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## REVIEW OF PAUL ANDERSON'S *FOLLOWING JESUS: THE HEART OF FAITH AND PRACTICE*

MICHAEL WILLETT NEWHEART

In my opening plenary lecture at the 2013 annual session of the Baltimore Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, I discussed the sources of messages during worship at Adelphi (MD) Friends Meeting, of which I am a member.<sup>1</sup> I applied the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, which speaks of four sources for religious reflection.<sup>2</sup> I found that most messages focused on experience, several on reason, some on tradition, and a few on scripture. If I were to examine Paul Anderson's book in the same way, I would almost reverse my findings. For him, primacy of place belongs to scripture, followed by tradition, then experience, and finally reason. Scripture is key for Anderson; it is his base, his "home plate," actually. And he is safe at home. In this review, then, I will discuss Anderson's "biblical bases" and his "rules of engagement" in his book *Following Jesus*. I will then evaluate his approach to the Bible and suggest a way forward.

### ANDERSON'S BIBLICAL BASES AND RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

In touching Anderson's "biblical bases," I counted about 260 references to specific biblical passages. Anderson refers to the Old Testament ten times and the New Testament 250 times. Of these he refers about 100 times to the Synoptics and Acts, about 100 times to the Gospel and Epistles of John, and about 50 times to the Epistles (minus the Epistles of John) and Revelation. Anderson's biblical bases, then, are the Gospels and Acts.

With these books, he follows certain "rules of engagement." In an article on biblical hermeneutics and environmentalism, Francis Watson distinguishes between two biblical hermeneutical strategies: resistance and recovery.<sup>3</sup> For example, Lynn White is "resistant" to the Bible because he contends that it has contributed to our ecological crisis. Richard Bauckham, on the other hand, attempts to "recover"

12 • MICHAEL WILLET NEWHEART

the Bible's message about creation care. Anderson certainly falls into the "recovery" camp because that's where the early Friends were, he says. Following William Penn's lead, Anderson entitles one of his early sections "On Reviving Primitive and Apostolic Christianity" (pp. 9-14) because that's what Fox and others did. Indeed, Anderson summarizes in a page with "bullet points" how the early Quakers embodied "New Testament Christianity" (p. 11). In discussing the sacraments later in the book Anderson writes, "The more I learn about the New Testament, the more Quaker I become" (p. 127). So the New Testament, which is primarily the Gospels for Anderson, is claimed--or reclaimed, that is, recovered--for and by Quakerism.

In recovering the Bible for Quakers, Anderson's mostly refers to verses at the end of relevant sentences. Passages are typically not quoted or discussed at length. For example, in the first 6 lines of p. 39 Anderson refers to four scriptures, two from John and two from Romans. Anderson does, however, examine in some detail a few passages, including "sacramental" passages (e.g. Mark 14:12-25; 1 Cor. 11:17-22; John 6:53-58). He also "carries a bit" with the Lord's Prayer, which he uses as a "transformative pattern," and the section of Sermon on the Mount that deals with "turning the other cheek" (Matt 5:38-48).

In summary, then, Anderson's "biblical bases" are the Gospels, and his rules of engagement consist of "recovering" the Gospels by and for Quakerism.

## EVALUATION OF ANDERSON'S BIBLICAL BASES AND ENGAGEMENTS

I found a number of strengths in his approach. I like Anderson's language: "radical discipleship," "the resurrected Lord," "abiding in Christ," and "transformation." I also appreciate many of his questions and statements, which I marked with "YES" in the margins: "Is your life given totally, unreservedly, to God? . . . As Thomas Kelly invites, may we commit our lives in unreserved obedience to [Jesus]" (p. 1). "[N]ot only are we a people who ask what it means to follow Jesus, but in a real sense, we are that question" (p. 9). "[P]rayer is not just something we do; it is something we become" (p. 77).

Along with these several strengths, the book only has one weakness: it does not go into sufficient depth with the terms, questions, and

statements it sets forth. Specifically, “following Jesus,” “radical discipleship,” and “the centered life” are repeated throughout the book without fleshing them out, especially in terms of how we relate to our Quaker community and how we relate to the world. For example, Anderson writes, “[T]he central Christian question is not simply “What *would* Jesus do?” but also “What is Jesus *doing*--in the church and in the world?” (p. 13) Excellent question! But after a few general sentences, the section ends, and Anderson moves on to a different subject. This practice becomes a pattern throughout the book. Anderson frequently sets forth “provocative proposals,” which he leaves undeveloped.

Although I applaud Anderson’s “biblical recovery project,” it simply doesn’t go far enough. His approach seems more evangelical than Quaker, more concerned with individual than social transformation. Peacemaking comes in the next to last part of the book, and in the last part is a section entitled “Faithful Witness and Social Concern” (pp. 197-204). Anderson summarizes well Quakers’ contributions to the abolitionist and suffragist movements, but what about today? Anderson notes in his “Acknowledgements and Dedications” that some of the essays were written twenty years ago as pieces for the *Evangelical Friend*. But to publish them (or new pieces) without reference to Iraq or Afghanistan or Occupy or climate change is not very transformative! This Jesus that we’re supposed to follow is neither in the world nor of the world.

Thus, the most disappointing section of the book was Anderson’s treatment of the Lord’s Prayer as a “transformative pattern” (pp. 68-77). This model prayer for a group of radical disciples, which begins “OUR Father” and prays for the giving of bread and the cancellation of debt, is tamed into an exercise in privatism, which is supposedly powerful and centered but seems powerless and self-centered. Anderson does not take into sufficient consideration that Jesus had us pray, “Thy kingdom come,” that is, may God loose the powers of Rome and establish God’s sovereignty.

A major problem is that the Old Testament is neglected, only about 10 references compared to 250 for the New. Jesus, his first followers, and thus Quakers are then cut off from their roots in the Hebrew scripture. When my wife and I married, we chose a new name--Newheart--from Ezekiel 36:26: “A new heart I will give, and a new spirit I will put within you” (NRSV). The “new heart,” as well as the “new covenant (see Jer 31:31-34), deserves more treatment

14 • MICHAEL WILLETT NEWHEART

than it receives here. So does Exodus, the pivotal event in the Old Testament, which is so often echoed in the New Testament. And so do the Prophets, who thundered against injustice and looked forward to that new age of “sword-beating plowshares.” Can we really follow Jesus if he is not clearly shown to be a Jewish prophet?

I became a Quaker after a lifetime of being a Southern Baptist minister and missionary. I left Baptist life and became a Quaker because of my increasing commitment to contemplative prayer and to action for peace and social justice. Anderson does a very good job of sketching out Jesus’ vision of peace, and he uses my late mentor Walter Wink, who regularly attended Quaker meeting. But when it comes to “Peacemaking at Home and Abroad,” Anderson’s queries are rather wan and superficial. My favorite one is: “Am I willing to speak directly to others regarding concerns, in patience and in good faith, rather than lobbying politically in order to manipulate a desired outcome--even a noble one?” (p. 173). I hope that the Friends Committee on National Legislation doesn’t read that query!

Anderson mentions Ron Mock’s peacebuilding, peacemaking, and peacekeeping, which sounds very promising. In his brief description I can see very clearly how Jesus’ ethic might be lived out, but Anderson seems like he’s run out of gas and merely concludes by saying that peacemakers are blessed “both then and now.” Anderson seems more interested in then than now. Here and elsewhere Anderson seems to be resisting a certain interpretation of the Gospel that other Quakers are pursuing. Similarly, Anderson writes in the next chapter on testimonies, “This is why I prefer to draw on the historic Quaker witness rather than ‘spicy’ acronyms by others” (p. 181 n 1). Instead of bringing his disagreements with other Quakers out into the open, Anderson dismisses them with caricature and sarcasm.

## CONCLUSION

Much to my surprise, I found this book to be deeply disturbing. It lays out some excellent terms and questions, but it fails miserably in elaborating them in any depth. I have read Anderson’s New Testament works, both popular and scholarly, and I know that he is a careful, thorough, reflective scholar. I found these essays, though, superficial, filled with generalizations and clichés. I understand how some sections might have worked 20 years ago in a magazine, but

when stitched together into a book they come across as repetitious and empty.

Judging from Anderson's book, it seems that evangelical Quakers, like liberal Quakers, simply don't know what to do with the Bible. Liberal Quakers distance themselves from it, while evangelical Quakers "honor" it (or at least the NT Gospels), but it really does not help them in addressing the large issues of the day, such as peace and social justice.

I think that Anderson realizes this fact, for he entitles the epilogue "Humble Learners in the School of Christ." In this book Anderson has not been so humble, and he has been too much the teacher lecturing his students with rather empty imperatives. Now he invites us to learn humbly. No talk of "radical discipleship" or "transformation" because one can only chant those words for so long without discussing what they mean. But Anderson, no, Jesus, invites us to learn humbly together, in community and in the world.

I wholeheartedly agree. Let us learn from Friendly folks who have passed, such as Henry Cadbury, Harvard New Testament scholar, translator of the RSV, and co-founder of the American Friends Service Committee. When asked why he was so involved in social issues, Cadbury said, "I'm still trying to translate the New Testament."<sup>4</sup> Let us also learn from Bayard Rustin, 2013 recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, who makes clear in his recently published letters how foundational the Sermon on the Mount was for his activism. He writes in 1944 while in prison for not participating in the draft, "I certainly am convinced that there is need of a spiritual revolution if we are to avoid complete moral degeneration. I am equally certain that some totally dedicated and spiritually radical group, giving itself constantly and wholly to a life of the spirit, will (by its virtues) usher in the forces that will make genuine change possible."<sup>5</sup> And let us learn from Walter Wink, whom Anderson quotes. Wink wrote transformatively about the Powers and about the "Human Being," which is his translation of the phrase often rendered as "Son of Man." And we cannot neglect living Quakers, such as Mary Lord, Georgia Fuller, and Chuck Fager. And we certainly cannot afford to ignore Kenyan Friends, who outnumber all the rest of the Friends in the world.

We follow Jesus by humbly learning, gathering in community and acting in the world.

16 • MICHAEL WILLET NEWHEART

## ENDNOTES

1. “Where Words Come From: Texts and Textures in Meeting for Worship (A Preliminary Report),” *Quaker Theology*, forthcoming.
2. For a brief definition of the Quadrilateral, see The United Methodist Church, “A Glossary of Terms,” <http://archives.umc.org/interior.asp?mid=258&GID=312&GMOD=VWD>, accessed 15 January 2014. For recent discussion, see Don Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral* (Lexington, KY: Emeth, 2005); Ted E. Campbell, et al, *Wesley and the Quadrilateral* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997).
3. Francis Watson, “Strategies of Recovery and Resistance,” *Journal of the Study of the New Testament* 14 no.1 (January 1992), 79-103.
4. Quoted in William Baird, *History of New Testament Research* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013) 3:18.
5. Bayard Rustin, *I Must Resist* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2012), 31.