

What about war in the Old Testament? A survey.

Introduction

The Christian Life booklet says that Jesus' teaching on loving our enemies is well known, but Christians disagree on how far to apply it. It lists variations: love for family and neighbours, people in general, personal enemies, and for political enemies (p. 50).

The booklet also says that Christians disagree on how far to become involved as citizens in a country at war with another nation—to refuse to pay war tax, pay war tax, non-combatant service, combatant service (p. 50).

There is a need to recognize people are at different points on their journey toward peace. Discussion is appropriate.

Many Routes to Pacifism and Varieties of It

John Howard Yoder, considered the most influential Anabaptist theologian of modern times, wrote of 25 varieties of religious pacifism in his book *Nevertheless* (Herald Press, 1971, first ed.).

Yoder held to *The Pacifism of the Messianic Community* (“the Christological non-resistance of the Radical Reformation” p. 132). Jesus is Christ, Lord, and resurrected. Because of what he has told us, Christians are to follow as a community that opposes war. This opposition is a “foretaste of God’s kingdom,” even if society sees it as a “scandalous enemy-loving way of life” and even if “this position does not promise to work” as a calculating strategy (pp. 124–127).

Yoder, however, recognized that there is more than one route to pacifism. He hoped that “Mennonites would recognize with more precision and responsibility the various ways men are led...to recognize the wrongness of war and to devote themselves to the service of their fellowmen, even though in other ways or under other labels and with other understandings, than those a historic peace church has found most adequate” (p. 132).

A Key Question

What about wars in the Old Testament? How do Christians view stories of God ordering war in the Old Testament with Jesus' admonition to “resist not evil” (Matt. 5:39) in the New? Again, there are a variety of views. This could be freeing. To disagree with a particular Anabaptist does not mean a disagreement with Anabaptism itself.

Harold S. Bender said in comparing two views, “It is apparent that differences concerning the question of Old Testament wars are not a matter of paramount importance, since both views agree on the New Testament teaching concerning the Christian’s participation in war” (Hershberger, p. viii.).

An Inadequate Survey of Some Opinions of Anabaptists

Anabaptist Christians don’t agree on whether God actually told Israel to go fight or, if He did, why he did. Anabaptist Christians do agree that the Old Testament was a preparation for fuller revelation in Christ.

Guy Hershberger, *War, Peace, and Nonresistance* (Herald Press, 1953, first ed., p. x.) says, “...God has provided one fundamental moral law which has been and is valid for all time...the lower standards of the Mosaic civil code represent a temporary concession on the part of God to the lowered moral state and spiritual immaturity of that time; a concession made necessary by the sin of man, and not by the will of God” (p. x).

He held that God’s plan was originally to drive out the Canaanites without armed force and violence. “Divine action will replace human action; miracle will replace war” (p. 31, no. 48). When Israel proved itself spiritually disobedient, however, “The various Old Testament commands of God requiring killing... were permissive commands to a sinful, lean-souled people who had chosen to live on the lower, ‘sub-Christian’ level” (pp. 33–34). It was an example of God’s “permissive will.”

Harold S. Bender responded (in the foreword to Hershberger’s book) by saying, rather “...God permitted under the old covenant what He forbade under the new...Some within the church maintain that under the old covenant the waging of war was in full accord with the will of God, but that the new covenant ordains the way of nonresistance and love which is taught by Christ and the apostles” (p. viii).

John H. Yoder said that in reviewing the record of the Canaanite battles, “we are struck by the parts of the story that do not fit our modern pattern; but the Israelite reading the story was more likely struck by the other cases, where Israel was saved by the mighty deeds of God on her behalf” (*The Politics of Jesus*, Eerdmans, 1972, p. 79). The holy war “is more a miracle than a calculating instrument of politics...The combatants were a volunteer militia gathered by a trumpet blast from their daily occupations, not professionals paid and drilled for military effectiveness” (p. 84, n.7). The Old Testament history is a complicated preparation for a fuller revelation in Christ, where warfare is forbidden.

Ronald J. Sider and Richard K. Taylor say, “Why God would repeatedly order the annihilation of men, women, and children we do not understand. Certainly it helps to remember that the Old Testament gives reasons. The abominable sexual practices and hideous human sacrifices of the Canaanites merited punishment (Num. 33:50–56; Deut. 18:9–14). And God did not want their idolatrous practices to seduce Israel into idolatry (Deut. 20:17–18).

“Yet we still struggle. Were these sinful practices sufficient reason to destroy entire cities? Only God has the right to make such decisions. We can only confess in faith that he is the sovereign Creator and Lord of life. He promises us that he is both just and merciful. And he know that his justice and love met at the cross.

“We also know that in the final revelation given by his incarnate Son, God summons us to love our enemies. And he explicitly commands us to leave vengeance to him (Rom. 12:19). We dare not confuse these two issues. To insist that the Sovereign of the universe has the right to execute vengeance and retribution on sinners is one thing. To claim that we should imitate that aspect of God is quite another” (*Nuclear Holocaust and Christian Hope*, IVP, 1982, p. 143).

Dr. Archie Penner says the Old Testament command of God for Israelites to wage war is an example of the “concessive imperative” (p. 75 “his concessive will with imperatives” *The Divine Covenants, Conflict or Harmony*, Servant, 2001).

God’s nature and morals are unchangeable and perfect, and God cannot command warfare. Hebrew thought does not adequately distinguish between primary and secondary causes (between nature and God, or between God and the devil). “...the God who is sovereign and therefore in control...deals with sin by concession, i.e., making room for self-determination on the part of morally responsible man.” Concession is not permission, but is “without consent or authorization. It means to allow while even objecting to that which is allowed” (p. 104).

“...events and actions can be and are ascribed to God, as commanded by Him, even when they are not His actions or will. Such being the case, it may not be too difficult to recognize that even God’s commands, as articulated in human language, for example the instructions and commands to exterminate the Amalekites...may be seen as the result of concessive imperatives” (p. 183).

In short, God allowed man freedom to act in a way He didn’t command, just as a parent might say to a child bent on going the wrong way, “Well, go ahead then...,” and a child could then respond, “Well, you told me to.” Yet it was not

what the parent wanted or intended the child to do. (This summary is not original with me, though I've added to it.)

Pierre Gilbert, professor at Canadian Mennonite University and MB minister, says, God “intervened to liberate his people from an oppressive and ruthless ruler... [and] destroys Pharaoh and his army only after repeated warnings by Moses.” While in Genesis 15:14–15, Israel is not permitted to enter the land because the Amorites are not sinful enough to be removed, but in Lev. 18:24–25 “the text justifies the removal of the inhabitants of the land by pointing to the immorality of their culture.”

“When God decided to work through an ethnic group and committed himself to establishing his Kingdom through a political and national entity, he also committed himself to the necessity of war both to conquer a territory and to retain it thereafter” (p. 15).

“God’s pledge to work in partnership with humanity also commits him to working with human beings where they are, with their strengths and weaknesses. Humanity by nature is locked into history. God cannot simply transcend human culture and bring man up into some idealistic plane of existence.” Like a father playing with young children, “he must take into account their limitations and adapt himself to their reality.

“God’s involvement in war in the Old Testament reveals exactly the same thing. It does not suggest that God is intrinsically violent. On the contrary, his willingness to intervene and participate in human history, a history profoundly and irrevocably tainted by sin, broadcasts his infinite love for humanity” (p. 17). (“Is God a God of War? Understanding war in the Old Testament” *The Christian Leader* Jan. 2003, pp. 13–17). This is the U.S. Mennonite Brethren publication.

Jon Bonk, EMC minister and former Providence College and Seminary missions professor, says there are three ways to relate the differing ethics in the two Testaments: 1) “Yahweh of the Old Testament and God the Father revealed in the New Testament are two different gods.” This is rejected. 2) “...the wars of the Old Testament as holy wars based on God’s covenant with a chosen people. This covenant is superseded when the new covenant begins.” 3) To see there is progressive revelation in the Bible. “We expect a more complete revelation of God in the New Testament...It is not difficult for most Christians to understand that the Old Testament prohibition of the eating of pork does not apply under the new covenant. Nor should we bridle at the discovery that war is no longer a part of God’s missionary strategy for his people” (*The World at War, The Church at Peace*, Kindred Press, 1988 pp. 47–52).

Myron Augsburger said, “Some readers may ask, Does Augsburger not understand that God used war in the Old Testament and blessed it? The answer is simply yes, this is well understood, but interpreted in relation to the ‘unfolding revelation’ in which God moved men to higher levels of understanding his will...the Bible...is an unfolding revelation of God’s will in Jesus Christ...This is our mission: discipling people to become members of the kingdom of Christ, not helping to justify participation in war” (*War: Four Christian Views*, R.G. Clouse., ed., IVP, 1981, pp. 94–95).

J. C. Wenger wrote in a general statement on the relationship of the two Testaments, “Christians shall follow the higher ethical standards of the New Testament rather than revert back to the sub-Christian standards given by God through Moses. Jesus, however, did not regard His teaching as standing in opposition to that of the Old Testament but as fulfilling it. That is, Jesus sloughed off those portions of the Old Testament law which were not the final revelation of the will of God and He built upon and even extended those portions of the Old Testament moral law which were a positive and clear statement of God’s law...Nor only is all killing wrong, but even anger expressed by one’s language is unbecoming for the members of Christ’s kingdom” (*Introduction to Theology*, Herald Press, 1959, p. 29).

Conclusion

The survey reveals various approaches held by Anabaptists and is evidence of the benefits of discussion. Because there are such benefits, the material is forwarded.

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Parent-child dedications: what's really happening?

by Terry M. Smith

We say in evangelical Anabaptist circles that there is no clear New Testament example of child baptism. Neither, it can be added, is there any example of parent-child dedication.

Perhaps we would benefit from being more aware of Christ's grace toward children, while either clarifying the practice of parent-child dedication or removing it from within our congregations.

A Slender Basis

Hannah's dedication of Samuel (1 Samuel 1:25-28) is used within our EMC *Minister's Manual* to illustrate the intentions behind parent-child dedication; but the passage is a weak basis for developing a formal practice. When Samuel was dedicated, he was not blessed by a religious leader and returned to his parents. Hannah dropped off Samuel at the Temple to be raised by the priest Eli—a highly unusual act.

Likewise, when Jesus blessed children who were presented spontaneously (Mark 10:13-16), parents made no commitment and the act did not become a formal practice of the New Testament-era Church. While Jesus' action has also been used for centuries to defend infant baptism, it is about blessing those already in the Kingdom, not dedication or baptism.

Who is Being Dedicated?

Who, precisely, is being dedicated: child, parents, or both? After reading of EMC churches holding a "child" dedication, a minister contacted me a few years ago to say that I should correct such descriptions. They were "parent" dedications, in his view.

As an editor I declined, holding that the descriptions needed to match what the individual churches saw as happening. Still, we can legitimately ask what should happen.

Responding to What Felt Need?

In a parent-child dedication ceremony, parents make a wonderful commitment to raise their child in the Lord, they dedicate their child, and the church joins in. Far be it from me to squelch such commitments!

But what else happens? How much does this practice, though centuries-old in Baptist and Anabaptist circles, respond to the insecurity of people (with a past, however removed, in infant baptism) who fear that children without a ceremony are lost?

If Christian parents go through a ceremony, or refuse, does this change the spiritual status of a child? Do parents want to clarify the child's status in the church, to *ensure* or to be *reassured* that the child is safe in Christ?

If going through a dedication ceremony is to make the child safe, the practice is misplaced (the *Minister's Manual* stresses this). If it is to reassure parents that the child is safe, the ceremony is unnecessary (though perhaps helpful).

What is the Child's Status?

The Anabaptist church's historic position is that infants and children do not need protection by ceremony; they are already protected spiritually, "holy" (1 Corinthians 7:14). A child is covered by Christ's atoning work, and only if this act is rejected later does the individual become spiritually at risk (Romans 5:12–21).

Claus Felbinger, a Hutterian missionary martyred by beheading, said in 1560, "We can see in little children that they have no awareness of sin and have never committed any. They have never provoked God's wrath. And still they have to die to their own nature in their own way, just as much as we grown-ups; but sin does not harm their souls" (*Confession of Faith*, Plough Publishing House, 1978, 126–127).

J. C. Wenger, a Mennonite leader and educator, said in 1955, "From their earliest years we should teach our children that they are objects of the love and mercy of God, not that they are lost sinners standing under His wrath. Small children should and will think of Jesus as their loving Shepherd, and of God as their heavenly Father, if they are properly taught" (in Gideon G. Yoder, *The Nurture and Evangelism of Children*, Herald Press, 1959, 134–135).

The Church of Today or Future?

Are children the Church of the future or of today? The answer is *both*. Marlin Jeschke, a Mennonite minister, says children under the ministry of the Church, whether of Christian parents or not, are children of the Church (*Believers Baptism for Children of the Church*, Herald Press, 1983, 107).

While not yet baptized members, they are not outside of the Church. It is a designation worth pondering: children are part of the Church until they consciously choose not to be.

In dialogue with Reformed leader Gellius Faber, Menno Simons was prepared in 1554 to say that children should be considered part of the Church: “That the children should be considered in the church on account of the promise [of Christ’s grace], to this we consent. But we deny that they should be included in the ordinances of the church, for this is out of keeping with all of Scripture and reason...” (*Complete Writings*, Herald Press, 708).

Maurice Martin

Maurice Martin, a Mennonite pastor and educator, says, “Practically speaking, the practices of circumcision, infant baptism, and child dedication seem similar. Theologically speaking, there are significant differences. The first two suggest in effect the child becomes part of the covenant community through the covenant commitments of the parents, ‘by proxy,’ so to speak.

“In the believers’ church tradition, we believe that the event is really a parental dedication or commitment, and that that the child does not at that point become part of the covenant agreement. However, the child is as much part of the covenant community from birth as a part of the family, not by choice, but by circumstances.

“What the child makes of those circumstances will depend finally on him or her, but in the meantime the choices will be shaped and bent in that direction by the nurture of the parents and the church, the family of God” (*Identity and Faith: Youth in a Believers’ Church*, Herald Press, 1981, 83–84).

What, finally, provides the best spiritual protection for a child? It is the parents’ genuine daily following after Christ within a church that is conscious of the spiritual needs of the children in its midst.

There is value in parents going forward to commit themselves, together with the help of the church they are part of, to raise their child in the Lord. Yet such a commitment and reliance on the church can happen without the ceremony.

The Highlighting of Grace

In stressing that ceremonies such as baptism and the Lord’s Supper do not convey grace (at least not automatically), perhaps we Anabaptists under-emphasize how the Church is surrounded by grace.

Our worship services are permeated by God’s grace. In our gathering together, grace is conveyed by the Holy Spirit, who indwells believers individually and collectively; and the Spirit touches those not yet believers.

Paradoxically, then, there could be value in dropping the practice of parent-child dedication, while increasing our awareness of grace that exists in our life together as the Church. However, if we continue with a dedication service, leaders need to clarify what it means, who it is for, and what it can and cannot do.

Finally, learning from Hannah, there is nothing to stop parents from inwardly dedicating a child to the Lord (without leaving the child permanently at a local temple!)—and, as Jesus shows us, a church leader should only respond eagerly and positively to a spontaneous request that a child be blessed.

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Some useful writings on Arminian theology

“Mennonites have been historically Arminian in their theology,” said Dr. Harold Bender, “whether they distinctly espoused the Arminian viewpoint or not” (*GAMEO*).

Balthasar Hubmaier (d. 1528) is described as an “Arminian before Arminius” by Roger Olson, who says Anabaptists nearly a century earlier responded to some of the concerns Arminius addressed (*The Story of Christian Theology*, IVP, 1999).

Dr. Karl Koop says of 17th century Dutch Anabaptist confessions of faith, “An emphasis on prevenient grace and the ability of humans to choose between good and evil is also part of their conviction, although Mennonites avoid the Calvinist doctrine of limited atonement and emphasize Christ’s universal atonement” (*Anabaptist-Mennonite Confessions of Faith: The Development of a Tradition* (Pandora, 2004).

Dr. Harvey Plett notes in *Seeking To Be Faithful* (EMC, 1996), the EMC’s 1954 *Historic Articles of Faith* has a section *Of the Free Will of Man*, which clearly responds to certain views considered today as Calvinist.

Original Writing

Arminius, James. *Arminius Speaks: Essential Writings on Predestination, Free Will, and the Nature of God*. ed. John D. Wagner. Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011. 381 pp. \$54.99. ISBN 9781610970303.

In looking at a theology that bears his name, it is fair to consider what the Dutch Reformed theologian Jacob Harmenszoon (James Arminius, 1560–1609) actually thought. Key writings of his are provided within one volume. Among these are “A Declaration of the Sentiments of James Arminius,” Parts I and II. The editing has shortcomings: the writings are poorly introduced and not set well into their historical contexts. Inadequate mention is made of the editing principles and none is made of original translators from Latin into English.

Current Titles

Allan, David L. and Steve W. Lemke, eds., *Whosoever Will: A Biblical-Theological Critique of Five-Point Calvinism*. Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2010. 298 pp. \$28.99. ISBN 9780805464160.

Southern Baptist Convention leaders largely respond to TULIP Calvinism from varying approaches: biblical exegesis, history, pastoral implications, and more.

Olson, Roger E. *Against Calvinism*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011. 192 pp. \$18.99. ISBN 9780310324676.

The title is quite unfortunate! This is literally a case of where a book should not be judged by its cover. Olson is not against all parts of Calvinism or Calvinists. He seeks to protect God’s reputation against what he considers to be radical expressions of Reformed theology. He is mostly concerned about the ULI of the TULIP. For the busy pastor, this book is quite accessible, but its overview of Arminian theology is less useful than Olson’s *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities*.

Olson, Roger E. *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006. 246 pp. \$30.99. ISBN 9780830828418.

A scholarly, highly readable exploration of Arminianism that looks at James Arminius's own writings and then looks at Arminianism of the "heart" (e.g., John Wesley) and of the "head" (to which he objects). If a pastor has to choose between *Against Calvinism* and this one, *Myths and Realities* provides a wider range of topics. If the reader focuses on each chapter's introduction, Arminius's writing, and conclusion, a thoughtful overview appears—with more detail waiting for when time allows.

Olson, Roger E. *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1999. 613 pp. \$40.00. ISBN 9780830815050.

Of key interest are chapter 26 *Anabaptists Go Back to the Roots of Christianity* (414–428) and chapter 28 *Arminians Attempt to Reform Reformed Theology* (454–472). Unless one seeks to have this readable overview of Christian theology for other reasons, it can be borrowed from a library.

Walls, Jerry L. and Joseph R. Dongell. *Why I Am Not a Calvinist*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004. 221 pp. \$17.99. ISBN 0830832491.

A somewhat more philosophical study in favour of Arminianism, looking at some weaknesses of Calvinism and their implications for the Christian life.

Older, Useful Titles Still In Print

Pinnock, Clark H., ed. *Grace Unlimited*. 1975; rep. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999. 264 pp. \$27.00. ISBN 9781579102371.

The writers of this volume recognize their indebtedness to Calvinist scholarship, while challenging the exegesis and logic behind five-point Calvinism.

Shank, Robert. *Life in the Son: A Study of the Doctrine of Perseverance*. Minneapolis, MI: Bethany House Publishers, 1960/1989. 232 pp. \$20.00. ISBN 9781556610929.

Shank looks at whether believers can lose their salvation and presents the case for conditional security.

Shank, Robert. *Elect in the Son: A Study of the Doctrine of Election*. Minneapolis, MI: Bethany House Publishers, 1970/1989. 368 pp. \$28.00. ISBN 9781556610912.

Shank present a case against unconditional particular election (double predestination) and limited atonement (Christ died only for believers).

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MennoMedia releases new Bible study series

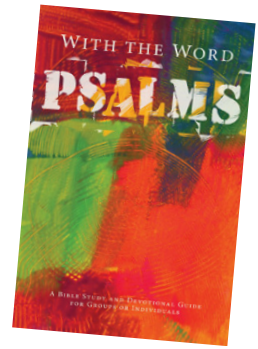
'With the Word' makes fresh connections between Bible and daily living

by Cynthia Linscheid

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