

Theodidaktos *Taught by God*

Journal for EMC theology and education

Volume 5 Number 1 April 2010



ETHICS

black and white?

If only the world were as simple as that!

B Black and White.
Good and Evil.
Right and Wrong.

If the world were as simple as that our decisions would be that much easier. If the world were like that we wouldn't need Christian Ethics classes in Bible colleges and seminaries. We would read our Bibles and know exactly what to do. But life is not like that.

Recently I took just such a course on Christian Ethics in seminary. Our main text was written by the German theologian-pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Many of us found the reading difficult at first; and not only because it was German literature translated into English, but because the man was brilliant.



Why would a man who preached Jesus Christ get involved with those who would kill someone in cold blood?

He had a keen mind and wrestled deeply with many subjects such as abortion, euthanasia, politics, and the place of the Christian in the world at large. As we continued reading his works it became easier to follow his train of thought.

One of the most revealing things I read of Bonhoeffer was his perspective on the person who does not acknowledge Christ. Some would call Bonhoeffer a universalist but that is a misunderstanding perhaps.

Certainly we Evangelical Anabaptists would agree with Bonhoeffer that Christ died for everyone, bearing the sin of the whole world on his person. Therefore, the theologian would say, in his unique way, that every person belongs to the community of faith; they just don't know it yet.

That perspective turns our treatment of the unconverted on its head. Our churches cannot be clubs where only members are welcomed. Without question every person who enters the fellowship of believers is welcomed simply because Christ died for them whether or not they understand the ramifications of that act.

What does this have to do with *Ethics*? Bonhoeffer was a pacifist. He was passionate

about Jesus Christ and believed in the sanctity of life. However, he was involved in a plot to kill Adolf Hitler and was hanged near the end of the war for his part in the failed attempt.

Why would a man who preached Jesus Christ get involved with those who would kill someone, even Hitler, in cold blood? It was his very love for Christ and his belief in the sanctity of life that drove him to do it. Or so some would say.

This is where ethics gets messy. It is not so black and white. To preserve the sanctity of life Bonhoeffer believed he must take the life of the man who was destroying so many lives. It is better that one man die than that the whole nation should perish.

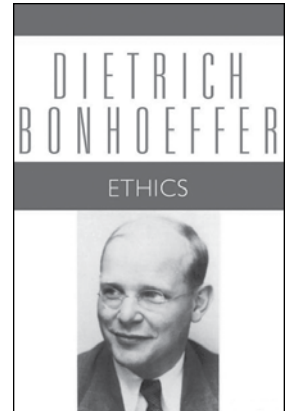
I don't agree with his logic in this event. Others in our class of Anabaptist background or peace positions also found it horrific that Bonhoeffer, a pastor, would help assassinate Hitler.

Does that negate everything he said about ethics? No, it actually underscores the reality that life is not black and white and that our choices are not cut and dried. His Christian conviction led him to do what our convictions would not. But we don't live in his context or he in ours.

And fortunate for all of us we have a gracious God who understands our motives and actions better than we do ourselves. Let us tread carefully this walk of life and make very sure we are stepping in the footprints of Jesus.

In this edition of *Theodidaktos*, two of the feature articles are based on writings of Bonhoeffer. They were class assignments requiring some theological reflection on an ethical situation of our choice. Have a read and see what Bonhoeffer has to say to these issues and perhaps you will find you want to read more of him.

The third feature issue is also on ethics as studied in the Old Testament. This is the ethics issue of *Theodidaktos*. ☹



Darryl G. Klassen

Table of Contents

- 2** Editorial: If only the world were as simple as that!
- 3** Ethical Reflections on Abortion – Shannon Doerksen
- 7** A Theological Reflection on Mennonites in Politics – Darryl G. Klassen
- 10** Social Ethics: Justice and Righteousness – Michael Doerksen
- 15** Feature Sermon: In the Presence of the LORD Almighty! – Jeff Plett
- 18** Book Review: Jesus Matters: Good News for the Twenty-First Century – Darryl G. Klassen
- 20** The Final Word

Theodidaktos: Journal for EMC theology and education

is published occasionally and distributed freely under the authority of the Board of Church Ministries, Evangelical Mennonite Conference, 440 Main Street, Steinbach, Manitoba R5G 1Z5; messenger@emconf.ca; 204-326-6401; www.emconf.ca. Inquiries and submissions can be sent to Editor, **Theodidaktos**, Box 129, Kleefeld, MB R0A 0V0; kemc@mts.net; 204-377-4773. Submissions should be accompanied by the writer's photo. Editor: Rev. Darryl G. Klassen. Layout: Rebecca Roman. Copy editor/staff adviser: Terry M. Smith.
ISSN 1911-7272 (print)
ISSN 1911-7280 (online)

Ethical Reflections on Abortion

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Dietrich Bonhoeffer's work provides refreshing insight into Christian ethical reflection, specifically on the subject of abortion. He identifies the foundation of life's sanctity for the Christian not in biological fact or natural law, but in God's revelation. Bonhoeffer's description of the Christian church's being and purpose creates an avenue for constructive reflection on what constitutes an appropriate church response to the issue of abortion.

The radical Christocentric nature of his thought emphasizes life's value as inherent in Christ's work, rather than in features of itself, thus distancing Christianity from explicit or implicit support of any system that esteems individual lives differently based

upon qualities contained in those lives themselves. All human life, both before and after birth, is thus rendered equally valuable and worthy of preservation, as the preservation of life accords with the will of God. Christian thinking on the subject of abortion is determined then, by the revelation of God in Christ and the value ascribed to humanity by that revelation in Christ's incarnation.

Christian response to the presence of abortion is determined, in Bonhoeffer's thought, by a description of the Christian church as the location wherein the reality of Christ's revelation is recognized and communicated to the larger world. This concept acts as a filter for Christian activities regarding

the practice of abortion and all other ethical issues—any physical or communicative activity undertaken by the church must be evaluated based on its conformity to the church's intended purpose to proclaim in word and deed the reality of Christ's work to the world. With this directive in mind, a survey of common activities undertaken by the Christian church community in response to the practice of abortion will demonstrate that some of these activities are not conformant with the church's given purpose.

A Christian ethic regarding abortion must begin with the reality that God in Christ has reconciled humanity to himself, and that the

church is to be “the place where [God’s reconciliation] is proclaimed and taken seriously.”¹ From personal observation, this foundational reality is most often unacknowledged as the starting point for contemporary Christian ethical discussion, particularly regarding the issue of abortion. Rather, the starting point is typically based upon the argument that a distinctly human quality is present in an unborn life, beginning at conception.

This affirmation of human life may be in itself good, and demonstrative to a limited degree of the value for human life that is illustrated by Christ’s own becoming human. However, the Christian church community has made a subtle but significant error in this respect; the foundation of this ethic is the belief that human personhood is established at conception, rather than a recognition of God’s redemptive activity. The foundation for a Christian ethic upholding the value of unborn life is constructed apart from Christ, and is rendered a strong indicator of a widespread application of pervasive modernist ideals. These ideals include the privatization of beliefs, and a greater reliance on natural law in the construction and defence of Christian ethics.

The church is acting upon and engaging the larger world as something other than what it is, not as the church, Christ’s body. In Bonhoeffer’s thought, this constitutes a choice to “reckon with...the so-called realities of life...with earthly inadequacies...with death” rather than with “God’s revelatory word.”² Bonhoeffer’s insight that “discussion of the question whether a human

being is already present confuses the simple fact that, in any case, God wills to create a human being”³ speaks to this error and realigns the Christian ethical basis for opposing abortion to God’s redemptive activity in the world. This foundational realignment similarly counters the aforementioned temptation of the Christian church to engage the world regarding ethical concerns by reckoning with the world’s “reality” rather than with Christ’s.

Christ’s becoming human, for Bonhoeffer, is the only means through which “we have the right to call people to natural life and to

All life is valuable as God’s creation and as that which he seeks to draw to himself.

live it ourselves.”⁴ Thus the reality of Christ’s incarnation as a human, and the redemptive work accomplished thereby, is the basis upon which the church values, and proclaims value for, human life.

Bonhoeffer’s placement of the basis for valuation of human life upon God’s self-revelation in Christ, and not in its own human nature, is what renders life universally valuable and abortion conversely reprehensible in a Christian ethical framework. This basis in Christ is articulated in his own incarnation as a human, and in that “God wills life and gives life a form in which it can live.”⁵ This form is purposed to maintain life for justification in Christ.⁶ All life is valuable as God’s creation and as that

which he seeks to draw to himself. If human life were rendered valuable based on some feature of its own, then it is possible, probable, and historically evidenced that weaker or disadvantaged groups within society would be placed at risk of having their humanity questioned and perhaps eventually denied.

The context Bonhoeffer himself speaks from, that of Nazi-governed Germany attests to this. His voice is thus uniquely suited to an articulation of Christian grounds for the defence of life in whatever circumstances may arise to challenge its value. The church’s proclamation of the value of human life must be based upon God’s valuation of life in order for it to apply to all persons, particularly when ideologies such as those based on “the false presupposition that life consists only in its social utility”⁷ hold a prominent place in societal worldviews. These societies would otherwise be free to determine some lives as more highly valuable and others inevitably as less so.

The practice of abortion is often intellectually defended by the citation of cases of profound disability, genetic defects, or illnesses in which it is determined that such “lives” are not worth living and should not become the burdens of parents and society at large; abortion also has the potential to demonstrate a devaluation of life based on sex or other factors of perceived “undesirability.”

Essentially, Christian beliefs regarding God’s will to create life, and his universal valuation of it, counters those who would claim the right to abort what is, on a social or individual level, believed to be a less valuable life. The universal value of human life established in Christ’s incarnation and work also provides an appropriate Christian answer to any attempts to abort based on convenience or due to circumstantial disadvantage. To this end Bonhoeffer notes, “The killing

1 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Clifford J. Green et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 63.

2 *Ibid.*, 49.

3 *Ibid.*, 206.

4 *Ibid.*, 174.

5 *Ibid.*, 178.

6 *Ibid.*, 174.

7 *Ibid.*, 193.

of an innocent person in passion or for some advantage is arbitrary. Every conscious killing of innocent life is arbitrary.”⁸

Both reasons pertaining to the perceived value of a particular life, and the degree of its perceived imposition on the relative convenience or advantage of those related to it, are silenced in the mind of the Christian by the clear articulation of the universally applicable value that is ascribed to human life in Christ.

The reality revealed in Christ is that God wills to create and preserve life. The church community’s response to this reality must be designed to “proclaim” and “take seriously” this aspect of God’s reality. To date, one of the church’s most public foci with regard to the abortion debate has been the legislative grounds that permit legal abortions to be obtained; the purpose being thereby to have the laws altered to either outlaw the practice entirely or to severely restrict the availability of the procedure to cases of perceived medical necessity. An activist approach that engages individuals more closely involves the practice of protesting at the clinics of abortion providers.

My own sense is that both of these activities fall vastly short of the church’s imperative to the proclamation of Christ’s reality. The church does not convey, in a true sense, that the Christian church values human lives because of Christ’s reconciling activity in the world in situations where its primary response to the issue of abortion is directed to legislation and not to people. An entirely legislative focus is further still from a true proclamation in that it seems to abdicate to the legislative bodies the church’s own responsibility to proclaim and foster



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value for human life. Such a focus in the church’s ethical programme regarding abortion resembles Bonhoeffer’s description of activities by which the church should *not* be characterized.

Bonhoeffer’s suggestion that “the church is not there in order to fight with the world for a piece of its territory”⁹ is in many cases belied by the contemporary North American church, which seems to grant itself a right to so engage with the world as if to apprehend the world’s territory, particular in the arena of government. The reality being proclaimed to the world in this manner is not the reality of God’s reconciliation, but the false reality of the church’s self-glorifying political influence and public relations savvy. This approach also seems to polarize the church community from humanity at large, to the detriment

of the church’s proclamation of the reality of Christ’s reconciliation which is directed toward *all* of humanity.

Here the church risks suspicion that the displacement of legislation as the primary or sole focus in Christian engagement regarding abortion could be mistaken for a condemnation of any and all public engagement based on “private” beliefs, that is, as a highly modernist filter for the church’s response to abortion. However, a tempering of the legislative approach should not be synonymous with a modernist approach to Christian ethics, wherein private beliefs are not held to be appropriate influences on the shape and character of public activity. Rather, the public activity taken will be focused on the communication to humanity of God’s gracious reconciliation and his will to create and preserve life.

The slightly more individualized practice of protesting at the clinics of abortion providers similarly fails to

8 Ibid., 190.

9 Ibid., 63.

live up to the church's imperative to proclamation in that in many cases it represents, albeit often contrary to the intentions of those involved, the condemnation of God and the church community. At its worst, this practice can involve a purposeful disavowal and disregard for the value of the lives of those involved in obtaining and providing abortions, which is intensely damaging to the Christian community's witness to Christ's reconciling work. Mere communication of displeasure and disagreement regarding the practice of abortion does not equate to an effective proclamation of the value of life.

Such participation in an activity that is most often interpreted as judgement can be detrimental to the church's effectiveness in proclaiming in word and deed the reality of God's reconciliation, to which the life of the church is intended to testify. "Those who are judging never arrive at doing, or rather, whatever they can point to as their action—and there can be plenty of it—is always nothing but verdict, judgement, reproach, and accusation against others."¹⁰ Therefore it is also crucial that the church weigh the means of communication and activity to be undertaken so as to ensure it is not, however inadvertently, usurping God's own role as judge and otherwise neglecting its imperative as the body of Christ to proclaim his reconciliation to humanity.

The failure of the church to adequately proclaim the value of life through protest is compounded when it is considered that this can also be a primary way in which a "Christian" hierarchy of life is inferred, in which the unborn life is recognized and upheld by the church to the detriment of that of the parents. The church can

The church can affirm the value of the lives of both parent and unborn child by offering effective support for those who may be contemplating abortion.

sometimes abdicate its responsibility to proclaim Christ's reconciliation to the parents involved in a prospective abortion case.

The church can affirm the value of the lives of both parent and unborn child by offering effective support for those who may be contemplating abortion. A ministry which offers prospective parents ready access to practical items such as baby furniture, clothing and other necessities, and that supports programs in areas such as adoption services, employment skills development, prenatal and parenting classes, childcare services, and the like may provide a more honest and effective means of communicating the church's value for life to the world.

Post-abortion grief counselling services are another means of explicitly proclaiming the value of both unborn children and that of their parents. This is an outreach that not only affirms the value of the lives of these parents, but constitutes what is, in Bonhoeffer's thought, the appropriate means of enacting "judgement" upon sin for the church community. Bonhoeffer writes, "Their judgement will consist in a Christian way of helping others put things right, lifting them up, guiding them onto the right path, admonishing and comforting them...it will be a judgement of reconciliation and not of disunion."¹¹

In providing these means of support for parents who may be

considering abortion, the church may not only filter their activities through the church's imperative to proclaim the reality of Christ's reconciliatory work, but also acknowledge the concept of community guilt that Bonhoeffer reckons may often be behind abortion, "[abortion] may be a deed of despair from the depths of human desolation or financial need, in which case guilt falls often more on the community than on the individual."¹²

Bonhoeffer's Christological ethical foundation is invaluable as concerns the development of a Christian ethical stance regarding the practice of abortion. The church community must view abortion as murder, because it is in direct opposition to both God's will to create and preserve life, and life's inherent value established in Christ's own incarnation as a human being, his having "entered in to natural life."¹³ This same church community is bound to proclaim this reality to humanity in word and deed.

Bonhoeffer's development of the concept of Christ-reality and the church's responsibility to proclaim it provides a framework and truly Christian foundation for ethical thinking on the issue of abortion, as well as a filter for examining the church's active engagement as regards the issue. These insights allow the Christian church to pursue a course in which it can demonstrate God's value of life in a way that does not detract from, but is in harmony with, the foundational reality of Christ's reconciliatory work in the world among humanity. ⊖

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10 *Ibid.*, 314.

11 *Ibid.*, 316.

12 *Ibid.*, 207.

13 *Ibid.*, 174.

A Theological Reflection on Mennonites in Politics

Darryl G. Klassen



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The purpose of this paper is to reflect theologically on the involvement of the Mennonite Church in Canadian politics. The Mennonite Church has been historically apolitical due to a faulty understanding of its place in the world and its ethical obligations to the world. This apolitical stance is in part the result of the Church wars that erupted between religious denominations and their political allegiances following the Reformation.

Mennonites avoided political affiliations with regional rulers so as to maintain their nonresistant stance which they based on the teachings of Jesus. In conversation with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, I will explore the theological motivations for active involvement in politics as a church and how the church can impact society through political activity today.

As I understand it from my own upbringing, Mennonites have avoided politics based on Jesus' words found in John 17:14-16. Jesus said, "They are not of the world, even as I am not of it."¹ The Apostle Paul reinforced this impression in his letter to the Philippi-

ans when he wrote "our citizenship is in heaven" (Phil. 3:20). A favorite slogan among Mennonites is that we are "in the world but not of it." It follows then that to get involved in politics and, worse yet, to become a politician is to embroil oneself in worldly affairs and risk compromising our Christian principles. A prominent Member of Parliament of Mennonite heritage was even dismissed from his church for engaging too deeply in politics two decades ago.

A failure

Taking Bonhoeffer's writings and context into consideration I have come to recognize that the Mennonite "hands off" approach to politics is a failure to be what Christ envisioned for the Church. Some might say that Bonhoeffer was too political in his work or that his situation prompted this involvement. Stanley Hauerwas saw this exactly opposite when he wrote, "Bonhoeffer's life and work would have been political if the Nazis had never existed; for Bonhoeffer saw clearly that the failure of the church when confronted with Hitler began long before the Nazi challenge. Hitler forced a church long accustomed to privileges dependent on its invisibility to become visible."²

The Mennonite Church is in danger of becoming invisible on the Canadian stage in much the same way as the German

Church in Nazi Germany. When those privileges that Mennonites have quietly enjoyed are slowly taken away they will one day realize that the kingdom of the world has encroached on the Kingdom of God.

Christ's purpose for the Church is to be a visible and active part of this world so as to reveal reality and true humanity. To remain invisible is to shirk that responsibility. Hauerwas said of Bonhoeffer, "He sought to recover the visibility of the church because, 'it is essential to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ that it occupies space within the world.' Put positively, in Jesus Christ God has occupied space in the world and continues to do so through the work of the Holy Spirit's calling the church to faithfulness."³

Not only is the Church responsible for the revelation of Christ, Bonhoeffer saw the Church as responsible for the proper functioning of government. Bonhoeffer himself wrote, "By falling silent the church has become guilty for the loss of responsible action in society, courageous intervention, and the readiness to suffer for what is acknowledged as right. It is guilty of the government's falling away from Christ."⁴

The Church must have a voice in the political conversation of whatever nation it finds itself so as to help that government fulfill its divinely mandated purpose. That divinely mandated purpose is to maintain what God has created in the order it was given and to protect what God created through its exercise of justice.⁵ Bonhoeffer asked whether the Church should risk its privileges, worship and community to speak up against anti-Christian

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1 All Scripture quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible.
2 Stanley Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2004), 42.
3 Hauerwas, 48.
4 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 141.
5 Bonhoeffer, 72.

policies. His answer was a resounding "Yes."⁶

Not disconnected

The Church is not set apart in the manner to which Mennonites have grown accustomed. Certainly we are a peculiar people because we follow Christ in a world that does not know him, but we are not disconnected from life in this world. Bonhoeffer made this clear when he wrote that the New Testament does not advocate such a degree of separation so as to alienate the world.

"On the contrary, in line with New Testament statements about God becoming flesh in Christ, it expresses just this—that in the body of Christ all humanity is accepted, included, and borne, and that the church-community of believers is to make this known to the world by word and life. This means not being separated from the world, but calling the world into the community of the body of Christ to which the world in truth already belongs."⁷

Bonhoeffer did acknowledge that there were two kingdoms unquestionably tied together but uniquely separate. He called these two kingdoms "the kingdom of the proclaimed word of God" and "the kingdom of the sword." The sword is incapable of bringing unity to the church while preaching cannot govern the people, but Jesus Christ is Lord of both.⁸

While the two do not mix, Bonhoeffer made it plain that the government cannot function without the church. Government does not produce values but rather maintains what is created and sustains what God has mandated in terms of work, marriage, and so on. The Church reminds the government of its role to preserve the world for the reality of Jesus Christ.⁹

Without the voice of the Church,

Without the voice of the Church, government begins to take on the responsibility of creating values for the people.

government begins to take on the responsibility of creating values for the people, something for which the government was never ordained. Yet this is precisely what is happening in Canadian life and government. The Mennonite Church has a responsibility to awaken to its purpose together with other denominations within the universal body of Christ to be salt and light to our government.

A proposal

How do I propose that the Mennonite Church is to perform this responsibility? First of all, let us consider what the Mennonite Church is not called to do. John Howard Yoder advocates for being political without being a politician. He argues, "The disciple chooses not to exercise certain types of power because, in a given context, the rebellion of the structure of a given particular power is so incorrigible that at the time the most effective way to take responsibility is to refuse to collaborate, and by that refusal to take sides in favor of the victims whom that power is oppressing."¹⁰

Bonhoeffer would probably agree that being a political servant in Hitler's Germany would make one complicit with the victimization of thousands of innocents. In a milder sense being a Canadian politician does require at times making concessions that victimizes one people group while advocating for another. Vic Toews, Member of Parliament for Provencher, stated that on moral issues his party allows its



members to vote by conscience.¹¹ One cannot help but surmise that this is not as easy as it sounds. Consequently the Church has a stronger voice from outside the political arena as one lobby group among others.

Just as the government is not mandated to dictate values, it is not the responsibility of the church to dictate values either. Rather, the Church is ordained to call the government back to maintain the mandates or directions for life that God established through creation. Toews recalled the issue of mandating the recitation of The Lord's Prayer in schools in the 1970's, saying that the state should not impose religious values on the nation. Here was a case in which the Church was initially outraged that prayer was removed from schools, forgetting that not every citizen shared this value.

Finally, among the things that the Church is not called to do, Bonhoeffer reminds us that we are not to sit by while dictators refuse to change their policies. At the same time we are to trust in God's sovereignty, "The church leaves to God's rule of the world whether God will allow the custodians of power to succeed...."¹²

While this may not be a problem in Canadian politics, it does call the Church to respect and submit to the

6 Bonhoeffer, 141.

7 Bonhoeffer, 67.

8 Bonhoeffer, 112.

9 Bonhoeffer, 72.

10 John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*. 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1994), 154.

11 From a telephone interview with the Honorable Vic Toews, Conservative Member of Parliament.

12 Bonhoeffer, 133.

government with the knowledge that God is sovereign over those in power. In the midst of an oppressive regime or simply a government that does not acknowledge God's values the responsibility of the Church is to be obedient to its calling.

What is the calling of the Church in terms of political involvement? The Church is not called to fight for rights, but to act responsibly. It is not to fight for rights, but to call the government's attention to the truths that God has mandated for life in this world. These include the sanctity of life as it relates to euthanasia or abortion, or a proper view of marriage.

Bonhoeffer saw it this way, "Only where the becoming human of God's love is taken seriously can it be understood that God's love for the world also includes political action, and that the worldly form of Christian love is therefore able to take the form of a person fighting for self-assertion, power, success, and security. It is here that the limits or, rather, the ultimate foundations of the law of self-assertion in political action become evident...Political action means taking on responsibility."¹³ The Church, Kelvin Goertzen said, must address certain matters before they become issues, to be proactive in knowing what might become an issue in government.¹⁴

The Church is a powerful change agent in the public domain. Yoder wrote that some conservative religious groups understand the gospel to deal only with personal ethics and not with social structures. These groups believe that if the heart of the individual leader could be changed then possibly the fate of the nation could be improved.

Yoder responded to this fallacy, saying, "What needs to be seen is rather that the primary social structure through which the gospel works to change other structures is that of the Christian community."¹⁵ Toews said that if a community of faith like the Mennonite Church would decide on a political matter, write a statement, and present it to their MP, there is the potential for incredible influence. Most churches, he said, fail to realize the power they have as change agents.

Alongside of this political voice is

The Church is not to fight for rights, but to call the governments' attention to the truths that God has mandated for life in this world.



the testimony of community as seen in the life of the Church. William Cavanaugh wrote that modern politics makes individuals of us all, alienating one person from another, by enforcing laws that protect autonomy and so-called protection. The Church on the other hand, teaches that we are a community of people.¹⁶

A new public

The Church needs to be in the public, but the Church is itself a new public, a different public. We relate differently to each other because we are reconciled to Christ. Bonhoeffer agreed with this notion when he wrote, "The church must bear witness to Jesus Christ as living Lord, and it must do so in a world that has turned away from

Christ after knowing him."¹⁷

Canada was at one time considered a Christian nation, but no longer. Our nation needs now more than ever to see the community of faith in Jesus Christ express God's politics in the political arena both through its voice and its example of true community. "The church's calling is to be the conscience and the servant within human society."¹⁸

To be the "silent in the land" is to be disobedient to God's purposes for his Church. Oddly enough, as Toews pointed out in our interview, Mennonites have always been democratically inclined. Whereas many mainline churches (i.e., Roman Catholic) appoint leaders to congregations, Mennonites have always elected their own from within. Congregational led churches are very familiar with the democratic process, and thus are not far off from political understanding.

What is needed is an awakening to the political Jesus who came not only to save individual souls, but to introduce true community to the world. When the Mennonite Church grasps that principle and begins to speak, we will shake off our disobedient rebellion and become what God intended.



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¹³ Bonhoeffer, 244-45

¹⁴ From a personal interview with Kelvin Goertzen, Conservative Member of the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba.

¹⁵ Yoder, 153.

¹⁶ Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, ed. *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*. (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 201.

¹⁷ Bonhoeffer, 132.

¹⁸ Yoder, 155.

Social Ethics: Justice and Righteousness

Michael Doerksen



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Isaiah deals with the nation of Israel as a representative of God. The list of grievances is long, but the result of not following the way of God is punishment meted out by other nations. So when the question of Isaiah's social ethics comes up, there needs to be discernment as to which passages to pay attention to. Usually the key to social ethics is the oppression of a people group, but in Isaiah this creates difficulty because the nation of Israel is oppressed due to their spiritual rebellion.

A study of Isaiah turns up a people group that is the exemplar of the social underclass. In dealing with social ethics, Isaiah has a high regard for both justice and righteousness. Treatment of this people group must include these two aspects. Other prophets also speak to this subject and come to similar conclusions. This writing has been a platform for Christ's teaching and what he passed on to the disciples as well.

I. *Isaiah* Who is Oppressed?

There is a triad of people who are considered to be most vulnerable to oppression in Israelite society: the

resident alien or stranger, the widow, and the fatherless. *'ani* is used of the disadvantaged in society who endure physical affliction or suffering.¹ This term is never linked to deserved poverty, but "always is used to denote those who were exploited and wrongfully impoverished."² Isaiah uses this term in conjunction with the widow and fatherless in 10:2 and together they form a sort of litmus test of justice and righteousness within society.³ They were disadvantaged because of "their social standing...dependent on others for their welfare and livelihood. They constituted a third economic class positioned somewhere between free man and slave, threatened socially and probably excluded from normal communal life. Yahweh, however, was their defender...Israel was exhorted by the prophets to deal justly with the *'ani*."⁴ It is this group that will be followed through Isaiah as the exemplar for Isaiah's social ethics.

In opposition to the *'ani* are the leaders and the rich. It is not the possession of a title or wealth that automatically places one in opposition, for the rich and powerful are also attributed characteristics of the wicked,

the violent, and the oppressor.⁵ Also, the poor and God's people are paired.⁶ This contrast between the pairings brings to the forefront why God has an interest in the *'ani* and acts as their defender.

What Area of Life?

In Isaiah, the focus seems to be on promoting justice (Isaiah 1:17; 10:1; 56:1). Other aspects include feeding the hungry (Isaiah 58:10) and protecting the vulnerable (Isaiah 58:7). The focus is then on those who administer justice, especially the king. This administration can be broken down into two parts, law-making and judgement.

In the kingdom of Israel, at the time of Isaiah, the laws were influenced by God's law, but there were other laws enacted by the kings of the day as well. Isaiah declares a woe on those who have made unjust laws (10:1). It is clear that subverting "justice here does not refer to abusing the judicial system *per se*, but rather the enactment of unjust laws."⁷

Application of the laws was another aspect of Isaiah's concerns. There was an expectation that "justice must in all circumstances be rendered with absolute impartiality."⁸ The abuse may have happened as a result of being "interpreted in a narrow and restrictively literal manner by the imposition of heavy penalties for relatively minor infractions or by an insistence that every crime should be expiated in full, irrespective of the social or economic position of the defendant."⁹

1 Willem VanGemeren, *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*. Volume 3. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), 455.

2 Ibid.

3 Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1 - 39*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 21.

4 Willem VanGemeren, *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*. Volume 3. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), 455.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., 457.

7 Benjamin Uffenheimer, Henning Reventlow, and Yair Hoffman. *Justice and Righteousness: Biblical Themes and Their Influence*. *Journal for the study of the Old Testament*, 137. (Sheffield, Eng: JSOT Press, 1992), 239.

8 Eryl W. Davies, *Prophecy and Ethics: Isaiah and the Ethical Traditions of Israel*. *Journal for the study of the Old Testament*, 16. (Sheffield, Eng: JSOT Press, 1981), 110. As Exodus 23:3 and 6 state, the poor must have access to justice, but favouritism should not be shown to them.

9 Ibid.

Justice and Righteousness

Isaiah's understanding of *mispāt* encompassed a variety of meanings, but was decidedly judicial as seen in the depiction of God as a prosecutor. "What is most often the topic of concern is the process governing the settling of some dispute, whether between human parties or between God and the Israelites, or the actual verdict itself."¹⁰ The reason for God's intervention is the corrupt leaders, but God does not stop there as he enters judgment against the whole of Israel. In a progressive way this will continue until the Day of the Lord when the whole world will enter judgment.¹¹

Righteousness (*sdq*) is used to indicate a right behaviour or status in regard to something else.¹² *Sdq* is related to maintaining interpersonal relationships and as such involves both God and other people in community. Isaiah insists on "relating *sdq* to the sphere of social justice and the needs of the oppressed."¹³ Other nuances in Isaiah's use of *sdq* include relations to deliverance, *salom*, alignment with *tora*, and ultimately a restored judiciary.¹⁴ It points to God's action on behalf of his people as the divine outworking leading to a brighter future.

Correlation to the Wicked

A correlation can be built between the oppression of the poor and wickedness. This starts right away in

A correlation can be built between the oppression of the poor and wickedness. This starts right away in Isaiah 1:16-17 where the people are told to seek justice and rebuke the oppressor.

Isaiah 1:16-17 where the people are told to seek justice and rebuke the oppressor. In Isaiah 5:22-24 the prophet proclaims a woe on those who deny justice, the reason being they rejected the law of God. A similar woe is pronounced in Isaiah 10:1-2, here the difference is that they create unjust and oppressive laws. Later, Isaiah 32:6-7 develops a picture of a fool who is wicked because he tries to destroy the poor and needy. Fools "embody and practice a fundamental moral indifference and disorder that inevitably works damage to the social fabric."¹⁵

Background of the Law

Deuteronomy is where God expressed his intent for the case of strangers, widows, and fatherless in Israel. They were to have food provided for them (Deuteronomy 14:29; 24:19-21; 26:12-13) and were to be treated justly (Deuteronomy 24:17; 27:19). These are just an extension of what God does, for he gives justice, food, and clothing to the orphans, widows, and foreigners (Deuteronomy 10:18). These express statements form the rule that God holds his people to. It is this that Isaiah compares

the people of his day to in order to hold them accountable.

Isaiah 1:15-28

The book of Isaiah starts off with a scene similar to a court case. God takes the stand, so to speak, and is the prosecutor against Israel, depicting its rebelliousness. How does this relate to social ethics/justice? Social justice was "expressed in ancient Israel and in the ancient Near East by means of a hendiadys. The most common word pair to serve this function in the Bible is... 'justice and righteousness.'"¹⁶ Also included in this passage are a couple of mentions of the fatherless and the widow, the oppressed.

Worship and prayer from the Israelites is no longer accepted by God because of their failure to deal justly and rightly with the oppressed. The passage centres on the prophetic lawsuit against Judah with the indictment in verses 21-23 and sentence in verses 24-26.¹⁷ Like Amos, the prophet Isaiah "insists on relating *sdq* to the sphere of social justice and the needs of the oppressed. This is the sense we find in the first occurrence of the term in Isa. 1:21."¹⁸ During the indictment, the rulers are seen as self-serving, looking out for their own interests. When this dominates society "the needy of society predictably disappear from the screen of public awareness... Jerusalem fails completely and decisively. The large theological issues of life with Yahweh boil down to the concreteness of policy toward widows and orphans."¹⁹

Resulting from this is God's sentence and action. Through the purging of the country God will once again restore it to its former status. It

10 Willem VanGemeren, *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*. Volume 2. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), 1142.

11 Ibid., 1144.

12 Willem VanGemeren, *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*. Volume 3. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), 750.

13 Ibid., 763.

14 Ibid., 764-766.

15 Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1 - 39*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 255.

16 Benjamin Uffenheimer, Henning Reventlow, and Yair Hoffman. *Justice and Righteousness: Biblical Themes and Their Influence*. *Journal for the study of the Old Testament*, 137. (Sheffield, Eng: JSOT Press, 1992), 228.

17 Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1 - 39*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 21.

18 Willem VanGemeren, *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*. Volume 3. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), 763-764.

19 Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1 - 39*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 21-22.

will be “redeemed with justice, her penitent ones with righteousness.”²⁰ Here again there is the pair of justice and righteousness.

This appears to be the establishment of God’s action in Israel regarding their sin, the beginning. There is movement in the passage from the current situation, vv. 10-17, to a vision of the future, vv. 18-20, back to the situation to see how God will work, vv. 21-26, and finally to the final state when God declares his people righteous, pointing to the Day of the Lord.

Isaiah 10:1-4

This passage finds itself in a larger context of God expressing his anger towards Israel and its rebellion. Leading up to this passage Isaiah proclaims Yahweh’s anger against



Israel but does not use the word “woe.” Isaiah 10:1 starts with “woe to those...” which can be seen as “God’s particular anger is reserved for those who consciously use the legal system to oppress the poor and make themselves rich.”²¹

Those to whom this passage applies seem to have been making advances for themselves on the backs of the vulnerable in society. Unknown to them the inverse is happening. For the “practice of social exploitation by the manipulation of the legal process... The writing of law turns out to be the ‘writing of oppression’ whereby exploitation of the vulnerable—widows and orphans—is completely legal...Such a process ensures trouble, vexation, and eventually death.”²²

This action of making unjust laws has had the effect of damaging the social fabric of Israel. Perhaps this can be best seen in Isaiah 9:17 where God’s anger does not relent even against the widows and fatherless. This is the only occurrence of this in Isaiah and accentuates the depths of evil in Israel.²³ Even on those to whom God usually shows care and mercy, there no longer is mercy.

This passage comes at a time when Samaria has felt the wrath of God.

“God’s particular anger is reserved for those who consciously use the legal system to oppress the poor and make themselves rich.”

God has been at work and yet Israel has not turned from their way. It points to a near future of captivity and yet the wrath is not fulfilled, a future “day of reckoning” in which full judgment will occur is to come.

Isaiah 59

In this chapter there are no express references to the widow or fatherless. A number of references to justice and righteousness are found though. This in combination with the descriptions of the evil actions the Israelites participated in would seem to indicate that social injustice is included. John Oswalt stated that in regard to chapter 59, “Together these two sins sum up Isaiah’s, and all the prophets’, understanding of sin: idolatry and social injustice.”²⁴

There is also a movement in the early part of the chapter that could draw this out as well. “The people are guilty of social injustice. In words reminiscent of 1:15, the prophet moves from the worst effects of the legal oppression (unjust condemnation to death) to the false witness that produced such a verdict, and ultimately to the state of deep social and moral apathy that was causing such a situation.”²⁵

There seem to be two parts to chapter 59: First, an acknowledgement that the Israelites have sinned and, secondly, that God will move to change the situation so that justice and righteousness will flourish.

Through it all “God continues to call for righteousness and justice as fruit of their restoration, but they are incapable of doing these things.”²⁶ Verse 20 states that a Redeemer will come to Zion. Only in this situation can social justice flourish. Divine government is the requirement for the justice and righteousness that God requires.

Within the book of Isaiah, this passage falls after the second Exodus

20 Verse 27. Isaiah 3:14-15 is much like this passage. It speaks of the ‘ani and how they have been broken by the rulers. They have ruined the vineyard of God through the specific actions of oppressing the ‘ani.

21 John Oswalt, *Isaiah: The NIV Application Commentary: from Biblical Text- to Contemporary Life*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 167.

22 Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1 - 39*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 90.

23 Eric Ortlund, BT719 Latter Prophets class notes, Fall 2008

24 John Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66*. The New international commentary on the Old Testament, 2. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 512.

25 Kenneth L. Barker, and John R. Kohlenberger. *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary—Abridged Edition: Old Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 1137-1138.

26 John Oswalt, *Isaiah: The NIV Application Commentary: from Biblical Text- to Contemporary Life*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 631.

back to Zion. Yet the people seem to fall back into the previous ways, thus showing their incapability to do what God requires. The Lord has to take action and bring justice and righteousness Himself.²⁷ It is the Lord who brings the lasting justice and righteousness.

Summary

Isaiah develops his idea of social ethics in a way that images a legal trial. The test of social ethics of Israel is seen in the concrete form of the response to the vulnerable, the widow, the fatherless, and the oppressed. Reasoning for the severity of the breach of conduct is that it "is not that they are first of all crimes against humanity but sins against the Creator who made us."²⁸

Isaiah is not "content to speak generally of in-justice and un-righteousness (as in Jer. 22:13), but takes up terms that are brutally concrete in asserting that Israel has completely renegeed on the most elementary social relations between the powerful and the powerless that Yahweh 'expects' from this beloved people."²⁹ It ends with an expectation of a Redeemer or Messiah who will bring about the change necessary. Isaiah 33:15-16 depict the righteous man with "rejection of ill-gotten gain, bribes, and engagement in community destroying evil. This verse may be regarded as one of the classic summaries of ethics in ancient Israel."³⁰

27 The end of chap. 59 is reminiscent of chap. 41 in the coming of the Lord as He brings justice and righteousness. Here is a more full description of the actions of the Lord, showing His compassion on the poor and needy so they will continue to turn to Him. There is a total reliance on the work of the Lord. A reflection can be seen in Ephesians 2:1-10.

28 Ibid.

29 Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1 - 39*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 48-49.

30 Ibid., 263.

31 Frank E. Gaebel, et al. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: With the New International Version of the Holy Bible. Vol. 7, Daniel - Minor Prophets*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), 270.

32 Ibid.

33 Kenneth L. Barker and John R. Kohlenberger. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary—Abridged Edition: Old Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 1467.

34 Ibid., 1478.

35 Eryl W. Davies, *Prophecy and Ethics: Isaiah and the Ethical Traditions of Israel*. *Journal for the study of the Old Testament*, 16. (Sheffield, Eng: JSOT Press, 1981), 113.

36 Ibid., 119.

II. Other Prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel

Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel contain references to the oppressed, the stranger, the widow, and the fatherless. The manner in which they pursue the matter of social ethics is not to the extent of an indictment in a judicial situation. Rather, it would seem that the social injustices are a result of playing harlot and chasing after other gods. Jeremiah 7:6 speaks of how Israel needs to change their actions towards the vulnerable in order to worship God in truth. Later, Jeremiah approaches the king with the exhortation to change his ways in regards to the treatment of people or his kingdom will be taken away (22:3).

The test of social ethics of Israel is seen in the concrete form of the response to the vulnerable, the widow, the fatherless, and the oppressed.

Ezekiel uses the treatment of the poor and needy as a proof of one who is righteous and one who is evil in chapter 18. In chapter 22, Ezekiel refers to the treatment of the stranger, widow, and fatherless in terms of Israel's sins. This section is reminiscent of Isaiah 1:15-28; here is mention of

Israel becoming like dross and how God is going to purify the nation.

Amos and Micah

There is much comparison made between Amos and Isaiah in regards to social ethics. It is said that Amos "is particularly vehement in denouncing the lack of social concerns in his time."³¹ Unlike Isaiah, Amos does not use the triad of vulnerable people groups in his writings. The social structure used here to describe the injustice is the cleavage between the rich and the poor. During this time the "improved economic situation in Israel led to an increase of the wealthy, who not only neglected the poor but used them to increase their own wealth. The social concern inherent in the very structure of the law was forgotten."³²

Micah attacked the idolatry of Israel as well as the social injustices. His emphasis was the social injustices of the ruling classes.³³ Perhaps the statement most critical is Micah 6:8, showing the need for just action as well as mercy. The response to God includes an ethical response manifested in social concerns.³⁴

Summary

There are similarities between Isaiah and the other prophets regarding social ethics. Some research looks at Isaiah's being dependent and influenced by "the legal tradition, while others stress his use of wisdom vocabulary, and still others have emphasised his dependence upon the prophetic tradition itself."³⁵ This is refuted in that he "does exhort and admonish his hearers, this is almost always done in *ad hoc* fashion in relation to the specific situations with which he is confronted... Moreover, these traditions were all grounded in a common faith and each recognised that the qualities which Yahweh demanded of men included a sense of compassion combined with humility, honesty and integrity."³⁶ Isaiah also found himself in similar situations as

In today's Christian faith there is an emphasis on personal morality, which is necessary, but one's integrity shows up in the treatment of vulnerable people groups.

Amos and Micah due to the fact that they lived in a contemporary setting. It seems that the other prophets do not develop the idea of a Messiah who comes to deliver true justice and righteousness though.

III. New Testament Echo

The only passage in the New Testament in which both the widow and fatherless are mentioned is James 1:27. There is a direct correlation here to Old Testament references and meanings in the passage. Here James' "admonition is for the readers to retain and guard their distinctive ethos as practitioners of true piety."³⁷ For it is as "faith unites us to God in Christ; it also relates us to our fellow men and women. We need a term such as 'religion' to assure us that faith has a social context."³⁸

In Acts 6:1-4 we can see this social ethic in practice. The concern here is the care or food distribution to the widows. There is no teaching on social ethics though.

There is an interesting situation found in Jesus' teaching though. In both Mark 12:40 and Luke 20:47 Jesus gives a warning to the disciples. They were to look out for the teachers of the law, reason being that the teachers "devour widows' houses" and for that they would be punished. This is reminiscent of the kings in earlier Israelite history, both the connection to the law and the mistreatment of a vulnerable people group. There are some other passages, like Matthew 9:13, that have nuances of social ethics, but the previous two examples are the strongest.



Conclusion

Key to Isaiah's understanding of social ethics is justice and righteousness. It is necessary for one to have this concrete action to have acceptable worship of God. Yet, there is a realization that this cannot be done without help from God through His Son. One can concentrate on the letter of the law, but there is another aspect included and that is grace. This did not stop after Christ's earthly ministry, but continues to be applicable. In today's Christian faith there is an emphasis on personal morality, which is necessary, but one's integrity shows up in the treatment of vulnerable people groups. ☹

37 Ralph P. Martin, *Word Biblical Commentary: James*. Word biblical commentary, v.48. (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1988), 53.

38 *Ibid.*, 54.

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Isaiah 6:1–13

In the Presence of the LORD Almighty!

Jeff Plett

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Have you ever wondered what it would be like to stand in God's almighty presence? What would it be like to experience the awe and majesty of God? What would you do? What would you say, if anything? How would you respond?

If you could see God, how do you think such an experience would impact you? Would it make any difference in your life? Would it change you in some ways, or leave you the same?

In Isaiah chapter 6 we are given a glimpse of God through Isaiah's vision. It is as if God is pulling back this huge curtain to let us peer into His very own throne room. We catch our breath! The scene is amazing! We have never seen anything like it before!

In God's Presence We Are in Awe of Him (6:1-4)

The prophet Isaiah informs us that he received his vision, "In the year that King Uzziah died" (v. 1). He links the vision to a historical event. It happened! He probably wants us to notice a comparison between an *earthly king*, Uzziah, and our *eternal King*, who is God.¹ In the year the earthly king died, like all earthly

beings around the throne. Mighty seraphs of the highest order of angels hover around the Lord. This vision of God would remind Isaiah throughout his difficult ministry that God is holy, glorious, all-powerful. You and I also need that assurance when things are especially difficult in our ministry.²

He sees the Lord, seated on a magnificent throne, "high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple" (v. 1). God seated on this high throne shows His absolute sovereignty over everything. God alone is king!

God is so awesome that the train of his robe fills the entire temple! We notice that Isaiah does not describe anything higher than the hem of God's robe. That is all he records about how God looks. Maybe he saw more, but the whole scene is too powerful to describe adequately. Words do not do justice to it. God is so holy and glorious perhaps he didn't dare to look higher than the hem of God's robe.

As Isaiah sees God's immense Being, he becomes aware of other

Isaiah does not describe anything higher than the hem of God's robe. God is so holy and glorious perhaps he didn't dare to look higher.

1 John N. Oswalt, *The Book Of Isaiah, Chapters 1-39*, in *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, 1986, 177.

2 David C. Cook adult lesson book *A Word from the LORD*, September–November 2008, Lesson 2: "Worship Is Service," 14.

3 Ibid.

4 Oswalt, 181.

5 Ibid.



the presence of God. The glorious singing of the seraphs causes the doorposts and thresholds of the temple to shake. Also the temple was filled with smoke (6:4). Both the shaking and smoke symbolize God's holiness and power, especially as it relates to judgment.⁶

In God's Presence We Recognize Our Sinfulness (6:5)

Who can stand in the presence of such a holy, powerful, majestic God? At this point, the prophet becomes aware of himself. When we come into the presence of an altogether holy God, we suddenly see our own sinfulness much more clearly. When we drift away from God we can be

oblivious of our sinful thoughts and habits. But in the presence of God our sins show up as awful blemishes. Suddenly we are very conscious of how dirty we are...and we are ashamed! It is true even today, before we can have a clean record with God we must come to recognize our sinful condition before Him.⁷

Isaiah is appalled and he cries out, "Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty" (6:5). Isaiah is finished. Even prophets and Christian leaders need cleansing because they too have sinned. Isaiah does not defend or excuse his sinful condition, as so

many people try to do. He is quick to admit that he has unclean lips, and the people he is a part of have unclean lips too.

Why are the lips singled out? Possibly because lips are an expression of the heart and will of a person. Many years later, Jesus highlights this same truth by saying, "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matthew 12:34). In other words, what your heart is full of, that's what you'll say. Your words, your speech, show what is inside of you! How you think and talk reveals your character. Isaiah now sees that his entire character, his will and desires, fall far short of God's holy character. Not only do his lips need cleansing—his entire body, mind and inner person also need God's cleansing power.⁸

⁶ Cook, 14.

⁷ Oswalt, 182.

⁸ Ibid, 183.

In God's Presence We Are Cleansed (6:6-7)

Isaiah recognizes he has nowhere to go with his sin, no way to change his sinful condition. When we come to that point of admitting our hopelessness...that is when God can step in and do His marvellous cleansing work. He does just that. Our God does not reveal Himself to destroy us, but rather to redeem us.⁹

Out of the smoke comes a seraph with a purifying, fiery coal. He has taken it with tongs from the altar. He touches Isaiah's mouth with it and says, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for" (6:7). With that Isaiah is cleansed.

Fire is an image of God's purity, His holiness. Fire can destroy but it can also cleanse. Fire is fascinating, but it can also be terrifying. "For the LORD YOUR God is a devouring fire," Moses warns the people in Deuteronomy 4:24. God's holy fire purges away our dross and removes our impurities (Isaiah 1:25). It is by the fire of God's own purity that the repentant are made pure like Himself.¹⁰

In God's Presence We Commit Ourselves to Service (6:8)

We notice that now, for the first time, God speaks. Perhaps Isaiah was not ready to hear and receive God's message up until this point. Certainly he must have been overcome by the awesomeness of God's majesty and deeply touched by His own personal cleansing.

God seems to be speaking to the heavenly host standing by, in verse 8. He asks a question, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" It

does not seem like God is speaking directly to Isaiah—He seems to be asking everyone there.

Well, Isaiah does not need to be prompted or coerced into serving God. He was so aware of God's holiness, so aware of God's cleansing he had received, what else would he rather do than to hurl himself into God's service?¹¹ Serving God works that way; it is our natural response of thankfulness to God for cleansing us. Who could be selfish after such an experience with God? John Oswalt writes, "Those who need to be coerced are perhaps too little aware of the immensity of God's grace toward them."¹²

Serving God is our natural response of thankfulness to God for cleansing us. Who could be selfish after such an experience with God?

Isaiah, who has had a chance to be part of the counsels of God, cannot keep silent. "Would I do, God?" he asks. "Could you use me in some way? If so, I'd be honoured to serve you in whatever way you want me to. Send me." A grateful offering up of ourselves—that is the response of those who have received God's grace after they were hopelessly lost in sin.¹³

God took him up on it, despite the prophet's weakness and the fact that He has mighty seraphs at his disposal. How wonderful that God also accepts our humble offer to serve Him. God warns Isaiah, though, "It won't be a popular message. The people won't listen to you. In fact, the effect of your

preaching will be a hardening of the peoples' hearts. I will have to punish and destroy them. The nation will be like a forest whose stumps have been cut down and burned. Yet after that a holy shoot will come from these stumps, a Saviour who will bring healing and restoration" (6:9-13).

It is not the sort of message Isaiah wanted to bring to the people; he did not want to see his people punished. Yet, he has witnessed God's holiness and been cleansed of all sin. With His help he is determined to faithfully preach the message God has given him.

Three Straight 'A's

There are times when you and I are confronted with the awe and wonder of God's holiness. Take note of such times. Our response to Him should involve the same three 'A's as Isaiah's did:

The 'A' of adoring. We experience a sense of awe and delight in God's presence. He is powerful and majestic. We fall at His feet and humbly worship Him.

The 'A' of admitting. In the presence of God's holiness we become acutely aware of our own sinfulness. "Woe is me!" we cry out to God, "For I am lost!" We admit that we are sinners desperately in need of God's forgiveness. We hide nothing from Him; we want Him to cleanse every part of us.

The 'A' of answering. We answer God by saying that if He can use us in some way, we would be glad to serve Him. We respond with a wholehearted "Yes!" to His call: "Here am I. Send me!"¹⁴

Three straight 'A's. That's a good mark in school. It's an even better way to respond to God. ☪

This sermon was presented on Communion Sunday, May 31, 2009.

9 Ibid, 184.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid, 185,186.

12 Ibid, 186.

13 Ibid.

14 Cook, 18.

Book Review

***Jesus Matters: Good News for the Twenty-First Century*, edited by James R. Krabill and David W. Shenk (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2009), 250 pp., \$16.99 USD, ISBN 9780836194487.**

Reviewed by Darryl G. Klassen.

Jesus Matters is, as the introduction suggests, another look at Jesus (16). The lens with which Jesus is viewed in this tome is multi-faceted as many authors have been recruited to address various subjects related to the person of Christ. Some of these authors in turn recruited younger persons, even their own children, to assist in the writing.

What all of them have in common is an Anabaptist/Mennonite tradition and a strong conviction that their perspective is worth sharing with others. That conviction centres on the belief that God is doing something in Jesus that is good news not only for Mennonites, but for all people (21).

Based on this premise, the authors' aim is to rediscover the narrative of Jesus and the consequent relevance of Jesus to our present era (17). For this reason the language of this treatment is biblically based but popularly

constructed. That is, one need not pick up a theological dictionary to understand what is written. In keeping with the theme of relevance there is a consistent attempt in each chapter to take the Biblical truths from Jesus' day and make them applicable to 21st century contexts.

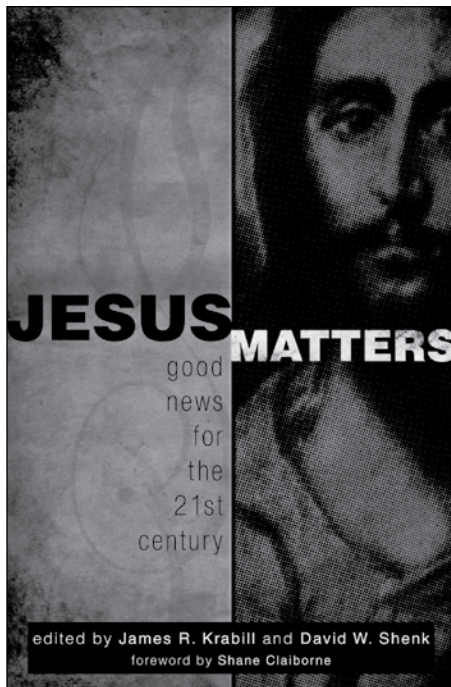
Each chapter takes on a classical theme concerning Jesus from *Who is Jesus?* (chapter 2) to *Jesus and Creation* (chapter 4) and Jesus' own relationship to God (chapter 7). Even the obscure and typically avoided subject of spiritual warfare is addressed in *Jesus Triumphs over the Powers* (chapter 6). Though the word is never used in this manner, *evangelical* could be applied since many of the non-Mennonite readers would give their "Amen" to what is written concerning Jesus.

In some chapters, such as *Jesus and Creation* (chapter 4) by George Brunk III and Laura Amstutz, there appears a "green" influence of ecological concern. They write, "Followers of Jesus have reason...to care for creation because we understand that God's ultimate goal is the redemption and restoration of all creation" (70). This is followed by their chastisement of current lifestyle habits involving consumerism and pollution making us complicit in the oppression of the world's poor.

And though they make no commitment to a theological position they are quite right when they write, "Whether we believe that God created the world in six days or six million years is really secondary to the proclamation that God created it, be that through instant acts or prolonged processes" (64). Is there a hint of acquiescence to the theory of evolution in these words? That may not sit well with some and bring cheers from others.

Though not a fan of Tom Yoder Neufeld's writing, I did agree with his statements on the Bible as a whole (chapter 3, *Jesus and the Bible*, with David Neufeld): "The New Testament is thus a library of diverse writings that faithfully recount Jesus and all he represents in light of the Scriptures of Israel. To eliminate the Old Testament makes the New Testament completely unintelligible. Worse, it makes Jesus unrecognizable" (56).

This is refreshing since many "peace" Mennonites do not know what to do with the violence of the Old Testament and thus ignore it. Yoder Neufeld suggests that it was with this lens that early believers were able to identify Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus himself would have taught them according to Old Testament scriptures who he was.



One need not pick up a theological dictionary to understand what is written. There is also a consistent attempt in each chapter to take the Biblical truths from Jesus' day and make them applicable to 21st century contexts.

Another intelligent chapter was *Jesus and the Church* (chapter 14). Here the authors, several of the Suderman clan, emphasize the kingdom of God is about “peoplehood.” “God prefers that kingdom presence be intentionally lived out in the lives of people. Kingdom, rule, authority, and reign are all word pictures that point to the existence of peoplehood—an identifiable group committed to living out the authority of God in their personal and corporate lives” (204).

The Gospel, they write, is also about peoplehood, a community formed on the presence of Gospel truths. The Church then, is ultimately about peoplehood. It was birthed in the arrival of God’s kingdom in Jesus, realized in the calling of the first disciples into a community and shaped into the church through the teaching of Christ, and finally empowered by the coming of the Holy Spirit. An excellent theology of community is expressed within these pages.

These are but a few snippets of what is contained in this return to Jesus. One cannot possibly in the space allowed summarize each chapter. In the final analysis of this summary I refer to *Time* magazine’s assessment of books (*read, skim, toss*) and suggest that this is a skimmer.

Why would I relegate this book as a skimmer? Though the editors declare that this is another look at Jesus and an attempt at relevancy, I do not find that they have done anything particularly fascinating. I was reminded of two other books as I read this one, and kept hoping that there would be something more as I perused the next chapter.

One of those books was Philip Yancey’s *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Zondervan, 1999). Though not a Mennonite, he, as many had said, through his personal journey, struggles and all, had stumbled upon the Anabaptist Jesus. There were several parallels between the two books as I recall, and found that there was “nothing new under the sun.”

The other book that came to mind was Paul Lederach’s *A Third Way* (Herald Press, 1980). This is an even older book that was a text in my Bible College days for an Anabaptist Studies course. Though a text, it was a simple but informative reading of Mennonite beliefs on the centrality of Jesus and the purpose of communion.

Since this material in *Jesus Matters* is not new, it begged the question repeatedly in my critique: For whom is this book written? This is not readily identified in the introduction, though I suspect the range is meant to be broad. Several answers occurred to me as I contemplated its purpose.

Though the editors declare that this is another look at Jesus and an attempt at relevancy, I do not find that they have done anything particularly fascinating.

First, it was written for non-Mennonites. Here is another attempt to show Christians of another tradition that we have a flavour to add to the mosaic that is the Church. Except, as I said earlier concerning evangelicals, they will say, “So?” because they believe much of what is written in these pages.

Second, it was written for Mennonites who do not know the tenets of their own faith. In my experience those who do not know those tenets are unaware of them because they do not read in the first place. Some pastor somewhere may take this book and use it as a sermon outline and preach each chapter with the hope of bringing those tenets to bear. But we know that verbal communication is limited in its effect and so the listeners will chalk it up to one more sermon.

Third, it was written as a baptism catechism. If you could convince new

believers willing to be baptized to also read this book, it would greatly educate them on the meaning of discipleship. That is, provided they are mentored through some of the deeper parts by someone mature in their faith.

Since there is nothing new in this book I would endorse option three above as the most likely reason for recommendation. Otherwise I found it rather elementary.

Further, as referred to before, there are clear agendas throughout the book in the applications to suggest that “this is the way Christians act.” One case in point was the chapter on creation where it was suggested that churches use fair trade coffee or organic coffee at coffee breaks to help out workers in Third World countries where there are no fair wages. This is a band-aid solution to a greater problem that only allows a slight pat on the back to those who feel guilty about living in an affluent country that oppresses the poor and cannot do anything substantial about it.

I had some issues with the exegesis of a few writers. Yoder Neufeld writes, “As Paul reminds us, God chose what is weak and foolish—human memory, human communication, rooted in and shaped by history—to bring news of salvation to the world” (58). Being a New Testament theologian, he would, I think, know better than to exegete so poorly the words of Paul. What the Apostle referred to as being weak and foolish was the cross of Christ, not the human vehicle of transmission.

And what of chapter 7, *Jesus and God*, and its ignoble beginning, “If God is not a person...”? God is not a person? I know that he is not flesh and blood, that he is Spirit, but I always thought he was a person. Do we not speak of the first person of the Trinity? With language like that my guard is up.

My conclusion to this critique is the same as when I began: This is a skimmer. ☹

The Final Word

We have tried to make clear the unity and diversity of the incarnation, the cross and the resurrection. Christian life is life with the incarnate, crucified and risen Christ, whose word confronts us in its entirety in the message of the justification of the sinner by grace alone. Christian life means being a man through the efficacy of the incarnation; it means being sentenced and pardoned through the efficacy of the cross; and it means living a new life through the efficacy of the resurrection. There cannot be one without the rest.

As for the questions of the things before the last, it follows from what has been said so far that the Christian life means neither a destruction nor a sanctioning of the penultimate. In Christ the reality of God meets the reality of the world and allows us to share in this real encounter. It is an encounter beyond all radicalism and beyond all compromise. Christian life is participation in the encounter of Christ with the world.

–Dietrich Bonhoeffer,
Ethics

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) was a Lutheran pastor and theologian in Germany who was arrested in connection with the July 1944 attempted assassination of Adolf Hitler. He was executed by hanging at Flossenbürg concentration camp on April 9, 1945.

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