

Gospel of the Absurd Excerpt from Chapter 1

I suggest that the failure of Christian ethics is related to Christianity's continuing quest for power as a political force, because it is perceived to be a coercive force in people's lives. Yoder wrote that the good news cannot be good unless it is perceived as such.¹ The failure of Christian ethics is in fact the failure of the church to be Christ-like. The downfall of Christendom is its insistence upon maintaining political relevance at the expense of embodying ethics in a manner that makes claims about Jesus and the Bible credible to others. Human history shows that political power and the ethics of power are, if anything, in-credible. Such is the case for the contemporary church and its insistence upon making universal claims of transcendent truth, biblical inerrancy, and divine right to rule (often, the right to rule and control social and economic expression politics). What can be done?

The answer to the problem of discredited Christian ethics is to deconstruct the church, yet not to some primeval state that wishes to return to a sort of first-century purity. Many might agree that postmodern thinkers like Jacques Derrida goes too far in his assertions that all texts are inherently controlling and oppressive. Derrida, is a primary proponent of a literary process that strips away layers of what are referred to as historically privileged meanings that have been applied to authoritative texts. This process assumes that popular interpretation and privileged meanings occur with the intention of underwriting a maintenance of a privileged social, economic, and political class. Racism, sexism, and ethnocentrism are interpretive filters often stated to be at the core of such privileged meanings, among other institutionalized cultural

¹ Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom*, 55.

assumptions. Such themes are at the root of the understanding of texts as inherently controlling and oppressive.²

A text will, I believe, be inherently oppressive when any group asserts that it is transcendent and universally authoritative. Usually, those who make the claim that universally valid meanings are present in a text usually want control over which way such meanings are applied to social or political discourse in order to ensure favorable outcomes. Writers such as Yoder and Cartwright have rightly proposed that the text is liberating when it is read and interpreted by communities who eschew any stake in coercive political activity. The focus on Matthew 18 and the nature of how a congregation practices binding and loosing is important to communities of interpretation, as it allows the hermeneutical process to play itself out.³

Interpretations are always contingent, and so it follows that each community must interpret according to its historical and social place in time, and then, within the greater context of a world community.⁴ This is an ancient practice, and is evidenced in the four canonical gospels, each of which use the sayings of Jesus in a manner that suits the context of that community. For example, the gospels were written by members of a Jewish sect that insisted God's messiah had come and changed the nature of the relationship between Jews and Gentiles. As such, first-century messianic Jews interpreted the Hebrew texts in a manner that supported their claim.⁵

² Armstrong, "Deconstruction," 138. While reliance upon a dictionary citation for an explanation of deconstruction and Derrida's major themes is certainly suspect of intellectual laziness, the work of Derrida will play a minor role and be unpacked at that point in a more appropriate academic manner, and the importance of deconstruction as a literary and interpretive device will be made clearer as this project continues with appropriate referencing.

³ Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom*, 116, and Cartwright, *Practices, Politics, and Performance*, 71.

⁴ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, "The extraction of theological or philosophical statements from their contemporary context leads to a "false independence" which in turn attempts to make such statements universal truths." 11. Understandings and interpretations are also contingent upon the unescapable agenda of the interpreter. Ruf, *Postmodern Rationality*, 68-69.

⁵ Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 456.

