I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.
— Romans 12:1
The theme of this issue of Therefore reflects Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder’s influential book of the same title which was first published in 1972 and revised as a second edition in 1994. Dr. Yoder’s signal contribution to Christian ethics and to my own understanding of the gospel centers on his socio-political reading of Jesus in the context of the first century and his insistence that the figure of Jesus we encounter in the New Testament is the rightful grounding for Christian ethics. His depiction of the “politics of Jesus” through the communal practices of the early church serves as a pattern for what it means to follow Jesus in the world and to bear faithful witness to the world. These central themes are developed with power and precision throughout Dr. Yoder’s lifetime of teaching and writing and inspire all that follows.

H. Joseph Haag

Introduction

Politics is a dirty word these days on a number of levels. It is often taken to mean partisan politics, that mean-spirited contemporary phenomenon displayed daily in Congress and various other halls of state characterized by rancor, ideological intransigence, and disregard for the common good. Other times, politics connotes the very familiar skullduggery practiced in institutions of all kinds which substitutes narrow personal agendas, greed, and egoism for fairness, beneficence, and vision. But no matter which form it may assume in contemporary usage, the term “politics” does not often warm our hearts or inspire our spirits.

The etymology of the word itself suggests something less sinister. In ancient Greece, the word polis meant “city” or “body of citizens,” and politikos denoted a process by which citizens or other groups made collective decisions. The English word “politics” still carries this basic meaning today even as it has been corrupted by current political practice. This observation only reinforces the obvious; the problem with politics is not a matter of semantics or essence, but ethics. We have no choice but to engage in politics because we must do so to live together at all. The actual practice of politics is what makes it malevolent or benevolent, repugnant or praise worthy. The heart and soul of politics resides in our treatment of one another as we make or fail to make collective decisions. Or, to put it more succinctly and ironically, the alter ego of politics is what makes it malevolent or benevolent. It is often taken to mean partisan politics, that mean-spirited contemporary phenomenon displayed daily in Congress and various other halls of state characterized by rancor, ideological intransigence, and disregard for the common good. Other times, politics connotes the very familiar skullduggery practiced in institutions of all kinds which substitutes narrow personal agendas, greed, and egoism for fairness, beneficence, and vision. But no matter which form it may assume in contemporary usage, the term “politics” does not often warm our hearts or inspire our spirits.

The etymology of the word itself suggests something less sinister. In ancient Greece, the word polis meant “city” or “body of citizens,” and politikos denoted a process by which citizens or other groups made collective decisions. The English word “politics” still carries this basic meaning today even as it has been corrupted by current political practice. This observation only reinforces the obvious; the problem with politics is not a matter of semantics or essence, but ethics. We have no choice but to engage in politics because we must do so to live together at all. The actual practice of politics is what makes it malevolent or benevolent, repugnant or praise worthy. The heart and soul of politics resides in our treatment of one another as we make or fail to make collective decisions. Or, to put it more succinctly and ironically, the alter ego of politics is what makes it malevolent or benevolent. It is often taken to mean partisan politics, that mean-spirited contemporary phenomenon displayed daily in Congress and various other halls of state characterized by rancor, ideological intransigence, and disregard for the common good. Other times, politics connotes the very familiar skullduggery practiced in institutions of all kinds which substitutes narrow personal agendas, greed, and egoism for fairness, beneficence, and vision. But no matter which form it may assume in contemporary usage, the term “politics” does not often warm our hearts or inspire our spirits.

The etymology of the word itself suggests something less sinister. In ancient Greece, the word polis meant “city” or “body of citizens,” and politikos denoted a process by which citizens or other groups made collective decisions. The English word “politics” still carries this basic meaning today even as it has been corrupted by current political practice. This observation only reinforces the obvious; the problem with politics is not a matter of semantics or essence, but ethics. We have no choice but to engage in politics because we must do so to live together at all. The actual practice of politics is what makes it malevolent or benevolent, repugnant or praise worthy. The heart and soul of politics resides in our treatment of one another as we make or fail to make collective decisions. Or, to put it more succinctly and ironically, the alter ego of politics is what makes it malevolent or benevolent. It is often taken to mean partisan politics, that mean-spirited contemporary phenomenon displayed daily in Congress and various other halls of state characterized by rancor, ideological intransigence, and disregard for the common good. Other times, politics connotes the very familiar skullduggery practiced in institutions of all kinds which substitutes narrow personal agendas, greed, and egoism for fairness, beneficence, and vision. But no matter which form it may assume in contemporary usage, the term “politics” does not often warm our hearts or inspire our spirits.

The etymology of the word itself suggests something less sinister. In ancient Greece, the word polis meant “city” or “body of citizens,” and politikos denoted a process by which citizens or other groups made collective decisions. The English word “politics” still carries this basic meaning today even as it has been corrupted by current political practice. This observation only reinforces the obvious; the problem with politics is not a matter of semantics or essence, but ethics. We have no choice but to engage in politics because we must do so to live together at all. The actual practice of politics is what makes it malevolent or benevolent, repugnant or praise worthy. The heart and soul of politics resides in our treatment of one another as we make or fail to make collective decisions. Or, to put it more succinctly and ironically, the alter ego of politics is what makes it malevolent or benevolent. It is often taken to mean partisan politics, that mean-spirited contemporary phenomenon displayed daily in Congress and various other halls of state characterized by rancor, ideological intransigence, and disregard for the common good. Other times, politics connotes the very familiar skullduggery practiced in institutions of all kinds which substitutes narrow personal agendas, greed, and egoism for fairness, beneficence, and vision. But no matter which form it may assume in contemporary usage, the term “politics” does not often warm our hearts or inspire our spirits.

The etymology of the word itself suggests something less sinister. In ancient Greece, the word polis meant “city” or “body of citizens,” and politikos denoted a process by which citizens or other groups made collective decisions. The English word “politics” still carries this basic meaning today even as it has been corrupted by current political practice. This observation only reinforces the obvious; the problem with politics is not a matter of semantics or essence, but ethics. We have no choice but to engage in politics because we must do so to live together at all. The actual practice of politics is what makes it malevolent or benevolent, repugnant or praise worthy. The heart and soul of politics resides in our treatment of one another as we make or fail to make collective decisions. Or, to put it more succinctly and ironically, the alter ego of politics is what makes it malevolent or benevolent. It is often taken to mean partisan politics, that mean-spirited contemporary phenomenon displayed daily in Congress and various other halls of state characterized by rancor, ideological intransigence, and disreg
culture and finding an alternative consciousness which is rooted in living covenant with God. In this transformation the twin pillars of the royal consciousness—static, self-serving religion and the politics of oppression and exploitation—are displaced by the corresponding pillars of the prophetic imagination—the religion of the free and covenanting God and the politics of compassion and justice.

The birth of the prophetic imagination during the Exodus story serves as an ironic backdrop for its reversal during the reign of Solomon in which unevenly distributed affluence, religious syncretism, and forced labor signaled the revival of the royal consciousness. The injustice and oppression perpetrated by the Hebrew monarchy were complemented by a static religion in which the sovereignty of God became subordinate to the purposes of the king.

Against these abuses, Israel’s prophets plied their craft during the centuries leading up to and through the Babylonian Exile. Like the prophets who came before and after them, Jeremiah criticized and lamented Israel’s destruction while Isaiah of Babylon energized and hoped for Israel’s post-exilic future. The prophets asked not whether an alternative consciousness was realistic, practical, or viable, but whether it was imaginable. The first task of the prophetic imagination was thus simply to imagine, to allow the prophet and the people to be inspired by the free God who hears cries and makes promises.

The gospels depict Jesus of Nazareth as the incarnation of Israel’s prophetic tradition. His birth, life, death, and resurrection embody the ultimate criticizing of the dominant culture and energizing toward the alternate consciousness of the Kingdom of God.

Matthew emphasizes the criticizing tenor of his birth as Herod rages at the Magi’s announcement and deals death to the innocents, while Luke gives us the energizing poetry of Zechariah, Elizabeth, and Mary and the story of the inauguration of the Kingdom of God in the ministry of Jesus was subversive not only to the dominant culture but also to contemporary messianic expectation. To John the Baptist’s question (“Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?”), Jesus replies

Go tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is he who takes no offense at me. (Luke 7:22-23)

Throughout the gospels, Jesus’ words and works can be understood as forms of prophetic criticizing and energizing. Jesus’ readiness to forgive sin evoked both amazement and resentment. The people were amazed that he lifted burdens of guilt independently of the socio-religious apparatus which managed forgiveness, and the religious authorities were resentful that his doing so deprived them of the enormous social control the apparatus afforded them. Jesus challenged the rules which had grown up around Sabbath observance, which had become another means of social control for those who managed an array of Sabbath rules. Jesus’ willingness to have table fellowship with social outcasts called into question the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable in the dominant social order. In healing the disabled, the sick, and the demon possessed, Jesus touched those the dominant culture had judged to be untouchable and crossed the boundary between clean and unclean. Jesus’ public association with women who were not his kin represented a scandalous breach of contemporary
gender boundaries as female followers became a growing segment of the messianic community. Jesus reinterpreted the Torah and challenged the self-aggrandizing and oppressive means religious leaders employed to enforce legal observance. Jesus cleansed the Temple as a direct assault on one of the Sanhedrin’s most powerful expressions of social and economic power. References to Jesus’ compassion permeate the entire gospel tradition. Traveling through the cities and villages of Galilee, “healing every disease and every infirmity, . . . he saw the crowds, [and] had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless” (Matt. 35-36). Jesus’ best known parables, the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son, center on extravagant displays of compassion by an outsider and a grieving father. Jesus’ compassion epitomizes the reversal of the royal consciousness because it takes the pains and heartaches of humanity seriously and announces that they will not be accepted as normal features of the social landscape. His compassion directly contrasts the Empire’s numbness—numbness to oppression, numbness to suffering, numbness to the human costs of war, numbness to pervasive poverty.

The combined impact of Jesus’ words and works had a polar opposite effect on the authorities and the people. While the people were amazed and astonished, the authorities clearly understood Jesus as a threat to their positions of power and influence and responded with plots to kill him. In the first century, the logical endpoint of Jesus’ prophetic ministry was crucifixion, Rome’s instrument of state-sponsored terrorism against insurrection.

The most distinguishing feature of Jesus’ prophetic imagination is that he willingly submitted to the penalty imposed on him. It is though in his crucifixion Jesus takes into his own person the death all prophets announce for the royal consciousness. In disparate circumstances and with varying degrees of pathos, all prophets declare the demise of the dominant culture and the emergence of an alternative consciousness inspired by God. But here, as Brueggemann frames it, something more is at hand:

Rather, we might see in the crucifixion of Jesus the ultimate act of prophetic criticism in which Jesus announces the end of a world of death . . . and takes the death into his own person. Therefore we say that the ultimate criticism is that God embraces the death that God’s people must die. 3

From the standpoint of the prophetic imagination, the resurrection of Jesus is the ultimate act of prophetic energizing in which the apparent triumph of the royal consciousness in the crucifixion is shown to be fraudulent by the empty tomb. The same disciples who were cowed, defeated, and scattered by Jesus’ death are empowered and reunited by his resurrection.

Christ and the Powers

While the prophetic imagination locates Jesus within Israel’s prophetic ministry across the centuries, his relationship with the powers that be focuses on Jesus’ embrace of this ministry in the context of his own time. 4 For the people of the New Testament era, the existential impact of the powers that be was both undeniable and oppressive. The vast majority of the population experienced varying degrees of poverty which was exacerbated by, if not directly caused by, the powers. The heavy tribute levied by Rome upon provincial governments was passed on to local residents. Throughout most of the first century, the burden of this tribute led to small land owners losing their land and people who lived even closer to the margins falling into abject poverty. Wealth which was already unevenly distributed was concentrated into fewer and fewer hands.

The Pax Romana (Peace of Rome) was sustained by economic and military oppression. The presence of Roman legions and the regular experience of civilians being...
conscripted to carry soldiers’ burdens throughout the empire served as ready reminders of imperial authority. Religious establishments of various stripes claimed people’s allegiance (sometimes in behalf of the empire), and especially in Palestine, religious authorities closely regulated every aspect of daily life as they enforced categorical distinctions between clean and unclean, male and female, righteous and unrighteous, and insider and outsider.

Given this context, it is not surprising that the language of power pervades the New Testament. As Jesus heals diseased and demon-possessed Palestinian peasants, he ministers to the very people who have been oppressed and disregarded by imperial and religious authorities. As he reaches out to women, children, outsiders, and others who have been marginalized by the powers, he inaugurates the kingdom of God.

Central to the New Testament’s message about the powers is the proclamation of Christ’s victory over the powers. Ephesians 1:16-23 typifies the vivid testimony of a number of passages:

I do not cease to give thanks for you, . . . that God . . . may give you a spirit of wisdom . . . that you may know . . . the immeasurable greatness of his power in us . . . which he accomplished in Christ when he raised him from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come; and he has put all things under his feet and has made him head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

These texts are all striking because of their comprehensive redundancy. Just be sure no reader would ever think that some power in some domain of authority might not be subject to the sovereignty of the risen Christ, the author layers power term upon power term, insisting that all things (not just some things) have been subdued and revealed to be creatures (not gods) that stand under Christ’s authority.

As the embodiment of the prophetic imagination, Jesus confronted the powers’ presumptive sovereignty. He preached good news to the poor, ministered to their needs, and thereby challenged the injustices which perpetuated their poverty. He crossed cultural and ethnic boundaries as he reached out to Gentiles and other despised groups. He challenged the family’s role as society’s most basic instrument of nurture and social control. He assumed a radically countercultural position regarding women and children. He broke the spiral of violence by absorbing its momentum into his own body and calling his disciples to the Way of the Cross. He taught his followers to resist the powers by not becoming like them, but rather like God in loving even their enemies.

Walter Wink uses several summary statements to capture the abiding significance of the New Testament’s witness regarding Christ and the powers:

First, despite all appearances to the contrary, the clear witness of the New Testament is that we are not in thrall to the powers that be in any era or in any context. However potent, invincible, and intransigent the powers might appear, Christ’s victory over them means that his followers are not at their mercy and do not serve at their beck and call.

Second, while our relationship to the powers is most often described in terms of resistance, the form of our resistance is carefully circumscribed. A classic text is Ephesians 6:14-17:

Stand therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the equipment of the gospel of peace; besides all these, taking the shield of faith, with which you can quench all the flaming darts of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

(Ephesians 6:14-17)

Here the defensive and offensive weapons typically associated with Roman legions become metaphors for the “armaments” of Christian resistance: truth, righteousness, peace, faith, and the word of God. Christians are to take up arms, but not the arms used by the powers. In doing so, we are to follow the example of Jesus, who is depicted by the Gospels as resisting the powers at every turn, yet consistently doing so through creative nonviolence.

Third, even as the church’s approach to the powers is characterized by nonviolent resistance, this ongoing relationship is not described by the New Testament in purely adversarial terms. The powers are viewed in scripture as part of the created order—fallen, but not intrinsically evil. Like the rest of creation, they too must be redeemed and are blind to the purposes of God:

Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glorification. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. (1 Cor. 2:6-8)

The principalities and powers are so blind, in fact, that they put to death the incarnation of the very One in whom “all things” (including the powers themselves) “hold together” (Col. 1:15-17) and thus perpetrate the ultimate cosmic irony:

The incarnation of the orderly principles of the universe is crucified by the guardians of order. The very nucleus of spiritual power in the universe is destroyed by the spiritual powers. The parts do not or cannot know the effect of their acts on the whole, and some, less innocently, by their worship of their own selfish short-term interests, have become detrimental to the good of the whole.5
What the powers need from us is our faithful witness to the truth that the resurrection illuminates with searing clarity, that God was in Christ reconciling all things to himself and that all things are united in him (2 Cor. 5:19; Col. 1:20). The “manifold wisdom of God” (Eph. 3:10) which must be made known to the powers is that they were not created to rule over their own fiefdoms as feudal lords who serve only their own needs but instead to serve the whole which is held together by its one true Lord (Col. 1:17).

Fourth, Christ’s victory over the powers is described in the New Testament using all three tenses—past, present, and future. This “already, but not yet” character of the New Testament’s message regarding the powers is typical of the gospel itself. God has come to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth; is with us in the Spirit; and will appear with definitive finality in the future eschaton. In the two thousand years since the Christ event, Christians have thus lived in the overlapping of Ages—the Present Age ruled by powers (including death itself) who presume themselves to be gods and the Age to Come marked by divine justice, righteousness, and the power of the Holy Spirit. In Christ, the future has invaded the present.

Subversive and Creative Practices

Through these two interpretive lenses we discern the subversive and creative nature of Jesus’ ministry. The prophetic imagination criticizes the controlling consciousness of the dominant culture with the alternative consciousness of the covenanting God, and this alternative consciousness comes to life in the person of Jesus. As Jesus confronts the presumptive sovereignty of the powers, he enacts justice and compassion along the margins of first-century Palestine. As the powers perceive the real threat posed by this criticizing and energizing movement, they react predictably and swiftly with deadly force. To their surprise, Jesus does not respond in kind but absorbs their violent retribution into his own person as he suffers and dies on the cross. To their dismay, the always reliable instrument of crucifixion fails to end either Jesus’ life or the movement he launched. His politics of subversion and new creation is not eradicated, but spreads vigorously beyond Palestine across the Mediterranean basin. The incredibly good news of the gospel is not only that the Empire of God has gained a foothold in the space-time continuum of Rome and all other earthly empires, but that Christ is Lord of the powers.

The words which capture the essence of the politics of Jesus are subversion and new creation. In Christ, God subverts and invades the status quo of every era, every dominant culture, every power structure, and every self-proclaimed autonomous human life. Only as we grasp and claim the subversive and creative character of the gospel, can we fully appreciate the uncontainable joy of early church’s doxologies:

What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. . . . The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. (John 1:3b-5, 9-13)
So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! (2 Cor. 5:17)

In Christ, everything old has passed away. The politics of oppression and exploitation are superseded by the politics of justice and compassion. The static, self-serving religion of the powers gives way to the religion of the free and covenanted God who hears the cries of all of the oppressed who have ever lived.

Yet in the vision of scripture, the new creation in Christ is both as old as Moses and as new as the Pharaoh in tomorrow’s headlines. Human life is every bit as complex as the inaugurated eschatology of the New Testament, but this “already, but not yet” quality does not mean that we should take the New Testament’s doxological witness less seriously. Rather, it means that we should take the premise of the prophetic imagination more seriously—that reality as we know it is actually the struggle between competing imaginations and that followers of Jesus in every age are called to engage in this struggle through the politics of subversion and new creation. Like Jesus, we are called to announce and work for the freedom of slaves even as human traffickers continue to enslave people across the globe. Like Jesus, we are called to announce and claim the Year of Jubilee even though none of the provisions the Sabbath of Sabbaths—the fallow year, the remission of debts, the liberation of slaves, and the redistribution of capital—attend the time of our announcement. Like Jesus, we are called to bring good news to the poor even as the poor get poorer and the rich get richer. Like Jesus, we are called to resist the powers without becoming like them despite the ever-present temptation to violence and its apparent short-term advantages.

The questions which remain concern exactly how we are to engage in the struggle of competing imaginations. As we have seen, Jesus embodied the prophetic imagination in his own person and created a new community of God’s alternative consciousness. The subversive and creative practices of this first-century community give us important clues for understanding and embracing the politics of Jesus in our own context.

**Nonviolent Resistance**

The narrative movement of all four gospels centers on Jesus’ willing acceptance of his execution at the hands of the authorities. In the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), three passion predictions follow Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi. With increasing detail, Jesus tells the disciples how he must be put to death by the authorities. In the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), three passion predictions follow Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi. With increasing detail, Matthew follow the third prediction with a teaching about servanthood and the remark, “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28), but otherwise, almost no theological commentary accompanies these narratives.

What is clear from a careful reading of the passion predictions in the larger context of each gospel is that the way of the cross for Jesus involved a conscious rejection of the Zealot option, i.e., the way of violent resistance. This meaning emerges definitively as Jesus rebukes his disciple’s violent response at Gethsemane (“Put your sword back into its place,” Matt. 26:52; “No more of this,” Luke 22:51), but lurks just beneath the surface elsewhere in the gospels. Part of the significance of the “messianic secret” motif which is so dominant in the first half of Mark and is repeated to a lesser extent in Matthew and Luke is the yearning on the part of the oppressed multitudes for a Davidic-like military deliverer. In repeatedly commanding those he healed to “say nothing to anyone” (Mark 1:44), Jesus appears to quell this very expectation about his own ministry. That Jesus himself might have been tempted by the Zealot option may partly account for the intensity of his rebuke of Peter at Caesarea Philippi (Matt. 16:22-23).

Not only does Jesus choose the way of nonviolent resistance for himself, he calls his the disciples to do likewise. In the Sermon on the Mount, he tells them not to respond violently when the authorities humiliate them with back-handed slaps to the face or force them to carry their possessions or drag them into court for repayment of debts. Rather, the nonviolent response that Jesus prescribes in each case exposes and counters the powers’ pretensions in ways violent responses could not. It would be dishonorable for an authority to follow one back-handed slap with another, illegal to force a villager to carry his burden a second mile, and unseemly to reduce a debtor to public nakedness. Jesus’ followers are to resist the powers by not becoming like them, but rather like God in loving even their enemies (Matt. 5:38-48).

In all three synoptic gospels, the first passion prediction concludes with this teaching (nearly verbatim in each account):

> If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. (Matt. 16:24-25)

John Howard Yoder comments on the meaning of the phrase “their cross” in this saying:

The believer’s cross is no longer any and every kind of suffering, sickness, or tension, the bearing of which is demanded. The believer’s cross is, like that of Jesus, the price of social nonconformity. It is not, like sickness or catastrophe, an inexplicable, unpredictable suffering; it is the end of a path freely chosen after counting the cost. It is not, like Luther’s or... Kierkegaard’s cross or Anfechtung, an inward wrestling of the sensitive soul with self and sin; it is the social reality of representing in an unwilling world the Order to come... [This teaching] is not a pastoral counsel to help with the ambiguities of life; it is a normative statement
about the relation of our social obedience to the messianity of Jesus. Representing as he did the divine order now at hand, accessible; renouncing as he did the legitimate use of violence and the accrediting of the existing authorities; renouncing as well the ritual purity of noninvolvement, his people will encounter in ways analogous to his own the hostility of the old order.6

No aspect of the politics of Jesus is more subversive or creative than nonviolent resistance. While the threat of brute force may back the powers down, it also validates their violent and oppressive modus operandi. The way of the cross, on the other hand, resists the powers by subverting their core values. In the actual cross of Christ and in the symbolic crosses of all his followers, God thus literally shakes the foundations of the present order with the instigation of a New Order.

This subversive way of God in the world is not authenticated by its utility. Sometimes nonviolent resistance breaks the cycle of violence but often it leads to an escalation of violence. When Jesus turned himself over to the powers, they reacted with all the fury and brutality available to them. When civil rights marchers stood nonviolently against the powers fifty years ago in the South, they were met with gallows, guns, attack dogs, and fire bombs. The way of the cross is not validated by history, but by resurrection. Those who dare to follow Jesus along this subversive way must walk by faith and not by sight.7

**Binding and Loosing**

The focal biblical text for this practice is Matthew 18:15-18:

> If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

In a passage which appears to be an adaption of Jesus’ teaching, Paul calls this

---

Cappella della Velatio: **Lunette with Orant**, Catacomb of Priscilla, Rome

Early Christians had a profound sense of being linked through faith to those who had gone before them in death. Throughout the catacombs in which many Christians were buried are found Orants (from the Latin ora, to pray) which depict figures of dead persons as if alive with hands raised in prayer. Persecuted Christians were comforted by these images of martyrs offering prayer in their behalf.
practice “the law of Christ.”

My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves. All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbor’s work, will become a cause for pride. For all must carry their own loads. (Gal. 6:1-50)

Several sixteenth-century reformers, including Martin Luther and a number of Anabaptist leaders, used the phrase “rule of Christ” for the process outlined in Matthew 18, which they thought could move the Reformation from the university lecture hall and scholar’s office to local congregations and families. The key words for understanding Jesus’ teaching are, of course, “binding” and “loosing.” In first-century rabbinic usage, these terms referred both to forgiveness and to moral discernment. In the first instance, to “loose” meant to forgive and to “bind” meant to withhold fellowship, and in the second, to “loose” meant to relax an obligation and to “bind” meant to enjoin the obligation.8

These two meanings are interrelated in context and practice. First, forgiveness presupposes moral discernment in that it assumes that transgressions can be clearly identified. For binding and loosing to be practiced by the community of faith, the community must share a common ethical denominator. Second, forgiveness furthers discernment as it clarifies ethical standards through the person-to-person process described in Matthew 18. Through each step, the process leads to new decisions which either confirm or change these standards and thus become part of the community’s growing body of ethical insight. Third, both Jesus’ teaching and Paul’s adaption confirm that the intent of discernment is forgiveness. Each step of the process outlined in Matthew 18 is meant to reconcile the offender. Even the third step in which the offender refuses to listen and becomes to the community “as a Gentile and a tax collector” should be interpreted more in terms of reconciliation than excommunication. In the larger context of the New Testament, Gentiles and tax collectors are prime subjects of the church’s missionary activity. In the immediate context of Matthew 18, the focal text is preceded by the story of the shepherd who rejoices more over the one lost sheep that was found than the ninety-nine that never went astray and is followed by Peter’s question about the number of times he should forgive and the parable of the unforgiving servant.9

The practice of binding and loosing projects the politics of Jesus into the life of the Christian community. Fundamentally, this practice teaches that the very existence of this community presupposes ethical accountability. Whatever particular community of faith may claim our allegiance, we are all called to follow Jesus. While always subject to interpretation, following Jesus in Matthew 18 is clearly bound up with our relationships. In this regard, the practice of binding and loosing is quite consistent with Jesus’ teachings elsewhere in the gospels.

The focal passage also teaches that everyone in the church shares in the practice of binding and loosing. There is no indication here or elsewhere in the New Testament that the work of reconciliation through moral discernment belongs specifically to the ministry or is specifically assigned to pastors, elders, bishops, or deacons. This insight deeply influenced the early Anabaptists’ understanding of baptism and the voluntary nature of church membership. Infants could not be baptized, they contended, because everyone who enters the baptismal waters must be capable of submitting to the mutual obligation of giving and receiving counsel in the congregation.

Finally, Jesus’ instruction regarding binding and loosing illuminates the central importance of the local congregation in ethical discernment. Only in the face-to-face meetings of brothers and sisters in Christ who know each other well can this practice move forward in the reconciling spirit of Jesus’ teaching. We bear each others’ burdens in the familial context of loving faith communities. This insight is not so much an argument for congregational church government as it is an affirmation of the local congregation’s importance in practicing the politics of Jesus for all Christians everywhere.10

Yoder describes the subversive nature of binding and loosing in contemporary church practice:

The position suggested here may seem to gather together the dangers of several ecclesiastical scarecrows. It gives more authority to the church than does Rome, trusts more to the Holy Spirit than does Pentecostalism, has more respect for the individual than humanism, makes moral standards more binding than puritanism, is more open to the given situation than the “new morality.” If practiced it would change the life of churches more fundamentally than has yet been suggested by the perennially popular discussions of changing church structures. Thus the path to the rediscovery of Christian faithfulness may lead right through some positions modern Christian “moderates” have been trying to avoid.11

The practice of binding and loosing is subversive to the casual church-going experience which largely characterizes American Christianity because it denies that this experience is “normal.” From the vantage point of the politics of Jesus, warm smiles and hearty greetings do not constitute true Christian fellowship, which in the New Testament looks much more like a real family than an affinity group. In the congregational life commended in scripture, we do more than agree with each other or even
agree to disagree. Rather, what we bind and loose on earth is bound and loosed in heaven. In bearing each others’ burdens, we fulfill the law (politis) of Christ.

**The Universality of Gifts**

To the fractured congregation at Corinth, Paul writes:

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

(1 Cor. 13:4-7)

The same teaching is captured by the phrase “the fullness of Christ” in Ephesians:

His gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, . . . to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

(Eph. 4:11-14, RSV)

Following the first passage and within the text of the second, the metaphor of the body is used to describe a countercultural mode of group relationships in which every member has distinctly identifiable and divinely empowered role. In First Corinthians 12, Paul develops this metaphor extensively to affirm the value of each person in the congregation:

But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. (1 Cor. 12:24-25)

Not only is every member of the body gifted but also valued by the whole in a distinctly non-hierarchical way. This understanding of the fullness of Christ should not be mistaken for the individualism which so dominates our own era. Following Paul’s metaphor, the members of the body (e.g., eye, ear, hand) are not individuals but functioning parts of the whole. The fullness of Christ does not then equate to the autonomy and dignity of the individual, but to the recognition and honoring of the unique giftedness of every person in the life of the congregation. While Paul does provide some instruction regarding the ordering of gifts, his criterion for doing so does not focus on the intrinsic quality of the gifts but on their edification of the congregation. This criterion is, of course, love (agape), which “does not insist on its own way, . . . but bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Cor. 13:5, 7).

The word Paul uses for gift (charisma) is easily misunderstood in contemporary context to refer to the spectacular or powerful against Paul’s diametrically opposite usage throughout First Corinthians 12-14. Spiritual gifts (charismata) are just that—capacities that are gifted to us by the Spirit to serve the whole. They are not exceptional abilities like perfect pitch or extraordinary muscular coordination which can be possessed independently of the story of salvation. In Christian community, charismatic persons may be quite ordinary or even below average in intelligence, appearance, and speaking ability. They may occupy quite mundane and obscure roles in the congregation and never come close to having a building named after them. They may never preach a sermon or teach a class or sing in worship. What characterizes
all gifted (charismatic) persons in Christ is agape, the singular quality of covenant fidelity which empowers and authenticates every spiritual gift:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. (1 Cor. 13:1-3)

The universality of gifts (or the fullness of Christ) is subversive because it undercuts the means the dominant culture employs to order society. The world values the strong, the imposing, the intelligent, the beautiful, the articulate, the clever, and the driven and ranks humanity accordingly. God, on the other hand,

chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. (1 Cor. 1:27-29)

The earliest disciples do not appear to have been recruited because their innate giftedness, but because they were willing to follow Jesus. Those who possess the traits the world values—to some degree Paul himself may fit this description—may be gifted by God to serve the Body of Christ, but only for the edification of the whole. The church is not a talent show or a venue for finding fifteen minutes of fame, but the new humanity inaugurated in Christ. As we interpret this aspect of the politics of Jesus in contemporary life, Yoder cautions us to be clear about our grounds for doing so:

Paul does not call for a participatory community style because of a post-enlightenment conviction about the absolute dignity of every person. He does not reject domination because of a belief that the government, the marketplace, or the factory was created by a contract of freely negotiated individuals in order to maximize the selfish interest of each and protect them against the threat of anarchy. He does not believe that every individual is predominantly good and that therefore the summation of the individual’s interests and inclinations will make the best of all societies. He is not opposed to the domination of clergy and priest because he thinks that every individual should be saved according to his or her own conscience. He does not “reject leadership” on the grounds of a countercultural suspicion of all authority or because of the confidence that things will take care of themselves if all structures collapse. He rather confesses, even proclaims, that in the midst of a fallen world the grace of God has apportioned to everyone, without merit, a renewed potential for dignity in complementarity. This is not an anti-structural stance; it is the affirmation of a structure analogous to the human organism. God has done this not by making everyone the same, but by empowering each member differently although equally.

The authenticity of our witness to the world is directly proportional to the degree to which the church embodies the fullness of Christ. When we embrace this practice, we subvert and transform the world’s values. When we ignore this practice, the world’s values subvert and transform us.

The Spirit’s Freedom in the Meeting

Just two chapters after Paul’s teaching regarding the universality of gifts in First Corinthians 12, he provides this instruction about how to hold a meeting in the power of the Spirit:

When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification... Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. If a revelation is made to another sitting by, let the first be silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged; and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets. For God is not a God of confusion but of peace. (1 Cor. 14:26, 29-33)

Prefaced by lengthy cautionary advice on speaking in tongues, the crux of this teaching is that everyone who has something to say in a Christian meeting can have the floor following an orderly process which gives relative priority to prophetic speech (which provides “upbuilding and encouragement and consolation,” 1 Cor. 14:3). Paul’s egalitarian understanding of the meeting, which includes no mention of a single moderator or leader, complements his previous teaching on the universality of gifts.

The Spirit’s freedom in the meeting, which is sometimes called the rule of Paul, also appears to be operative in the story of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. The momentous questions before the church which revolved around various aspects of Jewish-Gentile relations were addressed by an orderly succession of speakers. First Peter, then Barnabas and Paul, and finally James, the brother of Jesus, rose to speak. After considering their prophetic testimony, “the apostles and elders, with the consent of the whole church” (Acts 15:22) arrived at the conclusion that the new humanity in Christ was indeed undivided between Jew and Gentile and agreed upon a missionary strategy which embodied this gospel truth. The decisions of the meeting were not dictated by authoritarian fiat or even democratic vote, but by a Spirit-led consensus which is reflected in the simple declaration, “it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28).
Breaking Bread Together

The oldest scriptural account of the Last Supper is the one Paul employs in First Corinthians 11:23-26 to address an issue in the Corinthian church. Partly because of its simple beauty and partly because it repeats the imperative, “Do this in remembrance of me,” after the both the breaking of bread and the passing of the cup, this account has served as the favorite for use in congregational Eucharistic observance.

Most of us assume that we know exactly what “Do this in remembrance of me” means when we hear it in church, but for that very reason it is important to consider these words carefully in their original context. According to Mark and Matthew, the Supper was instituted during the course of a common meal; Jesus broke the bread and passed the cup “as they were eating” (Mark 14:22; Matt. 26:26). While Matthew and Mark omit the “Do this” clause, it is included after the breaking of bread in most versions of the text of Luke. When read in this biblical setting, Jesus’ words direct the disciples to appreciate the breaking of bread and the passing of the cup in the course of their common meal as realistic reminders of Jesus’ broken body and shed blood. This is to say that the actual antecedent for “this” in Jesus’ direction was not a liturgy, but a meal.19

It might have been possible to have interpreted this command to refer to the Passover meal (which in the Synoptic gospels serves as the setting for the upper room scene), but the disciples clearly did not interpret it this way. The words of institution of Lord’s Supper were never understood by the early church as a directive toward an annual observance which coincided with Passover, but appear to have been understood as the theological and ethical matrix which undergirded their common meals. This is why Paul uses the words of institution as the preface for addressing corruptions of the common meal in the Corinthian church:20

So then, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. If you are hungry, eat at home, so that when you come together, it will not be for your condemnation.

(1 Cor. 11:33-34)

Paul’s words do not distinguish meals eaten at home from liturgy at church, but rather ordinary domestic food consumption from the common ecclesial meal. This common meal in the Corinthian church was to be observed precisely as the Lord instructed the Twelve to observe their common meal, which was an essential and regular expression of their itinerant fellowship. On the night before his execution at the hands of the authorities, Jesus infused this meal with messianic meaning. Only later when “this” morphed into a ritual, did we begin to lose sight of the profound socio-political significance that Jesus’ parabolic acts and pronouncements in the upper room held for the new community in Christ. The contours of this significance are reflected in the Acts accounts of the early church:

While only a few strands of the Reformation adopted the rule of Paul as an enduring feature of their polity, the Spirit’s freedom in the meeting remains before us as a subversive practice which undercuts our perennial readiness to polemicize discussion, to call the question, and to win the election. We have so lost this sense of primordial Christian politics that we need someone outside of the fellowship to remind us of our own truth. Gandhi said to his own people and to his Christian British overlords that we must renounce violence in social conflict not only because violence is morally wrong, but because the adversary is part of the truth-finding process. Our first hope for our adversaries is not to defeat them but to recognize the real possibility that they may bear a message from God to us which we can receive from no other source. The practice of the Spirit’s freedom in the meeting embodies this very recognition.18

Paul’s articulation of the Spirit’s freedom in the meeting and the prevalence of this practice in the life of the early church gave way to less consensus-like decision making as the church councils became more formal and church structures became more hierarchical. As Yoder recounts, part of the impetus for the Protestant Reformation was the desire to recapture this aspect of Spirit-led politics:

All across the beginning Protestant movement, we can observe the same theologically motivated conviction about the process whereby God’s will is made known. Independently in all the early Protestant movements, this conviction was understood to be prefigured in and mandated specifically by 1 Corinthians 14. Consensus arises uncoerced out of open conversation. There is no voting in which a majority overruns a minority and no decision of a leader by virtue of his office. The only structure this process needs is the moderating that keeps it orderly and the recording of the conclusions reached.17

It should be noted that the passage quoted above is at first glance inconsistent with the immediately following paragraph which seems to forbid women to speak in church (1 Cor. 14:33b-36). The larger context, however, prevents us from reading these verses as categorical instruction. In chapter 11, while Paul encourages women to observe the tradition of covering their heads in worship, he does not discourage their prophesying and praying in the meeting. In chapter 16, he sends warm greetings to Priscilla, who along with her husband Aquila, actually leads a congregation in her home. Some scholars attempt to resolve the apparent inconsistency by suggesting that the paragraph in question addresses the actions of a group of women who were disrupting congregational meetings at Corinth and that his instruction should be understood as situationally specific.16

The oldest scriptural account of the Last Supper is the one Paul employs in First Corinthians 11:23-26 to address an issue in the Corinthian church. Partly because of its simple beauty and partly because it repeats the imperative, “Do this in remembrance of me,” after the both the breaking of bread and the passing of the cup, this account has served as the favorite for use in congregational Eucharistic observance.

Most of us assume that we know exactly what “Do this in remembrance of me” means when we hear it in church, but for that very reason it is important to consider these words carefully in their original context. According to Mark and Matthew, the Supper was instituted during the course of a common meal; Jesus broke the bread and passed the cup “as they were eating” (Mark 14:22; Matt. 26:26). While Matthew and Mark omit the “Do this” clause, it is included after the breaking of bread in most versions of the text of Luke. When read in this biblical setting, Jesus’ words direct the disciples to appreciate the breaking of bread and the passing of the cup in the course of their common meal as realistic reminders of Jesus’ broken body and shed blood. This is to say that the actual antecedent for “this” in Jesus’ direction was not a liturgy, but a meal.19

It might have been possible to have interpreted this command to refer to the Passover meal (which in the Synoptic gospels serves as the setting for the upper room scene), but the disciples clearly did not interpret it this way. The words of institution of Lord’s Supper were never understood by the early church as a directive toward an annual observance which coincided with Passover, but appear to have been understood as the theological and ethical matrix which undergirded their common meals. This is why Paul uses the words of institution as the preface for addressing corruptions of the common meal in the Corinthian church:20

So then, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. If you are hungry, eat at home, so that when you come together, it will not be for your condemnation.

(1 Cor. 11:33-34)

Paul’s words do not distinguish meals eaten at home from liturgy at church, but rather ordinary domestic food consumption from the common ecclesial meal. This common meal in the Corinthian church was to be observed precisely as the Lord instructed the Twelve to observe their common meal, which was an essential and regular expression of their itinerant fellowship. On the night before his execution at the hands of the authorities, Jesus infused this meal with messianic meaning. Only later when “this” morphed into a ritual, did we begin to lose sight of the profound socio-political significance that Jesus’ parabolic acts and pronouncements in the upper room held for the new community in Christ. The contours of this significance are reflected in the Acts accounts of the early church:
They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. (Acts 2:42-45)

A similar description occurs at the end of chapter 4: There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. (Acts 4:34-35)

In these and other passages, the early church’s life together is summarized in terms of four basic activities—teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, and prayer. The manner of their common life did not represent a post-resurrection innovation, but rather the resumption of the disciples’ life together with Jesus before his death. Having “all things in common” was not the result of speculative theological or economic discussion, but the organic extension of the common meal which they had been sharing all along. The words of institution of the Lord’s Supper in their original location were not intended to launch a commemorative or sacramental ritual, but to interpret and connect the disciples’ foundational communal practice with the Way of the Cross.21

The breaking of bread at the common meal was thus a political expression which embodied the Reign of God in Christ. The breaking of bread at the common meal was subversive because it challenged the royal presumptions which legitimate the privilege of the few and perpetuate the poverty of the many. The sharing which the breaking of bread embodies spills beyond the disciples’ familial circle in the feeding of the 5000, when Jesus’ compassion for the poor Palestinian multitudes anticipates the Messianic Banquet.

The centrality of the common meal is evident in the New Testament’s accounts of the early church. The reorganization of leadership structures in Acts 6 was precipitated by the concern that the “Hellenist” widows were not receiving their just portion of the meal. The Seven, led by Stephen, were chosen precisely to ensure that justice was served in the distribution. Table fellowship at the common meal is the driving force behind both the narrative of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 (discussed above) and Paul’s lengthy instruction concerning the consumption of meat which had been offered to idols in chapters 8 and 10 of First Corinthians.

The subversive nature of the breaking of bread as an expression of the politics of Jesus was largely lost as the communal practice which was infused with new
meaning at the Last Supper transitioned into a ritual. To restate an earlier point, the original intent of the Last Supper narratives in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and First Corinthians was not to launch a ritual but to bless and interpret an ongoing practice. When the practice went missing, the political impact of the words “This is my Body” went missing as well. While we cannot undo two millennia of church history, we can still remember faithfully and adjust our practice accordingly. Especially we whose Eucharistic observance is largely commemorative can refocus our memories on the table fellowship which Jesus forever linked with his broken body and shed blood. As Yoder reminds us, part of this refocusing involves paying less attention to the bread and cup as signs and more attention to them as acts of economic sharing:

What I propose . . . spares us those abstracted definitions and articulations of how the sign signifies. When the family head feeds you at his or her table the bread for which he or she has given thanks, you are part of the family. The act does not merely mean that you are part of the family.

Baptism and the New Humanity

The “sacramental realism” which characterized the early church’s practice of breaking bread together applies also to its practice of baptism. Just as the words of institution spoken at the Last Supper described what was actually happening in (as opposed to what was signified by) the common meal, so it was with baptism. Prominent in the background of Paul’s descriptions of what it meant to become a Christian and therefore what he understood baptism to mean was the ever-present alienation of Jew and Gentile which hovered over the early church:

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God . . . . (Eph. 2:13-19)

The individualistic lenses through which we usually read this and similar passages fail to capture the point each text is making. Paul is not saying that the collective impact of individuals entering the Kingdom of God produces a new humanity. Rather he is saying the Kingdom of God is a new humanity which we enter through the waters of baptism. While initially this distinction may seem subtle, its implications for understanding the gospel are profound. The new humanity does not form, says Paul, like a melting pot of persons whose lives have been claimed by Christ. What he actually says is that when become Christians, we follow Christ into a new
humanity of which he is the first member. His life forms the new humanity which we join. The distinctions which previously served as grounds for class distinction are not simply dissipated by loving, egalitarian feelings wrought by the Spirit in the lives of believers. They are actually nonexistent in the new humanity headed by Christ:24

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Gal. 3:27-28)

While it is the case that these deeply ingrained distinctions no longer matter, his actual point is that in Christ, these distinctions do not exist. The end of the old distinctions does not turn on the enlightenment of baptized men or Jews or slave owners. In the new humanity, these distinctions are not because they are not a part of the One who opened his arms to the disenfranchised and who is the head of the church, the Body of Christ.

At its core, baptism is an expression of the politics of Jesus which subverts the reignign class distinctions of the dominant culture. These distinctions are not simply irrelevant; they are not. In a world where such distinctions mean everything in the lives of billions of people, imagine what good news the gospel of Jesus Christ really is. Just imagine.

This reading of baptism also subverts interpretations which construe baptism as a remedy for original sin which should therefore be applied to everyone within reach, regardless of their age or informed consent. When the central texts are read in their biblical context, it is hard to justify this interpretative approach. The political reading of these texts also subverts interpretations which see baptism only as an outward sign of an inward experience. While baptism certainly fits that description in part, to see it exclusively as a sign of an individual's commitment to Christ is to miss the extraordinary power of the New Testament's vision. As we have seen, Paul's description of the political significance of becoming a Christian (and therefore his interpretation of baptism) cannot be fully grasped via the individualistic framework of modernity. Our starting point for understanding Ephesians 2:13-19, Galatians 3:27-28, and similar passages must be the corporate Hebrew orientation which actually framed the writers' thought.25

Toward that end, our entry into the Kingdom of God through the waters of baptism is might be better described as parabolic act than sign. Like the parabolic acts performed by the Hebrew prophets, baptism participates in the reality which it signifies. Jeremiah did not think his donning the yoke of oppression only symbolized the Babylonian captivity, he also understood the yoke to initiate God's judgment in the person of Nebuchadnezzar. In this way, becoming a Christian, which the New Testament consistently associates with baptism, actualizes the new humanity in Christ in all of its political implications:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. (Rom. 6:3-5)

**Revolutionary Subordination**

The call to servanthood is a central teaching of the New Testament which is beautifully articulated in a number of passages including the kenosis hymn of Philippians 2:5-11, the foot washing scene that introduces the Fourth Gospel's long upper room discourse (John 13:1-14), and the synoptic accounts of Jesus' teaching on greatness:

A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. But he said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.” (Luke 22:24-27; cf. Mark 10:35-45; Matt. 20:20-28)

The new humanity which Christians enter through the waters of baptism is not only an egalitarian community, but also a community called into being by one who serves. The symbiotic relationship between these two aspects of the new humanity in Christ is displayed somewhat paradoxically in a set of passages which are sometimes referred to as the “house tables” of the New Testament. Ephesians 5:21-6:9 typifies the content and style of this teaching:

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. . . . Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. . . . Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. . . . And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. Slaves, obey your earthly masters . . . as you obey Christ. . . . And, masters, do the same to them . . . for you know that both of you have the same Master in heaven.

Similar instruction can be found in Colossians 3:18-4:1 and First Peter 2:13-3:7. The contemporary reader's first reaction to the house tables is that they stand at odds with the New Testament's teaching regarding the new humanity by ratifying the very hierarchies which have been annulled in Christ. If the Body of Christ is
egalitarian and if the distinctions which underwrite these hierarchies are not in the Lord, why should wives be subject to their husbands and slaves obey their masters? Precisely because this question seems to demand a negative reply, biblical scholars and others have suggested that the house tables represent a conservative response to the imminent expectation of the Lord’s return which might be paraphrased as “Jesus is coming; live as you are and don’t try to change your status or the social order.” The usual conclusion to this line of reasoning is that now, two thousand years later, the call to subordinate ourselves is no longer relevant. We are still waiting for Christ’s return, but the patriarchal presumptions which were so dominant then are less dominant now. A contrasting interpretation of the house tables simply transplants them in literalistic fashion into present practice without regard to present cultural milieu.

What these diametrically opposite approaches have in common is the failure to recognize the subversive nature of the house tables in their own time. Both approaches construe these texts as conservative responses which ratify existing hierarchies when their purpose is to resist and revolutionize the presumptions of the first-century social order. This subversive nature can be discerned by comparing the house tables to their non-Christian (e.g., Stoic) counterparts. The differences are telling and can be summarized as follows:

First, nonbiblical first-century house tables call (primarily male) individuals to live up to their particular roles as fathers, brothers, citizens, and so on. These roles are elaborated in successive fashion with respect to the person being addressed. By contrast, in the New Testament house tables the listings of roles occur as matched pairs, and the focus is on the relationship itself. This means that in the New Testament both members of the pair are addressed—husband and wife, parent and child, master and slave—and that the quality of the relationship serves as the focal point rather than the roles themselves. The New Testament house tables call family members to subordinate themselves to other family members rather than to live up to an accepted definition of particular familial roles.

Second, not only do the New Testament house tables address these relationships in pairs, they also consistently address first the member of the pair deemed by the dominant culture to be inferior (wives, children, slaves). While nonbiblical house tables ignored these persons by not addressing them at all, the New Testament makes the radical move of addressing persons presumed to be subordinate in the dominant social order as moral agents. For Paul and other New Testament writers, it was not acceptable to overlook these persons and simply assume their conventionally defined roles. Rather, their moral agency was worthy of definition in explicitly Christian terms.

Third, while Stoic and other descriptions of family and social roles focused on the dominant person’s dignity and freedom from obligation, the New Testament calls each person in these relationships into a willing and mutual subordination. The key Greek word used in the New Testament house tables is not best rendered by “subjection” which connotes being thrown down and run over or by “submission” which connotes passivity. Rather,
subordination in this case means willingly and purposefully serving the other rather than the expectations of the social order.

Another way of approaching the New Testament house tables is to ask why Paul and others felt the need to direct women, children, and slaves to subordinate themselves when contemporary society already assumed that they would do so. The simple fact is that people on the bottom of the social order had no other practical choice in the matter.

What the directives to subordination in passages like Ephesians 5:21-6:9 imply is that there must have been some specific reason why Christian women, children, and slaves might be tempted to rebel against contemporary expectation and to refuse to “stay in their places.” As the previous section details, conversion, discipleship, and the community life of these early Christians gave them a new sense of worth and meaning which undercut traditional social hierarchies. They understood that they had been born into a new Kingdom with a new King, that the Christ event had invested their lives with extraordinary significance, and that in light of the Lordship of Christ the old social stratifications were exposed as worldly pretentions.

Why then would Paul and others direct Christian women, children, and slaves to subordinate themselves? Was it simply to prevent their gospel-inspired sense of worth and meaning from leading to anarchy? Tellingly, the New Testament house tables do not appeal to the avoidance of anarchy or preserving social harmony as a motive for subordination. Rather, these passages and their contexts call upon Christians to follow the example of Christ who subordinated himself even when he was unjustly accused (I Peter 2:18-24) and in so doing to bear witness to unbelievers (I Peter 3:1-2).

If preserving the social order were the agenda of the house tables, then their call to subordination would have been directed only at the wives, children, and slaves. Instead, we find that the New Testament house tables are directed as well at those persons commonly considered to be the dominant partner in the relationship. Husbands are directed to love their wives as Christ loved the church. Fathers are directed not to provoke their children but to nurture them. The slave owner Philemon is invited to receive his slave Onesimus as he would receive Paul himself, “no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother...both in the flesh and in the Lord” (Philemon 16, 17).

This call to reciprocal or mutual subordination is revolutionary against the backdrop of contemporary culture. Not only is the servant spirit asked of both husbands/fathers/slave masters and wives/children/slaves, the call to subordination weighs more heavily on the dominant partner in the sense that more concrete behavioral change is required. Social context insisted that wives, children, and slaves were already subordinate.

Seen in this light, the New Testament’s injunctions to revolutionary subordination have the effect of resisting entrenched social stratifications. If we are all subordinate to each other under the lordship of Christ, then our distinctions of status and power are exposed to be groundless. The way we proclaim and claim our freedom in Christ is not by rebellious defiance, but by revolutionary subordination. We voluntarily follow the way of Jesus so that we might remember the world might understand that God’s power does not reside in social hierarchies or in any other worldly powers but in the one “who emptied himself, taking the form of a slave” (Philippians 2:7).

The call to revolutionary subordination in relationships, then, does not ratify the hierarchies it addresses. Quite to the contrary, mutual subordination is a distinctively Christian way of transforming the world’s injustice. As the wife who knows that in Christ she is free voluntarily subordinates herself to her husband, she bears witness to the life of the Servant in the world. As the husband in Christ voluntarily subordinates himself to his wife by loving her in the same sacrificial way that Christ loved the church, he bears witness to Christ’s triumph over the powers of domination and tyranny.

One concrete effect of the practice of mutual subordination is the transformation of oppressive structures. In First Corinthians 7:21-23, for example, Paul indicates that slaves might seek freedom. In several instances in the New Testament, women serve churches in leadership capacities. The early church distinguished itself from pagan society in esteeming and nurturing the lives of children.

Revolutionary subordination parallels Jesus’ teaching and example regarding nonviolent resistance. As we have seen in context, turning the other cheek and going the second mile are acts which resist the powers without validating their violent and coercive presumption. In a similar way, the voluntary subordination of Christians who have already discovered their freedom and worth in Christ is a decision to follow the way of the cross in dealing with culturally imposed socio-economic hierarchies. By subordinating ourselves to one another in our relationships, we demonstrate mutual servanthood in the very place where the world expects to see domination and submission. In Christ we are not bound to submit, but free to serve.

The Church in the World

The Otherness of the Church

In the New Testament, “church” and “world” are invested with theological meanings which help to define a distinctive relationship between the two concepts. The following passages suggest the contours of this relationship:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being
through him, and without him not one thing came into being. . . . He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him.

(John 1:1-3, 10)

I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.

(John 17:14-18)

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

(Rom. 12:2)

Although the Greek texts of the Fourth Gospel and Romans use different terms to denote “world,” both image the relationship between church and world in parallel fashion. Specifically, neither resorts to dualism in characterizing this relationship. In each text, church and world are understood as distinct realms but not as polar opposites. For example, “world” does not mean “earth” as opposed to “heaven” or “evil” as opposed to “good.” Rather, “world” is understood to be the fallen form of God’s good creation, and “church” and analogous concepts like “body of Christ,” “Kingdom of God,” “new creation,” and “new humanity” are understood to be the redeemed form of the very same creation. Church and world are distinct, but they are also inextricably related.

Taken together, the passages quoted above convey this dialectical truth. In the Fourth Gospel’s prologue, the in-the-beginning Word which became incarnate in Christ is depicted as the divine creative agency through whom the world (kosmos) came into being. This assertion is followed closely by the ironic remark, “the world did not know him.” In Jesus’ lengthy intercessory prayer which takes up the entirety of John 17, the disciples are described as having been sent into a world which hates them “because they do not belong to the world.” In the opening lines of Romans 12, the church at Rome is directed not to be conformed to the world, but to be transformed by God. This teaching is only one chapter removed from the opening lines of Romans 13, which counsel the church to be subject to the very governing authorities that Paul typically connects with “the world” (aion houtos, literally “this age”). John Howard Yoder attempts to weave these and other threads of the dialectical relationship between church and world into a synthetic whole:

“World” (aion houtos in Paul, kosmos in John) signifies in this connection not creation or nature or the universe but rather the fallen form of the same, no longer conformed to the creative intent. The state, which for present purposes may be considered as typical for the world, belongs with the other exousiai [authorities] in this realm. Over against this “world” the church is visible; identified by baptism, discipline, morality, and martyrdom. . . . But behind or above this visible dichotomy there is a believed unity. All evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, the church believed that its Lord was also Lord over the world. . . . This belief in Christ’s lordship over the exousiai enabled the church, in and in spite of its distinctness from the world, to speak to the world in God’s name, not only in evangelism but in ethical judgment as well. The church could take on a prophetic responsibility for civil ethics without baptizing the state or the statesman. The justice the church demanded of the state was not Christian righteousness but human iustitia [justice]; this it could demand from pagans, not because of any belief in a universal, innate moral sense, but because of its faith in the Lord. . . . This attitude was meaningful for the church because it believed that the state was not the
ultimately determinative force in history. It ascribed to the state at best a preservative function in the midst of an essentially rebellious world, whereas the true sense of history was to be sought elsewhere, namely in the work of the church. This high estimation of the church’s own vocation explains both its visible distinctness from the world and the demands it addressed to the world.  

The familiar phrase “in the world, but not of the world” is helpful in describing the relationship between church and world but requires some elaboration to capture the nuances of the New Testament’s vision. The otherness of the church draws its substance wholly from the otherness of Jesus himself who embodied the prophetic imagination in resisting the royal consciousness of worldly powers. Christ is not only Head of his Body, the church, but also Lord of the powers themselves. The destiny of the powers is to serve their true Lord, and the vocation of the church is to bear faithful witness to this truth. To do so, the church must be other than the world in visibly embodying the politics of Jesus. While worldly powers may appear at times to be demonic and unredeemable, Christians can never finally regard them as such since we are called to love even our enemies, who are also God’s children.

The biblical image of the people of God in the world is thus neither emigration, which abandons the world to the mercy of the powers, nor ghetto, which occupies the world as if the world did not exist. The biblical image is rather diaspora, the community life prescribed by Jeremiah for the exiles in Babylon:

*Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.* (Jer. 29:5-7)

Diaspora Judaism thrived in Babylon and elsewhere as scattered communities of Jews remained Jewish even as they sought the welfare of their cities of residence. In the Diaspora, the synagogue was born and the Babylonian Talmud was codified. As Yoder describes, Diaspora Judaism became a model for the first-century church in the world:

The minority status of Jews since Jeremiah, far from accepting enclosure within the ghetto, could with integrity express itself in important though non-sovereign participation in pagan power structures, as with Esther or Daniel. The very same legends recounted at once the radical refusal of the Jewish hero to have anything to do with the gentile regime’s idolatrous ways and the recognition of the true God by gentiles who asked the Jews to provide leadership *on their own terms*. There needed to be no tradeoff of a certain amount of faithfulness for a certain amount of effectiveness. These were the non-utopian visions and the success stories of the canon of the early Christians no less than of the other Jews. To “rule the world” in fellowship with the living Lamb will sometimes mean humbly building a grassroots culture, with Jeremiah. Sometimes (as with Joseph and Daniel) it will mean helping the pagan king solve one problem at a time. Sometimes (again as with Daniel and his friends) it will mean disobeying the King’s imperative of idolatry, refusing to be bamboozled by the claims made for the Emperor’s new robe or his fiery furnace.

*The Constantiian Transformation*

The nuanced, dialectical relationship between church and world envisioned by the New Testament and practiced by the early church collapsed in the fourth century with Constantine’s conscription of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire. The use of the first Christian emperor’s name in this connection is as symbolic as it is historical since Constantine’s conversion was only one step in a process which began well before and was consummated well after his era. The most significant aspect of this transformation was not that Christians were no longer persecuted and assumed the ranks of the privileged or that emperors began to preside over church councils or that the state started building churches. The telling and fateful motif of Constantinian Christianity was that the distinct but related realms of church and world became fused into one entity—the state-church or the church-state which baptized statecraft, warfare, art, history, economics, philosophy, and even superstition within its purview. Conversion to Christianity was no longer a voluntary act but a territorial presupposition marked by the baptism of infants and unwilling adults. *Church* was no longer distinguishable from *world* by the visible presence of Jesus’ politics since his politics were inherently subversive to the power the church had become. Theologians like Augustine, who presided over the latter stages of this transformation, were obliged to envision the “true church” where the differences between belief and unbelief and church and world were said to still matter since these differences had become invisible in the visible church. As the order of redemption was subordinated to the order of preservation, Christian hope was turned inside out:  

Previously Christians had known as a fact of experience that the church existed but had to believe against appearances that Christ ruled over the world. After Constantine one knew as a fact of experience that Christ was ruling over the world but had to believe against the evidence that there existed “a believing church.”
The practical effects of Constantinian Christianity, which later became known as Christendom, were both inevitable and foundational. Since the visible church had become populated by persons whose allegiance to Christ was nominal or nonexistent, faith and practice had to be adjusted so that ordinary church members were not expected to follow Jesus. Furthermore, the statesman, who before the transformation behaved as a worldly power and openly confessed his non-Christian self-identity, became in Christendom a Christian statesman even though the form and content of his actions remained essentially unchanged.13

The fusion of church and world endured as the primary expression of Christianity in the West throughout the Middle Ages and the Reformation. The medieval church did retain some vestiges of the politics of Jesus in its higher expectations of clergy, its missionary endeavors, the international character of church hierarchy, the visible opposition of this hierarchy to the princes, and the persistence of mysticism. While distorted and diluted, these and other features of medieval faith and practice expressed at least some sense of the strangeness and distinctiveness of the church in the world. The Protestant Reformers helped to sow the seeds of Christendom’s unraveling but could not reap the harvest of their efforts because of a strategic decision to depend on the princes to enforce Reformation ideals. Yoder describes the ironic results of this decision:14

[For the Reformation] the prince is not only a Christian, not only a prominent Christian; he is now the bishop. . . . The prince wields not only the sword but all other powers as well. . . . What is called “church” is an administrative branch of the state on the same level with the army or the post office. Church discipline is applied by the civil courts and police. It is assumed that there is nothing wrong with this since the true church, being invisible, is not affected. It cannot be said that this turn of events was desired by the Reformers. Their uniform intention was a renewal of the visible, faithful body of believers. But the forces to which they appealed for support, namely the drives toward autonomy that exist in the state and the other realms of culture, were too strong to be controlled once they had been let loose.15

The Church’s Witness to the World

Eventually, the millennium-long church-state union of Christendom unraveled with the emergence of the modern secular state through a complex process driven by a number of forces. While one of these forces involved reform movements within Christianity, it is fair to say that the institutional separation of church and state expressed in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was as much a development imposed on the church as created by the church. For every free-church Christian who supported the separation of church and state, there were established-church Christians who opposed this development. Even today, the separation of church and state evokes considerable misunderstanding and disagreement in the Christian community.

For Christians in America and elsewhere to grasp clearly the biblical image of the church in the world and therefore our witness to the world, we must see the new paradigm less as a dirty trick of history and more as the providential unveiling a fundamental error. The fundamental error of Christendom was not the embrace of worldly power and violence, not the mistaken identification of Constantine’s conversion with the coming of the Kingdom, not the appropriation of pagan religiosity which morphed into sacramentalism, and not the modeling of church hierarchy after Roman administrative structures. All of these were serious mistakes, but they derived from the deeper mistake of misconstruing the rightful place of the church in the world:36

The fundamental wrongness of the vision of Christendom is its illegitimate takeover of the world: its ascription of a Christian loyalty or duty to those who have made no confession and, thereby, its denying to the non-confessing creation the freedom of unbelief that the nonresistance of God in creation gave to a rebellious humanity. . . . We can only have gospel social ethics if we let confession and non-confession make a difference. . . . We can only be doing gospel social ethics if we are telling the story of Jesus.37

In the New Testament the church is marked by its embrace of the politics of Jesus. If we embrace the politics of the world rather than the politics of Jesus, we have no witness to be bear to the world because we have become indistinguishable from the world. Our witness to the world is to be the Body of Christ, whose corporate identity mirrors its risen Lord. When Paul confesses that “it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20), he is not simply describing his own individual identity, but the identity of the church itself. If the story of Jesus in all of its fullness is not our story, we have no story to tell to ourselves or to anyone else.

Conclusion

One of the primary goals and practical benefits of biblical studies over the past half century is our ability to see Jesus more clearly in his original social, economic, cultural, and political context. The basic outlines of the image we now see are reflected above and contrast rather sharply with our own experience of church and world on a number of levels. We are, for better or worse, the heirs of modern and post-modern individualism and thus tend to regard the autonomous individual locating himself or herself in various settings as the primary Christian orientation. That is, we instinctively interpret Christian
faith first in terms of our individual relationship with God and then ask ourselves what this relationship means for our other relationships, both inside and outside the church.

We are furthermore, for better or worse, heirs of the Protestant Reformation and Martin Luther’s well chronicled struggle of the soul. From our primary individualistic orientation, we easily identify our own search for personal redemption with Luther’s struggle against works righteousness, and like the reformer, we are apt to interpret Jesus through Paul and Paul through the lens of own experience. Like Luther, we search the Bible earnestly for answers to the questions posed by our soul struggles and then project back onto scripture the very answers we find. Paul becomes the prototype of every personal struggle against the tyranny of the law, and Jesus becomes the embodiment of “justification by grace through faith,” the famous mantra of the Reformation which encapsulated Luther’s understanding of the gospel.

Part of the work of biblical studies is to help us gain clarity regarding the difference between our reading of scripture and the text in its original context. This difference is always crucial. As it turns out, Paul’s interest in the Jewish law seems to have been less motivated by a personal struggle with works righteousness than by his determination to delegitimize the law as a divisive distinction in the new humanity in Christ. As it turns out further, Jesus’ teaching about the law seems to be more focused on its inner meaning in the context of the in-breaking of God’s Kingdom than any supposed dialectic between law and gospel. As it turns out still further, the primary Christian orientation in the New Testament is not the individual who has been saved by grace through faith locating him or herself in various settings, but the Christian community itself. Becoming and being a Christian is not primarily understood in scripture as an individual transaction but as a covenantal experience. When we are baptized, we are baptized into Christ’s Body, and this body experience becomes our primary orientation which is inherently political and driven by the politics of Jesus. This not to say that phrases like “justification by grace through faith” should not be used to characterize and communicate the message of the New Testament. Clearly, scripture depicts salvation as God’s gracious gift which cannot be earned by human achievement. The crucial reorientation called for by the witness of scripture is not to move toward works righteousness, but to move toward a more covenantal and holistic and less individualistic and privatized understanding of the gospel.

Understanding the gospel in this covenantal context calls into question the way we usually describe what it means to become a Christian and to live the Christian life. For example, the familiar phrase, “Christian faith and practice” implies that there exist two separable entities, “faith” and “practice,” when in fact scripture never countenances their separable existence. The phrase, “the social implications of the gospel” implies that there is something called “gospel” which is distinct from its social implications, when in fact the great good news of the New Testament is actually the announcement of God’s politikos in Jesus Christ. God graciously makes us part of
the new creation as we individually give our lives to Christ, but salvation is not best understood as an individual state which has social overtones. The new creation in Christ is always social and always political.

This covenantal framing calls into question the way we present the gospel to potential new converts. These presentations are often characterized by a transactional, propositional tone which seems foreign to scripture. To the new convert, we sometimes appear to be saying, “If you believe certain things, God will save you.” Contrast this quality of communication with Jesus’ exchange with the lawyer who asked Jesus what he had to do to inherit eternal life. Paraphrasing Deuteronomy 6:4ff and Leviticus 19:18, Jesus responded with the double love commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” When the lawyer (being a lawyer) pressed Jesus to define “neighbor,” Jesus replied with the parable of the Good Samaritan. The covenantal quality of Jesus’ answer is unmistakable. He did not say that if the lawyer believed (or did) certain things, God would save him and that once saved, the lawyer would then be obliged to take care of his neighbor. Rather, he said that inheriting eternal life entailed the movement of one’s entire person toward God, that this movement entailed love, and that this love entailed loving actions in behalf of others. Entering into eternal life was not a state to be achieved by certain beliefs (or actions), but a living relationship with God and others embraced through faith and characterized by covenantal love. After Pentecost the early church rightly made Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection central to its preaching, but as we have seen, the church’s invitation to new converts maintained this covenantal quality. To enter the Kingdom of God was to be part of the body politics of Jesus.

Furthermore, the politics of Jesus and its subversive practices calls into question the “politics as usual” of the dominant culture. Against hierarchical social ordering and divisive discrimination, we see the undivided new humanity in Christ. Against our relentless commitment to protect our self-interests and privileged positions in both individual and institutional settings, we see Jesus’ followers share the loaf and the cup in remembrance of him. Against our insulated individualism which is beholden to no one, we see the early church practice forgiveness and ethical accountability to the one true Lord. Against our determination to silence our enemies and to get our own way, we see the freedom and Spirit-led consensus of the Christian meeting. Against our competitive drive for recognition and glory, we see complementary charisma in the Body working for the common good. Against our need to dominate and control, we see Spirit-led revolutionary subordination.

The church’s faithful witness to the world is to be the new humanity called into being by the One who embodied the prophetic imagination in resisting the powers. We witness to the lordship of Christ over the powers and principalities when the Body of Christ embodies the politics of Jesus. As the history of both Israel and the church attests, however, the prophetic imagination is easily distorted in the flux and frailty of human institutions, and the subversive practices of God’s alternative consciousness readily morph into the usual politics the dominant culture. Without watchful vigilance, the church in every age can easily become as violent, hierarchical, discriminatory, self-serving, and near-sighted as the world itself. The Seer of Revelation offered this message of hopeful watchfulness to the saints of Asia Minor who were suffering persecution at the end of the first century:  

Then I saw in the right hand of the one seated on the throne a scroll written on the inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals; and I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, “Who is worthy to open
the scroll and break its seals?” And no one in heaven
or on earth or under the earth was able to open the
scroll or to look into it. And I began to weep bitterly
because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or
to look into it. Then one of the elders said to me, “Do
not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root
of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll
and its seven seals.”

Then I saw between the throne and the four living
creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if
it had been slaughtered, having seven horns and seven
eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into
all the earth. He went and took the scroll from the
right hand of the one who was seated on the throne.
When he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures
and the twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb, each
holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which
are the prayers of the saints. They sing a new song:
“You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals,
for you were slaughtered and by your blood you
ransomed for God
saints from every tribe and language and
people and nation;
you have made them to be a kingdom and priests
serving our God,
and they will reign on earth.

Rev. 5:1-10)

The Seer says to the seven churches, “The meaning of
history is not borne by the emperor or any of the authorities who
seem to control your destiny, but by the Lamb who was slain.”
He alone is worthy to open the seals of the scroll which
reveals the meaning of every single life within the vast
sweep of history.

Through his cross, the church is
constituted across every possible
human boundary to be a kingdom of
priests who serve God and rule the
world. We rule with Christ not
by taking over the world and
embracing its politics but by being
the new humanity formed by the
politics of Jesus. Serving God and
ruling the world as the vanguard of
God’s Kingdom in history is church’s
ture destiny and the world’s only hope.

To the saints of our own era who are disheartened
by the world’s violent, selfish, fractured, inept, and self-
destructive momentum and who are disillusioned by the
church’s capitulation to the world’s politics, the Seer
of the Apocalypse says, “do not weep, for the slain Lamb
bears the meaning of history.” Not ideological partisanship
which disparages the common good. Not individual and
asonic greed which oppresses the poor and destroys
the environment. Not narrow-minded self-interest which
preserves personal and institutional prerogatives at all
costs. Not violent regimes which disregard human life.
Not pop culture which escapes into self-absorbed self-
indulgence. Not even the shrill voices of a thousand talk
show hosts.

We remain faithful to the Seer’s vision when we
are watchful and vigilant, when Jesus’ politics is our
politics, and when our first invitation to the world is to
follow Jesus. Only then can the whole creation hear and
understand the refrain which holds the meaning of its
existence and the promise of its salvation: “Worthy is the
Lamb.”

Notes
All scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard
Version unless otherwise indicated.

Images from Imagining the Word, An Arts and Lectionary
Resource, Volumes 1 and 2. Cleveland, Ohio: United Church

1 “The Prophetic Imagination,” Therefore, Vol. 12, No. 2; “Christ
and the Powers,” Therefore, Vol. 12, No. 4. Available for
download at http://clc.texasbaptists.org/ethical-issues-2/
written-resources/.

2 Walter
Brueggemann,
The Prophetic
Imagination,
Second Edition
(Minneapolis,
MN: Fortress
Press, 2001). For a
fuller interpretation
with detailed
referencing of
The Prophetic
Imagination, see
Therefore, Vol. 12,
No. 2.

3 Ibid., pp. 94-95.

4 Walter Wink,
Naming the
Powers: The
Language of
Power in the
New Testament
(Philadelphia:

John Pitman Weber, Yell
For a much fuller synopsis with detailed referencing of Walter Wink’s work on the biblical motif, Christ and the Powers, see Therefore, Vol. 12, No. 4.

1. Ibid., pp. 114-115.


7. Ibid., pp. 325-6.

8. Ibid., pp. 362-363.


10. Ibid., pp. 54-55.


12. Ibid., p. 62.

13. Ibid., p. 67.


15. Ibid., p. 109.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid., pp. 133-134.


19. Ibid., pp. 47-58.

20. Ibid., p. 67.

21. Ibid., pp. 57-58.

22. Ibid., p. 58.

23. Ibid., p. 60.


25. Ibid.


27. See Yoder, The Royal Priesthood, pp. 127-140 for a fuller development of the theme “To Serve Our God and to Rule the World.” The essay published in these pages inspires the Conclusion section of this issue of Therefore and represents Dr. Yoder’s presidential address to the Annual Meeting of the Society of Christian Ethics at Duke University in January, 1988.