

## On “Knowing the Way of Peace”

In recent weeks I have often wondered what in the world is going on and how in the world we should respond. Of course, the war in Iraq continues, trudging along uncertainly toward hoped-for stability. But now a new war—or an old one resuscitated—between Israel and Lebanon, or Hezbollah, which has found a base of operations within Lebanon. Each day brings news of attack and counter attack, and horrific reports that many, sometimes most, of the casualties have been innocents—not terrorists, not even soldiers, but civilians, even children. I write this in the wake of Israel’s mistaken bombing at Qana where mostly children were killed. Qana is the traditional site of Jesus’ first miracle, the turning of water into wine. Someone has observed this week that Qana has now become the place where water is turned to blood. And, in the days that have followed, tensions have tightened as each party pays back in kind.

What sort of response would most reflect the Spirit of Jesus and the kingdom he has brought to our world? Mega-church pastor and televangelist John Hagee responds in this way, as Andrew Higgins reports it in the Wall Street Journal (July 28, 2006):

*Standing on a stage bedecked with a huge Israeli flag, Mr. Hagee drew rapturous applause and shouts of "amen" as he hailed Israel for doing God's work in a "war of good versus evil." Calls for Israel to show restraint violate "God's foreign-policy statement" toward Jews, he said, citing a verse from the Old Testament that promises to "bless those who bless you" and curse "the one who curses you." ... "Leave Israel alone. Let them do the job," Mr. Hagee told his supporters.*

Surely, however, in such statements Pastor Hagee reflects the spirit of the anti-Christ! No where in the Scriptures does God endorse whatever Israel might do. In fact, God holds his people accountable for their faithfulness to his direction, or lack thereof. In fact, “judgment begins at the household of God (see 1 Peter 4:17)! In fact, one could argue that God’s people must hold to a higher standard than other nations that claim no special knowledge of or relations with God.

Pastor Hagee’s response is even more problematic. It assumes that modern Israel is the same as God’s covenant people “Israel,” of whom we read in the Scriptures. The Apostle Paul argued just the opposite in relation to the Israel of his day. Paul writes, “Not all Israel is Israel” (Rom. 9:6), and goes on to describe the Israel that will be saved and bless the world in a way very different from Pastor Hagee. If in *Paul’s* day not all “Israel” is “Israel,” how much more in *our* day?

Perhaps most disturbing of all, however, is the tone of Pastor Hagee's rhetoric. Indeed, his rhetoric and theological justifications sound no different than those of many radical Islamic fundamentalists who advocate violent (we would insist, *terrorist*) strategies. Change some of the names and places, but the message is much the same. To say, "stay out of Israel's way, let them do God's work," when an Israeli attack has killed more innocents than combatants, should chill our blood. In the strongest possible terms, we should reject and denounce this theologically specious and un-Christ-like rhetoric. Clearly, neither the rhetoric nor those who use it commend "the way of peace."

[In leveling this critique I am not offering support for any of those whom Israel now identifies as an enemy. In other words, to call one party to account for atrocity is not to justify the atrocities of another! I am rather concerned about the message—prophetic and otherwise—that the world, including all combatants, hear from people passionate about following Jesus and eager, even if uncertain how, to pursue and practice the ways of peace.]

A few days ago I was reading from Paul's letter to the church at Rome and came to a passage that seemed to speak to our current situation. As you know, Paul carefully establishes the universality of human sin and its tragic consequences. He concludes, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (3:23). In support of this conclusion he cites several lines from the Psalter, Proverbs, and Isaiah culminating in, "The way of peace they did not know. There is no fear of God before their eyes," (Rom. 3:17-18).

I was struck by how apt these words seem in the summer of 2006. Each day brings news of people who "did not know the way of peace." Instead of "peace," they choose language that deceives, words that curse, and pronouncements that leave a bitter aftertaste. Indeed, their feet are swift to shed blood, and calamity and misery litter the path they walk. I'm quite sure Paul would insist also of these, "there is no fear of God before their eyes," and "none of them are righteous, none have understanding, and not even *one* seeks God," (see Rom. 3:10-16).

Of course, everyone in Paul's day would claim religious support for the policies they championed. All would claim to be mindful of the gods, or the one true God, and diligent to seek divine favor for their adventures. Similarly today, those who respond with violence do so claiming "divine right," or the righteousness of their cause. Most often they pursue their alleged God-approved violence swiftly and relentlessly. And even when graphic evidence shows how much harm they have brought to the

innocent, still they refuse to practice kindness and mercy toward them, and deflect responsibility upon others.

Regardless of what they claim, however, what they *do* matches Paul's description of people who do not seek God, do not recognize ways of peace, and do not fear or reverence God. And, those who fail to protest participate in their injustice.

I note that Paul (and Isaiah whom he cites) does not say, "They are quick to shed *innocent* blood." No, for those who do not reverence and seek God life becomes negotiable and dispensable, when the cause justifies it and the ends sanctify the means. So, a little "collateral damage" becomes tolerable. And, of course, "little" will always be understood relatively.

I note also that Paul is concluding a section of his letter designed to show how all people and people groups need the gospel of God's saving grace in Jesus our Lord. The fact that people could so abandon the way of peace signals the depth of their (our) depravity.

We must note and celebrate that in Jesus Christ a lost humanity finds peace with God and grace to love one another. That is, we find grace in Jesus to seek after God, to practice kindness and mercy, to abandon the shedding of blood whenever possible, and honor God's universal saving plan in Christ. We honor that plan by speaking the truth in love: policies that destroy mostly innocent civilians stand under the judgment of God, as do all who support them and carry them out, and in the name of Christ they must stop. We honor God's saving purposes in the world by practicing mercy and kindness in the fear of God, most of all by giving priority to the interests of the suffering over the interests of the political, military and economic stake-holders. Those of us who name Christ as Lord must go a second mile in praying for all concerned, especially for those who seem our enemies; in advocating for the many brothers and sisters in Christ who are among the innocents suffering in the region; and in maintaining hope that God will surely and powerfully manifest his kingdom even in the chaos of southern Lebanon and northern Israel.