

2009 BECHTEL LECTURES

LECTURE ONE

"Ambassadors in Chains": Evangelizing the Powers *Ephesians 2-3 and M.L. King's Letter from Birmingham City Jail*

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One of the central questions facing Anabaptist identity in every generation is: What does it mean to be a Peace Church today? In this year's Bechtel Lectures, we hope to address this question afresh. We are interested in how its contours have changed over the last 50 years under the impact of two historic developments. One is the way in which 20th-century experiments in nonviolence, from Gandhi to Martin Luther King to Christian Peacemaker Teams, have influenced how the traditional Peace Churches understand their vocation. The other is the fact that in the last half-century the just war theory has steadily atrophied among mainstream churches. This is due primarily to two factors: the moral challenge of weapons of mass destruction, and the slow but steady unraveling of the Constantinian arrangement. Today the question of how to be a peace church is increasingly one that faces *all* Christian churches, and it has opened up a vigorous ecumenical conversation in which we believe Mennonites have much to offer, but also much to learn.

A second question we wish to explore is: What does it mean to be an *evangelical* peace church? For many Mennonites over the past century, evangelicalism has meant embracing the culture and theology of Pietism while *trying* to retain a distinctive peace witness, a strategy that has yielded decidedly mixed results. In contrast to mainstream contemporary evangelicalism, Menno Simons contended famously that "true evangelical faith" is expressed not in theological dogmas but in "clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, comforting the sorrowful, sheltering the destitute, serving those that harm, and binding up that which is wounded."

Menno further exhorted believers to wield nonviolent "weapons

with which the spiritual kingdom of the devil is destroyed." But it is well documented how the militancy of early Anabaptism has, because of centuries of persecution and accommodation, largely been replaced by a culture of being "quiet in the land." In these lectures, we wish to explore how Mennonites might recover a more engaged evangelism, by looking at both ancient witnesses from the New Testament and contemporary witnesses from the emerging, non-Mennonite (and non-evangelical) "Peace Churches."

By way of introduction, Elaine is a Canadian birthright Mennonite and restorative justice trainer and practitioner, and Ched is a longtime ecumenical activist and theologian who has recently joined the Mennonite Church. We hope our reflections will help all who are committed to the gospel to embody more deeply and broadly our peacemaking faith and work in these difficult times. In that spirit, we want to acknowledge that today [March 26] is the third anniversary of the return to Canada of Christian Peacemaker Teams member James Loney after 118 days of captivity in Iraq. We dedicate this talk to Jim; may his witness continue to challenge and inspire us.

Our societies have never been more in need of courageous and creative alternatives to violence and injustice. Street crime, police abuse, and domestic violence are epidemic, while there has never been a time in history more militarized. More people are enslaved today than two centuries ago, and poverty is the number one killer around the globe. Torture seems to have again become acceptable, and even our entertainment culture is ruled by the gun. We live in a world defined by dividing walls, the expression of the social architecture of enmity and inequality. In the past these included the cultural walls of racial apartheid – the American *and* Canadian versions – as well as the political barriers of Cold War hostility. The walls persist: No sooner had the Berlin Wall come down in 1979 than another wall at the US-Mexico border went up.

From personal alienation and family abuse to urban uprisings and social prejudice, and from a domestic war against immigrants to an international war against real and imagined terrorism, we are caught in an escalating spiral of violence. This is why Martin Luther King, Jr., in his last speech, the night before he was assassinated – 41 years ago next week –

delivered this ultimatum: "It is no longer a choice, my friends, between violence and nonviolence. It is either nonviolence or nonexistence."

King was, as Vincent Harding puts it, *"the inconvenient hero"* for the US and for our churches.¹ King's legacy and challenge belongs to Canadians as well, as our friends north of the border often point out. But we Americans have truly been "in the wilderness for 40 years" since our greatest prophet was cut down by his own government on April 4, 1968.² Harding stresses that we must learn the history of movements for social change because moral imagination begins with memory.³ For this reason, we are committed to learning from King's work and witness, and our comments tonight will be in conversation with one of his most enduring reflections: his 1963 "Letter from Birmingham City Jail."

We will also draw on the biblical book of Ephesians as the other essential part of tonight's conversation. In the middle part of the 20th century, this epistle, with its emphases on peace and overcoming division, was a favorite text of three notable social movements: international ecumenism, disarmament, and Civil Rights. "If Christ is peace," wrote Marcus Barth during the darkest period of the Cold War, "then he is by nature a social, even a political event, which marks the overcoming and ending of barriers however deeply founded and highly constructed."⁴ In the last 30 years, however, Ephesians has fallen into disfavor in mainstream Christian circles, and is sometimes avoided today. We believe that the central character of this epistle as a manifesto of peacemaking is too important to ignore, and we want to reclaim it with a particular eye toward Anabaptist discipleship.

I

We agree with Tom Yoder Neufeld, who has helped rehabilitate Ephesians with his fine *Believer's Church Commentary*, that the epistle probably dates from the late first century, authored by someone (or group) belonging to a



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"Pauline school."⁵ Ephesians takes on the task of summarizing the social character of the apostle's theology for a new generation of Christians, a quarter-century or more after Paul's death. Though tradition attached this letter to Ephesus, it was probably a circular letter sent around to churches throughout Asia Minor. Indeed, a map of the ancient Mediterranean world shows Ephesus in the geopolitical middle, roughly halfway between Jerusalem and Rome, and we know it was the hub of early Christianity in the region. Thus we find it helpful to consider Ephesians as the first "encyclical" in the history of the church.

The thesis statement of the epistle is found in the middle of a long, run-on opening prayer (1:3-14). It introduces a "mystery," but not one which is unsolvable. It has been *revealed* in Christ: God's desire and intention is to re-gather all things alienated back into unity through Christ. Citing the Hebrew tradition of *sophia*, upon which we reflect in the second lecture, the author lays out a vision of the reconciliation of everything. In charge of this new "administration" is Messiah. The Greek word here is *oikonomian*, from which our term "economics" comes, meaning management of a household. This theological assertion seeks to answer the perennial question of individuals and churches alike: What is God's will for me, for us? According to Ephesians, this is a settled issue: to join Christ's program to overcome all division, to include *all* beings, to heal every wound.

This is, by any account, a remarkably big vision for a small movement just four generations old. (It also raises the uncomfortable question of whether our big churches nurture only small visions.) That the writer repeatedly stresses this vision as a *mystery* throughout the epistle, however, testifies to his realism. It is not evident; indeed, human history has long defied the hope for true, cosmic peace. Yet the fact that God's dream has been *revealed* invites and challenges us to be part of this messianic program.

A second key theme of the epistle is then introduced, which grounds the vision in the concrete social terrain of the writer. We read the following equation: "we" (v.12) plus "you" (v.13) will constitute an "us" (v.14). This suggests the author was Jewish, which is indicated by such phrases as "we who first hoped in Messiah" (v.12a). The audience being addressed, on the other hand, consisted predominately of non-Jewish Christians, who had "heard the word of truth . . . and believed" (v.13). This scenario is clearly

expressed in 2:11f: "Remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called the uncircumcision . . . were separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise." It is God's plan to deliver a joint "inheritance" to both Gentiles and Jews (1:14).

Ephesians is thus a treatise on the struggle within salvation history to realize God's great plan of reconciliation, focusing upon the conflict between Christ's inauguration of peace and the Powers' perpetuation of enmity. At the center of this struggle stands the church, which has inherited the messianic vocation of peacemaking. Ephesians reflects concerns of a fourth generation ecclesiology, in particular a changing social situation in which the Jewish roots of the church are in danger of being forgotten by the emerging Gentile majority. The epistle re-contextualizes Paul's argument for inclusion in Romans, where he contends that Gentiles must be allowed into the Jewish tradition. Ephesians inverts this argument, urging a now predominately Gentile church not to forget its roots in Judaism, and to ensure that majority culture discrimination against the Jewish minority – already the norm in the Roman imperial context – isn't reproduced in the church.

Because this joint inheritance is not just spiritual but concretely social in character, deep cultural and political segregation must be overcome. The dream of God, therefore, stands or falls on the creation of a new people, who will be tested upon the historical fact of human alienation, indeed upon a worst-case example. In Hellenistic antiquity the cultural, economic, and political conflict between Jew and Gentile was considered to be the prototype of all human hostility. In other words, we are talking about two communities that are in a protracted, intergenerational war – not unlike the legacy of American apartheid, or Israelis and Arabs today, or Protestant Unionists and Catholic Republicans in Northern Ireland. The epistle invites Christians today to face the same enmities in our historical context.

This brings us to the theological heart of Ephesians, which articulates the historical shape of the cosmic reconciliation in Christ promised in the prologue. The structure of this section is neatly concentric, articulating this magnificent vision of social reconciliation:

- A 11-12: Gentiles not citizens
 - B 13-14a: Gentiles brought near by peace of Christ
 - C 14b-16: The dividing wall torn down
 - B¹ 17-18: Peace has been declared near and far
- A¹ 19-22: Gentiles now citizens

The outer frame reflects, in explicitly political terms, on the notion of "citizenship": v.12 – you were . . . excluded from citizenship (*politeias*) in Israel and strangers (*xenoi*) to the covenants of promise; v.19 – you are no longer strangers (*xenoi*) and 'outside the house,' but are fellow citizens (*sumpolitai*) with the saints and 'members of the household' of God. Those outside have now been welcomed in, and a new society is being built upon the radical principle of inclusion of the ethnic "other." Texts such as this wreak havoc on modern ideologies of xenophobia and discrimination against immigrants.

The inner frame represents a *midrash* on Isaiah 57:19: "Peace, peace to the far and the near, says the Lord; I will heal my people." Verses 13-14a – But now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; v.17 – So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those near, for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.

These two frames bracket the author's central, magnificent articulation of what transpired on Christ's cross as the great moment of cosmic peacemaking. Isaiah's promise has been realized "in the blood of Christ" (v.13). The author now offers a series of participial clauses stacked on top of each other, as if he is searching for different ways to communicate this magnificent but incredible assertion. Christ embodies peace because he has *in his flesh* made us both one, broken down the dividing wall of hostility, the enmity, the law consisting of commandments in statutes; creating in himself one new humanity from the two; thus making peace; reconciling both, in one body, to God through the cross; thereby putting to death the enmity in himself (v. 15f).

The wall that has been torn down is a metaphor for the political, economic, social, and psychological structures and practices that enforce segregation between Jew and Gentile. This enmity was enforced by a

complex matrix of "statutory laws, cultural prejudices and institutionalized imperatives" – just as race or class apartheid was and is in our own time. Such dividing walls are made up of both outer structures and inner attitudes, and this litany claims that *every one of these* has been dismantled by Christ. This is not just a truce in which adversaries tolerate each other; it is a vision that seeks to abolish the deepest justifications for enmity. That is the only peacemaking that endures.

Extraordinary Notions Articulated

Two other extraordinary notions are articulated in this key passage. One is an image fraught with irony. The author claims that the cross – still a symbol in his day of Roman public terrorism, the executioner's stake on which all political dissidents were strung – *itself* somehow "put to death" these deep-seated hostilities (v.16b). This is tantamount to saying today that "the electric chair killed the death penalty." It defies logic. Here the work of René Girard is illuminating. In his comments on the parallel passage in Col. 2:14f, Girard contends that the cross unmasks the scapegoat myth that ultimately lies beneath every justification for officially sanctioned violence:

The Crucifixion reduces mythology to powerlessness by exposing violent contagion, which is so effective in the myths that it prevents communities from ever finding out the truth, namely, the innocence of their victims.... Though ordinarily the accusation nails the victim to a cross, here by contrast the accusation itself is nailed and publicly exhibited and exposed as a lie.⁶

Then and now, the majority culture believes that the state's use of violence "when necessary" is rational, noble, and just (think of the popular support today in the US for the death penalty and foreign military interventions). But "by depriving the victim mechanism of the darkness that must conceal it so it can continue to control human culture, the Cross shakes up the world"; it "discredits once and for all the untruth of the principalities and powers."⁷

The power of nonviolent love has undone the love of power in a world of domination. Peace has been declared, not as a sentimental absence of conflict but as a unilateral disarmament for the purpose of genuine reconciliation of adversaries. This represents the core of Paul's theology of

the cross, which with no understatement he calls a mystery. It is why Girard claims that "the explanatory power of Jesus' death is much greater than we realize, and Paul's exalted idea of the cross as the source of all knowledge is anthropologically sound."⁸

The other remarkable notion is that Christ has "created in himself one new humanity from the two, reconciling both, in one body, to God through the cross" (2:15f). The doctrine of atonement implied by the order of these assertions is as unambiguous as it is controversial: reconciliation with our ethnic or political enemies is a *precondition* to reconciliation with God. This wreaks havoc on the long tradition of pietism that imagines we must first "get right with God" if there is ever to be any social change. As Markus Barth put it, "to confess Jesus Christ is to affirm the abolition and end of division and hostility, the end of separation and segregation, the end of enmity and contempt, and the end of every sort of ghetto."⁹

This peace is neither a sentimental feeling, nor the absence or suppression of conflict, nor a truce in which adversaries tolerate each other, but the abolition of the deepest justifications for enmity. Reconciling peacemaking has thus been declared as gospel, and the gospel as reconciling peacemaking (*euēngelosato*, 2:17; see 6:15). The result, stated in almost Trinitarian fashion, is that in Christ both formerly alienated groups now "have access in one Spirit to the Father" (2:18). "Accordingly" (*ara*, 2:19a), those who abide by this unilateral declaration of peace represent a third force in history, the desegregated community of the church (2:19-22). The church is thus described, in frankly political terms, as a "house without walls."

Note all the ways that the root *oik* appears here: 2:19 – you are no longer strangers and outside the house (*paroikos*), but are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household (*oikeioi*) of God; 2:20-22 – built upon (*epoikodomēthentes*) the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the "keystone." The whole structure (*oikodomē*) is joined together in Christ and grows into a holy Temple in the Lord, in whom you also are built (*sunoikodomeisthe*) into it for a dwelling place (*katoikētērion*) of God in the Spirit.

The apostles and prophets are the foundation of this house, and Christ Jesus the keystone – not the cornerstone, as is often translated, but the stone at the top of a Roman arch, literally lying at the extreme angle – the final

stone placed at the top of a building structure to integrate it. In fact, this house is not architectural at all but *organic*: joined sinew to sinew, heart to heart. It is what Martin Luther King, Jr. called "the beloved community."

Members of this undivided house cannot by definition cooperate with any of the myriad social constructions of enmity – nation, gender, class, race, or sexuality. Although walls still exist in the world, Christians should live as if they have been torn down. This means we have to rethink some of our most fundamental assumptions, as the Jewish writer to the Ephesians did concerning the Law. How, for example, is the integrity of the US church compromised by the wall at the US- Mexico border? Or by the second-class citizenship of the gay and lesbian believers among us? Or by the social architecture of our cities that still insulates rich from poor by the thin blue line of police discrimination and the thick red line of economic apartheid? If we Christians are not defying these walls of division, we are not being the church, no matter what we call ourselves.

This vision sounds radical to our ears, since we have been habituated to accept political hostility and division as "the way the world is." This is why Ephesians now turns to ground this vision in sobering reality: a true peace church *will* be persecuted because of its refusal to abide by enmity. We might say that Eph. 1-2, with its vision of comprehensive reconciliation, is analogous to King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech in 1963, which held out a new social possibility to Americans that rejected racism and embraced a common destiny for white and black. But the rest of the Ephesian encyclical speaks from and to the context of engaged struggle, as did another piece authored by King that same year, his "Letter from Birmingham City Jail." God's dream is not a pollyannish fantasy but a social imperative, and requires real disciples to engage strategically and nonviolently the existing dividing walls, often at a real cost.

II

Dead middle in Ephesians, almost like a fulcrum on which the epistle's argument balances, comes this stark reality check to its lofty vision of peace: "Because of all this I, Paul, am a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles." The phrase is incomplete, hanging over the whole of Eph. 3 until

it is reiterated in 4:1, which begins the formal parenthetic (i.e., encouraging) section of the epistle, thus firmly anchoring its exhortations in political reality.

The apostle is locked up by the very laws that were allegedly annulled on Christ's cross; obviously the good news that racial hostility has been abolished has not yet dawned on Caesar's world. We tend to romanticize the terrain in which the NT takes place, deluding ourselves into thinking these events happened in Disneyland. Even biblical scholars (few of whom have been to jail) often romanticize Paul's prison experiences, as if he endured only brief stints in a civilized holding cell. In fact, the prisons of the Roman Empire were brutal, marked by "suffering, beatings, chains, darkness and squalor," according to Craig Wansink.¹⁰ The incarcerated had no rights; then (as now) the prison population consisted either of poor people or dissidents – and apparently Paul was both. "Imprisonment might lead to death," says Wansink, "either execution by the authorities or death resulting from disease, torture, or the psychological trauma of imprisonment." The Roman historian Sallust (86-34 BC) described one prison starkly: "Its appearance is disgusting and vile by reason of the filth, the darkness and the stench.... Some have been crucified, others thrown to wild beasts; a few whose lives were spared, in gloomy dungeons amid sorrow and lamentation drag out an existence worse than death."¹¹ Roman subterranean prisons were so identified with the horrors of perpetual darkness that they became synonymous in contemporary literature with Hades.



Paul was a political prisoner, a convicted felon with years of hard time under his belt. If Ephesians was penned in the last decade of the first century, there would have been strong resonance between the author's political situation and that of the apostle. The latter was executed during the first great systematic persecution of the church under Emperor Nero (64-68 CE). Ephesians most likely circulated during the next wave of imperial

pogroms under Domitian (81-96 CE). This period, during which Jewish practices were outlawed and the emperor cult established, inspired the fierce apocalyptic rant of another political prisoner, John's Revelation.¹²

We might well wonder whether the author of Ephesians, like his teacher three decades earlier, also experienced incarceration. In any case, the letter's "origins" in prison give its grand vision of cosmic unity a distinctive realism. The Pauline tradition could indeed claim to have "lived within the monster and know its entrails."¹³ "Assuming, that is, you have already heard of my 'administration' of God's grace (*oikonomian tēs charitos*) given to me for you" (Eph. 3:2). The writer wonders rhetorically whether his audience might have heard about Paul's lock-up, which of course they had. If this isn't slightly sarcastic – something the historic Paul was surely capable of – it certainly introduces an edge to the epistle. This is intensified by the claim that the apostle's incarceration is specifically on *behalf* of the Gentile Christians to whom the epistle is addressed. The author could just as well have said "*because* of you Gentiles." For Ephesians to invoke Paul's imprisonment (in full knowledge of his eventual martyrdom) by the Roman authorities functioned as a warning to Gentile Christians not to be complacent citizens of that empire, particularly if the heat was again ramping up under Domitian.

The political significance of this scenario sharpens when viewed through the analogical lens of the more historically familiar witness of Martin Luther King, Jr. There are compelling parallels between King, appealing from jail to white clergy for solidarity with his witness against American apartheid, and Paul, calling on Gentile Christians from prison to support his challenge to the political-cultural system of social segregation between Jew and Greek. King's repeated jailings were embarrassing to polite Southern society, and we can assume the same was true of Paul's imprisonments for his Gentile converts. Jail epistles served as unwelcome reminders that all was *not* well, that good people – religious leaders, even – were being treated as criminals because of the problems everyone knew existed. This was precisely the strategy that King took from Gandhi: using civil disobedience to provoke a moral crisis. Paul is leaning on that disruptive, but divinely-sanctioned, moral authority as well.

Letters from Jails

We think, therefore, that it is fruitful to read Ephesians as a sort of ancient "Letter from Birmingham City Jail." King's jail epistle was penned on April 16, 1963, amidst a tough period in his struggle for integration and voting rights for African Americans in the South – his eight-day confinement as a result of civil disobedience. Biographer Taylor Branch sets the context:

Furtively through the bars – because the jail rules allowed no material possessions to prisoners in solitary – King showed [his lawyer] Jones a copy on the *Birmingham News* that had been smuggled in on a previous legal visit. All around the margins, meandering from page to page, he was scribbling a passionate response to a small story headlined "White Clergymen Urge Local Negroes to Withdraw from Demonstration." Led by ... the Episcopal bishop of Alabama, an ecumenical group of eight religious leaders – all at least mild critics of segregation – had issued a statement calling King's Birmingham campaign "unwise and untimely".... He addressed the eight Birmingham clergy in dozens of voices – begged, scolded, explained, even cooed to them, and conspired icily with them as fellow experts.... Outside the jail, the finished letter was typed neatly at a length of twenty pages, then copied and distributed widely by hand and post.¹⁴

The letter, like Paul's epistles, initially remained obscure, yet its eventual fame is justified. It is a brilliant theological and political defense of nonviolent direct action, especially enduring for activists who face (as they almost always do) the criticism of prominent leaders who inevitably appeal for more time and less agitation.

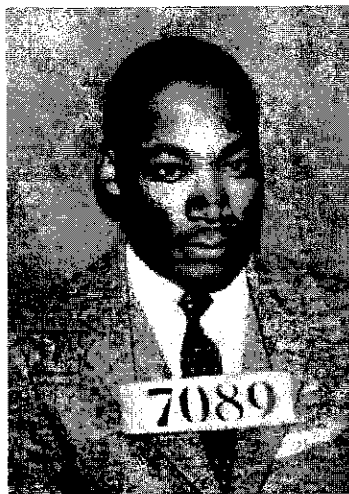
King responds to the charge that he was an "outside agitator" by appealing to the example of none other than the apostle:

I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their "thus saith the Lord" far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners

of the Greco-Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid....¹⁵

Then King adds one of his most sublime rationales: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny."

King, a member of an oppressed and marginalized minority, was appealing directly to leaders of the Christian church who, as members of the majority culture, were also his historic adversaries, socially and politically speaking. He both defended his witness and challenged them to live up to



their faith. This is exactly what the author of Ephesians was doing: reminding his Gentile colleagues of the moral authority of the Jewish founders of the Jesus movement, while also charging them to follow Christ by refusing to cooperate with the institutionalized segregation that kept Jews and Gentiles "separate and unequal." Both authors languished in jail *knowing* that good Christians were doing nothing about apartheid, taking comfortable refuge in their dominant culture privileges, and hiding behind pious rhetoric while avoiding real solidarity with their oppressed cousins in the faith.

King was particularly critical of "the white moderate, who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: 'I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action'; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom."¹⁶

Paul's Jail Letter

Perhaps with similar frustration, the author of Ephesians returns to the "we/you" discourse of Eph. 1-2, now personalized:

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3:1: *I* Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of *you* Gentiles—

3:2 assuming *you* have heard of the administration of God's grace that was given *me* for *you*,

3:3 how the mystery was made known to *me* by revelation, as *I* have written briefly.

3:4 When *you* read this you can perceive *my* insight...

Ephesians challenges Christians, as King would later, to fully embrace both the gospel and their responsibilities in the historical moment. And both do so from behind bars of the system they are seeking to overturn. King, moreover, invokes the biblical precedent for his dissent:

Of course, there is nothing new about this kind of civil disobedience. It was evidenced sublimely in the refusal of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to obey the laws of Nebuchadnezzar, on the ground that a higher moral law was at stake. It was practiced superbly by the early Christians, who were willing to face hungry lions and the excruciating pain of chopping blocks rather than submit to certain unjust laws of the Roman Empire.¹⁷

The radical message of these letters and the disturbing social location of the letter-writers are deeply challenging to comfortable audiences, in Paul's time and ours. The vision of reconciliation is a tall enough order; all the more when broadcast from such an obscure, vulnerable space in the entrails of empire. This is why the author now returns to the notion of God's will as a "mystery" (3:3,4,9).

The prospects for transformation are not at all evident to the rational or the powerful. But this counterintuitive truth was "revealed by the Spirit" to Paul, as an apostle in the prophetic tradition (3:5). The Greek verb here is *apocaluptō* (literally "to unmask"), because the dream of God requires a different way of seeing. An *apocalypsis* is always a double "revelation," as evidenced in the writing of that other NT political prisoner, John of Patmos: on one hand, seeing realities of injustice that are being denied; on

the other, glimpsing possibilities of a world transformed.¹⁸ In Ephesians, the reality articulated was the fact of human enmity, the possibility was that this fact would be overcome in salvation history (3:6). As peacemakers, both King and Paul stressed repeatedly that members of the very group who had historically oppressed their people are welcome as full members in the movement. This was not easy for nationalists in their respective minority contexts to accept, and both men were accused of being "traitors to their race."

Nor was their advocacy of nonviolence widely embraced. Why should the already marginalized suffer *more* in the struggle to wrest justice from the dominant culture? But both King and Paul understood that it is the oppressive majority which stands in deepest need of redemption. Those who nonviolently resist their adversaries are offering a healing gift, though it is rarely perceived that way by those with power. This is the heart of restorative justice; such work is incredibly demanding. So we can understand why the author of Ephesians repeatedly emphasizes Paul's dependence on the transformative energy of divine grace: "Of this gospel I was made servant, according to the gift of God's grace, given to me according to the energy of God's power" (3:7).¹⁹ In this way nonviolent work and witness for justice becomes a "force more powerful."

Ephesians now describes three goals of Paul's ministry (3:8-10):

1. to proclaim to his ethnic adversaries "the unsearchable riches of Christ";
2. to help *all* people see the "administration of the mystery," already identified as the overcoming of social enmity; and
3. to animate the church "to make known the wisdom of God (*sophia tou theou*) in its rich variety to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places."

This third aspect sets his vocation firmly in a political context. Paul is in jail because he is an evangelist for the gospel of peace in a world of hostility and division, and that includes proclaiming it to the highest authorities, the very architects of social enmity. Walter Wink has popularized the theological re-appropriation of "Principalities and Powers" language in the NT, helping us

understand that these “rulers in the heavenly places” were counterparts of the earthly authorities – the spirit of Domination, we might say today.

King’s Jail Letter

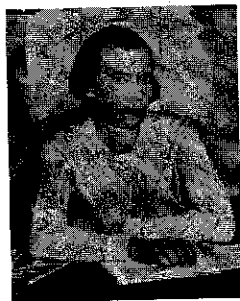
This same concern for the unavoidably *public* vocation of the church marks King’s jail letter, which includes a scathing indictment of the white church’s lack of support of the Civil Rights movement. Speaking as “one who loves the church,” King laments that whereas he had hoped that religious leaders in the South would be “some of our strongest allies,”

instead, some have been outright opponents, refusing to understand the freedom movement and misrepresenting its leaders; all too many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of the stained-glass windows.... In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churches stand on the sideline and merely mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard so many ministers say, “Those are social issues with which the gospel has no real concern.”²⁰

King abhorred the church’s failure to preach the gospel to the Powers, and upbraided it as a community “largely adjusted to the status quo, standing as a taillight behind other community agencies rather than a headlight leading men to higher levels of justice.”²¹ King and Paul could not be more explicit, yet modern Christians still imagine that churches should “stay out of politics” – as if that were possible. The only question is what *kind* of politics the church should embody.

Archbishop Oscar Romero learned the truth of this when he began to speak out on behalf of the poor in El Salvador in the 1980s. Cesar Chavez (at right), inspired by King, often took the symbols





of his deep Catholic faith into his public struggle on behalf of farm workers. Julia Esquivel, a Presbyterian laywoman from Guatemala and a celebrated poet and activist, was exiled from her home for many years because of her outspoken advocacy for human rights. And Dorothy Day (at left), co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement, was arrested many times for civil disobedience. These disciples were embodying the church's vocation to evangelize the Powers.

In light of this sobering task, it is no accident that the author of Ephesians concludes this meditation with a long, pastoral prayer for the very Gentile Christians who aren't too sure about the appropriateness of his witness (3:14-21). He asks his audience to pray that he will "not lose heart over my suffering" (3:13), which is redefined as *their* glory. This is no doubt intended ironically, since it will be his audience's response that determines whether or not Paul loses heart. He hopes they will be "grounded in love" (3:17) and will "comprehend the big picture" of this love (3:18f) – a sort of "keep your eyes on the prize" exhortation. In a final summons for these citizens of empire and disciples of Jesus to transcend their entitlements and their domesticated fears, a benediction invokes "the One who is able to do far more with us than anything we might ask or think" (3:20).

King penned a similar conclusion to his jail epistle:

I hope this letter finds you strong in the faith. I also hope that circumstances will soon make it possible for me to meet each of you, not as an integrationist or a civil rights leader but as a fellow clergyman and a Christian brother. Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities, and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty.²²

In both epistles, the authors' pastoral concern makes no attempt to hide their hope that these ambivalent colleagues will become true partners in the faith. Ephesians as a whole will close, after the well-known meditation on putting on the nonviolent armor of struggle (6:10ff), with a similar petition

for solidarity. Paul, the political prisoner, asks for courage to continue to speak truth to power:

Pray also for me, so that when I speak I will
open my mouth boldly (*parrēsia*)
to proclaim the mystery of the gospel,
for which I am an ambassador in chains,
so I might declare it boldly (*parrēsasōmai*; 6:19f).²³

The message of Christ's abolition of enmity is not warmly received by those in authority – not in ancient Rome or Ephesus, and not in modern Birmingham or Washington, DC. This explains the ironic “ambassador in chains.” It also echoes 2 Cor. 5:20, in which the historical Paul urges disciples to become “ambassadors of God's reconciliation.”

That phrase of Paul's seemed fitting for the title of our two-volume project on Christian peacemaking and restorative justice.²⁴ Volume II includes interviews with cutting-edge practitioners who embody this kind of faith-based peacemaking work. We will conclude this lecture by sharing one of those profiles, because in order to understand the concern and call of the Ephesian and Kingian jail epistles, we must look to those who are making this word flesh in our own time.

III

Nelson Johnson of Greensboro, North Carolina (*below*) is a Baptist minister, a community leader, a dear friend and important mentor to us. Deeply grounded in the black freedom movement, he has for five decades been involved in struggles for justice, particularly around issues of race and labor. He is pastor of Faith Community Church, which also houses the Beloved Community Center, a grassroots outreach in their low-income African American neighborhood. Recently we



Photo Credit: Word and World

asked him where his courage and convictions come from. "I was born in 1943," he replied. "Many of those who held me as a baby had been slaves or were the children of slaves. I need to bear witness to *that*."²⁵

A powerful preacher and teacher, Johnson interprets the story of Jesus and its relevance to the present struggle for cultural and economic equality each week with his small congregation. He speaks with the moral authority of someone who has been profoundly victimized by racism: stabbed by would-be assassins, jailed on trumped-up charges, targeted by the police, and maligned by the political establishment. Yet his countenance bears none of this; indeed, as a community organizer he is more interested in helping residents find *their* voice and tell their stories. Most recently, he has animated the historic Greensboro Community Truth and Reconciliation Project, the first such effort to take place on American soil.

Greensboro has been at the crossroads of Civil Rights history. On February 1, 1960, four students from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical University sat down at a Woolworth's lunch counter to protest segregation, which launched a direct action movement that re-energized the Civil Rights struggle and eventually changed the United States forever. But it was the events of November 3, 1979 that changed Johnson's life forever. He and other labor organizers were preparing for a rally in a working class black neighborhood in Greensboro, in order to address unjust labor practices and racism in local textile mills. People were slowly gathering to begin the demonstration, with children and older folk coming out of the projects to join the singing.

Suddenly a caravan of nine cars drove towards the organizers; in it were members of the Ku Klux Klan and Nazis. The Klansmen got out and began shooting at the crowd. In 88 seconds, they killed five leaders of the march and wounded ten others, all of this captured by local television cameras. The neighborhood was terrified and the city was thrown into shock. Slain were a Latino community organizer, two white medical doctors, a black activist, and a white researcher – all friends and colleagues of Johnson's. It was learned later that the Greensboro Police Department were fully aware of the Klan's presence and plans yet did nothing. The attackers escaped serious injury, and most were able to flee the scene unhindered. In two ensuing trials, all-white juries exonerated the suspects. Finally, in 1985, a third civil

trial found, for the first time in US history, that police were jointly liable with white supremacists for a wrongful death.²⁶

The entire community of Greensboro continued to suffer from the trauma of that day. Yet most chose to try to suppress those events from the collective memory. So it was up to the survivors of the massacre, led by Johnson, to try to help Greensboro face its past. Using some of the precedents set by the South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commission,²⁷ he and others launched a project to bring this process to the US for the first time.

Supported by people like Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the Greensboro Truth and Community Reconciliation (TRC) organizers began formal outreach to the community. In March 2003 they invited 17 different factions of the Greensboro community to form a selection committee. Only three groups declined to participate: the Sons and Daughters of the Confederacy, the Greensboro Police Department, and the Chamber of Commerce. Despite much public opposition, seven commissioners were chosen, and were installed on June 12, 2004. Klan members sent death threats to the commissioners; one read: "The only reconciliation we want is at the end of a gun."

Nevertheless, the commission held three public hearings, and over 200 people presented testimony. This number included the judge who presided over the original criminal case; the lawyer for and members of the Klan and Nazis; survivors; and residents of the traumatized community. Hundreds of people gathered to listen to riveting testimony. The Greensboro project affirms a motto of the South African project: "Without truth there can be no healing, without forgiveness, there can be no future."²⁸ The commissioners released a 600-page report on May 25, 2006, which launched a year of discussion in the city. Now the task is to see the Commissioners' recommendations implemented. We were honored to be advisors to this project, and believe that it will inaugurate a new era for those who have suffered historical injustices in the United States. Dozens of community leaders from around the country have come to Greensboro to learn how to organize their own TRC processes, as the despair of historical silence gives way to restorative truth-seeking.

The Greensboro story should be both challenging and heartening

to Canadians, for Canada is about to embark on its own Truth and Reconciliation journey concerning the terrible legacy of the Residential Schools, something in which many churches were deeply involved. From the 19th century through 1996 there were some 130 such schools spread throughout most territories and provinces. About 150,000 aboriginal, Inuit, and Métis children were removed from their communities and forced to attend these schools, and many students lived in substandard conditions and endured physical, emotional, and sexual abuse.

After much organizing and advocacy, in December 2006 a \$2-billion compensation package was approved for Aboriginal people who were forced to attend residential schools, and Prime Minister Stephen Harper delivered an official apology in Parliament on June 11, 2008. The proposed settlement promised a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to examine the legacy of the residential schools. Its purpose is to create a historical account of the schools, help people to heal, and encourage reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians. The commission will host events across the country to raise awareness about the residential school system and its impact.

The TRC process allows for acknowledgement, appropriate public mourning, forgiveness, and healing. We believe that this represents an evangelical opening for all Canadian churches – including Mennonites. We hope many will choose to become involved in this process, in the spirit of the Ephesian gospel of reconciliation. And this is just one of many important issues we need to engage in order to build just relationships with Aboriginal Canadians. Last month the United Nations review of Canada's human rights record criticized its track record on Aboriginal affairs. In fact, Canada, like the US, has refused to sign the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Other issues include the environmental devastation on First Nations land caused by tar sands development, and the impact of Petro-Canada pipelines running through reserves; the many recent disappearances of First Nations women that have not been accounted for; the need to give more recognition to Aboriginal justice processes in the criminal justice system; and above all, the ongoing issue of land, including unsettled claims right here along the Grand River in Ontario.

* * * * *

What does it mean to be an evangelical peace church? We believe that we gain our best clues from the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the movement he led. The Lorraine Motel in Memphis, where King was gunned down in 1968, has since been turned into the magnificent national Civil Rights Museum. Underneath the balcony where he died lies a memorial stone on which is inscribed a line from the biblical story of Joseph and his brothers.

They said to one another,
Behold, Here cometh the dreamer...
Let us slay him...
And we shall see what will become of his dreams.
(Gen. 37:19-20)

We believe this verse represents an historical ultimatum to our churches. King's vision of beloved community, like the apostle Paul's vision of a church without walls, remains the dream of God. What will become of this dream, however, is up to us.

Notes

¹ Vincent Harding, *Martin Luther King: The Inconvenient Hero*. 2nd. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008).

² We do not make this assertion lightly. In the Fall of 1999, the King family, long convinced that Martin's convicted assassin James Earl Ray did not act alone, brought a civil suit to the Circuit Court of Shelby County, Tennessee, 30th Judicial District in Memphis, in order to discover the real facts of Martin's murder. The family statement on Dec. 9, 1999, in the wake of the jury's verdict, read in part:

1. We initially requested that a comprehensive investigation be conducted by a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, independent of the government, because we do not believe that, in such a politically-sensitive matter, the government is capable of investigating itself.
2. The type of independent investigation we sought was denied by the federal government. But in our view, it was carried out, in a Memphis courtroom, during a month-long trial by a jury of 12 American citizens who had no interest other than ascertaining the truth.
3. After hearing and reviewing the extensive testimony and evidence, which had

never before been tested under oath in a court of law, it took the Memphis jury only 1.5 hours to find that a conspiracy to kill Dr. King did exist. Most significantly, this conspiracy involved agents of the governments of the City of Memphis, the state of Tennessee and the United States of America. The overwhelming weight of the evidence also indicated that James Earl Ray was not the triggerman and, in fact, was an unknowing patsy.

4. We stand by that verdict and have no doubt that the truth about this terrible event has finally been revealed.

The story of this trial and its stunning verdict was virtually ignored in the US press. The full narrative can be found in William F. Pepper, *An Act of State: The Execution of Martin Luther King* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2003). For complete trial transcripts see <http://thekingcenter.com/news/trial.html>.

³ Vincent Harding, *Hope and History: Why We Must Share the Story of the Movement* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990).

⁴ Marcus Barth, *The Broken Wall: A Study of the Epistle to the Ephesians* (Valley Forge, PA: The Judson Press, 1959), 44.

⁵ Tom Yoder Neufeld, *Ephesians*. Believers Church Bible Commentary (Scottsdale: Herald, 2002).

⁶ René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 138.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁹ Barth, 45.

¹⁰ Craig S. Wansink, *Chained in Christ: The Experience and Rhetoric of Paul's Imprisonments*. JSNT Supplements (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 33.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹² See Rev. 1:9; 2:10-13; 13:15; 17:5f; 20:4 for allusions to persecution and death for refusal to worship "the beast." Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999) point out that the only place the term *aikmalōsian* ("prisoner of war") appears in the NT is Rev. 13:10 and Eph. 4:8.

¹³ This famous phrase comes from Jose Martí, the late 19th-century Cuban independence leader and anti-imperialist, who knew the inside of prisons intimately. Paul's imprisonments were legendary for the church which survived him, as reported for example by Luke in Acts 21:23 and 28:30. Emphasizing this jail legacy, and the moral authority it freighted, was an important literary aspect of later pseudepigraphic epistles (see e.g., 2 Tim. 1:8-12 and Col. 4:3,18). Jail was nothing to be "ashamed" of; indeed, it represented a *bona fide* of Paul's apostolic stature. And for Ephesians, it offered courage to a new generation under persecution.

¹⁴ Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years 1963-65* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), 46-48.

¹⁵ James M. Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco: HarperSanfrancisco, 1986), 299ff.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 295.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 294.

¹⁸ See Ched Myers, *Who Will Roll Away the Stone? Discipleship Queries for First World Christians* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 396ff.

¹⁹ The noun *energeia* (here and 1:19; 4:16) and verb *energeō* (1:11,20; 2:2; 3:20) appear more often in Ephesians than in any other book of the NT.

²⁰ Washington, 299.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 302.

²³ Both adverb and verb mean "openly," and, in a public or political context where breaking silence can result in opposition or arrest, "boldly or courageously" (e.g., Acts 2:29; 4:13,29; 9:27-9; 13:46; 14:3; 18:26; 19:8; 26:26; 28:31; Phil. 1:20; Col. 1:20; 1 Thess. 2:2).

²⁴ Ched Myers and Elaine Enns, *Ambassadors of Reconciliation, Vol. I: New Testament Reflections on Restorative Justice and Peacemaking* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009).

²⁵ For a fuller account of Johnson's story, see Myers and Enns, *Ambassadors, Vol. II*, chapter 7b.

²⁶ For background and details of this incident see the accounts of Sally A. Bermanzohn, *Through Survivors' Eyes: From the Sixties to the Greensboro Massacre* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2003), and Signe Waller, *Love and Revolution: A Political Memoir. People's History of the Greensboro Massacre, Its Setting and Aftermath* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), who are fellow survivors of the 1979 Greensboro Massacre. For a compelling personal narrative of parallel events during this period in nearby Oxford, North Carolina – just a few miles from where Nelson Johnson grew up – see Timothy B. Tyson, *Blood Done Sign My Name* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004); for broader social and historical context, see William Henry Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

²⁷ See Russell Daye, *Political Forgiveness: Lessons from South Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004).

²⁸ See Desmond Mpilo Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999).