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WISDOM FOR THE COMMON GOOD

**Review: *How to Have an Enemy:
Righteous Anger & the Work of Peace*
by Melissa Florer-Bixler, Herald
Press, 2021 (ISBN 978-1-5138-0813-0).**

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At least in the English-speaking world, the Christian churches are undergoing a series of rolling internal conflicts over their responses to structural racism, white Christian nationalism, welcoming LBQTI people, and sexual abuse. Most of these are being managed very poorly, with perceived enemies within the church, let alone outside it, multiplying on every hand. Practicing enemy love within the church seems a good, indeed necessary (if largely neglected) response.

Loving your enemy and working for peace are key themes in Anabaptist discipleship. What has not always been either acknowledged or explicitly dealt with in this tradition is the reality of the anger that can rightfully accompany our response to injustice. If we do not own up to righteous anger, our commitment to loving our enemy can lurch wildly astray, causing damage to ourselves, as well as to those we are trying to reconcile in our peace-making initiatives.

In *How to Have an Enemy: Righteous Anger and the Work of Peace*, Melissa Florer-Bixler, a Mennonite pastor and community activist in Raleigh, North Carolina, USA, has provided us with a rich reading of the Bible, exploring who enemies are, what they do and how the followers of Jesus can respond appropriately.

The author is honest about the tensions in her own relationship with the Mennonite tradition. She confesses that she wrote this particular book “out of discontent with my own tradition’s response to the Trump administration. This book is my cantankerous act of love for my church because I want the Mennonite church to live into the fullness of God’s reign. As it is this book is suited for people who make claims to a shared commitment to following Jesus. I don’t have an agenda for society at large, or even ecumenical dialogue. As a Mennonite I am a localist when it comes to church, and I hope this book will be helpful for congregations who grapple with unity and difference.” (p.16)

The account of the church that underpins the author’s exploration of loving enemies is one which does not depend upon institutional structures, commitment to orthodox theology, or the exercise of sacramental power.

In her understanding “the church is occasional, occurring from time to time, rather than a product that can be traced in linear fashion through history. Sometimes the church is the space of intimacy between two or three people, sometimes an episodic and rare response to the call of Jesus.” (p.15)

I suspect that despite ecclesial differences, Christians operating with other understandings of the church will nevertheless benefit from her reading of and reflection on scripture.

At the heart of the book Florer-Bixler names the exercise of power as separating the experience of difference from that of enmity. In calling us to love our enemies, Jesus is underlining the fact that

having enemies is a reality of life. His call to love enemies does not imply that we will necessarily do away with enemies. Instead, from the call to love enemies, Jesus shows us how to have enemies well, that is, how to have enemies in a way that is consistent with following him and truthfully exercising power.

Florer-Bixler explains that the exercise of power is what separates difference from enmity. “I use the language of enemies in this book to describe a relationship between people, one that recognizes how a person uses their power actively or passively to harm or dominate another. When there are enemies one is in power over the other, or there is conflict over who holds power. Power is not bad. We need power to act. Exercising power is how we make our lives better. But calls to Christian unity that ignore the dynamics of racial, gendered and class power end with devastating consequence.” (p.28)

Those with power in the church are frequently oblivious to these dynamics, and our call for peace is often little more than an exercise in avoiding the conflict that arises once injustices in the church, whether they be of race, gender or class, are named for what they are. Those without power who call for justice are then asked to carry the burden of a premature step towards forgiving the enemy that would simply paper over injustice. A quick survey of the rhetoric within the churches by those in power who are responding to those naming the abuse of power makes this clear.

“The work of peace that begins with the transformation of structures of power stands in stark contrast to call for unity that purport to overcome a category called ‘politics.’ Our mutual participation in the destruction of ourselves and our neighbours and our redemption from these cycles of violence is at the heart of the gospel. In Jesus we come to know that there are no ‘pure victims.’ We are each of us both victims and victimisers.” (p.30)

The reality of conflict and violence brings us to the question of how the recognition of the abuse of power finds expression in our worship, and particularly in our response to the problem of anger in prayer. Christians’ attempts to slide away from acknowledging the raw intensity which anger can generate is demonstrated most graphically in the way we have handled the Psalms.

The psalms of rage remind us that in the face of intense evil, if we do not express grief and outrage, it will become accepted and commonplace. These psalms are an uncomfortable reminder that in spite of defeat someone dared to say that the world was not as it should be. Whatever else they are such psalms are at the very least an important statement of resistance to injustice and destruction.

This chapter should provoke our consideration of how these psalms can appropriately be used in worship and why our failure to include their most graphic sections in the liturgy may be related to our ability to sit comfortably with unresolved and inappropriate exercises of power within the church.

Anger against injustice is also carried forward in the Magnificat if we stop to attend to the language used and not let its familiarity allow us to slide by its meaning.

“The anger of the psalms echoes in Mary’s defiance against oppressive regimes. Mary’s life in the collective lives of women and the communities of the oppressed affirms that enemies are potent and formidable. ... But in Christianity we do not resolve enmity by destroying our foes or finding middle ground with them. Instead, Jesus ushers in a different system that changes the order of power itself.” (p.91).

The call to love our enemies is a call to reimagine the possibilities for a new world. For those of us who benefit from economic systems that are experienced by others as oppression and racism, this is going to require attention to our implication in the logic of vengeance and judgement. To love our enemies, Karl Barth reminded us, “is a significant action which announces the Coming World. In doing so we recognise with our lives that we are bound to the same edict of degradation as our enemies, that the same power of death is working on each of us.” (Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 473)

Although her orientation is shaped by substantive theological resources, Florer-Bixler writes in a way that is accessible to a wide range of readers. She illustrates her reading of scripture with stories of pain, conflict and painful reconciliation many of them grounded in the community in which she lives. She presents narratives that embody issues of racialised violence, white supremacy, the undoing of family relationships and the worship of mammon.

There is nothing easy about the path she charts towards forgiveness of the enemy. She makes it clear both from the scriptures and from life why the path of enemy love may lead to further conflict and disruption within families and relationships with the wider community. Her account reminds me of the lines from G K Chesterton’s poem ‘The Ballad of the White Horse’: “I tell you naught for your comfort, yea naught for your desire, save that the sky grows darker yet and the sea rises higher.”

Florer-Bixler concludes with a reading of the Book of Revelation as scripture, dealing with the end of enemies. Revelation, she affirms, is not a prophecy of the future, but is about the world we know now. Apocalypse reveals our social order, what we value and what we do not care about in its imaging of the destruction we are bringing upon ourselves. Revelation is certainly a frightening book. It is preserved for us she suggests “so that in every generation we awake from sleep, pulled

out of moderation, and moved into a form of life where if we live as Jesus lives, we will stand against the work of death in its brutal and benign forms.” (p197)

The burden of this book is that forgiving enemies is not about moderation and toleration, nor is it a way of avoiding anger at injustice. Naming and confronting our enemies may be disruptive, but it is an essential first step towards forgiving them.