

Divine Violence: Two Lectures

Lecture One

40 years ago when I was a theological student “the crisis of the Scripture principle,” as Wolfhart Pannenberg argued in a famous essay, concerned the historical veracity of the biblical testimony to God’s saving acts in history. Minimally, historical veracity could no longer be stipulated dogmatically nor taken uncritically. While his proposal to remedy this crisis by taking history as a whole up to the eschaton as the self-revelation of God has not won universal approval, at the time his diagnosis of the deep loss of confidence within Christian theology seemed spot on. And to a degree, the problem Pannenberg fingered abides. Attacks on the historical credibility of the Bible have are not uncommon even in the church these days, where the flip resort to a denial of historicity replaces theological argument about anything one disagrees with in Scripture or its interpretation in the creedal tradition of the gospel (I Cor. 15:3-4).

But the crisis of the Scripture principal has shifted focus in the ensuing years. Today, it is the divine violence that seems to be deeply encoded in Scripture which provokes passionate critique, if not outright repudiation. I mentioned this at the beginning of my commentary on Joshua, citing the Jewish thinker Zachary Braiterman to the effect that after the Holocaust contemporary Jews wonder whether they can sustain a relationship to the God of the covenant and his Torah when it seems plausible that Western civilization learned ethnic cleansing on up to genocide from the Bible – in particular, from the Book of Joshua. Such self-critical examination is not exclusive to Jews. I also noted the former nun, Karen Armstrong’s probing

book, *Fields of Blood*, chronicling the history of religious violence rooted, she claimed, in the intransigence of King Josiah's exclusively monotheistic reform violently imposed upon the happy go lucky polytheistic bonhomie of ancient Judah. Such critiques of the divine violence of exclusive biblical monotheism have become commonplace today, while exclusive monotheism is the biblical foundation of creedal Christianity (cf. Luther's explanation of the First Commandment).

The presenting problem of the Bible's sacralization of violence is a very serious one; we witness echoes of such divine violence to this very day. Speaking at his murdered daughter's memorial service Russian ultra-nationalist Aleksandr Dugin recently said: "Our history is a constant battle of light and darkness. God and his adversary, and that we are now in this and our political situation and our war in Ukraine, but not with Ukraine. This is also part of this war: Light and darkness."

We could respond to this holy war fanaticism with the bromides of secularism. It is of course true, as John Locke put it at the fonts of political liberalism in his seminal *Letter on Toleration*, that "everyone is orthodox in their own eyes," leading to a zero-sum conflict over non-adjudicable faith claims. And it is equally true that anyone full of such religious self-certainty easily appropriates Scripture's motifs of divine violence to their cause. Thus the burning question in current times about the authority of Scripture in view of its representation of divine violence: is there any alternative to this echoing through the ages of divine violence from the Scriptures other than the drastic solution, as Braiterman and Armstrong indicate, of repudiation of the one true God of the covenant and his Bible?

Perception of this problem, however, is not new. As I discovered in reading Origen of Alexandria's third century *Homilies on Joshua*, he regularly had to deal with the offense caused by the blood soaked narrative of the Book of Joshua. Before studying the eastern theologian Origen on this, I had known that Augustine in the West, for example, had the identical difficulty especially with Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Scripture. For him in the West as well as the East, the solution had been the Gnostic doctrine that the God of the Old Testament was a phony, a cruel imposter imprisoning us in the material body beset with irrational passions that produce suffering and violence. But Augustine learned from Bishop Ambrose a method of spiritual interpretation of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible quite similar to the hermeneutic employed by Origen. Yes, then, while the literal text spoke of *herem* warfare, i.e. in which all that was conquered had to be devoted to the Lord by way of its destruction, this literal text was to be taken in Christian reading in the light of the gospel of the servant Christ, the Crucified One, as a prophetic metaphor indicating another battle by which the old Adam is daily sacrificed in the power of the Spirit to the gift of the new creation in Christ.

Now rhetorically metaphors work by stating a literal incongruity: the incongruity of divine violence is that the divine Author of life kills. One must abide with the puzzle, indeed the scandal, of this until insight into the jolting innovation in language yields to an unexpected reference, namely, to the crucified servant of the Lord for us and our salvation. Such is the only possible Christian reading of a book like Joshua. Yet therein lies a continuing problem. In speaking of the death of the sinner and the resurrection of a believer divine violence persists metaphorically with its powerful grip on the imagination. As Luther would put it, God kills in order to make a life. Did you hear that? God kills. And under pressing circumstances this gospel

truth of divine violence for the sake of true healing can be re-literalized, as we witness in Dugin's funeral address sacralizing the Russian aggression in Ukraine as an instance of holy war, of the light battling darkness.

I stumbled into the authorship of the book of Joshua. I was interested in the Brazos series, but by the time I inquired the book I was truly interested in commenting on, the Gospel of Mark, was already assigned. So I let the matter drop. When the editor was looking for someone to do the commentary on Joshua, he turned to Sarah Wilson (full disclosure: my daughter). She sat down to read and got through about eight chapters of Joshua, before she closed her Bible and said, "Nope. No way." Good child that she is, she then suggested the editors contact me about Joshua. I was actually eager to undertake the assignment, just because the afore-described crisis of scriptural authority vis-à-vis divine violence was for many reasons pressing upon me and I wanted this opportunity to tackle it. Truth be told, I didn't realize the depths of the problem I was getting in to. Not only had it been years since I used the Hebrew I learned in seminary, but I discovered a vast literature which I described in the opening chapter of the commentary on preliminary considerations.

What I found was discouraging: very few authors did not fall on one and or another of a spectrum of modern strategies to deal with the divine violence of the text. Conservatives tended to affirm the historical facticity of Joshua's divine violence but mitigate the scandal by confining it to a specific time and place of history (if not resorting to the lazy theology of affirming that God being boss can do whatever God wants). Liberals tended to deny the book's representation of literal historical facticity but insist that the Book of Joshua's canonical status continues to license, if not inspire religious violence – as in so-called "Christian nationalism" –

with the tyrannical idea that God being boss can do whatever God wants and that we find what God wants in our literalistic reading of the Bible. I found neither of these strategies, both literalisms, helpful even to understand the Book of Joshua literarily.

Following the precedents of the apostle Paul and Luther's hermeneutic based on it, I instead look for the gospel in the book of Joshua and founded in the reiterated promise to Joshua and Israel that it is the Lord who fights for you. At length this "gospel" made literary sense of the peculiar doctrine of *herem* warfare, i.e. the apparently genocidal demand to destroy all booty which otherwise could be gathered from vanquished Canaan. Israel, then, is never to fight for the sake of booty because it is the Lord who fights for Israel to give this nomadic people the land long promised to it by demolishing the Canaanite city states with their warlord kings. Thus the extreme demand of *herem* warfare to destroy the booty, removing it from any possible human usage, undercuts the incentive and the logic of ancient warfare. Warfare in the ancient near East routinely saw the extermination of the adult male fighting population to eliminate resistance for the sake of the enslavement of the surviving women and children, not to mention the expropriation of livestock, precious metals and other resources. Interestingly, ancient war was not very much interested in land acquisition for its own sake, but rather for the subjugation of territories which would become satellites, vassals, i.e. colonial resources for the conqueror whose territory was centered elsewhere. But nomadic Israel was promised – and thus was to desire *only* – a humble piece of land for its own dwelling on the earth. Implicit in this understanding of *herem* warfare was the implied threat that if Israel should ever become like the Canaanite city states in cahoots with imperial Egypt which the Lord through Joshua had defeated, Israel would fall under the same ban. Just this defection to politics as usual from the

Lord who fought for Israel Joshua sharply warns against but also predicts will take place in the stunning conclusion to the book.

Moreover, in the process of executing *herem* warfare, it unravels as a literal policy. The book of Joshua shows this through its contrast between Rahab the Canaanite prostitute who confesses Yahweh better than the spies that she shelters and Achan of the tribe of Judah who sneaks booty into his tent and so brings the wrath of the Lord down on Israel; or again in the tale of the Canaanite Gibeonites who hoodwinked Joshua into giving them protected status, and in many other lesser details. The narrative shows how impossible was a pure execution of the demand for *herem* warfare. As a practical and literal possibility, the policy self-destructs in the course of the book. What remains, as in the paradigmatic opening scene of battle at Jericho, is the reality of divine violence: it is the Lord who fights for Israel, never Israel who fights for the Lord. So all ensuing appropriations of *herem* warfare which transform it from a free and sovereign divine action into a religious ideology of holy war at the disposal of human-all-to-human political calculation and aggression fall under its very ban.

Although I did not treat this in the commentary, the sad story of King Saul in First Samuel corroborates this thesis. Saul falls out of divine favor, when, impatient for the arrival of the prophet Samuel, he undertakes the sacrifices preparatory to warfare in place of the absent Samuel and rashly makes vows that he cannot keep to motivate the warriors on to victory. The first king of Israel, ignoring the theological meaning of *herem* war represented by the prophet Samuel, in turn represents the temptation to transform memories of the Lord who fought for Israel into a religious ideology sanctifying its own stratagems of violence. Indeed, mention is made that Saul slaughtered the very Gibeonites whom Joshua had protected in a futile attempt

to perform the very *herem* warfare which the Book of Joshua has shown to be the divine work alone and thus unworkable as a human political policy. Shown to be unworkable, that is, when we read carefully, textually and more literally (literarily!) than literalists i.e., in the light of the gospel message of the Lord who fights for us.

None of this contextualization exonerates the divine violence of the text. I want to put the stress on that. In the book of Joshua, it is God who kills with the occasional employment of the armies of Israel but also sometimes against the armies of Israel. It is not that Israel fights for the reputation and honor of its deity in the Book of Joshua, but on the contrary the Lord of the covenant fights on behalf of his chosen people. In one of Jesus's little many parables, he asks what king would go out to war without first counting the cost? In the paradigmatic battle of at Jericho, Joshua, in compliance with militarily unstrategic obedience to the Torah, in the first place lays his army prostrate before the enemy by having them circumcised. Then he reveals his power to the watching enemy with a seven day liturgical parade around the city. And he mops up only after a mighty deed of the Lord collapses Jericho's vaunted defenses down upon themselves in a heap. Now, if you are wondering, "What king would in faith count on that of divine work in going to war?" That bewilderment is precisely the point. You see, Joshua is not a king and does not want to be a king. The Lord through Joshua kills kings. The title that is awarded to him is "servant of the Lord." And in this very way Joshua is a type of the servant of the Lord who is to come – the One who came not to be served but to serve and lay down his life a ransom for many. It is in just this way that the God of Israel continues to fight for us and summons us to combat in turn, to be sure, not against flesh and blood but against spiritual forces of wickedness in high places.

So Luther drew to THE conclusion in his precious little treatise of 1530, "Admonition concerning the Sacrament." "Truly the devil is still a prince in the world, and I have not eluded him. As long as I am in his principality he is a threat to me." He can drive believers to "unbelief, despair, blasphemy and hatred of God." He can "assail us with great spiritual temptations and thus exercise us in our faith." Just so God "also permitted several kings and princes to remain here and there in the vicinity of his people Israel so that they might learn to wage war and thus remain accustomed to war. For God's word is almighty; therefore, faith and the Spirit are busy and never resting, and must always be active and engaged in combat. Consequently the word of God must not have insignificant, but the most powerful, foes against whom it can gain honor according to its great might; these four companions – the flesh, the world, death and the devil – are such powerful foes. Therefore Christ is called Lord Sabbaoth, that is, a God of warfare or of hosts, who always makes war and is engaged in combat in us" (LW 38:130-132). The grace of God in Jesus Christ is not a lazy blessing upon the world the way it is still so sick with pride and despair, aggression and defeatism in its grim cycles of literal violence and counter violence. But the God of love is *against* what is against love. *Really!* The grace of God in Christ is *militant* such that in the combat of faith we are not overcome with evil but overcome evil with good, just as in the cross of Christ God overcomes his own righteous wrath to find a way to a righteous and holy mercy, as Luther was wont to say, "for real, not fictitious sinners."

Such a dialectical view of grace is of course always in danger of simplistic re-literalization as I introduced above citing the example of Alexandr Dugin. But we could also include here the very Martin Luther who wrote the words I have just quoted. As Volker Lepin has shown, the embattled Martin Luther adopted the human-all-too-human posture of the warrior for God

against pope and emperor, peasant and Jew and indulged in the most disgusting rhetorical violence inciting political violence. We can see this failure and repudiate it. But in the process there is no evading the problem of God who in fighting for us kills in order to make alive. The problem of divine violence abides in the New Testament, whenever we sing, "This is the feast of victory of our God," and mean what we say. Even metaphorically divine violence poses profound problems of intelligibility, also when we understand this truth spiritually rather than literally, that is, as the exclusive work of the Holy Spirit for us and in us, never our work supposedly for God. It is God who kills to make alive.

That is the problem - the *real* God problem. It is not merely that human imagination projects a violent God for us to imitate or emulate, although such projection should be called out for the idolatry that it is. The point is that it is no solution to the real God problem to preach the emasculated and defanged liberal Protestant "stillborn God," as secular political philosopher Mark Lilla has put it; in H Richard Niebuhr's famous words, this is "a God without wrath who brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross." But then what becomes of us by way of this Christocentric and cruciform understanding of divine violence?

Lecture Two

In 2016, prior to undertaking the Joshua commentary, I published a chapter contribution on "The Powers and Principalities" to the book, *Life amid the Principalities: Identifying, Understanding, and Engaging Created, Fallen, and Disarmed Powers Today*. I wrote that the "biblical seat of the doctrine" is found in the Letter to the Ephesians: "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12, RSV). In this contribution I argued against Tom Wright's thesis that the apostle Paul meaning lies between the lines, coded in a language which he has unlocked, disguising his political attack on Roman imperialism with mythological language such as exhibited in the Ephesians quote above.

I found help in this argument from the impressive scholar John Barclay who voiced a number of important objections: 1) that Wright's reduction of demonology to political imperialism is clumsy, not least of all because it merely inverts imperial values and so remains captive to the same ideological system of contending domination between the powers that be and the powers that would be; 2) that the author of Romans 13 in any case interprets the empire as a field of human reality crisscrossed and contested like all others by the opposing forces of Flesh and Spirit, being subject to mysterious powers far greater than itself in the battle created by the gospel; 3) that the political product of the subversive and redemptive power of divine grace in Christ is the creation and empowerment of new communities of social and therefore broadly political significance – what I call "beloved community."

One might say in general that Wright's reading of Paul in the light of Hebrew Scripture according to a salvation history scheme stressing continuity thinks of Joshua's war against the Canaanite city states as simply continued in the gospel's war against Roman imperialism. All of the foregoing corrections to Wright's overstated claims are important for the proper understanding of the politics of the apostle's apocalyptic gospel. And more broadly, they correct the simplistic and *unthinking* demonization of "empire" when the tragic history of the 20th century witnessed the devastating rise of *nationalisms* out of the decaying Western empires. Such unthinking demonization of multicultural and cosmopolitan imperial systems proceeds on the naïve assumption that any alternative form of political sovereignty could emerge free from Augustine's "will to domination." By virtue of the fall, as Lutheran orthodoxy understood and Bonhoeffer tried to retrieve and revitalize, social structures including the state, the so-called "orders of creation" in the fallen world, ambiguously protect against chaotic violence but also can be captivated by malice which in turn transforms them into structures of injustice and oppression. Social structures can be demonized, but they are not the demons which capture them, just as social structures can also be sanctified, but they are not the Spirit who is holy.

Similarly, it is popular today to employ a psychologizing rhetoric of hate, i.e. as an irrational passion of aversion in place of the biblical sinful malice, i.e. the evil will of envy which fills the human soul not filled by the Holy Spirit and faith. Biblically this will not do. The prophet Amos tells us to hate what is evil and love what is good – nothing irrational about that! Picking up on this, the apostle Paul says that love should be sincere by hating what is evil. Love for the good entails repudiation of what is evil. Sinful malice is a far more subtle corruption of reason itself,

for it is a parasite corrupting love for the good as represented by the biblical figure of the Satan. In the 2016 chapter on the powers and principalities, I followed the suggestion of several church fathers, especially Augustine, to understand the Gospel of John's "liar and murderer from the beginning." This fallen angel of light, Lucifer, upon learning that the lowly earthlings had been elected the covenant partners of God, was seized by vicious envy and resolved in pure malice to undo the election of the earthlings. The malice of the devil's envy then provided Augustine a working idea of the motives of those spiritual forces of wickedness in high places. Looking at the story in Genesis 2 and 3, Augustine saw that the cunning serpent tempts the human couple with his own ambition to be as God, deciding good and evil for himself. As Luther put it, sinful envy be wants to be God and does not want God to be God. And it wants to pull others into the orbit of its will-to-domination.

How did Augustine come to this insight? He discovered the proud ambition motivated by envy of Gods as the negative reflection of the humility of the eternal Son and his human obedience as the new Adam, who did not count equality with God a thing to be coveted but became a servant and obedient, even to death on the cross. This Christological way to discover the enemy, supra-individual, trans-human, powerful to corrupt both social structures and individuals out of the incorrigible wickedness of malicious envy, is not a matter of curious speculation or ordinary observation but learned from the One who broke into this strong man's house to bind him – yet not by the edge of the sword but by his astonishing act of divine humility and in this holy way of human obedience to plunder his goods: his death at the devil's hands brings about the death of death and hell's destruction, death battling death in order to be life for us who are dying. The point for Augustine is not to come up with a speculative

ontology of the devil other than the necessary and minimal affirmation that the devil is also a creature of God, not God's equal, and therefore just so entirely perverse in its wicked desire to pull all into the orbit of its pride's inevitable downward spiral. Knowing merely this about the devil, the point for Augustine's knowledge of it is to engage in the struggle inaugurated by the One who broke into its house and to do battle in exactly the same holy way of wondrous acts of humility and obedience for the sake of others suffering the devil's multi-faceted oppression. That precisely is what the new human society of the ecclesia is to be, freed in faith from the devil's tyranny in love to become servants of all, the very body on the earth of the risen Lord who came not to be served but to serve. We struggle therefore against spiritual forces of wickedness in high places by creating, sustaining and expanding such caring communities of Christ's people. The present reality of such new communities of the new humanity is the true subversion of demonized political sovereignty – no whether it takes imperial or nationalist, or for that matter democratic , socialist or capitalist form.

Yet equally that means that *God who fights for us through the cross of Christ is a problem* also for us, for the church in Europe and America in our corrupt and compromised existence. I want to turn now to a brutal book on ecclesiology, Ephraim Radner's *Brutal Unity*. Necessary as is, for example, my previous explicit rejection of Luther's violent tirades against Pope, peasant and Jew, Radner' argues forcefully that it is too convenient for the Church to retroactively distance itself from the actions of members, particularly when the evil actions were widespread and included numerous high-ranking and theologically trained leaders. Not only is this move in danger of being a tactic, far too convenient, of self-exculpation, it continues the habit of forming group identity by means of contrastive identity markers. In plain English, putting others

down in order by name calling to build ourselves up. *We are -- not* Luther attacking the Jews, *nor* Calvin burning Servetus the stake, *nor* the Puritans on a witch hunt, *nor* the born-again slaveholders of the antebellum Southern plantation economy, and so on. True as it is that we must know these sins of Christians, we must also know them *as our own sin* since the theological reality of the church is that we belong to one another for good or for ill through time and across space, brutal although this solidarity be. I mean that I cannot claim only Luther's good theology without also taking responsibility for his evil theology; and if I fail to do the latter I remain complicit in the evil. Otherwise, as we see in much of my denomination, offended by the sins of Christians, even the great sins of great Christians, we simply expel these others as enemy, heretic or false Christian without realizing our own complicity in their sin on account of our solidarity with them in Christ. How righteous we can feel about ourselves when we loudly and abrasively denounce the fundamentalists or the liberals, the Protestants or the Catholics, the dippers or the dunkers, the dead formalism or the holy rolling. According to Radner, contrastive identity stratagems attempt to absolve the Church by the mechanism of division from the sinners or the heretics, such denunciation sanctified as divine prophetic judgment, as holy invective.

Radner, himself of Jewish descent, excavates the medieval conflation of "Jew" with "heretic" at the Western font of Christian deployment of contrastive identity markers which incentivizes the creation and nurture of racist stereotyping to enhance the self-perception of one's own group. We know painfully and inescapably how our Martin Luther succumbed to this dynamic. We can and must see in the Church's relationship with the Jews that, as this contrastive identity mechanism continued to work across the centuries, it served to dehumanize the Jews thereby

making division necessary and violence against the excluded possible – even a holy necessity. This mechanism played “a facilitating role” in the Holocaust. It is a fact that Nazi religionists regarded the excision of the Jews from the body politic of the German people on the secular medical analogy of removing a cancer. Yet they blessed the dirty work as a holy task on behalf of life and health.

Another escape attempt that Radner cuts off is the requirement of fulsome doctrinal agreement as the basis of fellowship. Radner challenges the assumption that unity and peace are achieved by agreement accomplished by the sharing of information. Knowledge as the basis for a change of mind or consensus among others who are disagreeing is difficult to specify. It is difficult enough for one person to know their own understanding of a topic and harder still to understand another person’s understanding of the same topic. The force of doctrinal agreement as in the church councils which produced the ecumenical creeds is actually governed by social rules and, historically, by state coercion. Agreements are in fact not about achieved unanimity in theological opinion, but rather about creating a church culture in which disagreement can be managed. Complicated doctrinal agreements are more accurately described as statements that multiple factions within a public church can live with rather than expressing a full-fledged meeting of minds. So being church, that is to say, owning not only the sins of others but also the disagreements with others, is not heaven on earth. But it is also not the sacred violence of the contrastive identity mechanism.

Radner summons us who follow Christ to take the violence of the others upon ourselves in the self-sacrifice of love. It is better to suffer evil than to do evil, so as not to be overcome by evil

but to overcome evil with good. Perhaps the most provocative articulation of such brutal ecclesiology as he recommends is Radner's idea of the sacrifice of conscience. What he means by this, however, needs some more precise explanation than he provides.

He identifies how in modern political liberalism, conscience is seen as a private or secret opinion known only to a solitary individual in their heart of hearts: "that's just how I feel. That's just what I think. Leave me alone. End of discussion." Judged theologically, this is a frightful decline from conscience captive to the word of God and publicly confessed before Emperor and Pope with the willingness to suffer martyrdom on its account. The modern liberal misconception of conscience elevates individual opinion to a privileged indeed sacrosanct status crowning the formation of the romantic, "expressive-individualist" self. This sense of sovereign selfhood in the name of private conscience dissolves all bonds of commonality. In protects unfounded opinion making it invulnerable to public criticism. This solitary conception of conscience, like privatized religion, however, can be deployed to sanction all too public violence, citing Pascal: "No one does evil so fully and happily as when done for the sake of conscience." Conscience disconnected and unaccountable to community and social forms of meaning-making can easily be co-opted by societal anxiety and eventually by group violence as the lonely individual finds a cause greater than him or herself in some collective of the conscientiously like-minded.

Retrieval of a better view of conscience demands recognition of its social and material nature in "the inescapable process of learning in the world, which reveals the self in relation to others." In other words, conscience is learned in the laboratory of life. Just so, such a conception of the

social and historical nature of consciousness in the formation of conscience allows it also to be formed by the confrontation with the love of Christ which bids us to lay down our lives so that we can find them again, regarding ourselves, the world and Christ no longer according to the flesh (II Cor. 5.16). As Christians our consciences are constantly being “relearned” and “restlessly reordered” in life in Christ as membership in the Body of Christ. This way of learning as disciples of Jesus entails sacrifice as our former lives and their self-understandings are laid down in favor of our God-given calls and identities. Privileged private consciousness in the false security of our own unfounded opinion is sacrificed for the sake of conscience bound to the word of God. Throughout our lives we have Pauline experiences where we are struck blind, the scales fall and we see again, but, as in Paul’s case, there is real pain and uncertainty involved as our opinion of ourselves and the world is sacrificed. This is the real problem of God again – the holy and divine violence of the Lord who fights for us by first fighting against us.

The community of the church is that of sinners, i.e. those that do the dividing by building themselves up at the expense of others who they put down, have been taken hold of by Christ who owns us, sins and all. Real not fictitious sin. The sin is real but so is Christ taking hold of us according to the joyful exchange: give me your sin and take my righteousness. The Church is not “a countercultural colony” of the perfected. Ecclesial unity is not a sublime state perfectly cleansed of division; rather it is the brutal unity of love which “is born of division and bound to division.” The Church is both unified and divided just as a Christian is both saint and sinner. This view of the Church situates grace and the forgiveness of sins in the messy, contradictory, and often violent lives of real people and in so doing brings the cross to bear on the real church in which live. This realistic portrait serves to remind us that the Church is “continually penitent,”

and that human righteousness takes the form of the humbly contrite prayer of the publican:
"God, have mercy on me a sinner (Luke 18.13).

"This is the true people of God," wrote Luther in his early Romans commentary, "who bring the judgment of the cross to bear upon themselves." It is the first of his famous 95 thesis: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Do penance!", he meant for the entire life of the Christian to be one of repentance." Repentance is the suffering of God – our suffering of God when and in so far as we have been knocked off of our high horse by the God who suffered for us arrogant creatures who want to be God and do not want God to be God. This is the true meaning of the Scriptures' divine violence: not literal but spiritual, and therefore far more real than shallow literalisms imagine; never, then, our fighting for God but the battle of the Holy Spirit to break through to us and in us, convicting the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment; never to be clumsily identified with any human violence but the alien work God does for the sake of his proper work which is not only the forgiveness of our very real guilt for violence, but our deliverance from its power.

Divine violence as the Spirit's hermeneutic of human experience is, to be sure, subject to important qualifications if it is not to be misunderstood as the sanctification of demonic hegemonies. As Simeon Zahl has put it, "There really are quite significant theological differences between the judgment of God and the judgment of our boss, our spouse, or our parents, and these in turn will have effects on how we "experience our experience."" (179). To be certain the judgment of God disrupting us may be hidden "in, with, and under" such historical events. This Christian wisdom to discern the difference so that the violence of God

always gives way to the peace of God. That is why the purpose clause, "God makes us sinners *in order to* make us righteous," is absolutely crucial to the proper deployment of the law-gospel hermeneutic of experience. As Zahl puts it: "It is only in the Spirit that the *revelatio peccati* is put in its proper context of divine love, as an instrument of compassionate diagnosis that is always ordered to an infinite grace" (181).