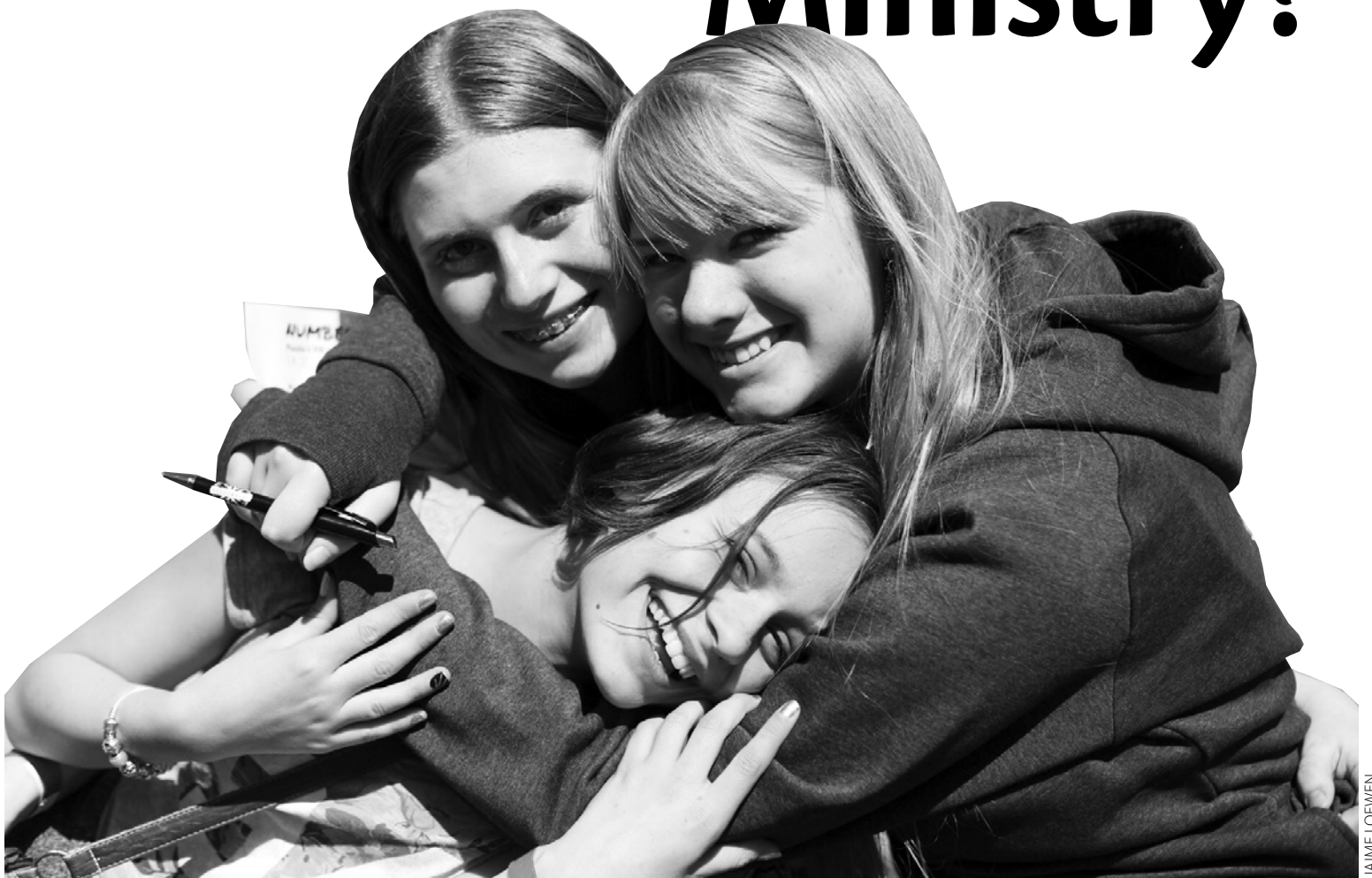


Theodidaktos *Taught by God*

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Why Youth Ministry?



JAMIE LOEWEN

ALSO INSIDE:

Partners in Ministry: Understanding Complementarity in the Church Today

The Worldliness of Pacifism

Stranger Xmas

Book Review: A Farewell to Mars



A PUBLICATION OF THE EVANGELICAL
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Editorial

Crisis Can Bring Clarity

“IN THEIR HEARTS HUMANS PLAN their course, but the Lord establishes their steps” (Proverbs 16:9). The truth of this proverb has been felt by people around the globe this year in ways big and small. We all do our best to make prudent plans for the future, but at the end of the day we are at the mercy of God to be able to accomplish all that we aim to. James speaks rather bluntly to his readers about how they spoke of their plans, “You do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes” (4:14).

As an editorial team for Theodidaktos, we had been hoping that this issue would be centred around the important topic of youth ministry. And while you will in fact find one excellent essay on the topic in this issue, that did not end up being our theme.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shaken our world this year and has laid waste to many plans. People have died, jobs have been lost, borders closed, and the economies of countries around the world lie in ruin. Ministries have been halted and countless mouths have been left unfed because relief organizations have had their hands tied in their efforts to bring food to the most vulnerable populations of our planet.

The thing about times of crisis is that they seem to bring to light issues that were hidden, ignored, or lingering just below the surface. Sometimes things we thought were long since dealt with once again rear their head, other times we discover a problem we had previously been completely unaware of.

The thing about times of crisis is that they seem to bring to light issues that were hidden, ignored, or lingering just below the surface.

Speaking anecdotally as a pastor, I and many of my fellow ministers have seen a sharp increase in marriage troubles, general relationship problems, and mental health issues. There are also those who were previously in precarious financial positions now facing dire circumstances.

Alternatively, there are also those who have been brought closer together with their spouse and other relationships through these trying times. Even while

being physically distant, communities have banded together to care for one another, doing what they can to brighten each other's day or bring encouragement. My county inadvertently set an unofficial world record for the largest food drive in a single day in the effort to restock the shelves of food banks.¹

These scenarios have illustrated what Jesus taught when he said, “For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of” (Matthew 12:23). The challenges of the pandemic will have revealed something to us, if only we have eyes to see it. For most of us it won't be fully good or completely bad, but it will reveal where our hearts are strong and where our weaknesses reside. There may be a need for repentance in some areas of life, and in other areas of life there may be a need for thanksgiving for the blessings and privileges that we hold.

Have you taken the time to reflect on what this crisis has revealed about the state of your soul? This can be a deeply uncomfortable question and something that can be very difficult to ask ourselves, especially as it pertains to the revelation of our own inadequacies. Yet at this time I think such introspection is healthy and appropriate. We should also be asking other questions that go beyond ourselves: what has this crisis revealed about the state of your community? Who are the ones who have fallen through the cracks and been left uncared for?

One of the dangers of such introspection, however, is that we can get lost in it and become overwhelmed with guilt, shame, or anger. Another danger is that we focus only on the positive and ignore the areas we need to grow. While honest reflection is a necessary step, it is not the end of the path. Once we take the step to reflect on all the things that have been dredged to the surface, we must once again come back to the cross and bring these things to our Lord Jesus. Our failures and sins we bring in repentance, and our successes we bring with gratitude, and in all things we seek humility.

So, I ask again: what has this crisis made clear to you about yourself or your community, and what do you find yourself needing to bring to Jesus? **☉**

¹ Melanie Borrelli, “Total Released for Record-Breaking Food Drive in Chatham-Kent,” CTV News, May 25, 2020, [https://windsor.ctvnews.ca/total-released-for-record-breaking-food-drive-in-chatham-kent-1.4953421?cache=.](https://windsor.ctvnews.ca/total-released-for-record-breaking-food-drive-in-chatham-kent-1.4953421?cache=)



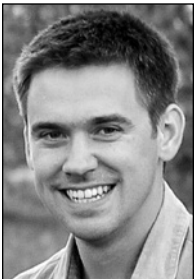
Kevin Wiebe

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Why Youth Ministry?



Jordan Doerksen

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“WHY BOTHER WITH youth ministry? Will going to youth group even make a difference? Isn't it just another program designed to keep our kids busy and out of trouble?”

I've definitely had these thoughts, and had them asked of me. Being directly involved in the local church youth ministry sometimes makes me want to build a wall and defend my role with a quick cliché answer, because I don't want to think that the last ten years of my life were wasted. I'm scared of feeling like I've failed God or others around me.

Yet when I think about it more closely, it is truly ok to ask these questions. It may

still be scary or costly, but considering why we serve in the manner we do brings value and depth to the ministry we offer as a church. I'm convinced that there is a biblical case for the church to put time and resources into ministering to teens in age-specific ways.

A Process of Calling to Ministry

Personally, I came to my role as a youth pastor without having planned on it. However, I grew into it through God's calling and gifting.

I had grown up in the EMC, faithfully going to Sunday School, Bible camp, and youth group. These were great

experiences for me, but I did not think that I would ever be leading one of these ministries. Yet God kept giving me opportunities to serve and learn in the church youth group setting.

For two years in Bible college, my student ministry was at a local church youth group. In my final year as a student there, the church asked me to lead their youth group since their pastor and some other leaders were no longer there.

Then, for my pastoral internship I served at our home church where part of my responsibility was helping Peter Fehr lead youth events and Bible studies. I enjoyed connecting with teenagers,

getting to know their story and trying to encourage them in life and faith.

I also found that I had strengths in teaching and helping people, so in a sense it simply felt natural to continue serving this specific group of people in the ministry approach that I was used to. God had opened my heart to care for these people.

All are Called; All are Gifted

This factor is not unique to my experience, or to youth ministry at all. God has given each person different spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12:4–11, Rom. 12:6–8). God has designed and empowered some people to preach, teach,

The ministry of the church needs to be grounded in the truth of Jesus, not simply the passions of individuals.

and evangelize, while others have been enabled by the Spirit to serve, encourage, and give generously.

Everyone has unique passions as well. Certain people groups tug at an individual's heart, such as single moms, college students, or the disabled. Specific needs also inspire individuals to action, like education, poverty, or evangelism, while other needs do not grip them as personally. This is why we have worship pastors focusing their time and energy on music and worship leading, while someone else is working at the Salvation Army, and another person is leading the local youth group or Bible camp. God has creatively planned to spread his children out, to serve in different areas and ways.

The Apostle Paul noted that he had been set apart from birth and called by God's grace, to a specific task. That task

was to preach the gospel among the Gentiles (Gal. 1:15–16).

Peter, on the other hand, had a very different ministry, but that did not make one ministry more valid than the other. “For God, who was at work in the ministry of Peter as an apostle to the Jews, was also at work in my ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles” (Gal. 2:8).

Earlier, in Acts 6, the apostles also recognized the need for different people in the church to take leadership of different roles. The apostles were being spread quite thin with their responsibilities of evangelizing, discipling



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new believers, and taking care of the physical needs of widows. All were valuable ministries, but they personally needed to give “attention to prayer and the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4). God had called them to a specific role, and there were others that God had in mind to take over the ministry of waiting on tables. The call of God and the unique gifting he has given each person, brings validity to the variety of ways in which the church serves, including youth ministry.

Called to Creative Ministry

But where is the verse that says, “Go forth and start a youth ministry”? It will be

hard to find that verse, just like it's hard to find the verse that tells us directly to start an addictions counselling ministry or an outreach to athletes.

We're actually fortunate that this is the case! The Holy Spirit and the Word of God can lead us into far more creative ministries than could be listed on a few pages. Nations, cultures, and needs change over time, and there is no limit to God's creative ability to use the church to impact a changing world.

Yet this is not a free pass for each person to do whatever they feel like doing. The ministry of the church needs

to be grounded in the truth of Jesus, not simply the passions of individuals. This is where the church needs to discern whether the foundational directives given to the Church in Scripture can be carried out in a given ministry.

Sharing Jesus, a Core Essential

Sharing the gospel of Jesus needs to be at the core of the ministry of the church, and youth ministry is one part of that. Jesus gave the command very directly when he said, “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation” (Mark 16:15).

The apostle Paul reminded the Corinthians that God had reconciled

them to Himself through Christ, and the church was now given the ministry and message of reconciliation to share with the world (2 Cor. 5:18–19).

Canadians, South Americans, and Asians need to hear the truth about Jesus. People from every “tribe and language and people and nation” were purchased with the blood of Jesus (Rev. 5:9), so there is no people group that is not invited to worship and serve the risen Savior. But the gospel cannot be passed on merely as a list of theological truths and historical events to remember.¹

The church needs to convey these truths to individuals in a way that they can understand and respond personally to the gospel, since every person will be evaluated by God for how they responded to his Son (2 Thess. 1:8). Thus we have cross-cultural missionaries who study, pray, and prepare for how best to communicate the news of Jesus to unique people groups.

Children, teenagers, and adults are also unique people groups who need to understand the truth about the gospel of Jesus. Thus, for more than two centuries, people in the church have made efforts to connect specifically with teenagers to communicate the truth of the gospel in

For more than two centuries, people in the church have made efforts to connect specifically with teenagers to communicate the truth of the gospel in a language or medium to which young people would respond.



JAMIE LOEWEN

a language or medium to which young people would respond.

A Brief History of Youth Ministry

In the late 1700s, when the industrial revolution replaced family-owned shops with factories in cities, young people moved to the cities to find jobs. Robert Raikes initiated a ministry to these children in Gloucester, England, that was known as “Sunday School.” In 1844, the Young Men’s Christian Association was founded in London, England, as result of a merchant who led Bible studies with his young apprentices.²

Many different kinds of youth ministries followed, such as Youth for Christ and Young Life, as well as denominational youth societies and local church youth groups. With teenagers having become such a distinct group or sub-culture within our wider culture, youth ministries responded with unique ways of passing the gospel along to the next generation. Youth ministry is a part of the church’s act of obedience in sharing the gospel of Jesus.

Another aspect of the church’s ministry is described in 1 Thessalonians 2:8, and this is something that youth ministry and other church ministries strive toward. “We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us.”

¹ Millard J. Erickson, *Introducing Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 351.

² Mark Septer III, *The Coming Revolution in Youth Ministry* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1992), 56.

Ministry is Personal Work

Building personal relationships within Jesus' Church is a must. Paul was a very academic person and a bold speaker. He was also well-known and well-travelled. If social media had been invented, I'm sure he would have had a huge list of followers or subscribers. Yet he maintained the perspective that those he shared the gospel with were not simply an audience or a class; they were brothers and sisters. They were people to be loved, people to share life's joys and struggles with, people to listen to and with whom to engage personally.

This kind of personal Christian fellowship truly complements the sharing of the gospel, and it reflects the teachings of Jesus, when he shared that the second greatest commandment was to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31).

These are directions that healthy

youth ministries take seriously. It's not hard to see that love can grow in small group discussions where teens talk about life and ask questions about personal dilemmas. Fellowship can blossom when older students welcome and include the juniors. Sharing the long bus ride and late night activities at Abundant Springs can be the connecting point that helps a teen to feel safe asking questions of their adult leader. Taking time to listen to a teen who struggles with anxiety and unanswered questions can be one more piece in the puzzle that leads them to finally say, "I'll trust you with my life, Jesus."

Jim Burns writes, "It is statistically staggering how few people respond to Jesus Christ and the church through mass evangelism. Most people become Christians through influential friendships and family relationships.... Influential and responsive evangelism is based

around a relationship with someone or a group of people who are modeling a vibrant, genuine Christian lifestyle."³

Personal relationships within the church are a must, and youth ministries of all different kinds facilitate this between peers, and between the adults and teens of the church. It is not just a bonus or an optional

item; it is part of the foundation of every Christian's life and service.

Potholes in Youth Ministry

If I look back on when I began in full-time youth ministry, I believe that I was trying to build on this kind of a foundation: responding to the gifts and calling God gave me, sharing the gospel, and building personal Christian relationships. I think there has been value and biblical vision in the youth ministry of our church and the ministry of others around me. But there have definitely been ruts and potholes that I've gotten stuck in, things that took my eyes off of the real goals of ministry.

The First Pothole: Forgetting the True Gospel

One pothole is forgetting the true gospel. Kara Powell shares about how many of today's youth view the gospel. They see Christianity as a list of do's and don'ts that they can pick up or throw in the corner depending on they feel:

Do... go to church and youth group as often as possible, read your Bible, pray, give money, share your faith, get good grades, respect elders, spend spring break on a mission trip, and be a good kid. Do not... watch the wrong movies, drink, do drugs, have sex, talk back, swear, hang out with the "wrong crowd," go to Cancun for spring break, or go to parties. This is a "gospel of sin management."⁴

I've certainly been guilty of passing along this kind of gospel. It's easy to focus on moral issues and passing on the values of our Christian heritage at the expense of clearly sharing the gospel.

I recall talking with a senior youth who was struggling to know how to grow in his faith. When I asked him to describe what it means to be a Christian, his response was very similar to the list of do's and don'ts above. That was a reality check for me!

In the book *Sticky Faith*, Kara Powell shares about how many of today's youth view the gospel. They see Christianity as a list of do's and don'ts.

✓ DOs	✗ DON'Ts
 go to church	 watch the wrong movies
 read your Bible	 drink
 pray	 do drugs
 give money	 go to Cancun for spring break

3 Jim Burns and Mike DeVries, *Uncommon Youth Ministry: Your Onramp to Launching An Extraordinary Youth Ministry* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2001), 79.

4 Kara E. Powell, Brad M. Griffith, and Cheryl A. Crawford, *Sticky Faith: Youth Worker Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 31.

The true gospel, however, is built on a trust-relationship with Jesus where godly behavior is the result, not the prerequisite. Colossians 1 describes part of the gospel:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation...all things were created by him and for him....

Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation (Col. 1:15, 16, 21–22).

John 6:29 says, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent." This truly is good news for sinners!

Our job as youth leaders, then, is not to concentrate so much on whether youth are living righteous lives, but to help them "discover and strengthen their trust and faith in Jesus Christ. In so doing, the righteousness they eventually display will be the product of the Holy Spirit."⁵

The Second Pothole: Busyness

Another pothole I hit is busyness. Sometimes I would get completely caught up in the tasks of preparing lessons and scheduling activities, running from one meeting to another and helping with nearly every project that came my way.

Going a whole day without church activities or conversations was rare. I recall a sinking feeling in my stomach one night as I pulled up onto the church parking lot for a youth night and it scared me. I wasn't facing difficult people or conflict in the group, but leading our youth Bible study had become just one more thing I had to do.

My relationships were also decaying because of how many things I was trying to do: my relationship with my wife and children, my relationship with individual youth, and my relationship with God.

I had wanted to share my life with people and experience mutual love in the church, but my fear of failure and fear of disappointing people led me to work without healthy boundaries on my time. I was driven to accomplish the most that I possibly could, and in the process, I was losing my sense of joy, hope, and meaning.

Mark Buchanan writes that, "Drivenness may awaken or be a catalyst for purpose, but it rarely fulfills it, more often it jettisons it. A common characteristic of driven people is that, at some point, they forget the purpose. They lose the point."⁶

Something that I had to learn (and continue to learn), is that everyone needs a saviour, and that saviour is not me. God himself rested, and offers me times of rest (Gen. 2:2; Mark 2:27). There are times when I need to be still, if I am going to recognize that the Lord is God (Ps. 46:10). He wants me to, and will even make me "lie down in green pastures" (Ps. 23:2).

If I want to continue ministering with purpose, and if I want meaningful relationships, I need to guard against busyness and make a point of resting. I need to let God take care of me and the rest of his children.

The Third Pothole: Wrong Focus

One more pothole that I've hit is focusing too much on entertainment and numbers in the church youth group. A few years ago, youth leaders from a couple of churches in our area got together and we planned what we thought was a great weekend activity. We would get

My disappointment revealed that my hope and expectation had been that exciting activities would get a big group of people together, and we would succeed.

all the youth groups together, we had a school gym rented and fun activities planned, there was food and a great message lined up... and maybe 20 per cent of our regular group came. What a disappointment! My disappointment revealed that my hope and expectation had been that exciting activities would get a big group of people together, and we would succeed.

There is a certain excitement generated when we take our youth to a special retreat, and we see great concerts and shows, super-trendy emcees and speakers, with all the latest ideas for groups to take home. These things are all fine and fun, but they also are not the main point.

Rick Lawrence describes it well when he compares the latest youth ministry "tips and tricks" to cup holders in a vehicle. "The cup holders are nice, needed accessories, but the car won't move without an engine and transmission."⁷ We've already established that the ministry of the church is centred around the good news of Jesus Christ, and he will move his Church farther and deeper than the fanciest cup holders ever will.

First Things First: Discipleship

Good times and big groups can be a part of the story for local youth ministries, and there is a need to share the truth in relevant, engaging ways. But we need to be careful to keep first things first. If students are being disciplined and are growing deeper in faith in Jesus, if the gospel is being communicated and lived out clearly, if adults are truly caring for the young people of

5 Ibid., 34.

6 Mark Buchanan, *The Rest Of God* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2006), 77.

7 Rick Lawrence, *Jesus Centered Youth Ministry* (USA: Group Publishing, 2014), xvii.

the church, then leaders can know that the important things are being done.

We can focus on serving God faithfully, even if our part seems small at times, and we can leave the results up to him. After all, he is the one who makes the church grow, and we are his servants (1 Cor. 3:5–7). We don't have to worry about pleasing people and drawing crowds, but we can focus on pleasing the God who sees and knows our hearts (1 Thess. 1:4).

Blessings of Youth Ministry

I'm thankful that God has used me and helped me grow in youth ministry. There have been many unique blessings that I could see first-hand from a youth ministry vantage point.

I've been able to hear Christian parents share appreciation that the church is thinking of and investing in their children. Their kids are hearing the gospel message in more than just their own home. I know that my own children are impacted by more voices than just my own, and so it is a mutual blessing when the church partners with families.

It is also very encouraging to see young people get baptized, seeking to obey Jesus and tell their community that they are

identified with Christ. They've walked through temptations, and questions, and they've personally concluded that Jesus is truly the way, the truth and the life.

Seeing many of our young people serve in the community and in church ministries, seeing them stick with Jesus through university, seeing them persevere through grief and hardship—these are just a few of the ways I've been blessed by the God and the youth that I serve.

Realities

I won't pretend that youth ministry is the most important ministry of the church; each part has its place and each part is important. I also won't pretend that every student that we've connected with is faithfully walking with God.

We make mistakes, students and families make mistakes, and God has given each person a choice. But I will affirm that the Church needs to keep investing in its young people. They are not only the church of tomorrow, they are an important part of the church right now. And we are all partners in the ministry of the gospel. ☺

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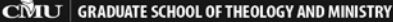
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The GSTM is a special place that helped me—by its faculty who care and think, students from different traditions, and subject matter that stretched the soul—to serve in the Church. The bursary for EMC students helped a lot, too.




David Kruse MA (Theological Studies), 2011 grad



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Partners in Ministry: Understanding Complementarity in the Church Today



Stephanie Fast

Stephanie Fast is a grade 2 teacher at Steinbach Christian School. She lives in Steinbach and attends Blumenort Community Church, where she is active on the global missions committee. She holds a Bachelor of Nursing (University of Manitoba) and Bachelor of Education (University of Ottawa). During a recent leave of absence from her teaching position she also studied part-time at Providence Theological Seminary. She loves to participate in the work God is doing in her local church community as well as invest in the lives of missionaries and the work God is doing in other parts of the world.

OVER THE PAST NUMBER of years there has been significant discussion within the EMC on the question of whether women should participate in pastoral ministry. Most recently, the Board of Leadership and Outreach have decided to begin a purposeful discussion in leadership regarding this issue.

In my study on this topic and in conversations within my church context, I have realized that there can be considerable confusion around the word *complementary* and how it is used within the gender debate. Interestingly, both complementarians and egalitarians regard the complementary nature of women and men as an essential part of their theological discussion.

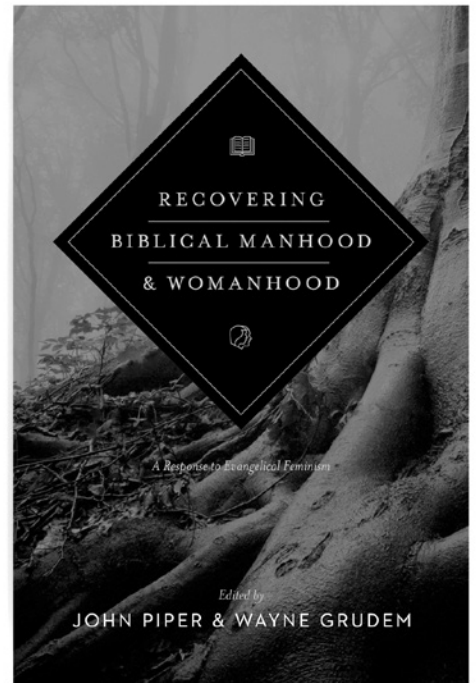
In this essay I focus on what it means for men and women to complement each other both within complementarian and egalitarian paradigms. I then highlight some of ways in which this works out on a practical level within the church and the implications for women who sense a call to vocational ministry.

The way in which men and women complement each other, then, is in their differing roles; the man's role is to lead and the woman's role is to affirm and receive that leadership.

Understanding Complementarity

The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW) is an organization that seeks to “set forth the teachings of the Bible about the complementary differences between men and women, created equally in the image of God.”¹ This begs the question: what are those complementary differences?

John Piper presents us with the following definitions: “at the heart of mature masculinity is a sense of benevolent responsibility to lead, provide for and



protect women in ways appropriate to a man's different relationships” and “at the heart of mature femininity is a freeing disposition to affirm, receive and nurture strength and leadership from worthy men in ways appropriate to a woman's different relationships.”²

The way in which men and women complement each other, then, is in their differing roles; the man's role is to lead and the woman's role is to affirm and receive that leadership.

¹ “Mission & Vision,” Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, accessed April 9, 2020, <https://cbmw.org/about/mission-vision/>.

² John Piper, *What's the Difference? Manhood and Womanhood Defined According to the Bible*, CBMW Practical Living Series (Wheaton, IL: Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, 1989), 12.

In the book *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, put out by CBMW, there are several arguments presented for why they understand complementary male and female roles in this way.

Raymond C. Ortlund Jr. addresses the question of God's design for men and women in Genesis 1–3. He understands men and women to be created equally in the image of God and to be equal in the sense that they are suitable for one another (referring to Genesis 2:18).

However, the distinguishable difference between men and women is understood through his interpretation of the word “helper” in Genesis 2:18 and 20, Adam's authority in naming the woman in Genesis 2:23, and Adam taking the responsibility to be the one who “leaves his parents to found a new household with his new wife” in Genesis 2:24.³

This interpretation of the first few chapters of Genesis has led complementarians to regard the differences between men and women as having to do with roles of headship and submission. According to their viewpoint, these roles were put in place by God from

the beginning and are as relevant for today as they were at the time of creation.

Egalitarians and Complementarity

Egalitarians also base their understanding of complementarity on their interpretation of the creation narrative. Kevin Giles explains how the creation

This differentiation between men and women is significant and God-given. However, it doesn't overshadow the equality and similarities in characteristics of men and women.

narrative emphasizes the equality and differentiation between the sexes. Genesis 1 describes how God made both man and woman in the image of God and how they *both* are given dominion over the earth.

In the words of Giles: “One does not rule over the other. They rule conjointly.”⁴ They are, therefore, equal both in “being and in function.”⁵

The egalitarian perspective also understands men and women to be differentiated from one another. These differences are understood to be “rooted in God's creative activity that gives to men and women differing bodies, differing chromosomes, differing contributions

in procreation, and statistically differing characteristics.”⁶

This differentiation between men and women is significant and God-given. However, it doesn't overshadow the equality and similarities in characteristics of men and women. When it comes to leadership ability, for example, studies have demonstrated that there is not a significant difference between the sexes.⁷

The egalitarian definition of complementarity, therefore, does not have to do with the different roles of men and women or their positions of headship or authority. The union of the man and woman in Genesis 1 demonstrates their complementary nature: the man and woman add to each other's life and through their union procreation is made possible. Together the man and the woman “complete what it means to be human.”⁸

In contrast to the complementarian perspective, egalitarians believe that it is *because* of their differences and how their unique characteristics complement each other that it is important that both men and women participate equally in all aspects of the life of the church, including in positions of leadership and teaching.⁹

Practicing Complementarity

The understanding of how men and women are to complement each other according to God's original design necessarily translates into practical implications for today. Within the complementarian church structure and its emphasis on role distinctions, I find there to be a number of challenges and inconsistencies in terms of these practical implications.

Firstly, these churches and organizations are faced with making tough decisions about what women can and cannot do within a church setting. Recognizing the difficulty of where to draw the line, some scholars have created lists of appropriate ministries for women as guidelines for churches.

3 Ortlund, Jr., Raymond C., “Male-Female Equality and Male Headship: Genesis 1–3”, in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, eds. John Piper and Wayne A. Grudem (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 1991), 103.

4 Kevin Giles, “The Genesis of Equality Part 1”, *Priscilla Papers* 28, no. 4 (Autumn 2014): 3, <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resources/article/priscilla-papers/genesis-equality-part-1>.

5 Ibid.

6 Kevin Giles, “The Genesis of Confusion: How ‘Complementarians’ Have Corrupted Communication”, *Priscilla Papers* 29, no. 1 (Winter 2015): 26, <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resources/article/priscilla-papers/genesis-confusion>.

7 Ibid.

8 Giles, *The Genesis of Equality*, 4.

9 Giles, *The Genesis of Confusion*, 27.

Although restricted in many positions of leadership, women are generally encouraged to pursue leadership positions in contexts where they will be teaching or leading women and children. This may be helpful in some contexts, but it can also lead to arbitrary decisions that need to be made and result in unanswered questions, such as “When do children become adults and when does teaching boys become teaching men?”¹⁰

The Piper-Grudem Perspective

Both John Piper and Wayne Grudem, who have developed these lists of appropriate ministries for women have done so, I believe, with noble motivations.

Piper states that he wants to “make clear that the vision of manhood and womanhood presented in this book is not meant to hinder ministry but to purify and empower it in a pattern of Biblical obedience.”¹¹

Grudem also wants to encourage women to be actively involved in ministry: “It is the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood’s sincere desire to open the doors wide to all the areas of ministry that God intends for women to have.”¹²

It is evident that these scholars aim to be consistent in their views and that they acknowledge some of the challenges churches face in how to live out their understanding of what it means to be men and women in the church, and for this I commend them.

Further Confusion

Another aspect of the complementarian



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Another aspect of the complementarian church structure that I find can bring about confusion is in the role restrictions for women compared with the freedom of roles for men.

church structure that I find can bring about confusion is in the role restrictions for women compared with the freedom of roles for men. In order for men and women to complement each other in terms of their roles it should follow that there are role distinctions for both men and women. However, this is not usually the case.

Cynthia Long Westfall comments on this, stating that “‘role distinctions’ are a euphemism for role restrictions of the disadvantaged party; in the traditional

paradigm, men have no ‘role distinctions’ because they can theoretically fill any service slot in the church, even kitchen duty and nursery if they are willing to do it.”¹³ This can present a confusing picture of the meaning of *complementary*.

It is evident that within the complementarian paradigm there is a fair bit of clarity given to men who sense a call to church ministry: theirs is the role of the leader. The structure is set up to support and train men in these positions of leadership.

For women, however, there is much less clarity as to what their role should look like. Even if a woman feels called to a pastoral role in which she would only minister to women, which is usually seen as perfectly acceptable, there is often little structure in place for her to be guided into the training and mentorship needed for such a vocational ministry.

In her book *Now That I’m Called*, Kristen Padilla addresses this issue. She

10 Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth: An Analysis of More Than 100 Disputed Questions* (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, 2004), 97.

11 John Piper, “A Vision of Biblical Complementarity: Manhood and Womanhood Defined According to the Bible”, in *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, eds. John Piper & Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 59.

12 Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism*, 101.

13 Cynthia Long Westfall, *Paul and Gender: Reclaiming the Apostle’s Vision for Men and Women in Christ* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2016), 171–172.

shares her sense of aloneness in her calling to ministry and her desire to see women find the freedom and support to follow their calling. She interviewed several women working in leadership and teaching roles within the church or parachurch organizations.

One of these women states that she has found that “many women experience fear, doubt, confusion and guilt when they consider going into ministry.”¹⁴ Another woman explains that her doubt and fear arose due to the fact that “the types of gifting I had were found in very few women around me.”¹⁵

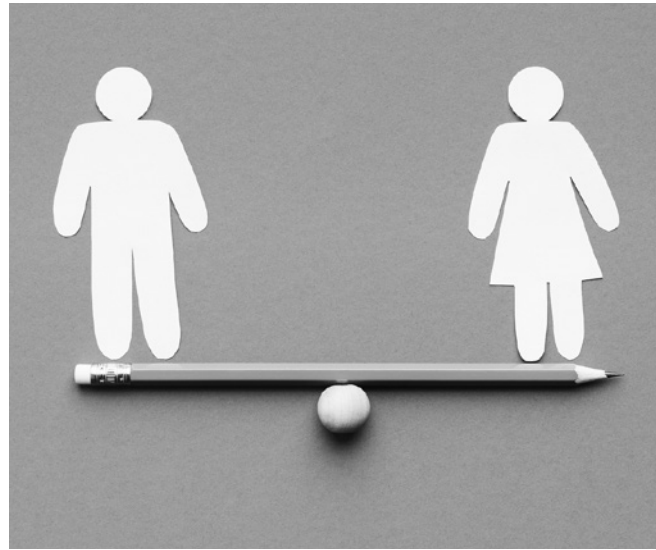
Westfall explains how this type of confusion can often result in women ending up following the path of least resistance, performing actions within the church that are most appreciated and

Prioritizing Spirit-gifting regardless of gender is another emphasis within the egalitarian framework.

expected, rather than experiencing the freedom and encouragement to follow their giftings in leadership and teaching.¹⁶

An Egalitarian Contrast to Role Differentiation

In contrast to the complementarian paradigm, the egalitarian perspective does not place an emphasis on the necessity of role differentiation regarding men and women working together in complementarity. Because complementarity is understood “in



terms of enrichment and synergy,”¹⁷ the emphasis is on men and women working together.

Mutual submission and the giftings of the Holy Spirit become the focus. Mutual submission, according to Alan Padgett, is what Jesus calls us all to and is how he himself lived out his life here on earth, ultimately submitting himself to death.¹⁸ He suggests that the teaching of hierarchical roles is “completely out of line with the model and teaching of Jesus, the Jesus who taught us that in order to be first you must be the servant of all.”¹⁹

Prioritizing Spirit-gifting regardless of gender is another emphasis within the egalitarian framework. Gordon Fee states that the focus of many churches today on leadership and church office was not the focus of the New Testament church. Fee sees, instead, the advantages of recognizing the

importance of gifting over gender, causing the church to be more ministry and less authority driven.²⁰

Patrick Franklin further adds that we need to understand that “our ministry is ultimately not our own, but a participation in the prior ministry of Christ.”²¹ We then live in the new covenant brought about by Christ “where distinctions of race, social status, and gender lost their significance as qualifying factors for priesthood.”²²

Within this framework, both men and women are free to draw upon their experience of the work of the Holy Spirit when determining their calling and gifting.

14 Kristen Padilla, *Now That I'm Called: A Guide for Women Discerning a Call to Ministry* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2018), 154.

15 Ibid., 186.

16 Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 218.

17 Giles, *The Genesis of Confusion*, 28.

18 Padgett, Alan G., “What Is Biblical Equality?: A Simple Definition Needs Further Discussion, Not Least Because of Misunderstanding,” *Priscilla Papers* 16, no. 3 (Summer 2002): 24, <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resources/article/priscilla-papers/what-biblical-equality>.

19 Ibid., 24–25.

20 Gordon D. Fee, “The Priority of Spirit Gifting for Church Ministry” in *Discovering Biblical Equality*, 2nd ed., ed. Ronald W. Pierce & Rebecca Groothuis (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP 2005), 254.

21 Patrick S. Franklin, “Women Sharing in the Ministry of God: A Trinitarian Framework for the Priority of Spirit Gifting as a Solution to the Gender Debate,” *Priscilla Papers* 22, no. 4 (Autumn 2008): 17, <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resources/article/priscilla-papers/women-sharing-ministry-god>.

22 Ibid., 17.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to unpack the significance of the word *complementary* in reference to God's design for men and women in the church. As we have seen, both the complementarian and egalitarian positions are scripturally based. Both positions seek to work out what God's original intentions were for men and women.

When we look at the practical implications of these theological understandings, however, it seems that there are significant inconsistencies within the complementarian framework, including the necessity of arbitrary decision-making for women's roles and the disparity between the freedom of roles for men and the restrictions of roles for women. This has brought about confusion and difficulty for women, especially those gifted in the areas of


Men and women, with all the gifts that God has given them, are both needed within each area of church ministry in order for the church to reflect what it truly means to be the body of Christ.

teaching and leadership who sense a call to vocational ministry.

The egalitarian understanding, on the other hand, places an emphasis not on roles but rather on the ways in which men and women, working and serving together, complete what it means to be

human. Mutual submission and Spirit-gifting, regardless of gender, are the focus.

I believe that men and women, with all the gifts that God has given them, are both needed within each area of church ministry in order for the church to reflect what it truly means to be the body of Christ, to be human in the way that God intended. This, I believe, is the emphasis which makes most sense within a Biblical framework. It erases confusion and frees the church from the task of making arbitrary decisions about roles and restrictions for women.

Most importantly, the egalitarian paradigm allows men and women to freely pursue and cultivate their Spirit-given gifts, building each other up through mutual love and submission as they partner together in the work of the Kingdom of God. 

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The Worldliness of Pacifism



Layton Friesen

Layton Friesen is the Conference Pastor of the EMC. He grew up in Mennville, Manitoba, and lives in Winnipeg. This essay was originally presented at the Toronto Mennonite Theology Centre Graduate Student Conference in 2016.

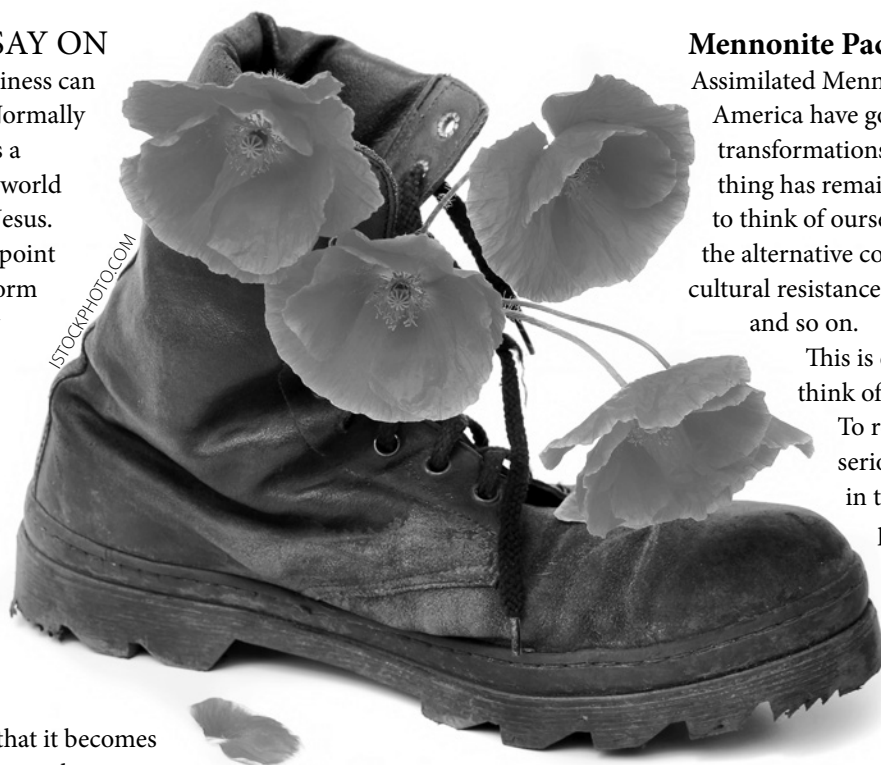
THIS IS AN ESSAY ON worldliness. Worldliness can take on different forms. Normally we think of worldliness as a simple becoming like the world instead of becoming like Jesus.

In this essay I want to point out a more complicated form of worldliness that is very tempting in a secular age. Worldliness can also occur as a culture latches onto the convictions of Christianity and then severs these convictions from Scripture, Spirit and Church.

Worldliness, as I am using it, is the tendency to orphan a Scriptural conviction in such a way that it becomes a self-standing absolute principle, separated from its source in God and no longer shaped by the inflections and movements of God's self-revelation. It has a holy origin, but has now become worldly, even as it maintains some features of its earlier holiness.

Methodology

I will try to re-describe the relationship between Mennonite pacifism and secular-ity to show that pacifism in the Mennonite tradition has always been at risk for becoming such a free-standing principle, and thus a form of worldliness. To do this I will use Charles Taylor's description in *A Secular Age* to show that Mennonite



gospel pacifism and secularity have often been next of kin, easily confused.

In order to highlight how intuitive nonviolence has become for us late moderns I will use Stephen Pinker's controversial book *The Better Angels of our Nature* to suggest that nonviolence and peacemaking in their instrumentalist modes are almost second-nature to secular people, Christians included.

Following that I will conclude by making observations of the Schleithem Confession to show how we can live true gospel non-resistance in a world that tries to look like the church.

Mennonite Pacifism Today

Assimilated Mennonites in North America have gone through many transformations in 250 years, but one thing has remained a constant: we like to think of ourselves as the little people, the alternative community, the counter-cultural resistance, the resident aliens, and so on.

This is especially true when we think of ourselves as pacifists.

To refuse violence, and to seriously try to live this out in the daily practices of peacemaking, this we have been taught and we believe makes us odd. We have come to assume over the course of our five centuries of history that the world really

does run on violence in some deep structural way and that to believe in peace as we do requires being a new creation in Christ. This has been the self-perception of many Mennonites in North America.

But has secularity exposed this as a bit of collective deception?

I want to make the claim that far from being a perpetually counter-cultural voice, Mennonite pacifism has resonance with some of the most powerful instincts of the trajectory leading to the secular age in which we find ourselves.

Dealing with Barbarity

Charles Taylor, in the book *A Secular Age*, tells the long and zig zag story of how secularity had its original impetus in late medieval attempts to finally Christianize Europe all the way to the commoners of society. This Christianization often took the form of overcoming barbarity. Disgust with the vulgar brutality of pre-modern society was a key impetus for this reform from both the church and the state's perspective.

Leaders, both sacred and secular, were vexed by barbarity and sought to civilize their society by repressing violence. This trajectory eventually led to the monopolization of violence by the state, the rejection of killing for religion's sake, the extension of just war principles to engagements with "Indians," and the gradual regulation of warfare.

A key impulse against violence, according to Taylor, was the emerging Renaissance notion of "civility," a refined ideal of order that was defined over against the "savages" that were coming to the attention of Europeans now exploring the world.

In Taylor's words, "It is what we have, and those others don't, who lack the excellences, the refinements, the important achievements which we value in our way of life."¹

To leave behind the "barbarian" existence "one needed to be governed in orderly fashion, under a code of law."²

A key component of this re-making of society that began in the late middle ages was the emerging belief that the human person was malleable, that ordinary commoners could really and truly change to live a civilized, holy life.

Civility required a secular state which "badgered, bullied, pushed, preached at, drilled and organized [commoners] to abandon their lax and disordered folkways and conform to one or another feature of civil behaviour." It required a government that would not "consort with rowdiness, random and unauthorized violence, or public brawls, either in young aristocratic bloods, or among the people."³ An ironic motivation for this suppression of chaotic barbarity was the need for disciplined, productive state armies who could be relied on in battle.⁴

A key component of this re-making of society that began in the late middle ages was the emerging belief that the human person was malleable, that ordinary commoners could really and truly change to live a civilized, holy life.⁵ In part, this was the religious realization that all vocations and stations of life came under the blessing and guidance of God. All should read the Scriptures and all could obey them.

But this had wider societal aspects as well. A key shift that led to the reduction of violence came through overcoming

the medieval belief that chaos and order existed in a relation of complementarity and that occasionally, say at Carnival, the forces of misrule needed to be vented across society.⁶

At first all this combined sacred and secular ideals seamlessly. Jan Laski, a Polish minister who debated Menno Simons summarized the 16th century ideals of a godly (read civilized) society:

Princes and magistrates would be more peaceful; wars would cease among the nobility; the ambition of prelates would be punished; and all would do their duty in their calling. Children would be instructed from a young age in holy discipline; doctrine would be purely preached; the sacraments properly administered; the populace held in check; virtue would be prized; vices corrected; true penance restored and excommunication pronounced on the obstinate and rebellious; God's honour would be advanced together with the proper invocation of his holy name; the most honourable estate of marriage would be restored to its original form; brothels would be abolished; the poor would be cared for and all begging eliminated; the sick would be visited and consoled; and the dead honoured with an honest burial devoid of superstition.⁷

It is not difficult for someone familiar with Anabaptism to see that in some key features, Anabaptists were not living against the spirit of the age. I quote from Conrad Grebel's letter to Thomas Muntzer in 1524: "There is more than enough wisdom and counsel in the Scripture on how to teach, govern, direct, and make devout all classes and all men."

This is part of the laicizing of the counsels of perfection that Kenneth Davis, Arnold Snyder, Andrew

1 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 99–100.

2 Taylor, 100.

3 Taylor, 100.

4 Taylor, 103.

5 Taylor, 121.

6 Taylor, 107.

7 Taylor, 105–6.

Marten, and others have noted.⁸ In its attentiveness to the suffering lowly Christ, Anabaptism found a way to connect Christ and his commands to the disenfranchised commoners that swelled its ranks. My point here is that Anabaptists were in the vanguard of a trajectory that Taylor describes as leading to the secular age.

The Schleithem Legacy

Pacifism followed this. The Schleithem Confession makes two points that were key moves in the quest for civility that eventually became secularity.

First “The sword is an ordering of God outside the perfection of Christ. It punishes and kills the wicked and guards and protects the good. In the law the sword is established over the wicked for

Secondly, Schleithem said, “But within the perfection of Christ only the ban is used for the admonition and exclusion of the one who has sinned, without the death of the flesh.”¹⁰

Here the Anabaptists are saying, common lay Christians in union with Christ and his church can be nonviolent. It is possible for lay people to be orderly. Now, this is clearly by the power of Christ.

But Taylor shows that this is exactly how the trajectory of secularity begins. First common lay people are enjoined to be civilized through the power of Christ, but once they arrive at this order in daily life, it gradually becomes imaginable that one could achieve that order without Christ.

In even larger terms, Anabaptism rejected a whole medieval model of

Traditional clerical exemption from war, such as Thomas Aquinas prescribed, was built upon a multi-layered approach to the gospel and culture in which some members (the clergy) gave witness to salvation through nonresistance while other members served as soldiers, and were not expected to be Christian in the nonresistant way.¹¹

In Anabaptism, as eventually in secularity generally, violence was not reduced by establishing pockets of holy peace, but by encouraging holiness everywhere, in all of life, by all people. We might say that rather than establishing pockets of peace, Anabaptism established pockets of violence by restricting it to the state. Everyone in the church could be peaceful. Only those involved in the secular state were permitted by God to be violent.

Anabaptists were partaking in the first-fruits of a powerful modern idea that we all now assume: through state monopolization of violence, commoners can be nonviolent, orderly people. Anabaptists thought this required union with Christ. Similarly, Pharaoh’s magicians discovered they could do the same magic as Moses.

The kinship with this larger trajectory of nonviolence need not ignore the fact that the world at the time could not countenance the Anabaptist presence. It is true that the view of the sword established at Schleithem quickly led to sociological separatism for Anabaptists, and to a return to a kind of monastic elitism in which the Anabaptists maintained a heroic ethic within their enclosed communities that was not possible for society at large to imitate. And we do find mention of pacifism in the interrogation of Anabaptists. However, it is noteworthy that relatively few Anabaptists were martyred in the 16th century for refusing to kill or serve in the military.

Going forward from Anabaptist beginnings, it should also be noted that the “Mennonite apologetic” through the

In Anabaptism, as eventually in secularity generally, violence was not reduced by establishing pockets of holy peace, but by encouraging holiness everywhere, in all of life, by all people.

punishment and for death *and the secular rulers are established to wield the same.*⁹

This secularizing of the sword, echoing Martin Luther who said something similar, claims that the secular state is now the only power wielding the sword. This takes the sword away from the church, but it also takes the sword away from the commoner.

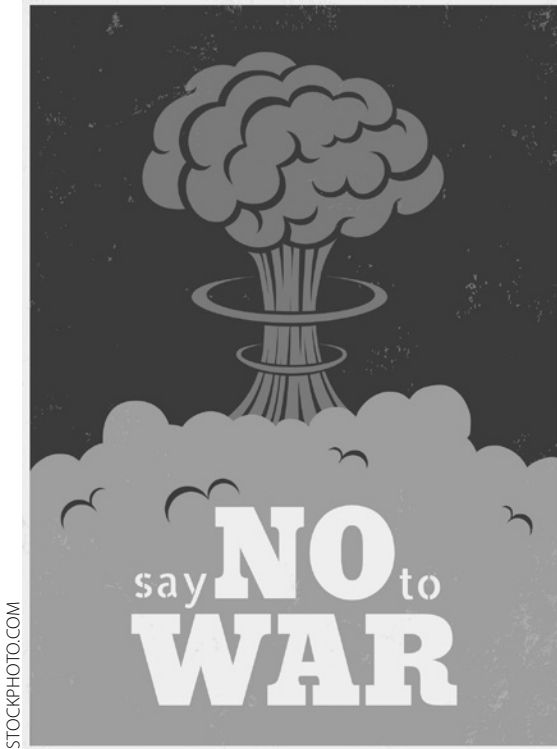
violence reduction that reduced violence by sequestering pacifism within special sacred places. The older medieval “Peace of God” and “Truce of God” movements tried to restrain violence by teaching that certain holy days, places and people were sacred and should not be desecrated with bloodshed, while other “secular” places were left open for violence.

8 Kenneth R. Davis, *Anabaptism and Asceticism: A Study in Intellectual Origins* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1974) was a pioneer in this effort. See also C. Arnold Snyder, “The Monastic Origins of Swiss Anabaptist Sectarianism,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 57, no. 1 (1983): 5–26 and Andrew C. Martin, “Mennonite Spirituality: A Reassessment of ‘Humility Theology’ in North America in the Nineteenth Century,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, April 1, 2011 for description of how it is now recognized that Anabaptism can be understood as a laicizing of the medieval monastic ideal.

9 “The Schleithem Confession | The Anabaptist Network,” accessed September 16, 2015, <http://www.anabaptistnetwork.com/schleithemconfession>. Emphasis added.

10 “The Schleithem Confession | The Anabaptist Network.”

11 Thomas Aquinas addresses this in *Summa Theologiae*, II, 2, q. 40.



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centuries, whether in Prussia, Russia, Paraguay or Canada by which they have secured their *privilegia* exempting them from military service has relied heavily on the claim that pacifists offer productive, civilized, and orderly service to their hosts.

Mennonite Peacemaking in the 20th Century

I give one example: during WWI when Canadian Mennonites from the prairies presented their case in person for exemption from combat service to Prime Minister Borden, they reminded him of what Lord Dufferin had told them back in 1877 when they first came to Canada: “the battle to which we invite you [the Mennonites] is the battle against the wilderness...you will not be required to shed human blood.”¹² The battle against the wilderness was a battle that

12 Frank H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1786–1920* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1974), 370.

13 Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York: Penguin, 2011), xxi.

[Steven Pinker] begins a massive and exhausting documentation of all the different ways in which our society today, compared to earlier ones, has substituted compassion, victim’s rights, human rights and tolerance in place of torture, cruelty, vengeance, barbaric punishments, and unfathomable disregard for the suffering of fellow humans.

Mennonites had always been most interested and capable to serve in.

Going to the 20th century I will only assert rather than demonstrate that the modern active peacemaking Mennonites have sought is an even clearer

manifestation of this claim that non-violence can be a close kin to order and decency. Practices such as restorative justice, nonviolent direct action, peacemaker teams, conflict mediation practices, and the whole MCC model of peacemaking through relief and development, require little justification in our society. We may still hope that they are done for religious reasons but no one believes that they have to be done for religious reasons. And that is a uniquely secular state of affairs.

To this I add Steven Pinker, whose 2011 book *The Better Angels of our Nature*, to my knowledge, did not receive much attention from Mennonite pacifists. He begins this way:

This book is about what may be the most important thing that has ever happened in human history. Believe it or not—and I know that most people

do not—violence has declined over long stretches of time, and today we may be living in the most peaceable era in our species existence...No aspect of life is untouched by the retreat from violence. Daily existence is very different if you have to always worry about being abducted, raped, or killed, and it’s hard to develop sophisticated arts, learning, or commerce if the institutions that support them are looted and burned as quickly as they are built.¹³

And if you reply that in fact there are today many people who fear being raped or abducted or killed, his reply is always, try living in the 1800s or the 1300s.

And so he begins a massive and exhausting documentation of all the different ways in which our society today, compared to earlier ones, has substituted compassion, victim’s rights, human rights, and tolerance, in place of torture, cruelty, vengeance, barbaric punishments, and unfathomable disregard for the suffering of fellow humans.

I am not so much interested in his more controversial claim that fewer people, per capita, died in war in the 20th century than in any previous era, as in his much more intuitive claim about what now constitutes “common sense.” Customs such as slavery, serfdom, breaking on the wheel, disemboweling, bearbaiting, keelhauling, cat-burning, heretic-burning, witch drowning, thief-hanging, displaying

rotting corpses on gibbets, dueling, debtors prisons, public flogging, and all sorts of other amusements and punishments we not only condemn but find almost unthinkable.¹⁴

The book is certainly weakened by Pinker's vexing blindness to the specifically Christian origins of nearly every revolution and transformation he

sanctity, confession, or increasing participation in the Eucharist but rather to talk about education, psychotherapy, judicial inquiries, child safety policies, and community development.

I am not suggesting that these instrumentalist approaches are wrong, only that they have become default, common sense, and perhaps even

exclusive as approaches to human violence. We still have violence in our world but our answer to it is instinctively instrumentalist. Mennonite pacifism, as developed in the 16th century and practiced through the centuries, but especially as it has adopted active, involved concern for society, is right at home in that environment.

Burning Questions

The burning question for gospel pacifists now is not the old trump card that was always played: what would you do if your family was attacked?

The burning question today, I suggest, is why do you insist on attaching Jesus to a

practice that everyone can see is obviously common sense?

As an aside this is partially why so many young people are leaving Mennonite churches—secular society has come around to Menno's way of acting; and, contrary to Stanley Hauerwas, it's not at all obvious any more that you need the church to live out Anabaptist ethics of nonviolence.

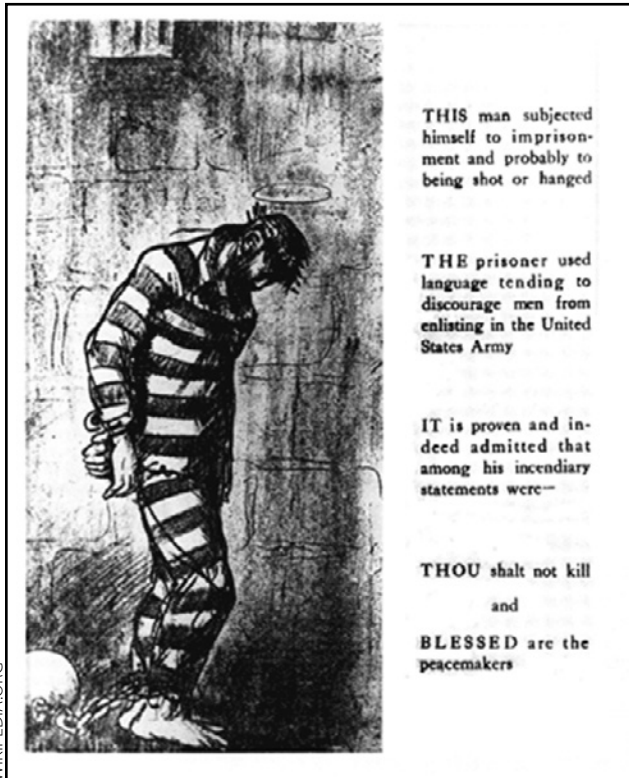
The burning question today is why do you insist on attaching Jesus to a practice that everyone can see is obviously common sense?

And so it has become easy to enshrine nonviolence today as a kind of free-standing principle, as common-sense that needs no theological or religious grounding.

But I would also like to ask, *how do we maintain with gospel conviction a view of human community that has significant parallels to, but should not be reduced to the way of the world?* If our ethic has come to carry substantial cultural power how should we wield it? Not by denying its power. Not by seeking some other ethic that is more counter-cultural. And not by giving up on the vision of a truly theological ethic.

Lets go back again to the Schleithem Confession. Earlier I argued that this confession reflected the secular trajectory in sequestering the sword in the secular state and normalizing peace for commoners. But two additional observations should be made now: first, nonviolence is not an absolute and free-standing principle within the confession. Yes, the state is clearly ordered by God to use the sword. Furthermore, the Church is also given a kind of rule, even a kind of sword-bearing that is contemplative of Christ—this is the ban. Neither nonresistance nor non-coercion is a stand-alone principle (we might say ideology) upheld as an ideal in the confession. A different north star is in place—by which Sattler and company are attempting to orient themselves.

What is the north star of this confession's statement on the sword if it's not absolute nonviolence? And here is my second observation: the benchmark



Blessed are the Peacemakers by George Bellows. Anti-war cartoon depicting Jesus with a halo in prison stripes alongside a list of his seditious crimes. First published in *The Masses* in 1917.

describes; it needs to be read alongside Charles Taylor who is acutely tuned to that.

But he is right, I believe, that when we today hear about violence or injustice such as mass-shootings, campus rape culture, abortion on demand, or missing/ murdered indigenous women in Canada, our solution to the problem, even as Christians is not to call for baptism,

¹⁴ Pinker, 291–92.

is the manner of Christ as described in the words of Scripture. Schleithem on the sword does not even really rest on the commands of Christ, such as his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. Rather, the confession has what we might call a contemplative approach to the sword. It focuses on watching, observing the choices of Jesus.

Should a Christian use the sword against the wicked for the sake of love? Observe the manner of Christ with the woman taken in adultery.

Should Christians pass judgements in disputes within society? Observe the manner of Christ with the two brothers who were quarrelling over inheritance.

Should a Christian be a magistrate if chosen? Ah, but Christ fled those who sought to make him King. Christ suffered rather than ruled.

Finally, the confession tells us how this imitation is to come about—it comes about because we are spiritually, one could even say mystically, joined to Christ as members of his Body. “Since then Christ is as is written of Him, so must His members also be the same, so that His body may remain whole and unified for its own advancement and upbuilding.”¹⁵

In this participation, this union with Christ mediated by Scripture we contemplate and assume the manner of Christ. And this contemplative union with Christ is what structures our unity and difference from the world. In mystical union with Christ we contemplate and take in the manner in which he lived.

The Final Point: Being Like Jesus

The point is not to be like or unlike the world—the point is not to be nonviolent or violent—the point is to wield cultural power as Christians mystically united to Christ and through that union, to be contemplative of his posture as portrayed in Scripture.

In contemplative union we will know how to rightly divide the age, now giving, now receiving, now rejecting, now accepting, once blessing a wedding, another time disturbing a funeral, here suffering quietly, there making a scourge of cords for the temple, now blessing the children, now cursing the devil. Christ was non-resistant to the inflections of his Father—through contemplative spiritual union with him as our head, we enter into a body of nonresistance to Christ—the first measure of the Christian use of power.

It is this contemplative union to the gentle and humble Savior by which our lives are calibrated, rather than an absolute “worldly” principle such as nonviolence. The actions that flow from this may resonate in the world, or not. Our north-star is the Christ of Scripture. Θ

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Feature Sermon

Revelation 12:1–17

Stranger Xmas

Chris Loewen



Chris Loewen is a minister within Blumenort Community Church who works as a certified crop adviser in the agricultural industry. He has studied at PRBI, with Venture Teams International, and at the U. of M., and is currently a part-time master's student in New Testament studies at Providence Theological Seminary. He presented this sermon at Blumenort on December 29, 2019.

WHAT COMES TO mind when you think of the Christmas nativity scene? You might think of shepherds, wise men, the star, the manger, the wooden stable, baby Jesus, Joseph and Mary, angels. Indeed, all these things are part of the cast that makes up the story of Christmas according to the gospels.

When we think of the gospels, we really only have two Christmas stories told by Matthew and Luke. We could say that John tells his own story when he says, “The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (1:14), but that is still quite different from the narrative stories in Matthew or Luke. We certainly don’t have anything in the gospel of Mark.

It is interesting that in these stories we see no mention at all about animals being present at the birth of Jesus like we see in many of our nativity scenes. But we do have another story written by John in Revelation 12, which does include a stranger (mythological) animal.

In that story, we don’t see any cute sheep, goats, donkeys or camels. In this story we have a character that is big and red...but it is not Santa Claus. It is an animal far more dangerous and terrifying than a rowdy sheep or ram. You may have noticed the picture in our bulletins, but there we have a great and terrifying red dragon with seven heads who is hungry for revenge. We also have a beautiful

pregnant woman in dazzling clothes, a young male child, a wilderness, a great eagle, a rushing river, and a great war between Michael and the dragon. Truly, *this is a Stranger Xmas.*

According to John, there was no such thing as a “still quiet night in Bethlehem.” There was no such thing as a “Silent Night.” It was not a quiet peaceful night with comforting music droning in the background; it was an evening “of great danger and death.”¹

The traditional notion that “all is calm, all is bright” is more like a fairy tale than it is a true story. *It was not a silent night; it was a violent night.*

I think John would have a problem with how sanitized and G-rated we’ve made the Christmas story. The Christmas story is full of intense conflict and tension;² in this telling, the birth of Jesus instigated the greatest war of all time. We have often heard it said that “we need to put Christ back into Christmas,” but that’s only half the truth. I also think we need to “put the dragon back into Christmas.” “When we tell the Christmas story and leave out the dragon, it loses all its power, and is only a sugar-plum fairy tale.”³

Before we get into our Christmas story, let me just say a few things first. Revelation 12 forms the centre and most pivotal chapter in the book.⁴ It is in this chapter that John expresses what he

1 J. Richard Middleton, “Let’s Put Herod Back in Christmas,” *The Catalyst*, 16/98–9 (Nov–Dec, 1993), 1.

2 Esau McCaulley, “The Bloody Fourth Day of Christmas,” in *The New York Times: Opinion*, December 27, 2019, accessed December 29, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/27/opinion/christmas-feast-of-innocents.html?fbclid=IwAR2w_OM5KMhXe7uUHuyGi_idFKGKa4LZNq21ZI48b5q0Lw3XsaD4dyLv50U.

3 Pastor Steve Babbitt, “Herods of Judah – Matthew 2 & Revelation 12.1–12,” in *Spring Valley Community Church*, December 16, 2018, accessed December 23, 2019, <https://www.svchurch.org/blog/2018/dec/16/herods-judea-%E2%80%93-matthew-2-revelation-12-12>.

4 John often repeats himself but in a stylistic manner that is often not noticed at first glance. You can think of it like cycles. He tells a story that covers the time between the first and second coming of Christ, and then he tells the same story again but in a different manner using different language and images, and then again, and again. These stories are all parallel to each other. The one unique thing about these stories is that they intensify more and more in their nature from one story to the next. Now, when we take these stories and then stack them all on top of each other (there are about 7 or 8 of them depending on who you ask) you can see one grand beautifully detailed story of Jesus leading his followers, his flock, into New Creation (think of the Slinky toy as an illustration).

thinks is the heart of the matter—the victory and triumph of God over the dragon and all that is evil. John structures this chapter by dividing it into three sections (vv.1–6; 7–12; 13–17) with the middle section as the focus and centre; “the heart of the matter.” This is John’s Christmas story. Really? How is the story of God’s victory over the dragon the Christmas story? Let’s find out.

PART 1: 12:1–6 – The Dragon Threatens the Woman and Child

(12:1–2) “A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth.”⁵

John sees a great sign in the heavens—almost as though the constellations in the sky come to life before his very eyes. He first sees a woman clothed with the brightness of the cosmos. *Who is this beautiful lady?* We might instantly think of Mary since she gives birth to a baby boy who later turns out to be Jesus. It sounds a lot like Mary doesn’t it? Yet, Mary is never described like this in scripture. The most common understanding among scholars is that she represents the faithful people of God from both before and after the birth of Jesus.

This is not to discredit Mary at all, but to point out that the woman here is a corporate figure, even though she may be presented as a singular figure. First of all, she wears a crown of twelve stars, reminding us of the twelve patriarchs of Israel. After all, Jesus came through Israel. This imagery emphasizes that Jesus not only came through Mary, he

came through the faithful messianic community—the people of God in the OT. This isn’t so unusual since there are several prophetic moments in the OT where Israel is portrayed as a pregnant mother whose child will be delivered from captivity (Isa. 66:7–8; cf. Mic. 5:3).

Secondly, we are told in v.17 about the “rest of her offspring,” so she is also all those who follow Christ.⁶

This woman cries out in pain as she is about to give birth to her child. Listen, can you hear the Christmas bells ringing?

(12:3–4) “Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on its heads. Its tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that it might devour her child the moment he was born.”

The scene quickly turns dark and ominous. Another sign appears in the heavens and John sees a huge fiery red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and on its seven heads are crowns. We can already see that everything about this horrible dragon is evil and is the adversary of the woman. Dragons are never creatures portrayed in a positive light. They are always an adversarial metaphor.

Throughout the OT, the nation of Egypt and even Babylon are described numerous times as a dragon that fought against God’s people (Ps. 74:13–14; Ezek. 29:3; 32:2–3; Isa. 27:1). Additionally, John describes this dragon as fiery red.



An illustration of the woman of the Apocalypse in Hortus deliciarum (redrawing of an illustration dated c. 1180), depicting various events from the narrative in Revelations 12 in a single image.

We know already from the seven seals in chapter six that this colour signifies destruction and slaughter.

We can see that John is intentionally setting up a parallel between the woman and the dragon. She wears a crown of twelve stars, and her radiance is majestic and beautiful. But the dragon wears seven crowns on his seven heads and his appetite for power is unquenchable. With a flick of his tail, he casts down a third of the stars from the sky. This gesture is a display of his hostile arrogance and mockery towards the woman and her crown of stars.⁷

In what seems to be the darkest moment of this scene, this hungry dragon crouches in front of the woman and waits for her to give birth so he might “devour” the child. *This dragon is utterly repulsive.* “Revelation heightens the sense of horror by depicting a monster that not only wants to kill a newborn but wants to devour [and eat] it.”⁸ Christmas Eve was no silent night, it was no holy night. No—*not even close!* It’s more like a slaughter house!

⁵ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the New International Version (2011).

⁶ Gordon D. Fee, *Revelation*, NCCS (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 165.

⁷ Craig R. Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (The Anchor Yale Bible, USA: Yale University Press, 2014), 561.

⁸ Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation*, 561.

(12:5) “[The woman] gave birth to a son, a male child, who ‘will rule all the nations with an iron scepter.’ And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne.”

We are told that the woman gave birth to a son and John quotes from Psalm 2:9 that this child “will rule all the nations with an iron scepter/rod.” Here is where we see the heart of the conflict, the reason why the dragon desires to destroy the child. In Psalm 2:9, a messianic Psalm, God promises his son that he will rule over the nations despite the constant threat against him. The dragon knows the power of God’s son and he wants to kill him at his first breath. We might be reminded of Herod the Great and his desire to get rid of any threat to his throne by killing all the boys in Bethlehem who were two years old or younger (Matt. 2:16), or we might think of the Pharisees’ attempts to eliminate Jesus throughout his ministry.

But the dragon must have blinked, or his plan backfired, because the child was snatched up to God and his throne. It is interesting that, in this vision, John moves from the birth of Jesus right to his ascension with no mention of his death or resurrection.⁹ The point of all this is to show the exaltation in the enthronement of Jesus. Jesus is now Lord and King! The dragon is not.

We know that the *means* to which Jesus was enthroned was through his death and resurrection. Yes, the dragon may have killed Jesus, but he did not keep him dead. Jesus did not “escape death by avoiding it, but by dying and being raised to life again.”¹⁰

(12:6) “The woman fled into the wilderness to a place prepared for her by

God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days.”

The child is safe at the right hand of God, but the woman flees to the wilderness where she is taken care of for a limited period of time. What is the wilderness and how is she taken care of? John is using the imagery of the Israelite story and how they fled into the desert away from the hand of Pharaoh, and how they were taken care of and fed with manna. We will come back to this later.

When we think of the woman and who she represents, we shouldn’t

When we think of the woman and who she represents, we shouldn’t understand God’s action as the removal of his people from all threat; rather, he’s giving them strength in the face of threat.

understand God’s action as the removal of his people from all threat; rather, he’s giving them strength in the face of threat. We don’t have time to fully unpack what the 1,260 days in the desert might signify (three and a half years), but let’s remember that “time in the visionary world is not equivalent to time in the readers’ world.”¹¹

I believe the 1,260 days is a metaphor for the period of time between Christ’s exaltation and Second Coming which is a *limited time*. It is the period of time “in which Satan *threatens* and God *sustains*.”¹²

PART 2: 12:7–12 – Michael and the Dragon

(12:7–9) “Then war broke out in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough,

and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.”

With Jesus enthroned as King, we might expect peace and tranquility to be the new reality; instead, war breaks out. Christmas started a war. Not just *a* war—the greatest war of all time.

John links the dragon with the “ancient serpent” from the Garden of Eden. We’re reminded of the prophecy against the

serpent in Genesis 3:15, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” John might be alluding to the fact that the dragon, as an adversary of God’s people, has been around since the beginning of time. So when we say that war broke out on Christmas, we are saying that the devil’s occupation of God’s creation began way back in Genesis, but Christmas started the final war that would finally “crush his head.”

Michael and his angels fought the dragon and his angels, and we are told that Michael hurls the dragon out of heaven to earth. The dragon has lost the war and his place in the heavenly realm. He has been defeated.

(12:10) “Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: ‘Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Messiah. For the accuser of our brothers and sisters, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down.’”

Remember I said this passage was arranged into three sections with the

9 Ian Paul, *Revelation*, TNTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 218.

10 Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation*, 562.

11 Ibid., 563.

12 Ibid., 563.



The key here is to recognize that the dragon only has a *limited time* to wreak havoc and that infuriates him.

middle section being the “heart of the matter”? Here we are told the *meaning* of the dragon’s defeat. Satan has been conquered and God’s reign has arrived.¹³ God’s reign has ushered in salvation, power, the kingdom and Jesus is given full authority. With this we know that Satan “is no longer in a position to [condemn] the saints before God.”¹⁴

The OT term for Satan in the Hebrew language means “*adversary*” or “*accuser*,” and he was understood to be one of the members of God’s heavenly court who relentlessly accused people of sin (Job 1:6–12; 2:1–6; Zech. 3:1–5). By casting Satan out of the heavenly courtroom, we know that he no longer has the power to condemn and accuse.

Perhaps this makes the words of Paul that much richer in Romans 8:1: “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Later in the chapter, Paul asks four questions: “Who is against us? Who will bring a charge against us? Who will condemn us? Who shall separate us from his love?”¹⁵ (vv. 31–39). The answer is “NO ONE!” Our accuser Satan is defeated, and Jesus is Lord! My friends, Christmas is the story of Satan’s defeat and the story of our freedom.

(12:11) “They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.”

Not only are God’s people no longer

condemned, they now triumph over the dragon. There are two ways in which they conquer. First, their victory comes through the blood of the Lamb. The dragon and his minions conquer by their sheer force and power; the Lamb and his followers conquer by laying down their lives. Secondly, throughout Revelation, those who truly conquer and are victorious are those who remain faithful to Christ, even to the point of death, and refuse to submit to the will of Satan. “In the eyes of the world, Christians who lose their lives in order to remain true to the Christian faith suffer a tremendous defeat; but in the eyes of heaven, they are triumphant because they share in the victory of the crucified and risen Lamb.”¹⁶

(12:12) “Therefore rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury because he knows that his time is short.”

The victory over the dragon is heaven’s joy but is earth’s lament.¹⁷ You better watch out, it’s not big old Santa who’s come to town, but the big old dragon. Heaven should rejoice because the dragon

13 Brian K. Blount, *Revelation: A Commentary*, The New Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 236.

14 Craig R. Koester, *Revelation & the End of All Things*, 2nd Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2018), 122.

15 N. T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Romans, Part 1* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 158-159.

16 Koester, *Revelation & the End of All Things*, 123.

17 Blount, 239.

is forever removed, but earth should weep for the dragon has come and has wreaked havoc. The key here, however, is to recognize that the dragon only has a *limited time* to wreak havoc and that infuriates him. Why does it so enrage him? Because he has lost heaven and he knows he will soon be destroyed.

From an earthly perspective, it seems that evil can be so prevalent and unstoppable. But “from a heavenly perspective...evil rages on earth, *not because it is so powerful, but because it is so vulnerable* [and exposed].”¹⁸

We must not think that the apparent rage and fury of evil in our midst is because of its invincibility, it’s because of its frustrated outrage.

If we view Satan as our invincible enemy, we will give up in our despair. But if we can embrace the heavenly point of view, we can see Satan as a pathetic loser who wreaks havoc and will bring down as many people with him as he can to his destruction. He knows he will be destroyed. We can be confident that God will prevail. Christmas is the victory of God over the devil.

PART 3: 12:13–17 – The Dragon Pursues the Woman and Her Children

(12:13) “When the dragon saw that he had been hurled to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child.”

John continues the story from verse nine when the dragon and his angels were thrown down to the earth, and now

we find out how the dragon reacts. He unsuccessfully tried to eliminate the baby; now he goes after the woman.

(12:14) “The woman was given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the wilderness, where she would be taken care of for a time, two times and half a time, out of the serpent’s reach.”

John somewhat repeats himself. He

John is not coming up with brand new stuff here; he is reaching back into the narrative of the OT in order to tell a new story. John does this all over in Revelation.

has already told his readers that this woman fled to the wilderness to be nourished by God, where she stayed for 1,260 days or three and a half years. “Now he tells them again. God took her up as if on the wings of an eagle and carried her away from the dragon into the wilderness for a time, two times, and half a time (which is a reference to the same *short and limited time* as 1,260 days or three and a half years).”¹⁹

John is repeating himself from verse six. Here again, John is drawing on the story of the Israelites and their escape from Egypt. John is not coming up with brand new stuff here; he is reaching back into the narrative of the OT in order to tell a new story. John does this all over in Revelation. In fact, the Psalms speak of the Israelites journey through the Red

Sea in their escape from the Egyptians and it is “compared to God defeating a dragon.”²⁰

For example, Psalm 74:13–14 says, “It was you who split open the sea by your power; you broke the heads of the dragon in the waters. It was you who crushed the heads of Leviathan and gave it as food to the creatures of the desert” (cf. Isa. 51:9–10). Or in Exodus 19:4, the Lord said, “You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.”

We might wonder why the victory of God doesn’t lead the people of God straight into new creation, but into the wilderness. We ask this question only because the original context of the OT is so foreign to us. For John, the imagery of the wilderness makes perfect sense because “it was where the people of Israel lived between their deliverance from Egypt and [before] their entry into the promised land.”²¹

In their exodus towards the promise land, they faced continued periods of threats from Egypt (Ezek. 29:3; 32:2) and from Babylon (Jer. 51:34), and other nations. For John, the hope for the promised land lies in the background as metaphor for our hope in the new creation. For John, the birth of Jesus started a new exodus. “Revelation uses images like fleeing to the wilderness or leaving the city [of Babylon] in order to call its readers to leave the kingdom of the world for the sake of their faith.”²² If we can see this, we can place ourselves into John’s story and see that we are also on a pilgrimage towards God’s kingdom and his new creation. Our pilgrimage is temporary and will only be for a limited amount of time—but God will bring us to new creation.

(12:15–16) “Then from his mouth the serpent spewed water like a river, to

¹⁸ Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation*, 565.

¹⁹ Blount, 240.

²⁰ Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation*, 566.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

overtake the woman and sweep her away with the torrent. But the earth helped the woman by opening its mouth and swallowing the river that the dragon had spewed out of his mouth.”

In the wilderness, the people of God are protected, but the dragon will still relentlessly pursue and wreak havoc. There is no protection within the city of Babylon or in the kingdom of the world; there is protection in the wilderness and God’s kingdom. Protection is not escape from trials; it is perseverance *through* the trials.²³ Protection and perseverance exist in tension but are aspects of the same reality in which we must learn to live.

(12:17) “Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to wage war against the rest of her offspring—those who keep God’s commands and hold fast their testimony about Jesus.”

Here, John brings it all home.²⁴ The failure of the dragon to harm the woman has so enraged him that he turns his attention to the rest of the woman’s offspring—those faithful to Christ. The dragon despises anyone who are God’s possession, anyone who keeps his commands and any who are faithful to the testimony of Jesus. Those who are faithful are hated and despised. Why? Because they are rewarded with what he has lost—heaven itself.

Conclusion:

[1] The Christmas Story is the Defeat of Satan. When we look into the manger and see the baby for who he is—can we see that this child waged the greatest war of all time? This little baby was no ordinary child, he is King of kings and Lord of lords. He defeated our greatest

When we look into the manger and see the baby for who he is—can we see that this child waged the greatest war of all time? The dragon has lost his power. Can you see this as the true meaning of Christmas?

enemy and we are finally and forever set free. Throughout this story, the dragon is a loser. He constantly pursues, but everything eludes him. The dragon has lost his power. Can you see this as the true meaning of Christmas?

Someone recently told me that they had given up on the true meaning of Christmas. I responded, “You may have given up on the true meaning of Christmas, but the true meaning has not given up on you!” Can you hear the promise of Christmas and feel its joy? It is the greatest news given to humanity. It is what gives us the endurance to remain faithful to Christ.


[2] Our Life in the Wilderness. We might wonder what life in the wilderness looks like for us today. Remember, it is the place of *limited time* where “Satan threatens, and God sustains.”²⁵ If God is for us, who can be against us? Satan is always in the business of threatening and destroying God’s people whether it is through physical harm or through his lies and deceit. He constantly accuses us of our sin, and even though he may be right to point out our sin and failures, he has no power to condemn us. There is no condemnation for us who are in Christ Jesus.

He tries to convince us that we are unworthy of forgiveness and our

repentance is futile, but we know we can approach God’s throne with boldness and confidence to receive mercy and grace time and time again. Remember, Satan wreaks havoc, not because he is invincible and unstoppable—but because he is vulnerable and knows that he’s running out of time. He knows his destruction is coming. He knows he will soon come to nothing and he will take down as many people as possible with him. So, in the meantime, the battle rages, but the war is already won.

[3] Christmas is our only Hope. Why is this stranger Christmas story so important? Because it brings context to the true meaning of Christmas.

What would it mean for us to remove the dragon from the Christmas story? It turns it into a sugar-plum fairy tale, stripping the story of its power. It causes us to forget that Christmas is the story of God’s victory over the dragon. It causes us to forget that Christmas is the reason we can triumph over the dragon through the blood of the Lamb. It causes us to forget that Christmas enables us to be faithful to Christ until the very end.

My friends, let’s not forget the real meaning of Christmas. We are more than conquerors because of Christmas. As we come to the end of this year in the wilderness, and we look ahead to the beginning of another year in the wilderness, let us stand with confidence in the faithfulness of God. Jesus our great Shepherd will lead us through the wilderness on towards the new creation. Amen. 

23 Michael Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly: Uncivil Worship and Witness: Following the Lamb into the New Creation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011), 133.

24 Fee, 177.

25 Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation*, 563.

Book Review

A Farewell to Mars: An Evangelical Pastor's Journey Toward the Biblical Gospel of Peace, Brian Zahnd (David C. Cook, 2014). 208 pp. ISBN 978-0781411189. Reviewed by Pastor Ward Parkinson of Rosenort EMC (Man.).

NOT MANY AUTHORS write books knowing full well that what they write could end up diminishing the number of readers or followers they have. It is counterintuitive and does not form a solid business plan.

Brian Zahnd very consciously did just that with his book *A Farewell to Mars*. It demonstrates a commitment to truth and to an understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ that is more important to the author than accolades.

Zahnd is a pastor as well as an author, and he states that what he has learned about the teachings of Jesus and the theology of the kingdom of God has revolutionized his writing and what he teaches as a pastor. Also, he admits, this revolutionary change has not been equally welcomed by all his listeners and readers.

As an American, he acknowledges that in his own country most people—including those in the church—prize the power of the sword and honour their military to the hilt. To label this as idolatry does not sit well. This makes Zahnd's an important voice in the wilderness.

The main premise of the book is a rejection of Christian participation in war, and an encouragement for the church to be a prophetic voice against any state-sanctioned killing. Mars is identified as the war god of the Roman Empire, and Zahnd courageously claims that the church has flirted with an idolatrous relationship with Mars since the days of Constantine in the 4th century.

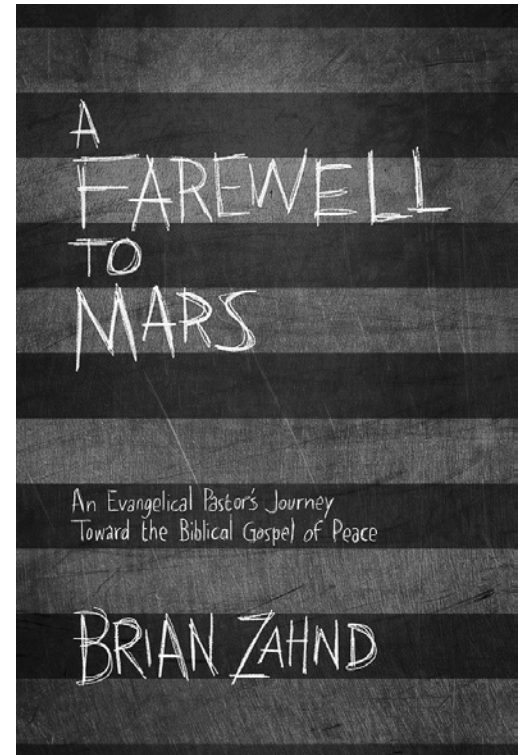
Zahnd begins with an acknowledgement that he too once espoused a militaristic approach to world conflicts. As a young pastor in the early 1990s, he excitedly supported America's participation in the Gulf War. He now confesses this excitement as his "worst sin."

Over many years of careful study of the gospels, Zahnd came to grapple with the teachings of Jesus and how radical they are. He states, "Believing in the divinity of Jesus is the heart of Christian orthodoxy. But believing in the viability of Jesus's *ideas* makes Christianity truly radical."¹

I support Zahnd's contention that in divorcing Jesus from his ideas we inevitably succumb to the temptation to harness Jesus to *our* ideas and assume divine endorsement of them. This has been true of the Church at many points throughout her history, with devastating results. If we claim any allegiance at all to the Prince of Peace, the Church needs to face up to her atrocious violent record.

Zahnd states that we have not taken Jesus' teachings about non-violence seriously because we have separated the Jesus who died on the cross from the ideas that Jesus taught. We have made a spiritualized Christianity that concerns itself only with personal conversion and the afterlife and not the embodiment of the revolutionary kingdom ideas taught by Jesus. Zahnd says this version of Christianity has made the church into a comfortable vassal of the state since the days of Constantine in the fourth century.

In *A Farewell to Mars*, Zahnd seeks to bring the real world ideas of Jesus and the



saving power of Jesus together. The truth that Jesus saves must not be relegated to just saving the souls of believers when they die. Jesus intends to save the world, not just evacuate it. Zahnd promotes an eschatology of hope rather than an escapism model of doom and gloom and violence.

This eschatology of hope is already underway, and Zahnd details the historical legacy of championing the cause of the victims, the voiceless, the slave, the destitute that has come about from followers of Jesus. Without Christ initiating a kingdom that embodies love, such a vision would never have arisen in our world. As Zahnd puts it, "We are not hoping for Armageddon; we are helping build New Jerusalem."²

One of the themes I found most intriguing in this book is the idea of scapegoating. In a very carefully written chapter, Zahnd exposes the demonic character of our human tendency to create scapegoats (or targets) to blame for our own sins and insecurities. Hitler's

1 Zahnd, *A Farewell to Mars*, ch. 1., italics his.

2 Ibid, ch. 2.

identification of what he called the “Jewish Problem” in Nazi Germany serves as a horrible modern example. This scapegoating can be seen as the root of so much war and violence in world history. We unconsciously see it as a solution to our problems.

Zahnd says scapegoating starts on the playground among children, and we all do it, but that Jesus Christ came to bring scapegoating to an end. At the cross “Jesus became the final scapegoat.”³ Even in his resurrection Jesus never spoke of revenge, but forgiveness and peace (Matthew 9:13). He calls his followers to reject the cry of the crowd, and follow the model of Perfect Love that drives out all fear.

Consistent with Anabaptist teaching and emphasis, Zahnd affirms that in order to follow Jesus we must take his teaching in the gospels seriously. We must give careful attention to the “red letters” in our Bibles. To do this faithfully is not easy. It means going against the prevailing worldview of Western culture, and Western power structures.

Zahnd’s treatment of Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) and also in John 8 is a revealing of how radical were Jesus’ words and how radical it will appear to follow them. It means redefining words like “enemy” and “freedom.” We tend to idealize the concept of political freedom as democracy’s gift to the world that must be defended, but too often this “freedom” is a thin disguise of justification for the killing of our enemies.

In addition, Zahnd affirms that the truth that *truly* sets us free, according to Jesus’ words in John 8, is that “our enemies are really our alienated brothers” and “there is no ‘them’—there is only us. The truth is that freedom is love, not power.”⁴

While holding solidly to a peace-making calling, Zahnd is wary of labels, and

reluctant to don the name “pacifist.” He sees it as a political label, a position on violence that could be adopted apart any teaching of Jesus Christ. He prefers simply to call himself a Christian and let Jesus’ teaching (and example) on non-violence hold sway, understanding that it will automatically be counter-cultural.

With the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, Zahnd envisions a scene of differing ideologies colliding together. The crowd was surging with messianic hopes of Jesus being a conquering saviour leading the charge against the Roman powers. Jesus meanwhile wept over Jerusalem, prayerfully predicting her impending destruction if she persisted in seeking freedom through violence. His lament is that the people did not recognize “the things that make for peace” (Luke 19:42). Jesus came to save them by giving up his life. In short, they believed in him, but not in his way.

Zahnd contends that it is inconsistent for today’s Christians to believe in Jesus for the promise of the afterlife, but continue to depend on (and endorse) the violence of war to maintain our notion of freedom. To truly believe is to follow the Jesus way: love for God and love for our neighbours—including our enemies.

A key component of Zahnd’s premise is a thoroughgoing kingdom theology. Convinced that Jesus’ teaching centred on the arrival of the kingdom of God, he sees the reign of Christ not as something waiting in the wings but a current reality. He shows that Jesus purposely used the term “Son of Man” for himself as a reference to the vision recorded in Daniel 7. The Kingdom Jesus announced in his earthly ministry was none other than the complete and everlasting authority and dominion given by the Ancient of Days to the Son of Man in Daniel’s vision.

Zahnd affirms that the kingdom of God will find its consummation at Christ’s return, but rejects the idea that it waits until that day. If that kingdom has truly come, here and now, then followers

who proclaim Jesus as Lord must order their lives in line with the values and teachings of their King. Followers of Christ are to embody the values of the kingdom of God here and now, values based on love, compassion, mercy, and justice—not political or military success.


The book concludes with a striking story of the author having the opportunity to visit the Cadet Chapel at an Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, an American National Historic Landmark. This Academy receives the brightest and best from around the country as students, destined to be leaders in their communities.

As they entered the chapel, they saw a large vaulted sanctuary with room for 1,200 worshippers. Zahnd continues:

But what arrested my attention the moment I entered was the nearly fifty-foot “cross” that hung above the altar. I put the word in quotes because though it hung where a cross would be expected and it was no doubt intended to remind the worshipper of a cross, it wasn’t a cross. It was a sword. This enormous aluminum “cross” had a propeller for a hilt and a metal blade with a central ridge and a tapered point. It was *not* a cross. It was a *sword*! I was stunned...the cross of Christ had been replaced by a sword of war.

As we drove away from the Air Force Academy, I told my wife, “That was no Christian chapel; that was a temple of Mars.”⁵

Symbols. The cross that the Romans intended as an instrument of torture and execution Jesus transformed into a symbol of self-sacrifice, forgiveness and love. It is our symbol. We carry the cross to state or willingness to give up our lives for our King, who gave himself for us.

To replace a cross with a sword certainly identifies one’s allegiance. But it is not to Jesus Christ. Brian Zahnd is a modern-day prophet decrying idolatry. 

3 Ibid. ch. 3.

4 Ibid. ch. 5.

5 Ibid. ch. 7.

The Final Word

GOD'S MEANS OF ACHIEVING THE
ultimate reconciliation of all things are not immediately evident to us. God cannot be subjected to our interpretation of the non-violent way of Jesus. Our commitment to the way of the cross (reconciliation) is not premised on God's pacifism or non-pacifism. It is precisely because God has the prerogative to give and take life that we do not have that right. Vengeance we leave up to God. Anabaptists called this Gelassenheit—surrender to and trust in God.

A. James Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2001), 492.

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