

Disarming Scripture

**Cherry-Picking Liberals, Violence-Loving Conservatives,
And Why We All Need To Learn To Read The Bible Like Jesus Did**

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Part 1: Violence and the Old Testament

Chapter 1: Confronting Violence in Scripture

Christians have long had difficulty reconciling the OT God who commands genocide (the main topic of Deuteronomy and Joshua) with the NT God revealed in Jesus, who is a God of love. There is no escaping the fact that violence and bloodshed committed in God's name is a major OT theme. God is there 'the Lord of hosts', i.e. the God of *Armies*. In over 100 OT passages God explicitly commands people to kill—the victims including women, children and infants. We must face this issue rather than avoid it or whitewash over it.

Down the centuries Christians have used the violent commands to justify committing violence themselves. The Crusades are a case in point, as are Cromwell and the Irish Catholics; the white settlers in the USA and the native Americans; and the genocide of the Tutsis in Rwanda in 1994. Dawkins and the New Atheists have used these horrors to discredit belief in God.

Conservative commentators on the Bible have often tried to justify the killing of the Canaanite people, even though we all find it morally repellent. The problem is the common assumption that faithfulness to Scripture means *accepting everything it says unquestioningly*. Liberals, on the other hand, focus on the 'nice' bits of Scripture (and there are many of these in the OT) and refuse to acknowledge the violent bits, leaving themselves open to charges of cherry-picking. All the main lectionaries omit the violent passages from their readings.

What we need is an approach that faces up to the violence in Scripture from a perspective of faith and a developing moral conscience. As our guide, we will look at how Jesus himself read and interpreted OT passages.

Chapter 2: Reading the Bible like Jesus Did

Jesus' approach to the OT is seen best in the Sermon on the Mount, where he repeatedly says, 'You have heard that it was said...[and he quotes from the OT] But I tell you...[and he contradicts or radically alters it]' (Mat 5). A typical example is that instead of exacting 'an eye for an eye' his followers should *love their enemies*. He had just said that he had not come to abolish the law and the prophets—which the Pharisees believed him to be doing—but to *fulfil* them. He did that in the sense of 'perfecting' them by his radical reinterpretations.

The Mosaic law put some limitations on vengeance: 'an eye for an eye' was one example, being a step forward from vengeance-slaughter. But Jesus, by what he now says, is overturning the whole system of *retributive* justice in the OT and replacing it with *restorative* justice based on the kind of enemy-love that he himself came to demonstrate.

Unlike the Pharisees, Jesus' concern was not to defend *texts* but to defend *people*. He often broke the Mosaic law in order to heal people—touching lepers and other outcasts, healing on the Sabbath, forgiving the woman taken in adultery etc. He could not bear to see people hurt in the name of religion. Thus he came to be viewed by the Jewish religious leaders as a blasphemer and lawbreaker. His hermeneutics and theirs were poles apart. To the Pharisees,

faithfulness to Scripture meant *unquestioning obedience*, whereas to Jesus it meant *faithful questioning* in the interests of loving and supporting needy people.

His hermeneutic of faithful questioning can be seen in germinal form in the prophets, who often challenged the letter of the law. Isaiah, for instance, says that God takes 'no pleasure' in the sacrifices and festivals of his people, even though God was himself the source of the laws regarding those practices (Isaiah 1:11-15). God's challenge through Isaiah was in the name of compassion, because the Israelites at the time were practising bullying and violence (v15, 17). In a similar way, if a law seemed unloving, Jesus felt free to break it—indeed, he felt an *obligation* to break it.

The OT is not a unified book with one view of God and of how life works. It is *multi-vocal*: it offers many perspectives, which sometimes contradict one another. The main dialogue is between a majority voice, which favours *unquestioning obedience*, and a minority one, which favours *faithful questioning*. The former is seen in God's genocide commands and his command that Abraham sacrifice Isaac. Questioning in such cases would have been seen as a sin; King Saul lost his kingdom for failing to complete the genocide God required of him (1 Sam 15). The latter voice is evident in, for example, the way both Moses and Abraham challenged God not to act violently (Exod 32:7-14; Gen 18:25). They boldly questioned his declared intent.

The *unquestioning obedience* approach finds expression in the system of *rewards and penalties*, typified in the blessings and curses of Deuteronomy 28. Some of the penalties that God says he would bring for disobedience are horrific! The assumption, on this view, is that if you are sick or the victim of violence it is because you have sinned, whereas if you are rich or successful in battle it is because you are righteous. The Psalms, however, represent a voice of *faithful questioning* that conflicts with this approach. The psalmist frequently complains that the righteous are suffering, while the wicked prosper. The strongest voice of questioning, however, is in Job. Job's friends stick to the strict Deuteronomy 28 line, while Job follows that of the psalmist. But in the end God commends Job's approach and condemns that of his friends (Job 42:7). The likes of the psalmists and Job, however, do not argue with the underlying rightness of the 'unquestioning obedience' and 'rewards and penalties' approaches; they just complain that they are *not being upheld*. They have not moved as far as proposing mercy and love for their enemies but are calling for God's wrath to descend upon them!

The prophets, as we have seen, sometimes challenge the demands of the law, but in general they support the 'rewards and penalties' approach of Deuteronomy 28. Jesus seems to go along with the prophets in the former but rejects their pattern of blaming the victim for the ills that have befallen them. He refuses, for example, to agree that sickness is the judgment of God and attributes it instead to the devil (Luke 11:17-20).

An exception to the prophets' tendency to blame the victim is the Suffering Servant in Isaiah, who is set forth as blameless, and a victim of oppression and injustice (Isa 53:7-8). Jesus accepts certain parts of the OT as applicable to his own messianic mission and ministry, and to the way of the kingdom, while other parts he either ignores or reinterprets: 'But I say to you...'

At the Last Supper Jesus links his imminent sufferings and death to the Passover and exodus accounts in the OT. There he identifies with the liberation of people from bondage, but has nothing at all to say about the genocide as they entered the Promised Land. Also, the original Passover came about through a demonstration of violent force against the Egyptians, but Jesus rejected this approach completely. Refusing to go along with those who wanted him to be a military Messiah, blasting the Romans out of the way, Jesus instead chose the way of suffering at the hands of those very Romans and instigated the new exodus by that very different method.

In 2 Kings 1 Elijah had called down fire from heaven to destroy a captain and his fifty men as proof that he was 'a man of God'. When Peter and John suggested that they do the same in response to the opposition they were facing, Jesus rebuked them and forbade them to do so (Luke 9:54-55). The way of Elijah, he was clearly saying, was not the way of God at all. So Jesus chose which OT narratives he was willing to embrace, and which he rejected. There is a

clear pattern: he embraced those that focused on compassion and chose not to use those that focused on violence. We need to do the same. It is the way of *faithful questioning* exemplified by Jesus himself.

Chapter 3: Paul's Conversion from Violence

As a zealous Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus was a violent persecutor of Christians. What caused him to turn from that violent understanding of his religion, in which he marshalled OT scriptures to justify his actions?

We get a clue from his later statements about the law, which he puts down in clear terms as powerless to save (Rom 8:3) and whose letter kills (2 Cor 3:6). Indeed, his whole Jewish heritage and Bible training as one committed to *unquestioning obedience* to the law he dismisses as 'garbage' (Phil 3:8). He came to see that approach as responsible for his being 'the worst of all sinners' and 'a violent man' (1 Tim 1:13, 15). So he turned away, not from his Jewish faith or from Israel's Scriptures, but from *his former violent interpretation of them*. His had been a religious zeal bordering on fanaticism (Phil 3:6). He had been dedicated to keeping Israel from being adulterated or defiled—with his actions echoing the genocide of the Canaanites in order to achieve the same end.

Paul's encounter with Christ changed all that. He adopted a completely different approach to OT passages calling for the extermination of Gentiles. In Romans 15, for example, he quotes from Psalm 18 and Deuteronomy 32 but omits completely the sections of those verses that speak of violence and retains only those parts that speak of the Gentiles rejoicing in God. 'Salvation', instead of requiring Gentiles to be removed by military means in order to keep Israel pure, now means the inclusion of those very Gentiles in the people of God! Paul subverts those OT passages by the way he handles them, completely ignoring the 'authorial intent' so beloved by evangelical exegetes.

The same approach is evident in Romans 1-3, where Paul takes OT passages from the Psalms that originally called for the violent overthrow of non-Israelites and turns them round to argue for their inclusion in God's people—the very opposite of the passages' original message. Paul is not rejecting such passages, he is redeeming them, seeking to 'fulfil' rather than 'destroy' them. He shows a hermeneutic of *redemptive transformation*, resulting in the *disarmament* of the texts in question.

In 1 Cor 15 Paul looks forward to the end of death, and addresses a defeated death by quoting from Hosea: 'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?' In Hosea, the import of the verses is the very opposite of what Paul has them saying. It is *inviting* death to come and destroy Israel in punishment, and the context confirms that (see Hosea 13:16). But Paul uses the passage to declare *liberation* from death through Christ!

Jesus had done a similar thing in the synagogue at Nazareth at the start of his ministry, where he read from Isaiah 61 what was in effect Messiah's job-description: 'The Spirit of the Lord...has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour' (Luke 4:18-19). He chose deliberately to omit the final phrase: '...and the *day of vengeance* of our God'—the very bit his audience were wanting to hear, because it would mean the violent overthrow of the Romans. The earlier part was included in God's purpose, this last phrase wasn't—and it led to a furious reaction from the people.

Jesus approach, however, was more often to use clever turns of phrase to upset his audience's expected perspective. For example, working on the Sabbath was, according to the law, punishable by death. But when people accused Jesus of this, he told them that his work was in fact God's work, implying that God who made the laws could break them if he wished—which they found hard to handle (John 5:17-18).

The Pharisees were captive to the letter of the law, but Jesus looked at its ultimate purpose, which was to foster *love* (Matt 22:37-40). Actions that didn't lead to love and care for the needy, even if they could be based on a legalistic understanding of the OT, were not what the OT was in fact teaching. For us, too, examining the text of Scripture carefully and arriving at a 'right' interpretation means nothing if loving action is inhibited by it.

It is well documented that it was ‘by the book’ interpretation that led many Americans to support slavery. Thus many black people were oppressed, exploited and hurt. The same approach today to, say, divorcees and homosexuals has had the same effect. But Jesus and Paul both interpreted Scripture in such a way that it led to love and compassion. Love was their hermeneutical baseline, their interpretive priority, and they put that before sticking with the original meaning or author’s intention. Should we not follow their example?

Chapter 4: The Divorce of Ethics and Exegesis

Down the centuries the post-Constantinian church has tended not to interpret Scripture that way. Instead, it has focused on orthodoxy, labelling as heretics those who disagreed—and torturing or killing them. This is the old *unquestioning obedience* approach. Judaism, by contrast, has maintained a tradition of *faithful questioning*.

In the second century AD, Marcion, unable to reconcile what he saw as the violent God of the OT with the teaching of Jesus, held that the OT in its entirety should be rejected. He failed to recognise the multi-vocal nature of the OT and threw out the baby with the bathwater. The church at large refused his proposal and branded him a heretic. Ever since, it has continued with its ‘us and them’ approach. This does not always issue in physical violence, but often produces hurtful psychological and emotional results.

The early church, though it rejected Marcion, did share his concerns about violence in the OT. Under leaders like Origen it rejected the idea that the violent episodes were literal and looked instead for an allegedly deeper ‘spiritual’ meaning by means of *allegorical* interpretation. In doing so they failed to face up to the realities of the OT texts, which is not helpful. This continued up until the modern era, when biblical scholars began to focus on a *grammatical-historical* approach to Scripture as being more appropriate. But this provides no tools for dealing with the violent passages. It falls short of the *ethical* approach to interpretation adopted by Jesus and Paul. It enters into no *moral* engagement with the text.

We can combine the best of grammatical-historical techniques in our examination of Scripture with an ethical approach. And that begins with the simple and obvious conviction that things like infanticide, genocide and cannibalism are simply and always categorically wrong. We must not shut off our consciences in the interests of submission to an approach of unquestioning obedience when it comes to moral atrocity. The Bible’s text is not authoritarian; it remains open to *faithful questioning* motivated by compassion.

Chapter 5: Facing Our Darkness

The OT records a gradual development away from the ancient concept of violent tribal war-gods. Part of this was Judaism’s transition from polytheism (many gods, some good, some bad) to monotheism, a downside of which was that people then attributed to the one god, Yahweh, both good and evil acts (Amos 3:6; Isa 45:7). God is portrayed as doing things that we find morally reprehensible (1 Kings 22:23). By the time of Jesus a more complex understanding had developed, and many of the violent acts attributed in the OT to God were now seen as the work of Satan—like sickness. This trend had shown up in the intertestamental period in the book of Jubilees. That book, for instance, said that it wasn’t God who slew the firstborn of the Egyptians but ‘the powers of Mastema’ (hate).

Even the OT itself shows this kind of trend away from blaming God. In 2 Sam 24:1 God incites David to take a census of Israel, then punishes him for it, resulting in the deaths of 70,000 people—a scenario which is hard to accept. The later account in 1 Chron 21:1, however, says it was Satan who incited David to take the census.

The concept of the devil is rare in the OT but by the time of Jesus it was common in Judaism. So Jesus, rather than blaming people for their sufferings, recognised their pain as the work of the devil and opposed it with compassion and healing power. We need therefore to see that much of the OT was written from the viewpoint of a people with little or no concept of the devil and who therefore attributed injury, deception and suffering to the hand of God. Perhaps we should also question whether the attribution to God of genocide-commands and other violent acts ought to be laid in fact at the devil’s door.

We have noted how the likes of Abraham and Moses argued with God. But the OT also shows God arguing with God, in that the direct words of God proclaimed by some prophets contradict the direct words of God proclaimed by others. So while Deut 28:63 says it would please God to ruin and destroy people, Ezekiel has God saying that he takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked (33:11). Similarly, God punishes children for their father's sins according to Exodus 20:5 and Deut 5:9, and the death of David's son was a case in point (2 Sam 12:14), but Ezekiel has God saying that nobody will die for their father's sins but only for their own (Ezekiel 18).

These contradictions are a record of the dispute in the Hebrew canon cataloguing developing views of God. The voices of faithful questioning are the minority; they are voices from the wings challenging the majority voice of unquestioning obedience. But they are a vital part of the overall picture and an example to us. And they question even the very words of God himself, which may embolden us to question whether in fact God really commanded the Canaanite genocide (1 Sam 15:2-3) and other moral atrocities.

Some would say that the likes of Ezekiel, being prophets, had the right to question statements in the law, whereas we don't. But surely we have *more* right in that we know Christ and the force of his teaching and example regarding enemy-love and the rejection of violence. Paul certainly thought so. He quotes Isaiah as asking, 'Who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?' then goes on to assert that we in fact know the Lord's mind because 'we have the mind of Christ' (1 Cor 2:15-16).

Archaeology suggests that the genocide accounts in Joshua are largely fictional: there was no fortified city of Jericho at the period for Joshua to conquer, and other cities allegedly wiped out show no traces of such destruction. The city of Ai—which means 'ruins'—was a ruin before the Israelites got there. If the accounts themselves are a fiction, perhaps we can conclude that God's command to commit genocide was also a fiction? This does not solve the problem of the Israelites' deplorable attitude to outsiders at that period, but it does at least take the edge off things.

Genocide is totally incompatible with the attitude, teaching and example of Jesus, so we have to reject the genocide texts as reflecting a primitive and morally inferior understanding of God that Judaism itself gradually developed away from. If we hesitate to do that, we may be helped along by trying to view the genocide passages from the standpoint of the victims! This will also help expose the horror of the darkness sometimes found lurking in our own attitudes to outsiders. These texts—and particularly Psalm 137—can also serve a useful purpose in letting us know that we can bring our raw emotions to the Lord without his rejecting us.

Psalm 139 is beautiful up to the end of v18, then it turns nasty, asking God to zap the psalmist's enemies. Ironically it ends with him asking God to reveal if there is 'any offensive way' in him! In the light of Christ we find his hatred of his enemies offensive, but clearly he himself did not. He was a man of his time. This mixture of the sublime and the ugly points to the fact that we, too, are a mixture and that the dividing line goes right through our own hearts.

Part 2: Violence and the New Testament

Chapter 6: Reading on a Trajectory

The NT clearly represents an advance on the OT in terms of violence. There are no genocidal commands there. Instead, the way of retribution is forbidden, and Jesus' followers are called to non-violent enemy-love and radical forgiveness. Nevertheless, many have found justification in the NT for slavery, corporal punishment of children and state violence in the form of war and the punishment of criminals, including capital punishment.

The development of Judaism in the intertestamental period is important for understanding NT attitudes. The OT prophets of Israel had assured the people that their suffering in exile was because of their sins and that if they repented they would return to the land and rule the Gentiles. Repent and return they did, but they remained under foreign domination right through into the NT era. Their continued oppression made it hard to accept that the

prophets' message was correct. Many were ready to rethink the narrative that blamed the victims. Certainly the idea of God as a war-God fighting on their side had become untenable because for centuries he hadn't shown up.

Jesus then came with a very different narrative and understanding of what God is like. The sick and suffering were not being punished by God for their sins but were the victims of Satanic oppression, he said. He demonstrated a non-violent way forward by his own death and resurrection. God is no longer seen as a warrior-God clothed in the blood of his enemies but as Jesus-like, clothed in his own blood, shed for his enemies. God has not changed, of course; Jesus reveals who God has always been. The NT, then, is itself a protest-narrative, a major critique of religiously justified violence. It sets out a radical alternative approach marked by forgiveness and enemy-love.

The NT, protesting as it was against OT ideas, was moving forward on a trajectory towards better things. But we cannot stop there. We must see where the trajectory was heading and go with it. Slavery is a case in point. The NT takes major steps away from slavery, encouraging slaves to gain their freedom if possible (1 Cor 7:21), advising masters to treat their slaves the way Christ treats them (Eph 6:9) and declaring that in Christ there is 'no slave or free' (Gal 3:28). But this is the start of a trajectory only; the NT does condemn slavery outright or call for its abolition. Slaves are not urged to rebel but to submit, even in the face of cruelty.

So the NT does *not represent an ultimate ethic* but records the first steps in the right direction. If we don't acknowledge this, we have to conclude that slavery is OK—as many in history have in fact done. But those who saw the need to stay on the trajectory and move beyond the NT became responsible for slavery's formal abolition.

There is risk in following such a trajectory: we might move in the wrong direction and thus reach the wrong conclusion. But avoiding risk by staying on the 'safe' ground of unquestioning obedience is far more harmful, as history has shown. It requires us to shelve our consciences and justifies harm in God's name.

The corporal punishment of children is one example. Many parents, in unquestioning obedience to Scripture, have sinned against their conscience by beating their children. In reality, they do not in fact follow the biblical pattern of striking a child with a whip or rod on the back or sides but opt for less violent methods applied to less vulnerable parts of the body, like the buttocks. But current psychology and mental health advances have shown without question that corporal punishment of children of any kind has potentially very harmful results. To follow the trajectory, then, will mean our giving up corporal punishment altogether.

But how can we be sure, with any such trajectory, that we know where it is leading? How can we know what is the right interpretation? Some say we should adopt a *Christocentric* approach, reading Scripture through a Jesus-shaped lens, so to speak. But even this has its difficulties: some have in fact used Jesus to promote violent and authoritarian readings of Scripture. Instead, we need to see how Jesus himself interpreted Scripture, and he always did that *on the basis of love and compassion*. So we need to evaluate everything based on its merit. In other words, if something is good we should be able to demonstrate its goodness in practice: 'By their *fruits* you will know them' (Mat 7:16). That's what it means to 'have the mind of Christ', by which we 'judge all things'. If our interpretation results in love, we have it right; if it results in harm, we have it wrong. Demonstrably, child abuse and slavery are deeply harmful, and therefore wrong; we cannot legitimately see them as endorsed by Scripture, regardless of what certain texts, limited by their time and culture, say on these issues, either in the OT or the NT.

It was William Webb who first introduced the idea of a 'trajectory' hermeneutic. His concern, however, was chiefly to see the direction Scripture was taking compared to the surrounding culture and religions. But mine (says Derek Flood) is slightly different: my concern is to determine the trajectory's direction in terms of its *end results*. So Webb is opposed to same-sex relationships because he sees Hebrew culture as being as opposed to it as the surrounding cultures, or more so. But I, looking at end results, see much benefit, rather than harm, in such relationships. The high incidence of drug abuse, mental illness and suicide among LGBT people is the result, not of their practices, but of the condemnation and rejection they experience from society at large. Jesus stands on the side of the condemned and vulnerable. Should we not do the same?

Chapter 7: God and the State Sword

Some have supported violence by the state (war and capital punishment) on NT grounds. They have appealed to *war imagery* like Paul's 'Put on the full armour of God' (Eph 6). But the whole point of Paul's passage is to prepare us for 'the gospel of peace'. He also makes it clear that 'our struggle is not with flesh and blood', i.e. we don't fight people, we fight evil, which we overcome by doing good.

Some cite *Jesus' praise of a Roman centurion* (Luke 7:9) as an endorsement of the violence a soldier's work entailed. This is unwarranted; Jesus was commending his faith, not his job. He was no more endorsing violence here than he was endorsing prostitution in Mat 21:31.

Others point to *Jesus' comments to his disciples about buying swords* (Luke 22:36ff). When they reply that they have two swords between them Jesus replies, 'Enough'—not meaning that two would be enough to defeat Rome, but 'Enough of this kind of talk'. That this is what Jesus meant is confirmed by Mat 26:52. Jesus elsewhere said he had come not to bring peace but a sword (Mat 10:34) and some take this as an endorsement of state violence. Clearly it is not. Luke's version has 'division' instead of 'sword' and points to Jesus' meaning that his message would sometimes divide families.

Then there is the incident of *Jesus overturning the tables in the Temple* (Mat 21:12-17 etc.). If he used violence, some argue, so can we. But it was animals, not people, that Jesus drove out (Jn 2:14-16). He was acting in the prophetic tradition of active demonstration of the message, which was that the temple system had become corrupt. We could say, however, that he was modelling civil disobedience.

Many see Paul as endorsing state violence in *Romans 13*, especially v4. But context is relevant, as always, and Romans 12 needs to be seen as the background. There Paul urges us not to be conformed to the world's pattern of thinking but to respond to God's enemy-love towards us by becoming a 'living sacrifice' ourselves, as Jesus had done. He then makes several statements that echo the Sermon on the Mount, like 'Bless those who persecute you... Do not repay anyone evil for evil... Do not take revenge... If your enemy is hungry, feed him' (Rom 12:14-21). In saying 'Do not take revenge...' Paul goes on to quote Deut 32:35, 41-42, which is a celebration of violent payback, but Paul turns it right round to argue for the very opposite. So it is unlikely that, in moving into chapter 13, Paul would then argue for violence.

Some hold that, while *personal* retaliation is forbidden, *state* violence is sanctioned. But it is always dangerous to privatise religion because it gives rulers a kind of diplomatic immunity to do as they wish.

In Romans 13 Paul is not setting out a general theory of government. He is addressing the persecuted church in Rome regarding a specific situation and showing how the enemy-love he has just advocated should best be worked out in that situation—which was a brewing tax-reform rebellion in Rome under Nero. Nero was becoming ever more oppressive, and if the Christians were to join in that protest, Paul believed, they would bring down the authorities' wrath on their heads for rebellion. So they should act sensibly, remembering that God, not Rome, is ultimately sovereign—Rome's authority is by his permission only. But in conceding that point (cf. Jesus and Pilate in Jn 19:10-11), Paul is not saying that Rome's authority was being exercised in a just and valid way.

A modern democracy is very different from the autocratic rule of Rome. We have the ability to shape our government and its policies, and as Christians we should take seriously our role in shaping how we as a society deal with crime and international conflict. We can bring things more into line with the ways of Jesus. Paul's statement in Rom 13 are no more an endorsement of state violence today than his advice to slaves endorses the practice of slavery today.

Chapter 8: A Practical Guide to Enemy-Love

Our society glorifies violence. It sees it as the only viable means of resolving conflict and keeping us safe. So we need to demonstrate that there are non-violent means of achieving these ends which are far more effective. How can we apply Christ's teaching on enemy-love to today's real-world problems?

Hypothetical situations usually dominate discussions on this topic, like 'If your wife was about to be raped and you had a gun in your hand, would you shoot her attacker?' There is a conflict between the natural desire to protect and defend and the desire to renounce violence as ultimately non-productive. By doggedly advocating non-violence in such a scenario are we not, in fact, adopting the way of *unquestioning obedience* that we have earlier decided is not right? To protect our loved ones is a good and valid concern, so the matter deserves some careful consideration, some *faithful questioning*.

Jesus often used hyperbole to shock us into thinking more deeply, e.g. 'cut off your sinning hand'. His call to enemy-love was to prompt not unthinking action but deeper and more serious thought about the practicalities of particular instances. Sometimes adopting a dogged, unquestioning *self-sacrificial* attitude in fact ends up strengthening our focus on 'self', whereas in these circumstances a *social* focus is usually more helpful.

Our emotions are the main barrier to the practice of enemy-love. Modern neuroscience helps us understand how. When we come under pressure our brains switch to self-focus mode as the amygdala is activated. This shuts down the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain concerned with social focus, reflection, impulse-control and moral judgment. Love of enemies involves learning to recognise and deliberately counter this reaction in a 'renewing of the mind'. The inbuilt neuroplasticity of the brain makes this a practical possibility. Sometimes, when the amygdala kicks in, the wisest step is to remove ourselves (if possible) from the situation to allow the prefrontal cortex to come back on line, enabling us to see things again from a more balanced, social perspective.

How we deal with criminals is a key issue relevant to all this. Our retributive punishment system reflects the fears triggered by our reaction to crime. Love of enemies challenges this approach. Justice should instead be about mending and making things right again for all concerned, which was always Jesus' concern. Our current prison system tends to harden criminals rather than heal them. Restorative models (like the RSVP programme in the USA) have shown good results, reducing recidivism by a huge amount.

It is common to distinguish governments from individuals. Individuals, we are taught, should turn the other cheek, but we can't expect governments to do the same because they are obliged to protect their citizens. But harm suffered should never be ignored, either by institutions or individuals. At both levels the way of Jesus must be applied in a way that reduces violence rather than legitimising it. The goal of enemy-love is not to subject oneself to violence but to act to *break the cycle of violence*.

Love of enemies and turning the other cheek are not the same thing. Love of enemies is a broad principle with many context-specific applications at both personal and societal levels. Turning the other cheek is one particular application of that principle that in one context may be very effective but in another irresponsible and even wrong. Turning the other cheek, applied on a corporate scale, is demonstrated in non-violent resistance, of the kind used by Martin Luther King. It has been very effective in toppling oppressive regimes around the world. This approach is fine in the context of an oppressed people struggling for justice against those in power. But it isn't appropriate in situations where the power-dynamics are different, e.g. a prison guard placing himself defenceless between two fighting inmates. Here, the guard is the one with the power, and the outcome would be helpful to no-one. In a similar way, a *nation* cannot turn the other cheek appropriately. So a careful look at the power-dynamics of a situation is crucial to settling on the right strategy for implementing the broad principle of enemy-love. It might even on occasions be appropriate for a nation to go to war.

Chapter 9: Undoing Judgment

For many people the main problem is that of God's final judgment. We are called to forgive, they note, while God judges and condemns people to hell. Is that fair? Some reply that God, being God, has the right to do what he wills. But this doesn't stand up, because both Jesus (Mat 5:43-48) and Paul (Rom 5:8, 10) present God as our model for enemy-love. God alone has the *right* to judge, but in Christ he gives up that right and chose to redeem sinful humanity through an act of self-sacrifice.

Mat 18:21-35 is the parable of the unmerciful servant. A king forgives his servant a massive debt but then finds out that the servant has acted harshly towards someone who owed him a small amount. So the king is angry and puts the servant in prison till he pays back all he owes. Jesus concludes: 'This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'

The parable was Jesus' response to Peter's question about how many times one should forgive. Jesus is referring to an OT declaration of escalating violence (Gen 4:24) and playfully turns the familiar phrase into an escalation of forgiveness. Like many parables, this is an intentionally exaggerated scenario, in this case to drive home the point about unlimited forgiveness. We are not meant to give equal weight to every detail. It clearly can't be right to read it as saying that, while we must forgive 77 or 490 times—meaning without measure—God forgives only once and after that turns nasty. The point is that since God has forgiven us such a great debt, we ought to be ready to forgive lesser debts.

That we should not press God's likeness to an autocratic king is made clear by Jesus a couple of chapters later (Mat 20:25-28). So Jesus is gradually deconstructing even the worldview assumptions of the setting in which his parables were first told.

Since 'hell' and 'torture' are part of many of his parables, we should ask whether they, too, are part of the 'scenery', the local colour, rather than integral to the point. Typical is the parable of the sheep and goats in Mat 25:31-46 (see especially v41). The 'familiar setting' in this one is Jewish apocalyptic, which is how people in his day conceived of the ultimate day of reckoning. Perhaps Jesus is no more saying that 'hell is like this' than he is saying that God is like an unbalanced dictator. We need to bring to these issues both a hermeneutic of *trust* that allows us to identify the original intent of promoting compassion within its cultural context, and a hermeneutic of *suspicion* that allows us to follow the trajectory beyond the cultural context of violent retribution to embrace a fuller image of God's true nature revealed in Christ: that of enemy-love.

It is Matthew's Gospel, far more than the others, that includes many violent descriptions of God's judgment. For example, compare Matthew's version of the story of the centurion's faith with that of Luke. Matthew adds that the subjects of the kingdom will be cast out into the darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth' (Mat 8 cf Luke 7). We need to wonder, then, whether these violent bits are Matthew's own embellishments. Was Matthew maybe still captive to violent aspects of a worldview that Jesus was trying to move us away from?

Some, like Miroslav Volf, have suggested that when believers are suffering persecution and seeking to react non-violently, they are fortified in their ability to do so by reminding themselves that God will avenge them in the end, and that this might be the rationale behind Matthew's approach. But this suggests that non-retaliation is a form of *inaction*, whereas the better line is to look for *active* ways to promote restoration and healing: restorative justice. If this can work, as it has been shown to do, at a human level, can we not look to God to do the same? Would not his worthiness be better demonstrated in overcoming evil with good rather than in enacting future vengeance?

Just as we find in the NT a less-than-ultimate view of slavery, we also find in the NT a less-than-ultimate view of God himself. He is ultimately a God of Christlike enemy-love, not a God of violent retribution. Matthew (and Volf) are moving in the right direction, but there is further to go. They are, nevertheless, further forward than most modern nations in their attitude to criminals and terrorists; we have not yet learnt as societies to love our enemies.

Chapter 10: Rethinking Biblical Authority

The trajectory approach outlined above raises questions about the Bible's inspiration and authority. Many today affirm that the Bible cannot be *infallible* (i.e. a reliable guide) if it is not *inerrant* (without error). Others recognise many scientific and scribal errors in it but still regard it as infallible. Either way, we still have a problem in that the scholars who translate it and we who read it are ourselves far from perfect. Even if the Bible is infallible, we are not.

The fact is that there are almost as many allegedly 'right' interpretations of it as there are Christians. The Bible is subject to pervasive interpretive pluralism (to use Christian Smith's phrase), as the *Four Views On...* series of books shows. In practice, then, the claim that Scripture is our supreme and final authority means very little. The problem is compounded by the fact that, in practice, the kind of unquestioning obedience that people have given to (their interpretation of) the Bible has led to all kinds of horrific outcomes, like slavery, child abuse and genocide.

The trajectory approach avoids these problems. It recognises that Scripture is not our master; Jesus is. It adopts his method of 'looking at the fruits' of a particular teaching or interpretation, evaluating its observable effects in life as to whether they result in flourishing or in harm, in peace or in devastation. In other words, *experience* is crucial. Scripture is not an end in itself but is inspired in the sense that it is able to lead us to experience God's love in Christ.

We saw in Chapter 2 how Jesus challenged the Pharisees' understanding of Scripture because it led to people being hurt. This is a vital principle for us to observe, too. Their blasphemy against the Spirit, in context, was the act of denying experience (the evident healing of the deaf and dumb man by the Spirit) because of a rigid adherence to their understanding of Scripture and their tradition. We need not take Jesus too literally when he said this was unforgivable; he is simply saying it is a serious sticking-point: we should not get so stuck on orthodoxy that we miss out on love and what God is doing among us.

The way Jesus read Scripture was shaped by his own direct experience of God working in his life. His experience of the Spirit shaped his understanding of Scripture, not the other way round. It was the same with Paul. He had held for years to a clear view of the OT Scriptures which was thrown out of the window by his experience of the risen Christ. The disciples of Jesus took a similar route. They proclaimed 'what we have seen and heard' (1 Jn 1:1-4). They interpreted the Bible in a new and subversive way in the light of their experience. Peter, for example, on scriptural grounds would never have gone near Cornelius, a Gentile, had not the Spirit shown him otherwise (Acts 10:28). His move came about as a result of neither normal exegesis of OT passages nor his Jewish tradition.

We must stand in the same place, and that will probably mean breaking with some dearly-held notions. Wesleyans evaluate doctrinal claims by the famous 'quadrilateral' of Scripture, reason, tradition and experience. Scripture is the primary means, with experience bringing up the rear. Other Protestant groups tend to drop experience altogether and stick with the other three. By contrast, for Jesus and the apostles experience came first and trumped all the others.

But experience does not just mean private inner experience or emotions. For Jesus and the apostles the focus was on what they experienced in their lives and relationships *together*. We must focus on our shared human experience and observation of how life works and the fruit that certain actions and attitudes produce. So our measure of a 'right' interpretation will be our evaluation of its results when it is *applied* in real life. Does it produce hurt or love? And we will mostly reach such conclusions together rather than just as individuals. This is the 'tradition' element of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. We need to fellowship with people who are on the same pilgrimage as we are, together seeking the right way forward.

The doctrines of inerrancy and infallibility have proved untenable and have led many to override thought and conscience and to justify profound harm and violence. So like family, which can lead to immense good or (when abused) serious harm, Scripture is fundamentally good but when wrongly used can do great damage. Its primary purpose is to lead us to the one who is Life! And as we grow in Christ's love we come increasingly to share his concern for those on the margins. This is a far cry from today's book-focused neo-Reformed Phariseeism.

The approach advocated here is one of *faithful questioning in the name of compassion*. That is the way Jesus read and interpreted Scripture. 'In the end, the real problem of violence in the Bible is not so much the particular passages that seem to endorse it, but more significantly a particular way of reading Scripture that shuts down all questioning and conscience.'

[END. June 2015]