in both its racial and national forms has plagued Christianity from the very beginning. It is not a theological solution but a theological problem.

I will assume that most are familiar what is meant by 'identity politics' and proffer two working definitions:

"[Identity Politics] is a tendency for people of a particular religion, race, social background, etc., to form exclusive political alliances, moving away from traditional broad-based party politics."

Another definition:

"The laden phrase 'identity politics' has come to signify a wide range of political activity and theorizing founded in the shared experiences of injustice of members of certain social groups. Rather than organizing solely around belief systems, programmatic manifestos, or party affiliation, identity political formations typically aim to secure the political freedom of a specific constituency marginalized within its larger context. Members of that constituency assert or reclaim ways of understanding their distinctiveness that challenge dominant oppressive characterizations, with the goal of greater self-determination."

With these working definitions in mind we turn to the topic at hand.

Part 1: The Problem of Liberal/Progressive Ideology: Idolatry in Intellectual Form

In the first century identity politics comes to the fore in Christianity with the insistence of the Jerusalem church that Gentiles become Jews to be considered valid Christians. Jerusalem Christianity, as others have argued elsewhere, was committed to a vision of Jewish-Gentile relations whereby race and Torah obedience (holiness) were equated. Emissaries from the Jerusalem church went all over the Empire to harass Paul's churches and prevailed upon them to accept their version of the gospel and to reject Paul's version. For the Jerusalem church, Gentiles were to blame for the woes that occurred upon the nation Israel. In the Maccabean period there was an intense anti-Hellenism that arose and is evident in

literature from that period. One can see, e.g., the way identity politics plays out in the Wisdom of Solomon, and the use of texts like that in Romans 1:18-32, a text which Douglas Campbell has identified as the 'voice ' of the false teacher(s) who had come to Rome.³

The letters to the Galatians and Romans are the clearest statement about the problem of identity politics in the New Testament; the books in the Jewish Scriptures that prominently illuminate this are Ruth and Jonah. In all four books, the problem of race relations is highlighted. I will leave aside the discussion of the latter two books and focus on the Pauline documents. I wish to highlight the issue as it rises in the apostolic churches, how it split the church, and the theological implications of taking identity politics as an epistemological and hermeneutical given. This occurs when certain assumptions, presuppositions and conclusions are added to the epistemology and hermeneutics of the Gospel and the end result is the always unhappy marriage of a 'natural theology' with the revelation of God in Jesus of Nazareth. This '*analogia entis*' has always been the bane of Christian theology; I have sought to point out how the default position of the traditions influenced by Protestant Orthodoxy are compromised in this regard in a number of my books and essays. Here I intend to show that the exact same phenomenon can be found in certain liberal and progressive Christian traditions (in the USA).

How does a fundamentalist think? In the Introduction to a series of essays in *Religion, Fundamentalism and Violence*, Andrew Gluck suggests that fundamentalism is not limited to religion but extends also to the sphere of the secular.⁴ Most peculiar is the conclusion Gluck and many of the contributors draw, viz., the solution to fundamentalism is to be found in liberalism. Ironically, when Gluck contends that "we should beware of calling every fervent expression of religiosity fundamentalism, even when they show a propensity for irrationality – and even violence. For example there are instances of mass hysteria – sometimes fueled by strong charismatic leadership and exploiting underlying beliefs- that might not qualify as fundamentalism because the belief systems are not clearly defined" he is describing what I will refer to as 'liberal fundamentalism. How does a fundamentalist think?

There are certain moves a fundamentalist makes which I will outline

1. There is an absolute authority which must remain unquestioned.
2. There is a zeal for that authority which manifests itself in attempts to convert the other to the position of the fundamentalist, whether through rhetorical violence or physical violence
3. The fundamentalist has a total position, that is, everything must be subsumed to the fundamentalist view. Similar to #1, any question raised about the worldview of the fundamentalist is deemed heresy at worst or 'the slippery slope' as best.
4. There is no equivocating or room for dialogue with a fundamentalist.

So a way to demonstrate this is to say:

1. We (fundamentalists) believe every word in the Bible is God's Word.

³ *The Deliverance of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).

⁴ *Religion, Fundamentalism and Violence*, ed. Andrew Gluck (Scranton: University of Scranton, 2010), 11. See also J. Harold Ellens, ed. *The Destructive Power of Religion* (Westport: Praeger, 2004), four volumes.

2. We have the correct interpretation of this authority.
3. To disagree with any one part of the fundamentalist rendering is to be marginalized (heretical).
4. The fundamentalist must then go on the attack to defend their position.

Now play this out in terms of identity politics:

1. We (fundamentalists) believe every word of identity politics given by academic elites.
2. We have the correct interpretation of this authority.
3. To disagree with any one part of the fundamentalist rendering is to be marginalized.
4. The fundamentalist must then go on the attack to defend their position.

There is symmetry between the way Christian conservative fundamentalists and liberal/progressive fundamentalists⁵ approach the issue of 'the other.' There can be absolutely no deviation from the viewpoint of the fundamentalist, for them, the issue has been closed and settled once for all. Sadly this sort of orientation has become the clash of two fundamentalisms in the Christian churches in the United States. It is splitting congregations and denominations. Rather than bringing about the transformation of Christianity, Christian fundamentalism, both liberal/progressive and conservative, is destroying it from within.

Undoubtedly there will be those detractors who will contend that I am over generalizing or abstracting. Such is not the case. Let me proffer examples from my own personal history. In the spring of 2017 I gently challenged a Facebook post by a self-styled 'Progressive Christian' who asserted that Christians had the right to retaliate if attacked and cited a number of texts from the Synoptic Gospel where Jesus was allegedly violent. For example, when I explained that Jesus did not whip people in the Temple and demonstrated how the Greek text is quite clear on that I was called "an elitist." I was told that the "white pacifist Jesus is preached to keep persons of color in place." This same individual, claiming to speak for Progressive Christianity also cited the Isaiah text in Luke 4 with the hashtag **#NotForWhitePeople**. When I observed, contrary to the viewpoint expressed by my interlocutor, that the citation of Isaiah 61 in Luke 4 was for all people, especially the 'enemy other', I was deemed 'racist' for daring to contradict a person of color.⁶ How dare I do such a thing, white allies never contradict the exegesis of a person of color (I had no idea that such a rule existed). To do so, in their view, is to be *eo ipso*, racist.

In this instance there was a complete and total unwillingness to dialogue, there was only the viewpoint of the interlocutor, all other viewpoints were deemed racist. This instant marginalizing of another viewpoint seems contradictory to the postmodern spirit my interlocutor(s) claims. If postmodernism includes the rejection of all meta-narratives, and identity politics is set up as an authoritative meta-narrative, is it not ironic that the LPF claims ultimate authority for their viewpoint, a viewpoint from which there can be no deviation? Is it not also ironic that the very same 'open minded' LPF's who castigate the conservative Christian fundamentalists use similar rhetorical strategies and tactics as their counterparts? One could, in terms of René Girard, argue that they are mimetic twins, doubles caught up in a fight, a battle, a war for 'right belief.'

⁵ I will use the shorthand LPF for Liberal/Progressive Fundamentalist/ism.

⁶ On which see my exegesis of Luke 4:16-31 from *The Jesus Driven Life* below in Part 2.

The LPF is as unable to recognize the fundamentalism of their position as their conservative counterparts. Every fundamentalist believes that what they are doing is correct, right, just and good or they would not be doing what they do or saying what they say. Again I find it profoundly disturbing that the rejection of certainty in postmodernism by the LPF is only for 'the other'. Is it not the case the LPF is certain of their moral position? Have we not seen the evidence of this in the academy today where institutions of higher education are being held captive to an ideological platform which cannot be questioned and where any slight deviance is punished with termination or discipline and ostracism? Whence does such certainty arise in a position which denies certitude? It arises from unquestioning blind obedience to a meta-narrative that has been in the process of development since the 1960's in America. It arises as a mimetic double of conservative religious fundamentalism, both replete with apologetics, experts and texts.

Here I give another personal example. While I have publicly acknowledged that 'white privilege' is a social reality and must be recognized and morphed into 'privilege for all' or 'no discrimination based upon social constructs', I have refused to accept the notion of white guilt.⁷ The attribution of historical guilt to the current generation would be feasible if it could be shown that all white persons were 'racist' in their attitudes, orientations and actions. However, such is not the case and this attribution of guilt to the white male is the single reason that many are now questioning the Liberal/Progressive view of the Gospel. The requirement to toe the line, to believe every tenet of LPF faith, to submit to the governing experts is just another form of intellectual totalitarianism. Again is it not ironic that the very people who reject meta-theories because they are 'totalizing' have themselves created an identical form of narrative which is just as totalizing?

Without realizing it, the LPF and conservative fundamentalist are engaged in a battle which is aptly described by Pinkaj Mishna, he calls our time the Age of Anger.⁸ His thesis is simple, we are experiencing the conflict of two alternative views of the Enlightenment, that of Voltaire and that of Rousseau. Voltaire would bring enlightenment at the end of the sword, following Augustine; Rousseau would also bring enlightenment at the end of the sword of nationalism. Both brought enlightenment the same way Augustine and Aquinas would: through Inquisition. As Augustine opined, it is better to convert a person at the end of a sword than see them burn eternally in hell. So our so-called enlightened forebears believed that the only way to make their viewpoint universal was to use coercion, force and violence. The Enlightenment did not produce the end of violence, it only exacerbated it. In our own time, intellectual elites are reprising the arguments of Voltaire and Rousseau, sometimes co-mingling components of both (as Mishna notes) and they are joining in the mad chorus to expel any who deviate

⁷ The LPF rejects the Genesis myth and the use the apostle makes of it when raising the question of theodicy. Any worldview worth its salt has to deal with the question of theodicy and the LPF does so by importing the original sin/guilt doctrine, first as a neo-feminist rendering of western history then as a screed against the white male in American history. This is not to say that white male hegemony is not and has not been a serious issue, however it does not begin with the white male and can be traced back in evolutionary terms to our primitive ancestors who 10,000 years or more B.C.E. were certainly not Caucasian. This is an ancient problem, it has been experienced this past two millennia as a white male problem and as such Christian white males must be willing to allow the transition to a more just and fair society with equanimity. Joining in solidarity with historically victimized people groups entails weeping with those who weep, but can never join in cries for retaliation.

⁸ Pinkaj Mishna, *Age of Anger* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2017).

from their definitions and platforms. It has become an intolerable situation in both the University and the church in America.

Of course, the LPF is going to demur, for they must. At this point they are obligated to attack these arguments, not because they are faulty but because they are critiquing the totalitarian ideology of the LPF. Engagement cannot be had at this point for the LPF, who like their conservative counterpart, cannot give one inch; this is how total their certainty is. They must find counter arguments, utilize apologetics and engage sadly in *ad hominem* attacks naming those who deviate from their position as *eo ipso* racist. That they do this is the sign that they have deceived themselves and compromised their postmodern position.

The LPF who has no view of the authority of Scripture at worst or a distorted hermeneutic at best will always challenge an appeal to the Bible. Rational exegesis, or the historical-critical method is disdained for an alleged 'hermeneutics from below' but the LPF is not at all meaning the same thing as Bonhoeffer did when he coined this term in 1944.⁹ The LPF imagines themselves concerned for victims and rightly so. They imagine that advocating for the victim calls for social solidarity and rightly so. They further imagine that the end justifies the means and their viewpoint must prevail at all costs. This Bonhoeffer did not do or suggest; if anything he struggled mightily with this complex issue, an esteemed virtue in short supply in America today.¹⁰

Let me come back to my example of the hashtag **#NotForWhite People**. Bonhoeffer never distinguished himself from his people which is why on his second trip to America in 1939, rather than play it safe and remain in America he decided to return to his beloved Germany to suffer her fate with his people. Nowhere does Bonhoeffer say that the Gospel is **#NotForNazis**. Never. Yes he is actively engaged in opposing the theology of the German Christian Movement, as was a small portion of the German Evangelical Tradition evidenced in Barmen, however, one never finds Bonhoeffer assailing those who had become 'Christian Nazi's' as less than human. Nor does one find Barth doing so. Both theologians took on the theology of the *Deutsche Glaubensbewegung*, and they criticized the thinking of those who, like Emmanuel Hirsch, would embrace Nazi ideology, but one does not find them engaging in the kind of totalitarian tactics of our contemporary LPF's in America or rejection of them as persons. The line Bonhoeffer and Barth draw is a theological line in the sand; inasmuch as there is no cohesive or coherent systematic theology from the LPF, we too will draw a line in the sand using categories drawn from the biblical and theological sciences.

⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010).

¹⁰ The argument that Bonhoeffer was complicit or condoned violence against the Third Reich has been a contentious question in Bonhoeffer studies since its inception in the 1960's. Fascinating is the fact that both liberal Bonhoeffer interpreters and the conservative Evangelical interpreter Eric Metaxas argue that Bonhoeffer would approve of the use of violence in order to 'save lives.' The most recent challenge to this are the essays in Mark Thiessen-Nation's *Bonhoeffer the Assassin?* In my forty years of engaging Bonhoeffer I would argue that perhaps there was a turn to this logic following the Finkenwalde period which can be seen in the posthumously published *Ethics*, but that a turn back toward pacifism is clearly indicated in the christology of the *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

It is the importation of other categories, alternate epistemologies and alien hermeneutics which creates the problem for the Christian who remains oblivious to the fact that when other sources are brought into conversation with the Gospel there is always a tendency to subsume the Gospel to these categories. This is common practice among LPF essays, books, blogs and social media. One finds this as well in a plethora of contemporary American biblical and theological studies. This is an allegedly intellectual theological enterprise, replete with footnotes and authorities; however, the inevitable twisting of the messages of Jesus and Paul lends itself to any number of reasons why the LPF and allies will not engage the question of retaliatory violence. If they do they risk the ire of communities of color. The question of retaliatory violence in the sphere of the church, however, must be asked with reference to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, particularly since it was so essential to his mission and why the Father sent the Son into the world.

At this juncture mention must be made of what is known as 'public theology.' Public theology is the purview of the person who is not beholden to a denominational position, often taken by independent scholars. The work of a public theologian is to translate the Gospel into categories that are secular and thus can have a real world impact for change. I have been called a public theologian, but I have chosen to interpret such a phrase as indicating that while I do theology 'publicly' (rather than in an institution) it is always within the domain of the church, that specific sphere of dialogue that acknowledges Jesus is Lord. There is much to be praised in public theology and theologians. Where public theologians can go amiss is when they fail to reckon with the problem of 'natural theology' in their model. When categories taken from the social sciences are used to define the Gospel, rather than the Gospel giving the categories by which it is to be understood, we are no longer engaging in theological science but the deformation of the Gospel. The public theologian may conclude that while Jesus spoke to the issue of violence, non-retaliation and forgiveness, this discourse is not applicable to those who are experiencing 'systemic oppression.' This may be well be the case, but in the sphere of the Church among those who name Jesus as Lord and where the question of the Gospel is at stake, this discourse is essential. To this we now turn.

Part 2 Identity Politics in Jesus and Paul: Case Studies in Nazareth and Antioch

The issue of race relations ran deep in Second Temple Jewish theological and political thinking. The conquests of Alexander the Great, circa 300 B.C.E. had brought Hellenistic thought and the Greek language (Koine) to Palestine. This was embraced by the intellectual and aristocratic elite but thoroughly rejected by the agrarian population and lay movements that had begun to develop in and around the time of the Maccabean revolt (167 B.C.E.). The vast majority of Second Temple Jewish literature (sans Philo, Josephus and certain Jewish-Hellenistic pieces) is anti-Gentile. Gentiles are not part of the *ethne Theou*. This vacillating orientation can be found by examining the post-exilic prophetic tradition where one finds certain prophets forecasting doom on the Gentiles while others have a vision of Gentiles coming to Jerusalem to worship (are we to presume that they have now become Jews?).

The eschatology of Second Temple Judaism, only found outside the Hellenizing circles, is replete with discussions of God's fiery anger at the gentiles, how God will destroy the gentiles and that gentiles are to be avoided at all costs. I Enoch and the Dead Sea Scrolls both testify to this as does pre 70 C.E.

Pharisaic halakha, particularly that of the school of Shammai (in which Paul was trained).¹¹ Volumes have been written on Jewish-gentile relations during this time and it suffices to say that there is a consensus that the problem of the *'ethne'* looms large in this discussion. In other words the presenting issue, then as now, was race. The entire project of the New Perspective on Paul was the recognition of this fact and that the apostle Paul was not against Judaism or Torah per se but rather stood against a particular use of Torah by parties prone to 'identity politics' in the first century C.E. Evidence for this is that the phrase 'works of the Torah' has nothing to do with earning salvation or what Lutheran justification theory does with it.¹²

The same could be observed in studies on the historical Jesus for the last seventy years. The massive criticism of the criterion of dissimilarity in the Third Quest for the Historical Jesus has led to renewed interest in the culture of Jesus and his Jewish existence. It is sad but true that Jesus' Jewishness was often perceived of as antiquated or of little relevance to his message or simply, following Bultmann and later The Jesus Seminar led by Robert Funk utilizing the criterion of dissimilarity, that the Gospels present very little of historical worth or value regarding Jesus of Nazareth. This is an extreme position and has not won popular acceptance among the majority of credible Jesus scholars. Jesus was Jewish; his message is to be completely understood in light of this and any attempt to deny this is a denial of his humanity.¹³ So let us turn to the incident at Nazareth.

We have learned from modern theologians that what one says about Scripture and how one uses it can be two different things and that how one uses Scripture is the real indication of what one believes about it. I notice, for example, that many preachers use Scripture as a diving board, they quote it and then jump off into a pool of ideas, leaving the biblical text behind. What they say might be good or true or even relevant but it has little or no connection to the passage under discussion. Other preachers I have heard treat Scripture like they are in a 7th grade science class dissecting a frog. They notice with some

¹¹ The author of Acts reports that Paul was trained under the grandson of Hillel, Gamaliel II. Unlike his 'liberal' grandfather Hillel and his father Gamaliel I, Gamaliel II switched parties to the more conservative *perush* halakha of Shammai. Like Dunn, I see a direct correlation between Paul and Qumran in the phrase 'works of the Torah' which in both texts indicates a halakic hermeneutic position. Paul's contention to the Galatians is that they are not saved by a particular 'required' interpretation of Torah but by Christ's fidelity. I follow those who understand the phrase *'pistis Christou'* as a subjective genitive. On that debate see Michael F. Bird and Preston Sprinkle, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Pistis Christou Debate* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009)

¹² See E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* and *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*; James D.G. Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*; Peter J. Tomson, *Paul and the Jewish Law*; J.L. Martyn, *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* as well as his Galatians commentary (Anchor Bible); Gabriele Boccaccini and Carlos A. Segovia, *Paul the Jew*. Douglas Campbell has brought the entire twentieth century discussion to a new level in his apocalyptic reading of Paul, following Martyn (and J. Christian Beker) in *The Deliverance of God* and other books. On this orientation, which in my opinion is able to best explain the Pauline data, see Joshua B. Davis and Douglas A. Harink ed., *Apocalyptic and the Future of Theology*; Ben C. Blackwell et. al. eds., *Paul and the Apocalyptic Imagination*; and Chris Tilling ed., *Beyond Old and New Perspectives on Paul*; Douglas Harink, *Paul Among the Postliberals* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2003).

¹³ James H. Charlesworth has been one of the leading American lights in this regard. See *Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (New York: Doubleday, 1992); *Jesus' Jewishness* (New York: Crossroad, 1991); *Jesus Within Judaism* (New York: Doubleday, 1998). Other Jesus scholars of note in this vein include Bruce Chilton, J. Duncan M. Derrett, Geza Vermes, David Flusser, E.P. Sanders, Bernard Lee, Joachim Jeremias, Ben Witherington III, N.T. Wright, *inter alia*.

repugnance the things they don't like and can be quite critical of the process of having to figure out what lies before them.¹⁴

Some have a high view of Scripture by which they mean Scripture is the Word of God, inspired and without error, yet the way in which they use it betrays that they really don't take it very seriously. These folks ignore context and a text without a context is a pretext. These folks have what I call the Old McDonald approach to the Bible, here a verse, there a verse, everywhere a verse verse. Contemporary fundamentalist preaching is like this, a string of verses on a chain like pearls that all make whatever point the preacher is seeking to get across.

Protestants frequently argue that because Jesus quoted the Jewish Bible, this means that he accepted its authority as a whole. When they do this they import a modern view of the authority of Scripture back into the past. I noted earlier that there were many and varied views of the authority of the biblical writings and that not all groups in Jesus' time had the same view of biblical authority. It is also true that the way the New Testament writers and Jesus quote and interpret Scripture follows certain patterns in their culture. Groups in Jesus' day had rules or guidelines for interpreting the biblical text. The key question for us and one that is rarely raised is this: Did Jesus have a way of using his Bible that was different from those around him? I want to suggest that he did.

The key text for us to explore in this section will come from Jesus' inaugural sermon at his hometown synagogue in Nazareth found in the Gospel of Luke. To be fair, many critical scholars see the hand of the Gospel editor all over this text, noting that many phrases are typical of Luke.¹⁵ Nevertheless, I suspect that there is an authentic story underlying this text inasmuch as Jesus' first sermon almost gets him killed. As I hope to show, there is also a tremendous congruity with how Jesus interprets the Scripture in this text and his way of understanding both theology and ethics that we saw in chapter 1.

In Luke 4 Jesus returns to his hometown in Nazareth after having been baptized and then tested in the wilderness. He enters the synagogue and is asked to be the Scripture reader.¹ In Jesus' day this could have taken two forms, the first is the actual reader (vocalizer) of the Hebrew text that would not have been understood by Galileans.¹⁶ It would be like someone reading from the Greek New Testament in church today. The second role would be that of a translator/interpreter known as a *targumist*. This person would not read from a scroll but recite from memory a 'standard' translation (a *Targum*) in

¹⁴ The following pages are adapted from my book *The Jesus Driven Life*.

¹⁵ James R. Edwards, however, notes the number of Hebraisms found in this text, *The Hebrew Gospel & the Development of the Synoptic Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 300-301. Luke's introduction to his work (Luke 1:1-4) indicates his use of sources, one of which may have been a Hebrew Gospel. On Luke 1:1-4 see also Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 114-124.

¹⁶ Martin Hengel *The Charismatic Leader and His Followers* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 45 n.19 quotes Strack-Billerbeck (4.156) "Reading the Scriptures in the synagogue was something which, apart from some exceptions, everyone could in principle do." Hengel goes on to observe that this was also true of targumists.

Aramaic that was the common Semitic tongue in Palestine.¹⁷ Luke appears unclear as to which role Jesus took, perhaps conflating both roles into one.

Nevertheless in Luke, Jesus arises takes the scroll and reads from Isaiah:

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to release the oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

After this he rolls the scroll up, hands it over to the attendant, who puts it away and then Jesus sits down. The sermon was short and sweet. He says, “Today this text has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Now what follows is strange for at first it appears that the listeners are quite glad for what Jesus said. But he retorts rather sarcastically and proceeds to cite two examples to justify his sarcasm. It is at this point that the crowd wants to take him out and kill him by throwing him off a cliff.

This really doesn't make much sense. Some interpreters might argue that what got Jesus in trouble was some sort of 'divine' claim, that God had anointed him to be special. But is such the case? In order to see what is happening we shall note three critical but interrelated aspects of the text. First, is the way Jesus cited the text compared to what is actually in Isaiah, second, the translation problem of verse 22 and the third is why Jesus uses these specific examples from Elijah and Elisha.

When I teach this passage I point out that Isaiah 61:1-2 is one of the most popular passages found in Judaism. It is cited in the Dead Sea Scrolls and other writings as well as in rabbinic literature. Have you ever seen a football game where, after a touchdown, somebody holds up a sign in the end zone seats that reads “John 3:16”? If they had played football in Jesus' day, that sign would have read “Isaiah 61:1-2.” What made it so important was that it was a lectionary passage for the Year of Jubilee. This was a text that expressed the hope of Israel for liberation from the bondage not only of spiritual dis-ease but also political and economic oppression. The vision of Isaiah was one of *shalom*, wholeness in all of life.

The first thing to notice is that Jesus does not cite the entire text but eliminates one very important line, “and the day of the vengeance of our God.” The question is why did he do this? Some suggest that now is the time of grace and so Jesus holds off on quoting the text about God's vengeance since that will come later at the end of time. But nowhere else does Jesus seem to quote the biblical text in this

¹⁷ Bruce Chilton has shown the influence of the Isaiah Targum on Jesus' teaching on the 'kingdom of God' in *A Galilean Rabbi and His Bible* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1984); Isabel Ann Massey shows the parallels between the Sermon on the Mount and the Aramaic Targums, *Interpreting the Sermon on the Mount in the Light of Jewish Tradition as Evidenced in the Palestinian Targums of the Pentateuch* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1991).

fashion, and he never seems to break the work of God into dispensations or periods of time. So something else is going on here.

Second is the problem of translation that arises in Luke 4:22. Most translations indicate that the crowd was pleased with Jesus. These same synagogue hearers then comment, "Isn't this Joseph's son?" The intonation we are supposed to supply would be something like "Oh, what a fine sermon and what a fine preacher Jesus has turned out to be, his father would be so proud!" But is this the case?

The Greek text is quite simple and the King James has adequately translated this "and all bore witness to him." This bearing witness in the KJV is neither positive nor negative. Why then do translators say, "all spoke well of him?" Translators have to make what is known as a syntactical decision, they have to decide whether or not the "bearing witness" is negative or positive. Technically speaking they have to decide if the dative pronoun "to him" is a dative of disadvantage or a dative of advantage; was the crowd bearing witness to his advantage or to his disadvantage? If it is the former case then the intonation we gave to "Isn't this Joseph's son?" above would make sense and Jesus immediately following gets sarcastic for no reason, but if it is the latter then we could just as well translate this text as "and all spoke ill of his sermon", that is, they didn't like what he did, then the intonation of the phrase "Isn't this Joseph's son?" should be rendered something like "who does Jesus think he is coming into our synagogue and saying such things?" With this alternate, preferable translation, of verse 23 Jesus is not being sarcastic but is responding to the negativity of the listeners.¹⁸

A third point to be made concerns the two examples Jesus cites from two of Israel's greatest prophets, Elijah and Elisha. In both cases Jesus notes that God worked not within the bounds of Israel but outside the chosen people when he sent these prophets to feed and heal. What is the connection between what these prophets did and what Jesus did when he quoted the Isaiah text and why did the crowd get angry enough with him to want to kill him?

We noted that when Jesus quoted the Isaiah text he did not quote the phrase "and the day of the vengeance of our God." If, in popular opinion, part of the promise of jubilee was that God would deliver Israel from her oppressors, and if that expectation was that God would punish her oppressors, then the phrase "and the day of the vengeance of our God" would be an aspect of the longed for and hoped for deliverance by which Israel's enemies would be cast down. Political deliverance was perceived as an aspect of God working wrath on Israel's enemies. By eliminating this line, Jesus also eliminated the possibility that jubilee included God's wrath upon whoever was oppressing Israel. His words were indeed "gracious words" ("words of grace").

¹⁸ Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* (New York: Scribner's, 1971), 206 who also notes "In Matt. 11:15 he [Jesus] passes over the eschatological vengeance on the Gentiles, although it is announced in all three Old Testament passages which he takes up (Isa. 35:5, 29:18f; 61.1). This omission of the vengeance is part of the offense of the message against which Jesus issues a warning." See also Matt. 23:31 for another example of *marturein* as a dative of disadvantage. Kenneth Bailey also notes this use of the dative in *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 151.

The citation of the two examples of Elijah and Elisha then justify Jesus' exclusion of this vengeance saying for both prophets had worked their healing miracles among foreign outsiders, those whom God was supposed (in popular piety) to hate. In short, Jesus is saying to his synagogue hearers "Jubilee is here, not only for you but also for those you hate; in fact God also goes to your oppressors with this message of jubilee, deliverance and salvation." Now we can begin to understand why they got so mad at him.

But there is a further implication to be drawn from this. By eliminating the phrase regarding God's vengeance, Jesus is removing the notion of retributive violence from the doctrine of God. He is in effect saying that God is not like you think, loving you and angry with those you hate. There is a great bumper sticker making the rounds these days that captures this problem. It says "Isn't it convenient that God hates the same people you do?" Like ancient Israel, we too have a tendency to want to believe that God is on our side and will judge "the other" who is over against us, or different from us. Such was not the case with Jesus. He observed that God makes no distinctions between righteous and wicked, between oppressors and oppressed, they both need deliverance and God's blessing. Did he not say, "God makes rain to fall on good and evil and sun to shine on just and unjust?" (Matt 5:45)

In this exegesis, the message of Jubilee goes to the enemy other. If this is correct then let us ask how someone could claim that this text was **#NotForWhitePeople**. Let us ask if the use of this text to justify such an exclusive orientation is correct. Can any exegesis support such an assertion except for a sacrificial one? If such exegesis were correct then why was Jesus almost killed? There is nothing particularly offensive in such a sacrificial interpretation. Rather, Jesus would be seen as fulfilling common hopes and aspirations. Some could say that Jesus was addressing the rich establishment elite of his time but it is hardly the case that the Nazareth synagogue was comprised of such. Galilee may have been only a few days travel from Jerusalem and the elite in Jerusalem, and Herod and his sons, who would have controlled a fair amount of the land in Galilee; however they did not worship there. The answer to the crowd's rage must be sought elsewhere. The answer lies in the identity politics of Jesus' auditors and his subversion of that ideology.

This same ideology of racial politics raised itself some 15 years after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection in the city of Antioch. In Galatians 2 Paul recounts his drawing the line in the sand over against the interpretation of the Gospel authorized by the Jerusalem church authorities. I will not recount the long debates in and around this text; what is important is to recognize that the entire letter to the Galatians, and one could argue this for Romans as well, has to do with the problem of identity politics. Whereas James, Peter and Jerusalem Christianity would argue for the absolute reality and indeed God givenness of identity politics, Paul has a focused Christological approach which is worked out in his ecclesiology, particularly as that is shaped in the Corinthian correspondence and Romans 12-15. The entire matter of the collection for the Jerusalem church which has had no little amount of research devoted to it could also be placed in the category of how Paul perceives race relations between Jews and non-Jews.

At stake in Antioch, from the apostle Paul's perspective was the Gospel itself. Prior to the advent of emissaries of Yakov/James, Jesus' brother, the Antiochene Christians, both Jew and non-Jew ate at a common table. One may have to read between the lines a bit, however given what we know from I

Corinthians and Acts, the early churches celebrated a part of their common meal with a Eucharistic ritual. The significance element here is that the table that the Jews ate at was not kosher by any Jewish standard. Dunn observes that kosher was one of three significant religio-ethnic markers of Judaism, the other two being circumcision and the keeping of the Sabbath. For Jewish Christian to eat together with Gentile Christians one had to have first dealt with this issue as an identity marker. Was Paul's influence in Antioch partly to account for this? I think this a likely possibility.

The 'men from James' came with a requirement, not a request. They demanded that Jews not eat together with Gentiles. The issue was a religious-racial issue. Paul will argue in Galatians that the Gospel revelation that God had come to destroy the '*stoikeia kosmou*', what we might term the epistemology, hermeneutic and meta-narratives of created by humans. In place of humanly constructed narratives only the story of Jesus remained. His was the story by which all other narratives were to be read...and critiqued.¹⁹ Jerusalem Christianity would subsume the Jesus story within Second temple Jewish eschatology replete with the destruction of the gentiles and the elevation of Israel as a nation.

¹⁹ This remark carries an important connotation: Jesus' scholarship, by and large, has tended to accept the meta-narrative of the writer of Chronicles regarding 'exile.' N.T. Wright's work, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) has been heavily criticized by Second Temple scholarship for the 'naïve' mingling of meta-myth and 'history.' In more 'liberal' Jesus studies one finds an emphasis on the categories of 'exile and restoration' now transmuted into ideological cultural wars, politics and economics. New Testament, Jesus scholars and [so-called] critical theologies might take note of this literature. See Lester Grabbe, *Leading Captivity Captive: The Exile as History and Ideology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998). In that volume Robert Carroll avers that the concept of 'exile' was strictly a Jerusalem approach to Israelite historiography. In other words 'Exile' is a trope of the domination system wrought by Jerusalem scribal elitists. Our argument that Jerusalem Christianity embedded identity politics in the Gospel is reflected in the ideological notion of the meta-myth of exile and redemption, which is reflected, as noted above, in certain Second Temple eschatological views. Carroll "Exile! What Exile? Deportation and the Discourses of Diaspora" states "It is the taking of an ancient Jerusalem-orientated point of view by writers who are twentieth-century scholars as if such a partisan position could be taken up by non-participants without involving considerable bad faith (*mauvaise foi*). The point I am getting around to making is this: from the position of modern readers of the Bible there can really only be a sense of exile as something propounded by a Jerusalem- or Palestinian-orientated point of view" and "The prophetic literature retains (maintains) a very strong awareness of the diaspora, but its tropes seem to be edited into the service of a Jerusalem-centered ideology. Of course this need only be centre and periphery discourse that reflects Jerusalem-based traditions. In the diaspora very different traditions may have played their part in maintaining identity and cultural prosperity. The very many references in the prophetic literature to the ingathering of the dispersed communities (e.g. Isa. 60.1-14; Jer. 31.2-14; Ezek. 36.16-38) may reflect a genuine expectation for the restoration of the diaspora or they may simply reflect the pious rhetoric of 'next-year-in-Jerusalem' type of discourse" and "the Hebrew Bible is a literature of dispersal and deportation, of representations of and reflections on life lived outside one centre and inside other centres (centre and periphery are relativized by perspective). There is more than one centre in the Hebrew Bible, though the tendency of the 'canonical' text is for the Jerusalem writers to have contaminated all the other writings with their own ideological holdings and values. No wonder among the prime requisites for any reading of the Hebrew Bible is the need for a strong application of *Ideologiekritik* (ideological criticism) in order to over-come the ideological biases which the writers may have incorporated into the biblical text.(67, 78, 79); in the same volume see the essay by Philip R. Davies, "Exile? What Exile? Whose Exile?", Davies notes "'The Exile' furnishes an excellent test case for such an approach, not least because 'exile' is itself a gloriously slippery term, disguising itself (to some) as representing simple historical fact or event, but clearly functioning as something different, namely, a claim about ethnicity and relationship to a 'homeland' and an implication of enforced absence" and "At the literary level, too, 'the Exile' stands at the centre of a quite complex

Paul drew a line in the sand at Antioch in 48 C.E. He would then go in in the years 50-52 C.E. to write his great letters. The Thessalonian letters had already been penned seven years previously.²⁰ These letters reflect one very singular thing missed by most interpreters of Paul who try to make the Thessalonian letters and the others letters form a cohesive theology, viz., there is an evident shift between the letters of 41. C.E. and those following the Antioch incident in 48. That shift is the rejection of a second Temple Jewish eschatological framework. The Christological apocalyptic element, the whole restructuring of reality, stands behind the shift that Paul made in those 'silent years' between 41 and 48.

It would be this shift that caused Paul to rethink theological anthropology in light of the True Human (or for Paul, the Second Adam) Jesus the Christ. No longer taking his anthropological categories of race, gender and class from his culture, Paul understood all these distinctions only in light of the event of the death of Christ, an event recapitulated in the liturgy and practice of the early church in her baptismal rites and Eucharistic celebrations. The ritual expression of the elimination of human distinctions or what today would be called socially constructed identities occurs for the believer as they enter the waters of baptism. Upon rising they are now all 'like' Jesus, they are all just followers of Jesus, no other distinction holds.

Now here is the sad fact: this did not anchor in early Christianity for a number of reasons. One already sees Paul's egalitarian ecclesiology morph into a patriarchal form in the Pastorals, and later as the second and third centuries develop there is a clear move away from that to an all-male priesthood. For 2,000 years Christianity has struggled to acknowledge and put away these '*stoikeia kosmou*' that continue to rule in the sphere of the church. When the New Testament was formed there was a

intertextual tissue. The major biblical narrative sequence that Kings brings to a close (sometimes called the 'Primary History', comprising Torah and Former Prophets) opens with a primeval story of order out of chaos, dry land out of ocean, and follows with a tale of loss of allotted garden and banishment following human disobedience. Soon afterwards comes the Flood: judgment on the world for its wickedness, with the preservation of a small 'remnant'. These themes, regardless of any authorial or editorial intentionality, of order and chaos (mythologized as dry land and sea: or Israel and nations), of expulsion from divinely granted territory ('flowing with milk and honey', a phrase used 15 times in the Pentateuch) and of preservation of a favored line clothe 'the Exile' with the garments of archetypal mythology. And like the great myth that it is, 'the Exile' mediates a basic contradiction: punishment and salvation. The 'exiles' are simultaneously punished for the past and by their very exile rather than destruction guaranteed salvation for the future" (128, 130). Davies is clear that underneath the 'myth' of the Exile lays real historical processes and 'victims': "But this is only half of my thesis; for my concern is also with the *realia* (I leave the term for the moment unproblematic), for without some knowledge of the events that constitute the wellspring of 'the Exile' we cannot totally explain the mythical configurations. The agenda I am pursuing does not by any means minimize the importance of historical events, for every myth and every idea, every ideological construction has, according to my materialist philosophy, a basis in human political, social and economic life." Of course this is very similar to the view of René Girard who contends that behind human myths lay real historical victims. The Protestant who accepts the myth of Exile-Restoration is also accepting the Janus-faced god that inhabits these texts, and an appeal to them and this myth lies directly beneath the entire social agenda of the both the Christian Right and Christian Left and their misconstrual of the character of Jesus' understanding of 'the reign of Abba.'

²⁰ See Campbell's convincing arguments for the early dating of these letters in *Framing Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014). Robert Jewett in his otherwise excellent work does not deal with the dating of the letters in his Pauline chronology, *A Chronology of Paul's Life* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979). One of the strengths of Campbell's chronology is his use of the internal data of the letters in light of social history to create a Pauline chronology.

desperate need for emerging orthodox Christianity to be unified over against the Gnostic and Donatist as well as Arian Christians and other heretical sectarian groups. Their perception that the books of the New Testament were mono-vocal included an implicit hermeneutic: no apostolic writing could be interpreted in contradiction to another apostolic document. Harmony was to be sought. This muted the fact that the two Christianities, one led by Jerusalem Christianity, and the other by Paul (and I would argue also the community of the Fourth Gospel) were contained in the New Testament.²¹

It is thus true that Christianity for almost the entirety of her history has contained two very different trees, both of which have borne fruit: the tree of 'obedience to Torah' and the message of the free grace of God. Back and forth these two competing visions of Christianity have battled in Christendom. The battle begun in Antioch rages until today in Christendom. This has two implications. First, the Evangelical white patriarchal Christian churches in America need to acknowledge their complicity in poor race relations, at the very least in their history, if not their current practice. Second, the LPF must acknowledge their complicity in turning the Gospel into identity politics. Both types of fundamentalism have litmus tests. Both appeal to a vengeful God. Both justify violence rhetorically and physically. Both have aberrant Christologies. Both worship a Janus-faced deity. Both can be called 'children of rage' who do 'not know what manner of spirit they are.'

Evangelicals have now, for several decades been challenging male hegemony in the church in America, sometimes more successfully than others. They have yet to really address economic, class or racial divisions adequately. They have yet to treat all who are baptized as members of one body. However the same is true of the LPF who can be applauded when they assert that the Gospel is **#NotForWhitePeople**. These too must repent for demanding the exclusion of the other in order to be heard. This is exactly the voice of Abel's blood. Hebrews says "Jesus' blood speaks a better word than that of Abel" and Christianity in America tends to act far more like disciples of Abel than disciples of Jesus.

Part 3: Zeal and Fundamentalism

Eric Hoffer composed *The True Believer*, his study on fanaticism, in 1951 and it has been through 23 editions from then until 2002.²² In that study Hoffer analyzes the problem of 'zeal.' The Wikipedia article aptly summarizes Hoffer:

The "New Poor" are the most likely source of converts for mass movements/for they recall their former wealth with resentment and blame others for their current misfortune. Examples include the mass evictions of relatively prosperous tenants during the English Civil War of the 1600s or the middle- and working-classes in Germany who passionately supported Hitler in the 1930s after suffering years of economic hardship. In contrast, the "abjectly poor" on the verge of starvation make unlikely true believers as their daily struggle for existence takes pre-eminence over any other concern.

Racial and religious minorities, particularly those only partly assimilated into mainstream culture, are also found in mass movements. Those who live traditionalist lifestyles tend to be

²¹ On this see my *The Jesus Driven Life*, esp. chapter 4.

²² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_True_Believer

content, but the partially assimilated feel alienated from both their forbearers and the mainstream culture ("the orthodox Jew is less frustrated than the emancipated Jew").

A variety of what Hoffer terms "misfits" are also found in mass movements. Examples include "chronically bored," the physically disabled or perpetually ill, the talentless, and criminals or "sinners." In all cases, Hoffer argues, these people feel as if their individual lives are meaningless and worthless.

Hoffer argues that the relatively low number of mass movements in America at that time was attributable to a culture that blurred traditionally rigid boundaries between nationalist, racial and religious groups and allowed greater opportunities for individual accomplishment.

That was 1951. In 2017 it is no longer the case that these boundaries are blurred; rather they have become rigidly defined. In the apostolic church, the same rigid boundaries prevailed in the race relations 'theory' of Jerusalem Christianity. The appeal of mass movements to individuals who feel powerless cannot be gainsaid; there is strength in numbers that is undeniable. However, as the 19th century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard noted, "The crowd is untruth." Those who seek their identity in a crowd, group or mob lose their individuality, that is, they perceive themselves to be completely undifferentiated. To be different from the crowd, to raise questions is to place oneself in the vulnerable position of being ostracized or scapegoated.²³ How then does the individual who seeks identity in a group behave? As a mimetic double of the leader(s). The behavior of such persons is frequently manic; destructive behaviors are manifested and perceived of in a positive manner. We will term this the problem of 'zeal.'

A few years ago Reza Aslan published *Zealot* which confirmed for many in the Progressive/Liberal community what they thought other writers like Richard Horsley, John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg were affirming in their studies on Jesus, namely that Jesus, the social prophet, engaged in some sort of revolutionary activity which while not explicitly condoning violence surely does not condemn it.²⁴ Of course Jesus scholars were the first to pan the book as inadequate historiography, but the masses do not read reviews and the book propelled Aslan into the high life of television news commentator; that is how well the book sold. This unfortunate circumstance has led certain LPF's to assert things about Jesus that cannot in any way be substantiated exegetically while claiming a pseudo-authority (the irony is almost off the charts).

In the LXX, *zeilos* translates the Hebrew word '*kanah*' "which underlies all uses of *zeilos* in the LXX."²⁵ Unlike the Hellenistic use of the term in which one 'zealously seeks to ennoble one's personality'; the biblical term is tied to the domain of violence. The zeal of YHWH is often accompanied by violence or threats of violence. Zeal is linked with holiness and the paradigmatic figures in Judaism were Phineas

²³ See the work of René Girard for a full explication of this thesis.

²⁴ <http://rezaaslan.com/book/zealot-the-life-and-times-of-jesus-of-nazareth/>

²⁵ The linguistic data is taken from the article by Stumpff in TDNT Vol 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1964), 877-892, on '*zeilos*.' Of course the 'Kittel' word studies volumes must be used judiciously particularly the earlier volumes which contain erroneous and often supersessionist views of Judaism.

and Elijah. The New Testament example of zeal is the apostle Paul who, in looking back on his life in Philippians 3, notes with regret that when it came to zeal, he was willing and able to destroy lives.

Laying out his 'creds' in Philippians 3:4-6 Paul says that when it came to zeal he was a top-notch, A-One lover of Torah. He went so far that in his thinking he had to "persecute the church." He loved Torah and that love led him to take as his model Phineas, the proto-typical zealot whose story is told in Numbers 25. God (El) had told Moses to "impale all the chiefs of the people in the sun before El, in order that the fierce anger of the Lord may turn away from Israel" (25:4). One poor bloke brought his lovely Midianite wife into their tent and whilst having a quickie before dinner, suddenly found Phineas busting through the camel skin, spear in hand. He proceeded to ruin their sex life by driving a spear through them both.

Now El (God) was so pleased with this that he turned away his fierce wrath from Israel due to Phineas' "manifesting such zeal among Israel on my behalf" (25:10). It didn't end there though. God granted Phineas his own personal "covenant of peace" and "a perpetual priesthood" (25:12-13). So if God is angry at the people because of their sin how did they get God to bless them? They would go kill anyone they think is offending God. The story doesn't end there for Phineas made it into Israel's rock and roll songbook: "Then Phineas stood up and interceded/and the plague was stopped/and that has been reckoned to him as righteousness/from generation to generation forever" (Psalm 106:30-31). At the time of the Maccabean revolution in 167 B.C.E., as the elder Matthias Maccabee lay dying he extolled the greatest heroes of Israel's faith citing Abraham who was "found faithful when tested and it was reckoned to him as righteousness", then he extols Joseph, and then Phineas who "because he was deeply zealous, received the covenant of everlasting priesthood" (I Macc. 2:51-54).²⁶

²⁶ On Phineas and the role of zeal see John J. Collins, "The Zeal of Phineas: The Bible and the legitimation of Violence" in SBL, Vol 122, No. 1, Spring 2003, 3-21. The following are representative texts that point to the luminous role Phineas played in 'fundamentalist Judaism.' **Numbers 25** "1 While Israel was staying at Shittim, the people began to have sexual relations with the women of Moab. 2 These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. 3 Thus Israel yoked itself to the Baal of Peor, and the Lord's anger was kindled against Israel. 4 The Lord said to Moses, "Take all the chiefs of the people, and impale them in the sun before the Lord, in order that the fierce anger of the Lord may turn away from Israel." 5 And Moses said to the judges of Israel, "Each of you shall kill any of your people who have yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor." 6 Just then one of the Israelites came and brought a Midianite woman into his family, in the sight of Moses and in the sight of the whole congregation of the Israelites, while they were weeping at the entrance of the tent of meeting. 7 When Phineas son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he got up and left the congregation. Taking a spear in his hand, 8 he went after the Israelite man into the tent, and pierced the two of them, the Israelite and the woman, through the belly. So the plague was stopped among the people of Israel. 9 Nevertheless those that died by the plague were twenty-four thousand. 10 The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: 11 "Phineas son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, has turned back my wrath from the Israelites by manifesting such zeal among them on my behalf that in my jealousy I did not consume the Israelites. 12 Therefore say, "I hereby grant him my covenant of peace. 13 It shall be for him and for his descendants after him a covenant of perpetual priesthood, because he was zealous for his God, and made atonement for the Israelites.' "

Psalm 106:28-31 "28Then they attached themselves to the Baal of Peor, and ate sacrifices offered to the dead; 29they provoked the Lord to anger with their deeds, and a plague broke out among them. 30Then Phineas stood up and interceded, and the plague was stopped. 31And that has been reckoned to him as righteousness from generation to generation forever."

Sirach 45:23 “23 Phineas son of Eleazar ranks third in glory for being zealous in the fear of the Lord, and standing firm, when the people turned away, in the noble courage of his soul; and he made atonement for Israel. 24 Therefore a covenant of friendship was established with him, that he should be leader of the sanctuary and of his people, that he and his descendants should have the dignity of the priesthood forever. 25 Just as a covenant was established with David son of Jesse of the tribe of Judah, that the king's heritage passes only from son to son, so the heritage of Aaron is for his descendants alone.

I Macc. 2:54 “54 Phineas our ancestor, because he was deeply zealous, received the covenant of everlasting priesthood.”

4 Macc 18.10ff (The martyrdom of the woman with seven sons) “[Your father] read to you of Abel, slain by Cain, of Isaac, offered as a burnt offering, and of Joseph in prison. He spoke to you of the zeal of Phineas...”

Philo, On the Life of Moses LV(301)ff: “Accordingly, when license was thus given, they brought over a multitude of young men, having already long before this seduced their minds, and having by their tricks and allurements perverted them to impiety; until Phineas, the son of the chief priest, being exceedingly indignant at all that was taking place (for it appeared to him to be a most scandalous thing for his countrymen to give up at one time both their bodies and souls--their bodies to pleasure, and their souls to transgression of the law, and to works of wickedness), undertook a bold and impetuous action, such as was becoming to a young, and grave, and virtuous man. (302) For when he saw a man of his nation sacrificing with and then entering into the tent of a harlot, and that too without casting his eyes down on the ground and seeking to avoid the notice of the multitude, but making a display of his licentiousness with shameless boldness, and giving himself airs as if he were about to engage in a creditable action, and one deserving of smiles--Phineas, I say, being very indignant and being filled with a just anger, ran in, and while they were still lying on the bed, slew both the lover and the harlot, cutting them in two pieces in the middle, because they thus indulged in illicit connections. (303) When some persons of those who admired temperance, and chastity, and piety, saw this example, they, at the command of Moses, imitated it, and slew all their own relations and friends, even to a man, who had sacrificed to idols made with hands, and thus they effaced the stain which was defiling the nation by this implacable revenge which they thus wreaked on those who had set the example of wrong doing, and so saved the rest, who made a clear defense of themselves, demonstrating their own piety, showing no compassion on any one of those who were justly condemned to death, and not passing over their offences out of pity, but looking upon those who slew them as pure from all sin. Therefore they did not allow any escape whatever to those who sinned in this way, and such conduct is the truest praise; (304) and they say that twenty-four thousand men were slain in one day, the common pollution, which was defiling the whole army, being thus at once got rid of. And when the works of purification were thus accomplished, Moses began to seek how he might give an honor worthy of him who had displayed such permanent excellence to the son of the chief priest, who was the first who hastened to inflict chastisement on the offenders. But God was beforehand with him, giving to Phineas, by means of his holy word, the greatest of all good things, namely, peace, which no man is able to bestow; and also, in addition to this peace, he gave him the perpetual possession of the priesthood, an inheritance to his family, which could not be taken from it.

Josephus Antiquities 4.6.12 “However, the mischievous attempt had proceeded further, if Zimri had not been first slain, which came to pass on the following occasion: - Phineas, a man in other respects better than the rest of the young men, and also one that surpassed his contemporaries in the dignity of his father, (for he was the son of Eleazar the high priest, and the grandson of [Aaron] Moses' brother,) who was greatly troubled at what was done by Zimri, he resolved in earnest to inflict punishment on him, before his unworthy behavior should grow stronger by impunity, and in order to prevent this transgression from proceeding further, which would happen if the ringleaders were not punished. He was of so great magnanimity, both in strength of mind and body, that when he undertook any very dangerous attempt, he did not leave it off till he overcame it, and got an entire victory. So he came into Zimri's tent, and slew him with his javelin, and with it he slew Cozbi also, Upon which all those young men that had a regard to virtue, and aimed to do a glorious action, imitated Phineas' boldness, and slew those that were found to be guilty of the same crime with Zimri. Accordingly many of those that had transgressed perished by the magnanimous valor of these young men; and the rest all perished by a plague, which distemper God himself

Does any of this language sound familiar? It should. The entire letter to the Galatians is built around the problem of what happens when Torah is interpreted through the lens of zeal. When Paul refers to Abraham in Galatians 3:6 should we think of Phineas as the contrast? Yes! Immediately Paul goes on to cite Deuteronomy 27:26, “Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all things written in the book of the Law.” If God curses you, then you are fair game here below for others to do with you as they please and that usually means getting rid of you. If you are perceived as a law-breaker, and if by your violating Torah you bring God’s wrath down upon the nation, it is essential to get rid of you, for you are sin, and must be purged. A zealous interpretation of Torah brings death and destruction in its wake. For the zealot, the law is an accusatory instrument. It is used satanically in order to justify violence against the perceived violator, the sinner, the heretic, the law-breaker. This is why Paul could say he was the most zealous person he knew. What he is saying in other words in his confession in Philippians 3 is that he was the most satanic person he knew, the one who, like the Attorney General in the Prologue to Job, went about looking for those evil law-breakers, and he found them in the early Jesus movement followers. How far did Paul go? He consented to the lynching of Stephen. That was a righteous act as far as he was concerned. This satanic accusatory perspective blinded Saul/Paul and it still blinds people today, including sadly, Christians.²⁷

Paul’s issue is not with the Torah as a set of guidelines, but as a means of exclusivity, of marginalization, of torture, and of death. This is why Paul can tell the Corinthians that the Torah was a “ministry of condemnation” (2 Cor. 3:9) or that “the letter kills” (3:6), and not just metaphorically or spiritually but literally. Every Christian justification for war, violence, subjugation, or torture comes from this

inflicted upon them; so that all those their kindred, who, instead of hindering them from such wicked actions, as they ought to have done, had persuaded them to go on, were esteemed by God as partners in their wickedness, and died. Accordingly there perished out of the army no fewer than fourteen [twenty-four] thousand at this time.”

Midrash Rabbah on Num 25:13: “But did he [Phineas] offer a sacrifice, to justify the expression ‘atonement’ in this connection? No, but it serves to teach you that if a man sheds the blood of the wicked it is as though he had offered a sacrifice.”

Targum Ps. Jonathan on Numbers 25 (6ff) [*Targum in Italics*]: 6. And behold, an Israelite man came *holding a plait of hair of a Midianite woman*, and brought her near toward his brothers in the sight of Moses and in the sight of all the congregation of the Israelites. *He answered and said to Moses: “What is it that is wrong to approach her? And if you say that it is forbidden, did you not marry a Midianite woman, the daughter of Jethro? And when Moses heard, he became excited and let himself go.”*²⁶ But they (the Israelites) wept and recited the Shema, and stood at the door of the tent of meeting. 7. When Phineas bar Eleazar bar Aaron, the priest, saw *this*, *he remembered the regulation and answered:* “Whoever ought to kill, let them kill...8. *Twelve miracles were performed for Phineas at the time when he went after the Israelite man with the stranger [there follows an enumeration of the twelve miracles].* 10. And the Lord spoke to Moses saying: 11. “The zealous Phineas bar Eleazar bar Aaron, the priest, has turned aside my anger from among the Israelites because when zealous of my zeal *he killed the sinners* among them; and *because of him* I did not destroy the Israelites in my zealousness. 12. *In an oath I say to him in my name: Behold, I have decreed to him my covenant of peace, and I will make him an angel of the covenant, and he shall live eternally*²⁶ to announce the redemption at the end of days.

²⁷ On Galatians 3, see my video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vq1kWhAnPHU>.

misreading of Torah. What was meant as life is, because of our misguided interpretation, death itself. The zealous interpretation of the law, an interpretive model which dominated most of the groups in Paul's time (and which Peter and James would follow), is, and always has been, the problem, it is still a problem in American Christianity.

The only times the term *ze/los* is used positively in Paul is when he switches to the Greek notion of zeal as the stirring of emotion to better oneself. It seems likely that Paul plays on the LXX (Jewish)-Greek contrast use of the term in Galatians 4:17-18. Paul will only use the term zeal when the end game is edification. It can never be destruction. Those who in their zeal take it upon themselves to protest in such a way as to destroy are not being zealous in the positive sense but in the LXX sense: full of self-righteous indignation they retaliate at those who will not line up with their particular and peculiar understanding and utter their shibboleths. This has been my experience and it is the experience of others. Empathy for the victim should never be correlated with exclusion of the persecutor in the Christian faith; we are those who are called to forgive our persecutors, to bless our enemies and to love them. We are called to weep with those who weep; we are not called to retaliation and 'justified anger.'

A story in the Gospels highlights this argument. In Luke 9 the brothers Zebedee reveal the role played by the Phineas-Elijah zealot prototype in their theology. All the themes we have mentioned come together at this point: exclusionary holiness codes, politics, race relations and justification of negative and/or hostile feelings toward the 'other.' The Zebedee brothers saw themselves as righteous bringing in the reign of God in the same manner as Phineas and Elijah: through violence. Jesus' clear rebuke to them ought to serve as a reminder to us today that there are those in our midst, even prominent voices (as were James and John in Jesus' circle) who would in their zeal discount, ostracize and potentially violate those who will not consent to their intellectual holiness codes and framing meta-narrative.

Zeal is a problem, not a solution, and unless the actions and theological model of the zealous LPF is taken seriously and dealt with the contamination of violence will prove disastrous among persons who self-identify as Liberal or Progressive Christians.

Part 4: Conclusion

In light of these exegetical arguments one may inquire how this plays out in the looming question about racism in America. The Google online dictionary defines 'racist' as "a person who shows or feels discrimination or prejudice against people of other races, or who believes that a particular race is superior to another." It is easy to spot the racism of the neo-Nazi; it is not easy to recognize that it is not just white people who are racist. For is it not the case that the hashtag **#NotForWhitePeople** discriminates against white persons? Is it not a perversion of the entire Gospel message which is 'for all' to declare that Jesus' inaugural sermon is exclusive to persons of color? How does this example not fit the definition of 'racist'? What if a naïve white Evangelical had done the same thing with the hashtag **#NotFor_____People** (fill in the blank)? Do you think for a moment that Christian progressives would ignore this? How does this interpretation which has no exegetical foundation receive such quick approbation as it did when it was posted on Facebook last spring, particularly by so-called white allies? Here is where the real problem of the LPF lies: the double standard or hypocrisy of asserting that all

people are equal but some are more equal than others.²⁸ The very thing they decry in others they do themselves. This does not help the conversation at all and just as in the first century was rent by a form of Christian fundamentalism so also in our own time churches are being rent asunder by the demands to conformity of the zealous LPF.²⁹ Churches, that since the 1960's had worked hard toward racial integration, are being split by the demand of the LPF to accept *in toto* the entire agenda of the LPF including the infallible meta-narrative of certain 'race relations theory.' This is not only unfair; it is also unacceptable within the ecclesial sphere.

Let us call the importation of this agenda what it truly is: the attempt to smuggle an elitist liberal Torah into the sphere of the Gospel. It begins with the assumption that God's revelation in Jesus Christ is insufficient and must have other grounding. Douglas Campbell, following Karl Barth vigorously inveighs against this referring to this particular theological move as 'methodological Arianism.' He is spot on to recognize that only God can reveal God, following the epistemological frame of Athanasius, particularly as the church father is interpreted by T.F. and J.B. Torrance, and of course Karl Barth. The LPF on the other hand has chosen to walk away from that which the church has always confessed, namely, that in Jesus of Nazareth everything was said that will ever need to be said about God. Of course this same move is made by the Conservative Fundamentalist when they argue from Platonic and Aristotelian presuppositions which led Phillip Lee to contend that both versions of Protestantism, liberal and conservative, have an identical set of presuppositions and these presuppositions are Gnostic Christian ones!³⁰ Little wonder then that both LPF and conservative fundamentalism dispense with Jesus' ethics and resort to some form of Niebuhrian theological ethics.³¹

Finally, the fundamentalist engages in selective justice. For the LPF this means justice for persons of color, and often, compensation for past wrongs. They will often include Native Americans in the list of those marginalized by white males as the US expanded from the Atlantic to the Pacific. The LPF contends that the person of color has an equal right to jobs, income streams, and lifestyles as the 'white privileged' have and they do. Yet none of these same LPF's would consider selling their home which stands on stolen land, and giving the money to the local Native American tribe (or any other if there are no descendants). There is no way they would do that, yet the demand of the LPF is that white males give up privilege (which is 'apparently' a social commodity with limited availability). This is hypocrisy of the highest order and it is selective justice.

If the conversation is to move forward in America the first thing that must occur for the Progressive Christian movement is to acknowledge that its fundamentalist adherents have created an untenable environment for dialogue or rapprochement. Instead of acting as the PC Police, requiring shibboleths to be uttered before one can come to the table, the Progressive Christian movement must acknowledge that the zealous activist and racist approach, tacitly approved by their virtual silence on this matter, must cease. The strategies and tactics of the fundamentalist LPF's must be condemned in the same

²⁸ This, of course, is a paraphrase from George Orwell's *Animal Farm*.

²⁹ Again, this applies *mutatis mutandis*, and perhaps even more so, to Evangelical Fundamentalism.

³⁰ *Against the Protestant Gnostics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

³¹ Stanley Hauerwas has shown the problems inherent in Niebuhr's theology in *With the Grain of the Universe* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001) comprising the Gifford Lectures of that same year.

fashion and with the same vigor as those who advocate for white supremacy. To not do so, to remain silently complicit, is to concede the Gospel to other powers which do not belong in the ecclesial sphere. To say that this problem does not exist is to hasten the inevitable outcome which is not just the presence of two Christianities in America but an all-out war between them.

Like Karl Barth in 1933, I name the problem of natural theology as another source or lord alongside or subsuming the Gospel in current Christian discourse. The fanaticism of the neo-Nazi movement in America is deplorable as is the Evangelical (virtual) silence on the subject.³² Yet, the silence of the Liberal/Progressive Christian Left regarding those who engage and justify violent and destructive rhetorical strategies and physical violence by appealing to the name of Jesus is also staggering. I won't impugn motives to those who remain silent. I will just warn them that if they do not address this elephant in the room, they will find themselves and their followers compromised when protests turn deadly. It has been said there is no moral equivalence between the violence of the neo-Nazi's and that of opposing crowds. That may well be, ethicists will have their debates. But if contemporary followers of Jesus do not renounce reciprocal violence in all its forms, as did Jesus and the entirety of apostolic Christianity, they will crown it King and it will kill us all.³³

³² As of this date only one Evangelical pastor has abandoned the Administration of the Executive in the White House. It stands as a daily shame on Evangelical Christianity that others have not done so. All theologies of glory must be protested.

³³ Nathan J. Robinson makes a similar plea from a secular perspective. Accessed August 23, 2017. <https://www.currentaffairs.org/2017/08/thinking-strategically-about-free-speech-and-violence>