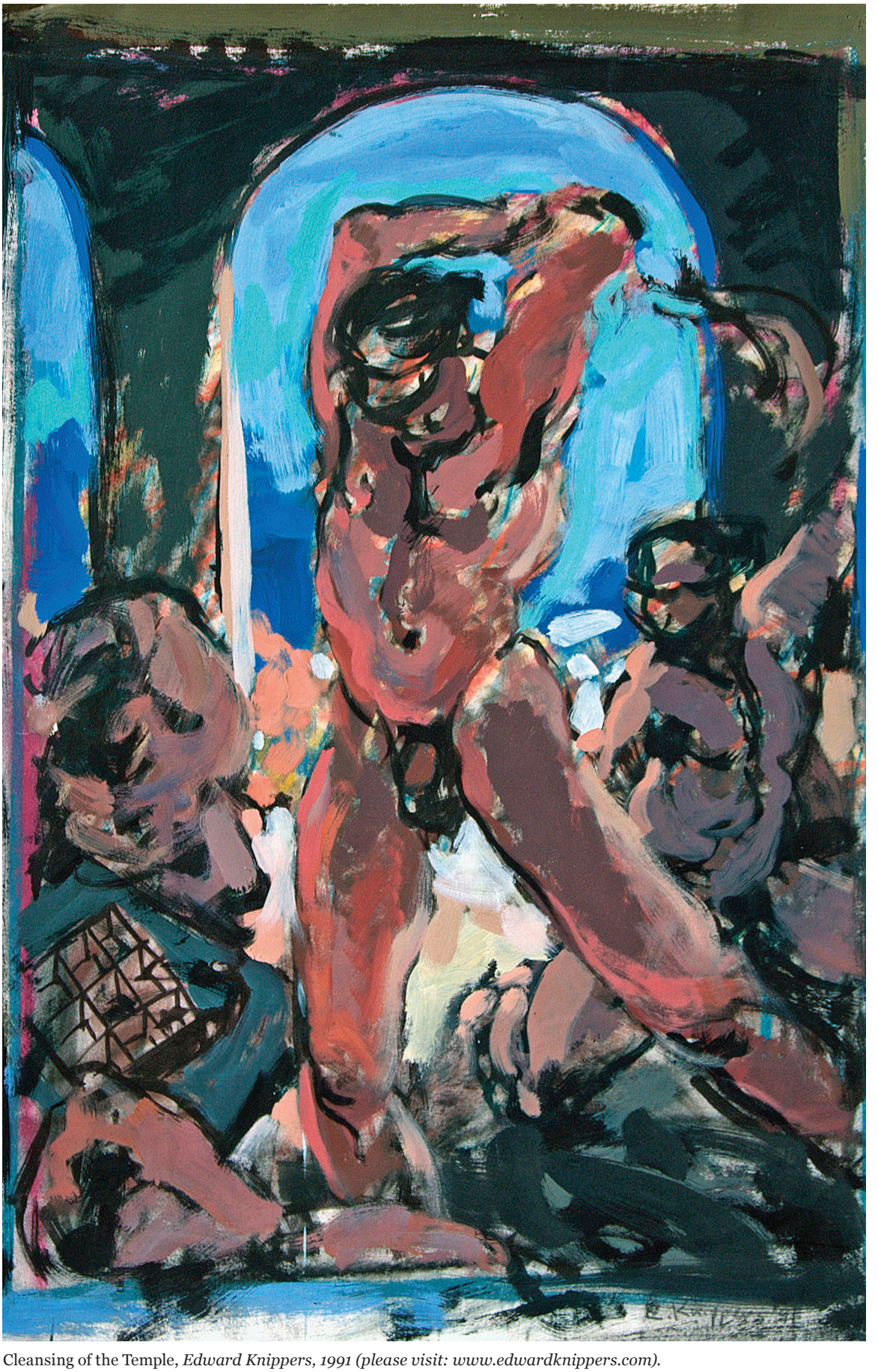

Cleansing of the Temple, *Edward Knippers, 1991 (please visit: www.edwardknippers.com).*

WAS JESUS A PACIFIST?

Andrew Fulford

INTRODUCTION

Socrates famously says that philosophy, the love of wisdom, begins in a feeling of wonder. Aristotle fittingly adds that wisdom consists in the knowledge of causes, not simply the knowledge that things happen, but also why they do. Over the centuries, while Christians have had a common text or set of precepts, when it comes to the ethics of Jesus, they have not agreed on its significance. The problem we all face is not that we have different common precepts, but that we lack wisdom. We lack the knowledge not of what Jesus said to us, but of the deeper, higher principles that caused him to give these commands and that therefore provide the implicit context which determines their meaning.

It would be brash of me to claim to have that wisdom when so many other, wiser interpreters disagree with my particular views on these ethical questions. Nevertheless, I think it is worth offering a solution where none has yet to win consensus, especially when I add that my solution is really not new in its substance. My suggestion is this: Jesus' aim was and is to bring creation to the end for which God always intended it, and his ethical teachings are consistent with this aim. In my book *Jesus and Pacifism,* I provide an historical argument that Jesus' precepts about violence fit within this general aim, and that they are interpreted incorrectly when they are pushed in a pacifistic direction.

The following will provide a brief sketch of most of that argument, and highlight periodically how it relates to the approaches of John Howard Yoder, Stanley Hauerwas, and Richard Hays. I obviously will not have time to present a comprehensive summary of their works, but for the sake of clarity it is helpful to highlight their words as foils for my own.

TYPES OF PACIFISTIC RATIONALES

I want to turn first to pacifism, specifically to two major varieties: those that appeal to natural law—to a divinely imposed order to the universe inherent in nature—and those that appeal to divine positive law—to commands coming directly from God. In my encounters with pacifists, I have observed six recurring arguments for absolute non-violence that fall under the category of natural law. They are:

- *The Cycle of Violence*: violence begets only further violence; it never resolves anything.
- *The Limits of Human Knowledge*: human beings can never truly determine the guilt of another person, so coercive judgment can never be verified as just.

- *The Immorality of Punishment and Vengefulness*: the very idea of retribution and vengeance are immoral and barbaric.
- *The Unloving Character of Violence*: violence is inconsistent with the virtue of love.
- *The Utopian Character of Violence*: despite claims otherwise, violence can never truly achieve real and true justice or common good.
- *Hierarchy as Intrinsically Dominative*: any sort of hierarchy is unjust intrinsically, so it is unjust for one person to punish someone under his or her authority.

Appealing to aspects of reality that remain true across redemptive history, these arguments collectively imply that non-violence has always been ethically obligatory.

And then there is the other kind of rationale for pacifism, the one based on divine positive law. Here, the reason for prohibiting violence does not derive from the nature of human beings, nor of the current state of the created order (including the presence of evil), but rather derives strictly from a divine command given in history. For our purposes, this divine command is encapsulated in the teachings of Jesus. With this kind of rationale, pacifism need not be ethically mandatory in every age or for every kind of person.

What all these arguments have in common is a specific conclusion. They all entail, at a minimum, that no Christian can participate in the state use of violence, especially in the form of killing another person. The moral and natural approaches entail an even stronger prohibition: absolutely no one can rightly participate in such activity, period.

WHERE THE NEO-ANABAPTISTS LAND

It is worth noting here that it's not always easy to pin down where authors like Yoder, Hauerwas, and Hays fall in terms of their particular positions. It's even possible that they're not completely consistent. For example, in *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, Hays says:

> If the Sermon on the Mount was addressed to a marginal community outside the circle of power, its teachings cannot be directly applied in a context where Christians hold positions of power and influence, or where they constitute the majority in a democratic political order. (342)

This would seem to suggest he does not regard the non-violent teachings of the Christian community as intrinsically binding on every human being or even every Christian in every context. Yet he can also say: "On the other hand, an equally serious case can be made that, on balance, history teaches that violence simply begets violence" (342). A paragraph later he insists, "if the church is to be a Scripture-shaped community, it will find itself reshaped continually into a closer resemblance to the socially marginal status [of the] nonviolent countercultural community" that heard Christ's sermon.

Similarly, Hauerwas also makes arguments that veer more into my divine positive law category. For example, in *The Peaceable Kingdom* he writes:

> That is why Christian ethics is not first of all an ethics of principles, laws, or values, but an ethic that demands we attend to the life of a particular individual—Jesus of Nazareth. It is only from him that we can learn perfection—which is at the very least nothing less than forgiving our enemies. (76)

Yet, as with Hays, he also sometimes makes comments that seem to make him a natural law pacifist:

> Jesus thus decisively rejects Israel's temptation to an idolatry that necessarily results in violence between peoples and nations. For our violence is correlative to the falseness of the objects we worship, and the more false they are, the greater our stake in maintaining loyalty to them and protecting them through coercion. Only the one true God can take the risk of ruling by relying entirely on the power of humility and love. (79)

Hauerwas draws a close connection here between violence and idolatry, and it's difficult to see how, on these grounds, coercion could ever be justified for anyone, anywhere, or anytime.

Finally, even Yoder seems to fit into both categories on occasion. For example, in his book *Nevertheless* he states quite clearly that his variety of pacifism is based uniquely on the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and not on other principles (137).

Yet, while he argues that the idea of nature as a source of ethical norms is the result of an intellectual failure, he nevertheless provides arguments at times that suggest violence is always wrong for everyone. In *The Christian Witness to the State*, he writes:

> In any state we can see self-glorification and the combining of religious and political motivations. The wielding of the sword is always an expression of a degree of unbelief, and the church that blesses this undertaking is always marked by a measure of apostasy. (77)

And in *Nevertheless* he states:

> The invocation of violence to support any cause is also implicitly a messianism. Any national sense of mission claims implicitly to be a saving community. One cannot avoid either messianism or the claim to chosen peoplehood by setting Jesus or his methods aside. One only casts the aura of election around lesser causes. (138)

So, all that to say, I'm not always sure where the big neo-Anabaptist names fit in my taxonomy. But no matter. For this reason, I will respond to all of these rationales.

BACKGROUND ON JESUS' TEACHING

Given this understanding of pacifism, I now want to summarize my argument about Jesus, and I'll begin with the backgrounds to his teaching: natural law, literary practices, social setting, and the Old Testament (OT).

NATURAL LAW

At the weblog *Calvinist International,* I have argued that Jesus appeals to natural law as authoritative in his own teaching, and I will assume this as a primary context to his teaching. Jesus assumed natural law existed, that it was binding, and that his audience knew it. In light of this, it is fair to ask: what does this law teach about matters of violence and war? Let's take this in steps.

First, Aristotle argues in book 1 of his *Politics*, rightly, that nature directs man towards forming both family and political community. His argument was essentially that human beings cannot survive as isolated individuals, and that they might flourish only when they live in community.

Second, throughout history, most natural law thinkers have recognized that the natural order directs animals toward self-preservation and self-defense. It is important to note that "defense" here is not necessarily an amoral concept, nor is it necessarily physically passive. Rather, defense is aimed at the preservation of natural goods, and so shares in that natural goodness. This brings us directly to the issue of punishment. Here, too, we find that basically all cultures of the world have recognized that punishment is a just and necessary form of behavior in appropriate circumstances. It consists of giving to people what they deserve (the definition of justice in general) when what they deserve is injury, because they have first injured others.

Third, following from these general principles, the classical tradition rightly derived fairly obvious consequences that were distilled into the just war tradition. These consequences do not offer a *carte blanche* approval for the use of force, but require all actors considering the instrument of violence to reason very carefully about the ethical characteristics of their actions. For the sake of brevity, I'll only mention some of these consequential principles.

From the fact that the common good represents the highest temporal end of human

activity, it follows that whatever acts individuals and communities perform must be in accord with the common good. But from this follows the axiom that no one should act when the foreseeable effects of an act will cause more harm than good. Together, these commitments find expression in the just war criterion of proper intention and in the prudential concern with having a reasonable prospect of success. Further, the obligation to act for the good of others entails that no one should harm another person unless they deserve it, in which case such actions would take the form of punishment, an expression of justice. In general, people should do good to their fellow human beings. This intuition is summarized in the criterion of just cause. Finally, the political nature of the human entails that people should act in community, and insofar as a government represents a community, members should act in accord with their own government. Together with right intention and just cause, this entails a third relevant *jus ad bellum* criterion: wars should be waged by legitimate authorities; that is, sovereign governments and those they have deputized, not private actors.

The natural created order, then, provides reason for governments to use coercion, and for subjects to remain subject to them and not take coercion into their own hands. In other words, it does not support pacifism. This provides one context for Jesus' teachings.

LITERARY PRACTICES

A second context is grounded in the literary customs deployed in the writing and interpretation of law. First-century rhetoricians made explicit a commonly accepted tacit point: laws need to be qualified because there are exceptions to general rules. This need to allow for unstated exceptions is also apparent outside legal contexts, such as in the even less exacting genre of wisdom literature like the book of Proverbs. None of this should be particularly surprising; it is a common convention of human communication to not always explicitly state things that are safely regarded as assumed.

SOCIAL SETTING

A third context for Jesus' teaching is the social setting surrounding him and his listeners. More explicitly, Jesus spoke as a man without political power to a people who were, themselves, essentially without political power. The examples in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount generalize about cases relevant to those without any real role as a public representative. In other words, most of the people listening to Jesus' teaching were simply private citizens, and he tailors his message accordingly.

THE OLD TESTAMENT

Finally, we must consider the Old Testament context of Jesus' words. Jesus was a religious teacher speaking as a faithful Jew from within the Jewish religious tradition. His Jewish listeners would have assumed an OT context for his words and, familiar with it themselves, would have recognized in Jesus' teaching a fidelity to that context.

THE BIBLICAL RECORD & NONVIOLENCE

We have already discussed how natural law rules out any type of moral or transhistorical pacifism. Additionally, in our discussion of contextual setting we have affirmed the place of divine positive law in Jesus' teaching. Because this is so, we must now measure the consistency of pacifism with the biblical record.

THE OLD TESTAMENT & PACIFISM

First, it seems to me that the OT assumes the existence, general knowability, and authority of the natural law, and this is obviously relevant to the present concern. But the OT rules out pacifism even more directly.

Referencing again the pacifistic rationales noted earlier, recall that the "Cycle of Violence" arguments contend that violence never solves anything, but only provokes more violence. In contrast, the OT states that the death penalty for idolatry will deter people from continuing to practice it (Deut. 13:11; 17:13). It affirms the efficacy of state coercion to

Christ Driving the Money Changers out of the Temple, *by Valentine de Boulogne, circa 1618. Galleria Nationale d'arte Antica, Italy. Source: Web Gallery of Art, via Wikimedia Commons.*

control the behavior of subjects. Similarly, the "Limitation of Human Knowledge" approach contradicts the OT's affirmation that people can determine the facts regarding infractions of the law (Deut. 13:12-15; 17:2-7; 21:18-21; 22:22; 25:1-3). So too, ubiquitous laws compelling punishment for various crimes belie the insistence that retribution is intrinsically immoral or barbarous.

Naturally, the OT also directs people to treat their enemies lovingly. John Day, in his book *Crying for Justice,* notes this is commanded in Ex. 23:4-5 and Prov. 25:21-22, and exemplified in 2 Kings 5-6. He adds:

> While it must be granted that the command to "love your enemies" is nowhere to be found in the Old Testament, the concept "cannot be confined to the words themselves. When enemies are fed and cared for, rather than killed or mistreated, love for enemy is being practiced."

Against the pacifistic insistence on the necessarily "Unloving Character of Violence", the OT witness insists there is no intrinsic contradiction between the general virtue of seeking the good of the other (love) and magistrates using violence for justice in some specifically defined situations.

The objection that violence is "utopian" or "messianic" also fails by OT standards because it imputes an intention to the law that the law rejects. That is, OT law does not use violence in some utopian belief that simply inflicting state punishment will usher in a new Eden. Rather, OT law recognizes that the root cause of crime is the fallen heart of man, and that only the grace of God can solve this problem (Deut. 29:4).

Lastly, contra the pacifistic insistence that hierarchy is evil, the OT law speaks approvingly of it, as exemplified in the command to the Israelites to set up hierarchical structures by appointing judges who can render decisions (Deut. 1:9-17), and through assuming a family structure of elder rule (Deut. 5:32; 19:12). The OT also commands subjects to submit to their rulers (Prov. 24:21-22), though not unconditionally (e.g., 1 Sam 14:43-45). Support for hierarchy abounds in the OT witness.

Just as it stands opposed to any "natural law" type of argument for pacifism, the OT clearly does not require pacifism along divine positive law lines; it rather does the opposite, requiring state punishment for evildoing. Of course, for a Christian ethic it would be inappropriate to conclude our biblical survey at this point. A positive explication of Jesus' teaching in the context of the New Testament (NT) witness is needed.

JESUS, THE NEW TESTAMENT, & PACIFISM

The strongest and most common arguments for pacifism from Jesus' teaching come from a few places in the Gospels. Primarily, these seem to be: the temptation narrative, the Sermon on the Mount (and parallel texts), his teaching about taking up the cross, his teaching about Caesar, his teaching about Gentile rulers, and his teaching about taking up the sword. Another argument comes from Jesus' acceptance of his own crucifixion. I cannot take up in-depth analysis of all these sources, so I'll pick a few representative cases.

Undoubtedly, the central didactic source for pacifism is Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5-7. In his preface to *The Sermon on the Mount*, Dale C. Allison writes about three common errors in exegesis of this sermon. The first is to interpret the text apart from the rest of the Gospel. The second is to read the sermon as a radical departure from Judaism, against parallel evidence that is substantively present in other Jewish texts. And the third is to miss that Jesus' form of teaching is not a prosaic law code, but an image-filled poetic text that seeks to cast a moral vision. Keeping these errors in mind, we'll turn to specific parts of the sermon.

Beatitudes

The most directly relevant beatitude to the issue of pacifism is obviously Matt. 5:9: blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the sons of God. This beatitude says nothing that is not expressed or implied in several OT texts (Ps. 34:14; 37:35-38; 120:1-7; and Prov. 12:20), all of which are part of a non-pacifist corpus and era of redemptive history and cannot be interpreted, retrospectively or otherwise, as pacifistic. However, they can be interpreted in other ways. First, the virtue of seeking peace is eminently useful and good in personal relations. Second, even in the matter of statecraft, the just war tradition has always emphasized war should be the last resort taken and aimed at peace. Jesus is lauding the personal and political expression of the virtue of peacemaking. More is said on this beatitude in Marc LiVecche's essay in this issue.

Jesus, the Law, & the Prophets

When discussing the structure of the sermon, Allison notes the discourse is bracketed with references to the continuity of Jesus' teaching with the Law and the Prophets (5:17-20 and 7:12). This primes us to read the Sermon in continuity with the OT, which as we have already seen is not pacifistic.

Various components of 5:17-20 deserve particular attention. In his book *The Gospel of Matthew,* R.T. France explains the meaning of the words "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets." He writes: "The verb *katalyō*...with reference to an authoritative text...means to declare that it is no longer valid, to repeal or annul. The issue is thus not Jesus' personal practice as such, but his attitude to the authority of the law and the prophets" (182). Jesus, then, directly denies he has come to annul the authority of scripture.

The reason for this denial is clarified by the connecting word "for" (γάρ) at the beginning

of verse 18: "For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished." This is to say that the law will stand until the end of the world. It is a witness to the eternality of the covenant. As Craig Keener elaborates in his own *The Gospel of Matthew,* Jesus' teaching here echoes rabbinic Jewish statements about law that affirm the absolute and unchangeable authority of the scriptures. Regarding verse 19—"whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments"— Keener also asserts that the Judaism of Jesus' day would have easily understood and agreed with Jesus' caution against annulling even seemingly trivial commandments. Keener writes: "The point is…that…[t]o deny that one was responsible to do whatever God commanded, no matter how trivial it may seem, was to deny his lordship and to intentionally rebel against his whole law" (179).

Thus, verses 18-19 work like this: because the scriptures are the word of God, they cannot be contradicted by the course of history. And because of that same divine authority, no one can rightly alter the law in his or her exposition of its demands.

Of course, a cursory glance at the rest of the New Testament shows many cases where OT laws are, in fact, clearly no longer binding for Christians. However, a feature common to these seemingly annulled laws provides the solution. Each of them are ceremonial and symbolic, or contain elements of symbolism, and are not mere re-publications of natural law, as are the imperatives of the Sermon. And this is precisely in accord with the eschatological vision of the OT. For in the *eschaton* envisioned in the law and the prophets, natural law—the created order— will be restored. The divisions and restrictions placed on Israel, and therefore humanity, intended to symbolize the problem with creation and the solution to that problem, will no longer be needed, the reality to which they pointed having already come. Jesus thus does not contradict the descriptive authority of the OT.

Regarding verse 20, contrary to some interpreters like Yoder who have attempted to argue the Pharisees were examples of perfect obedience to the Law, Jesus is quite clear about his view of Pharisaical righteousness: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you…appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (Matt. 23:27-28).

Jesus' demand in 5:20 is not about "surpassing the demands of the Law", but about truly obeying it, in contrast to these Pharisees who merely pretend to do so while being truly lawless.

The consequence of this analysis must be, at a minimum, to incline interpreters to recognize the continuity between the OT and the Sermon in 5:21-48.

Pitting the New Against the Old

This point about continuity is, I think, a crucial one and warrants a summary comment. In contrast to the perspective I've outlined here, Hays describes the Anabaptist position when he writes:

> [T]he New Testament's witness is finally normative. If irreconcilable tensions exist between the moral vision of the New Testament and that of particular Old Testament texts, the New Testament vision trumps the Old Testament… Jesus' explicit teaching and example of nonviolence reshapes our understanding of God and of the covenant community in such a way that killing enemies is no longer a justifiable option. (336-337)

This is inconsistent with Jesus' own words in the Sermon on the Mount, which, we see, the Anabaptists stress as authoritative. It seems to me, therefore, that any interpretation of the Sermon that requires an Anabaptist view of continuity is highly suspect.

Retaliation & Enemy Love

The most important aspect of the Sermon for the subject of pacifism is the antithetical sequences of 5:38-48 ("You have heard it said…but *I* say to you") that pacifists contend overturns the *lex talionis*—the law of the

tooth—and replaces retaliation with loving our enemies.

We have already argued that not taking vengeance, and instead doing good to one's enemies, is commanded in the OT, and that in the OT it is quite clear such unqualified commands were consistent with participation in ethical state violence. However, a strong positive interpretation of this text can also be made. And while it may seem banal, we should take care to note that all of Jesus' examples are drawn from the normal life of an average, politically powerless Israelite. This should incline us to affirm the old Augustinian interpretation of these texts, that they are not about the exceptional situations that a magistrate would encounter.

Further, the implication of Jesus' choice of examples in the first antithesis (essentially petty violations aimed at individuals) is that he is overruling a particular interpretation of the *lex talionis*—one that would sanction private vengeance—and not the *lex* per se. We have already noted that the OT itself prohibits private violence.

I have also argued that the OT commands the love of enemy. But this is not true for all Jewish tradition. In the apocryphal book of Sirach, for example, the twelfth chapter carries the injunction, "Do good to humble people, but don't give anything to those who are not devout. Don't give them food, or they will use your kindness against you." It is quite likely that Jesus is correcting Jewish teachings such as these, and not the OT scriptures—and he does so by reiterating OT ethics.

Taking up the Cross

Another command pacifists will sometimes appeal to is Jesus' "take up your cross, and follow me" (Matt. 16:24). Yoder argues that this command is essentially a command to be a faithful minority community under persecution. However, as some have noted in response to Yoder's work, at times he can seem to reduce the meaning of the Gospel to politics, and this problem becomes evident here.

Christ Cleansing the Temple, *by Bernardino Mei, circa 1655. Getty Center, Los Angeles. Source: Google Art Project, via Wikimedia Commons.*

What does Jesus mean by this command? Carrying the cross is set in opposition to some other possible choices. Among them are loving one's family, keeping all of one's possessions, gaining "the whole world", saving one's own life, and not denying oneself. It is easy to see that these last options are essentially opposites to carrying the cross. Carrying the cross means being willing to die for the sake of righteousness, while being unwilling to carry the cross is rooted in refusing to do so . Refusing the cross is thus *not* essentially about the temptation to take up, instead, political power but rather about repeating the sin of the Garden: an action rooted in distrust of God's goodness, leading to an attempt to maximize our pleasure by breaking God's commands.

In sum, this command requires nothing less than loving God with all one's mind, all one's heart, and all one's soul—it is to meet the terms of the Greatest Commandment, which is of course Jesus' summary of the Old Testament's requirements. The NT confirms this in its theology of suffering, especially in places like 2 Cor. and Rom. 8. But it is not suffering merely for the sake of suffering. Joining in the sufferings of Christ was not simply about being a persecuted minority in society.

Pacifism & the Cross of Christ

But what about the cross of Christ itself? By far, the most common event in Jesus' life used to justify pacifism is his own submission to crucifixion. In *The Politics of Jesus*, Yoder writes:

> There is thus but one realm in which the concept of imitation holds—but there it holds in every strand of the New Testament literature and all the more strikingly by virtue of the absence of parallels in other realms. This is at the point of the concrete social meaning of the cross in its relation to enmity and power. Servanthood replaces dominion, forgiveness absorbs hostility. Thus—and only thus—are we bound by New Testament thought to "be like Jesus." (131)

The basic claim is that his refusal to defend himself is an expression of his condemnation of violence in general. He regards dying as preferable to killing in all situations, and this is now normative for his followers.

There are problems with this argument. Granting that Jesus willingly suffers death, a number of possible explanations could provide the rationale for this act, without entailing pacifism. One such motive is that he simply had bigger things going on: to provide the propitiation for the sins of mankind.

The logic of the just war provides another motive. Jesus' vocation was to die for humanity. From this purpose God the Father would not save him—*could* not save him, for God the Father is a loving God. Despite the fact that Jesus could have called down battalions of angels to his defense, no army in all the world could have accomplished the purposes of his death. Given his mission, Jesus not only had no prospect of success; he had no reason at all to fight.

JUST WAR & THE TWO KINGDOMS

While the foregoing argument has attempted to provide better paths than the pacifist narrative, it may seem rather piecemeal apart from a greater whole. That whole is the two kingdoms vision of magisterial Protestantism. The two kingdoms vision begins with a distinction between the internal and the external, the soul and the body. God rules the internal immediately and irresistibly, in the hearts of believers by the power of the Word through the Spirit. The external he rules through various human agents in a way that *can* be resisted. At the same time, the inward power of the Gospel has external effects. This

Christ Cleansing the Temple, *by El Greco, probably before 1570. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. Source: Google Art Project, via Wikimedia Commons.*

power transforms creation organically, from the heart outward. The entire purpose of the Gospel is to effect this transformation: the Spirit's work aims at restoration and perfection according to creation's original *telos*—the purposes for which it was made.

The external kingdom, ruled immediately by human beings and according to Law, has an intrinsic nature, one that has traditionally been summarized into the "Three Estates": family, church, and state. Genesis provides us with the origin of these estates. God creates humanity and directs them to be fruitful and multiply and to take dominion, originating the family, marriage, and the realm of work. As the likenesses of God, these human beings also have the task and joy of worshipping Him. This is a description of the church. Finally, the human family, eventually to be composed of many smaller families, will naturally have to organize themselves together. This is the task of politics, ordering the *polis* toward the common good.

The Three Estates are just a part of nature, and it is nature that the Gospel, through the internal kingdom, will one day restore by grace. Until that day, however, sin remains, and so external law is needed. Grace, though in many cases eliminating the need for force, does not entirely do so in this world; nor does it require force to be abandoned in the face of severe threats to the political order. Until the day when all things are renewed, the external realm must be regulated by the systems and order of the old and sin-stained age. And so, against the seemingly gentle assertions of pacifism, those who truly want to love in our world must understand there remains a need of coercion to maintain a minimum of justice and to preserve those innocents whom the unjust would ravage. P

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