

The Children of God, Part 2

Opening

What if our theology could get up from our armchairs and move into our world? That would be something worth paying attention to. This is The Armchair Anabaptist podcast.

<intro song> Lay your guns down, down on the floor. There ain't no good in those guns anymore. Take my hand and let me kiss your feet. Let our friendship be sweet. <end>

“Because Mennonites have usually found that the way to faithfulness is to separate from others and eventually if only I am here, then at least I'll agree with myself.”

“And I don't think that we can say we love someone and then shoot them. It doesn't make sense.”

“I always tell folks that, ‘Look at - if you're in a debate and winning the debate becomes more important than reflecting love towards the person you're debating, then do the Kingdom of God a great service and shut up.’”

“How do we encourage people to see nonviolence as something more than a position about war?”

“Because we're not just sitting around doing podcasts and theology, we're actually trying to live our lives as Christians.”

<song> This is a reckoning between you and me. The righting of all wrongs as we eat and as we drink. <end>

Introduction

Kevin Wiebe: You are listening to The Armchair Anabaptist. This is episode number four, *The Children of God, Part Two*. I'm Kevin Wiebe.

Jesse Penner: And I'm Jesse Penner, and we are once again your hosts. We are going to be digging into this idea of what it means to be the children of God a little bit further. Last week we took a look at Matthew 5:43-48 and the call that Jesus has to a life of nonviolence, and how it relates to our identity as children of God. And we talked with our panel about that.

Today we're back with that same group of people to expand a little bit further and to ask the question as we take on this identity of children of God, as we enter into a different

ethic and a different way of thinking, there always is the risk about that creating a separateness or sort of a condescension in that we are now saying that we think about things differently and better than those around us, and certainly, in our own heritage as Mennonites, there has been the perception of pulling back into a group and thinking of ourselves as better than the community around us.

And let's not let ourselves off the hook too easily there certainly has been some truth to that as well. That we have sometimes created communities and groups that think of themselves as elevated as compared to the sort of worldliness around them. So how do we engage with the truth that we are children of God and we are called into a new way of thinking without becoming condescending to the world around us?

KW: And I think sometimes the temptation, Jesse, is that when we have failed in the past to live this out, we just want to avoid this topic altogether and say, "okay, well, because we've failed at living this out properly, we're just going to go to a different theology altogether," but I think it's actually important that we don't give up on this idea of loving our enemies and don't give up on this idea of nonviolent peacemaking, but rather that we learn to live it out in a way that's not condescending and our guests today are going to do a great job of explaining this for us. We'll be talking to Dr. Greg Boyd, Dr. Carol Penner. Dr. Layton Friesen, Dr. Thomas Yoder Neufeld, and Dr. Terry Hiebert.

JP: We're going to start off by coming back to Dr. Layton Friesen. He's the Academic Dean at Steinbach Bible College. He's also the author of *Secular Nonviolence and the Theodrama of Peace*, and we presented this question to him. How do we, as children of God, live that out without becoming condescending and self-righteous in the process?

How do we, as children of God, live that out without becoming condescending and self-righteous in the process?

Dr. Layton Friesen: I think that's a very real concern, and it's one that we have to be quite careful about because it's quite tempting for the church to fall into these patterns, and throughout the Church's history, whenever the Church has encountered an evil world or an overpowering world, the temptation has always been to withdraw, and sometimes they've had to do that for very, very necessary reasons.

You think of the monastery, for example, in the Middle Ages, or you think of the Mennonite colony in anabaptist history and that's not always bad. Sometimes that's just a necessary way of surviving, of getting on and of preserving the gospel. But it can also arise this desire to withdraw, to set oneself apart from the world, that leads to this condescending and self-righteousness.

It can also arise from some misconceptions that we have about what it means to be holy. Of course, we know that being holy means to be set apart, but I think the Bible does a very

interesting thing with that “being set apart.” Jesus is the model for us of being holy, of being set apart. But what does Jesus do that sets him apart from the rest of humanity? What does being God, being divine, look like in the human life that Jesus lived? I think it means so identifying with sinful humans, coming so close to people, that all their poison, the toxin of their lives, that the venom in their lives pours over onto Jesus and Jesus dies with this toxin in his system. That is what sets Jesus apart from the rest of humanity. His willingness to identify as the one sent from God, as God himself, with sinful humanity to that extent, without pulling himself back and extracting himself and setting himself at a distance he went into the far country and found us there in our rags, and he identified with us. He came to us, and that's what holiness means for Jesus.

And that's what sets him apart from the rest of the world. That's what distinguishes him. That's what makes him special. That's what makes him unique from everybody else that has ever lived is his insistence, his love and his willingness to do that and so that is, I think, a very different way of thinking about holiness that isn't at all condescending or self-righteous. It's really based on a very special and unique form of love that Christians are called to.

So what does all this have to do with following Jesus's teachings? I think this is not just about following his commands, I think this is really about having the mind of God here. It's about having the mind of the servant of the Lord. It's about having the humility of Jesus. It's about having his tenderness. Jesus loved hanging out and partying with sinners. That's actually what loving your enemies looks like. It's not removing yourself from people, it's actually moving in and being a part of their lives and loving them in very practical and human kinds of ways, and so I don't think there can be anything condescending or self-righteous about someone who has truly bought into the love of Jesus.

The whole command to love one's enemies is based upon Jesus' willingness to come and live among us and to eat with sinners and to touch people who had leprosy and so forth. I mean Jesus demonstrates this over and over, that's what loving our enemies looks like, and so it means that we are never going to be self-righteous, but it does mean that we will be righteous. I think it's important to emphasize this is not about just sort of becoming sinful. This is about so loving God that we are willing to love the world for the sake of God and to love the world in some very practical and human ways. That would be kind of the way I would approach that question.

JP: Right, that the pursuit of holiness is actually something that burns away that condescension and self-righteousness by the nature of what it means to be holy as Jesus modelled it.

LF: Exactly. Holiness is not something that we just understand, that you can just say holy and people know what you mean by that. In order to understand holiness, we have to look for a model. We have to have someone teach us about it. We have to say where, where can we see the holiness that God wants? Where has that been taught to us? We have been taught what holiness means by the life of Jesus. That is why Jesus came - to show us what genuine Israelite, human, Christian holiness looks like. And he did that by eventually being crucified for eating with sinners.

I think that's just a very interesting way to think about holiness, and it's one that the church has often struggled with because we often feel like getting too close to our enemies is going to pollute us, it's going to corrupt us, we're the ones who are going to get sick, rather than the healing going the other way. And I think Jesus had this incredible confidence in his own holiness and the potent power of his holiness to believe that if he just hung out with sinners, they would be the ones who would be sanctified. That his holiness would actually spill over and heal them if he could just get close enough to them, and if they would receive him as their saviour. That was a confidence that was given to him, I think, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

JP: Through our discussion we ended up talking a little bit more about something fascinating that happens with Jesus where we see a switch from the Old Testament. In the Old Testament it seems, when you look at temple practices and when you look at the rules and systems that were created around religion, there was always the risk of the unholy defiling the holy. That if you came into contact with something unclean, you too were unclean.

Yet with Jesus we see this reversed, where when Jesus, who is ultimate holiness and purity and cleanness, comes into contact with the sinful and the broken and the hurting, instead what happens is there is a transference of holiness and power to those that he comes into contact with. Layton expressed how this changes how we think about how we interact with people who think differently than us.

LF: I can't just walk into any situation, no matter what my weaknesses or temptations and think that, "oh, the Holy Spirit is going to prevent me from being tempted or falling or whatever." I have to be careful, I have to know my own situation, but there is something basically contagious, I think, within the Christian life that we need to take confidence in.

KW: Doctor Carol Penner is a professor and the Director of Theological Studies at Conrad Grebel University College. We also asked Dr. Penner this question about how Jesus differentiates between the logic of the world and the logic of God and how we can learn to live as children of God without becoming condescending and self-righteous in the process.

Dr. Carol Penner: Well, I think by definition, living into the identity of being a child of God means that you will always be humble because we are all children of God, because God doesn't have favorites. God loves everyone and so if I'm really being a child of God, I am acknowledging that I am one of billions that God loves. Being a Christian doesn't mean you're part of a special club, that God loves you more, you just are more aware of the fact that God loves everyone and that has to bring humility.

JP: When I connected with Dr. Terry Hebert, president of Steinbach Bible College, he grappled with this question as well, living as children of God without becoming condescending, here's what he had to say.

Dr. Terry Hiebert: Again, Paul says the same thing in Romans 12. He calls followers of Jesus to love their enemies. To feed them when they're hungry, to give them drink when they're thirsty. To grieve when they grieve and to rejoice when they rejoice.

It reminds me of the story of this nurse in southern Ukraine. She was in that besieged city of Mariupol, and she was bringing medical aid to the soldiers, and civilians, but to the soldiers from both sides of the conflict. It was kind of a remarkable example of this kind of loving enemies thing that that you don't hear about very often but was being practiced there. Remember that Jesus is talking about loving enemies in the context of the Roman occupation, in Roman brutality, enslavement of people, taxation that was unjust, and in the context of all these other messiahs who are saying we've got to resist the Roman occupation, and we've gotta do something to get rid of them.

And who knows? Maybe one of the characters, Barabbas, was he an insurrectionist? Was he in fact one of those people? And here we've got Jesus being exchanged for the one who is not loving his enemies, whose hating his enemies, and so there's an ironic exchange between those two. That the one who loves his enemies is actually the one on the cross and the one who hates his enemies is the one who is set free. It doesn't make sense. The reader should figure that out.

And these rebellions, Barabbas' and others, they generally failed. Basically, Jesus does the opposite. He treats Roman centurions with respect, even praises their faith, he heals their children. What is that?

Stassen makes the point that what he calls '*just peacemaking*' can occur between people but also between nations that love their enemies in such a way that they participate with each other in common treaties, in communication exchanges, travel and trade, whatever. The nations that love their enemies are much less likely to go to war with each other.

Similarly, he says that nations that cooperate extensively with each other in common projects, in common practices and initiatives tend to also make war less often. Being afraid of enemies and retaliating against them is actually the first step towards war.

Jesus is teaching to love enemies, to include them, and to include them in the community of neighbours of those whom we love, and that's really the climax of this whole chapter, in verse 48.

I've wondered sometimes one of the verses that I question and wonder what it means and all that stuff is verse 48 where Jesus says so "be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect," some other translations say, "be complete as your heavenly Father is complete." If we're thinking of perfection as somehow exclusion and separation and being pure in that kind of abstract sense, then that produces a certain kind of living in the world. Kind of separationism and not loving enemies, really. It's basically avoiding enemies, but if God's holiness, God's completion, God's perfection means that he gives love to the just and the unjust, the good and evil, to the righteous and the unrighteous, then it's about generosity and blessing and mercy rather than exclusion.

Luke says be merciful, as your Heavenly Father is merciful. That's what it means to be perfect or complete, if you want to use that term. Holiness is seen in compassion to your enemies and mercy toward enemies and I think that's what he's getting at with loving your enemies here.

KW: One of the things I love about panel discussions like this is that we take one question and ask the same question of different people and they come with radically different answers, not necessarily contradictory answers, just with different perspectives, all of them with so much wisdom.

When we talked to Layton, he talked to us about the holiness of God and the holiness of Jesus and this kind of reversal of purity, and this reversal of holiness as being something that instead of sin being something that infects the holy, that it's Jesus's holiness that infects the sinner. Then we talked with Carol Penner about humility and we talked with Dr. Terry Hiebert about the goodness of God and all of these different kinds of topics, all coming out of this desire of learning to be the children of God in how we love our enemies as Jesus talks about in Matthew chapter 5 and yet doing this in a way that's not arrogant and condescending in the way that is kind of the way that our ancestors maybe have succumbed to over the years.

JP: I think you're on to something there, and I think that there it's a fascinating thing hearing these answers stacked up next to each other, because I think from our human perspective it's difficult to understand how humbleness and holiness could interact. Humility and holiness feel like they should be opposite ends of the spectrum, they shouldn't be able to kind of coexist in one space, and yet both of those come up as answers here in terms of how we can live out this life of enemy love without falling into that trap of condescension and separation.

And to me, President Terry's answer at the end really does a beautiful job of tying those things together in some ways, because how do we understand holiness and humility as being able to relate to each other and connect?

I think that God's goodness is maybe sort of the emulsifying agent that can bring those things together and create this deeper understanding of what it means to follow in his image. That Jesus was someone who is perfectly holy but of course, he also humbled himself, right? Philippians 2 talks about that beautifully. The idea of a humble Saviour who came to be a servant to all and so those things can coexist when we truly understand the goodness of God.

KW: We had a chance to talk to Dr. Greg Boyd, the pastor of Woodland Hills Church in St. Paul, MN. He's also the author of numerous books, including *The Crucifixion of the Warrior God*. We asked Doctor Boyd this same question about how Jesus differentiates between the logic of the world and the logic of God. So how do we learn to be children of God without becoming condescending and self-righteous in the process?

Dr. Greg Boyd: The call to love all people is a call not to judge others. You can't love somebody if you're looking down on them. Ultimately, what I tell my congregation is that our most fundamental task as disciples of Jesus is to agree with God about the worth of every human being that you encounter, and you know the worth of every human being you encounter by the fact that God thought they were worth dying for. Jesus died for them. So God paid an unsurpassable price to be in relationship with all human beings, and that means all human beings have unsurpassable worth. And our job is to agree with God about that, and it doesn't matter whether the person is virtuous or terrible, whether they're being nice to you or being terrible to you or even threatening you, our job is to agree that they have unsurpassable worth. And we have unsurpassable worth, and so in that one respect, there's fundamental equality.

Now to do that, to love like that, we have to set aside all of our judgments. And we all have to discern things - is this person trustworthy or not, would I let them babysit my kids, you know we have to make those kind of decisions, but we're never allowed to at all degrade the worth of another person.

They may not be trustworthy, they may even be a scoundrel, but they have unsurpassable worth, and so while we must discern whether we're going to buy a car from them or not, or let them babysit my kids or whatever we can never discern the worth as being less than unsurpassable. It's absolutely impossible to be loving the way the father loves and to be condescending towards others.

To get this point across, Jesus said, "why are you looking for the dust particle in your neighbour's eye when you've got a log in your own eye" and I think part of what he's doing there is he's giving us a stance that allows us to be living in love. When you see

something in someone else's, consider that - whether it is a fault, or imperfection or whatever - that is a mere dust particle compared to the tree trunk of faults that you've got in your own life.

Jesus isn't saying that you know we're all objectively a million times worse than any sin that we see in another, there's probably a million dust particles in the log, but he's not making a statement about the objective morality of his disciples, he's giving them an attitude, and it's an attitude of absolute humility, that yeah, you'll see faults in folks, but our first response should be that I have my own logs and it's a million times worse than whatever I see in them.

Paul said the same thing in 1 Timothy 1 when he says, "here's a saying that is worthy for everybody to confess, that Jesus Christ came into this world to save sinners, of whom I am the worst." And that's the saying that is worthy for all of us to be saying, so we should all regard ourselves in one sense, as the worst of sinners. Now that doesn't mean that we should be beating ourselves up and loathsome in this kind of false humility that says, "oh, I'm altogether evil, there's nothing good in me, and all that stuff," that's nonsense.

You're created in the image of God. There's a lot of great things in you, but it is about this attitude and it's an attitude that will free us from our judgments, our negative judgments of others. You can't possibly be looking down on somebody if your posture is "I am the worst of sinners."

In my book *Repenting of Religion*, I contend that Jesus gives us this teaching to free us from our addiction to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The original sin of the Bible is eating from this tree of knowledge of good and evil, and that phrase was always used of kings in the ancient Near East. They were the ones who got to know good and evil because they were the law of the land. They got to judge everybody and nobody got to judge them. And when we're separated from God that's what we tend to do. We think that we are the king of the universe and that we are the arbiter of all good taste and that we have the capacity and the right to be judges of others. And we don't. We so don't. Only God has that right. And so we have to surrender that right and that's why the Bible repeatedly tells us "leave all judgment to God." God will square everything off in the end. Everyone will reap what they sow and justice will be done so we don't need to be doing it, that's God's job. Our job is just to love.

JP: As I talked with Dr. Boyd, we ended up jumping back to Genesis, and this concept of being created in God's image and the intrinsic value that that gives us. Dr. Boyd took that even further and tied it into our understanding of what happened on the cross.

GB: The intrinsic worth is unsurpassable worth. God couldn't have paid a higher price than he did to be in relationship with us, and so we have to be in agreement with that. If we call him Lord our most fundamental job is to try to see the world the way he sees it and

the way he tells us to see it. While that person may be harmful and all these other things, society might have to lock them up. While that is all true, it doesn't change at all the fact that Jesus died for them, and therefore they have unsurpassable worth.

JP: Dr. Thomas Yoder-Neufeld is Professor Emeritus of Religious and Theological Studies at Conrad Grebel University College. He's also the author of *Killing Enmity* and chair of the Faith and Life Commission at the Mennonite World Conference. We brought this same question to Dr. Yoder-Neufeld.

Dr. Thomas Yoder-Neufeld: I think that's a very important question because you might call it the occupational hazard of those who try to be like God. I mean, in that sense of wanting to emulate Jesus, wanting to be true sons and daughters of God.

It's very difficult not to begin to view others as less, as morally bankrupt, et cetera. And often we've used the term 'the world' for that, "don't be conformed to this world," as Paul says.

So that's a very important thing, and I think actually when I say occupational hazard, I think many of us who are Mennonite know how easy it is for us to see ourselves as the special minority who can look down on the rest of the world, including the Christian world, is not really getting it. I find it fascinating that in the exhortations in the New Testament, one of the most important themes again and again is humility. Now, why does it have to get stressed so much? Why is it important for Paul to, say, "think of others as more important than yourselves"? Put others before yourself? You usually have to stress because there's a problem, so I think people who try really hard to be good or to be faithful or to be terrific disciples are always in danger of seeing themselves as the benchmark for what's good. So I think that that emphasis on humility is a kind of sign, "OK, we might not be the first ones to be struggling with this."

Let me say something about 'the world' because that can easily lead to, as I'm sure that many of us who've grown up in the church know, to a kind of almost demonizing of the world outside the circle of the good that we're part of. And so I find it very interesting, for instance, to realize that this world that has its own logic, as you say, that is fallen, to use really old and important language, is the world God created and loves.

One of the verses most of us learned already as children is John 3:16, and I don't know whether we think about it when we've also grown up with thinking about the world as bad, God loved the world so much that he gave his own son. And then the very next verse, "he did not come to condemn the world, but to save the world." Now that needs to be held in some relationship to the world. In the Bible there's plenty of evidence that biblical writers learned a great deal from the surrounding cultures, the wisdom tradition is full of that, and if we're honest, we know how much we learn from quote 'the world around us.' Not everything about 'the world' is bad.

Having said that I think it's really obvious today - I can hardly watch TV news right now because the quote 'logic of this world' as you call it is playing out in graphic fashion. The brutality of power, the desire to dominate couched in highly theological language - we want to re-establish the Christian-Russian world and vice versa - those who think that the only alternative for them is to get more weapons and there's enormous push, including on Canada, to furnish as many weapons as we possibly can. That's what I would call the logic of the world: the way you solve the problem with abuse is to have at least as much power to keep it in check.

I don't think that we can expect as Christians the world, the states, the social organizations to be the Kingdom of God or to be disciples of Jesus. I think that's not a fitting expectation. But we should expect those who want to call themselves the sons and daughters of God to plug into the logic we were just talking about before, where you even give your own life to overcome the animosity. Again, let me just refer not only to the passage about God loving enemies as the creator who can make the sun shine and the rain fall, but think about Ephesians 2 where Christ is said to literally kill hostility through the cross.

Now that's absurd. How can someone who's been brutalized to death like Jesus overcome the hostility where his own death becomes an act of power to overcome that. Now as Christians we all live in deep gratitude for exactly that act of world changing grace. So as sons and daughters of God we ought to not assume that the logic that works in this situation is what those who work on a different basis, and a different premise assume these problems can be solved, but we are to follow this. This is what discipleship means in this case - follow the Jesus who as Lord and Master put on an apron and washed feet. Who as cosmic Lord gave his life to overcome hostility. That to me is a very clear picture of the logic of the world that is not yet the Kingdom of God and the logic of God that comes to expression in Jesus.

JP: Something that really caught my attention as Doctor Yoder Neufeld was speaking was the connection he makes in his speaking about John 3:16 and 17. I've read that verse so many times. Obviously it's a verse that's deeply familiar to many of us. It's one of the first verses that kind of gets stamped on our hearts as children, and it's one that comes up over and over again, and for good reason. It's a beautiful verse.

I think when I thought about that concept of the world, certainly the temptation is first to apply that to ourselves and I've gone through phases in my life where that's been the primary understanding. And then maybe we think about it in terms of our churches or our communities. And then we expand it, potentially, to think about the world as all the people in the world and this sort of beautiful notion of the unity of all people in the world and this connectedness.

But something that was drawn out in this conversation was the fact that that's actually the same world that we talk about when we're talking about a world that we fear, or a world that we are skeptical of or recognizing that the secular world, the other world, that thinks about things in different ways and that engages with things that are important to us in ways that feel offensive to us, that's the world that Jesus came to save.

And for me, that was a distinctive that I had never quite drawn in that way, and I appreciated the way that it was brought up here.

KW: And I think that part of that is something that often gets missed. And John 3:17 is this very helpful reminder, where it reminds us that Jesus did not come into this world to condemn the world, but in fact to save it. So when we think about those that like you said, think differently than us or those who have different goals than us or those who are possibly even enemies of God, that is those people, the world, that Jesus did not in fact come to condemn, but that he came seeking to save and his posture in coming to earth is not one of condemnation but one seeking redemption for the world. That gives us a huge clue about what our posture ought to be as well, and so many of us often get this wrong where we approach everyone with attitudes and dispositions and postures of condemnation and arrogance instead of postures of love, humility, and grace, and as we've been talking about this whole season, love for our enemies. It's really interesting to discuss this concept of the world in light of John 3:16-17.

Well, our feature song today is a song called Psalm 91 by Poor Bishop Hooper. This is a group that sings through the Psalms and one of the lines I want to bring to your attention is the line, again it's just kind of a reworking of a psalm, and it says, "for he will deliver you from every trap and disease, for he will cover you with his pinions. For you will find refuge underneath his wings, his faithfulness, your armor and protection, those who live in the shelter of the most high, of the most high will find rest in the shadow of the Almighty."

It's a great reminder that our protection isn't actually in the weapons of warfare, but our protection is in the arms of the Almighty. Our protection isn't in words of condemnation. Our protection is in the shelter of our God, a God who loves the world in fact.

This is Psalm 91 by Poor Bishop Hooper.

Psalm 91, Poor Bishop Hooper

Those who live in the shelter
of the most high, of the most high
will find rest in the shadow
of the almighty.

For he will deliver you
from every trap and disease
for he will cover you
with his pinions.

For you will find refuge
underneath his wings
his faithfulness, your armor and protection.

Those who live in the shelter
of the most high, of the most high
will find rest in the shadow
of the almighty.

Don't be afraid of the terrors of the night
of the arrows of the day
disease or disaster.
Though a thousand fall
ten thousand at your right,
all these evils will not come near you.

Those who live in the shelter
of the most high, of the most high
will find rest in the shadow
of the almighty.

He will command all his angels
to guard you in all of your ways
upon their hands they will bear you
you'll trample the lion, the serpent, the snake.

Closing

The Armchair Anabaptist is a Theodidaktos podcast, and Theodidaktos is a publication of the Evangelical Mennonite Conference. You can check us out online at www.thearmchairanabaptist.ca and find us on iTunes, Spotify and wherever podcasts are found.

A special thanks to our guests who have joined us today, that's Dr. Layton Friesen, Dr. Carol Penner, Dr. Terry Hiebert, Dr. Greg Boyd and Dr. Thomas Yoder-Neufeld.

Our intro song is First Communion by Dane Jones Hill and our feature song today was the song Psalm 91 by Poor Bishop Hooper.

Our executive producer is Erica Fehr and our producer and audio engineer is Kevin Wiebe and our administrative assistant and wizard of all things web related is Ruth Block I'm Kevin Wiebe. And I'm Jesse Penner, and we have been your hosts for The Armchair Anabaptist.

We certainly hope that what you have heard today will do more than stay is merely food for thought, but that it can help inspire each of us to get up out of the comfort of our armchairs and translate into living more like Jesus.

Join us next time as we continue our journey looking at the life of peace and particularly looking at conscientious objectors. Join us next time on The Armchair Anabaptist.

*Edited for clarity.