

With the Grain of the Universe

James J. Fehr

Director, German Mennonite Peace Committee

One intriguing approach to reading the Bible goes behind those doctrines like sin or divine grace that strike many of us as hackneyed and dreary and asks how specific concepts were actually intended and understood “back in the day”. You know, before the theologians began brewing their spells, and by the strength of their illusion drew us on to our confusion. It is interesting to discover, for example, that the Hebrew concept of the soul is not an aspect of the human that is distinct from our fleshly existence, but includes essentially our breathing, our appetites and emotions. Consider under this perspective how one must re-read “What does it profit a man to gain the whole world but lose his soul?” Much of the best and most arresting contemporary theological literature adopts this approach.

There is, however, another equally interesting interpretive method that is more seldom the object of serious scrutiny. It asks whether the New Testament authors had a political agenda for the people of God. Indeed, given what we know about the biblical message: that the prophets championed the disadvantaged, that Jesus criticized mainstream value-systems, and that God himself is characterized as opposing the structures of power and domination, we might well ask: Could these themes still have application for the church today? – Oops, dreadfully sorry to have disturbed your afternoon tea. But let’s consider what the Mennonites have made out of this notion.

Imagine that Jesus gathered disciples, not in order to have a docile audience for his magic acts, but in order to train a community of men and women in acts of engagement with the world. Imagine that he was not interested in adoring spectators, but wanted his trainees to continue his feats of confronting power circles and domination systems with peaceful and non-coercive acts of love. This is what following Jesus means to Mennonites. – To some this training programme may sound daft, to others it may sound heroic. But if that was Jesus’ intention, then clearly something got his community side-tracked along the way. The Mennonites have a word for that: Constantinianism.

The Mennonite Church is an attempt to revive the original form of Jesuan community that began in Palestine and that has lived on in various guises during the Middle Ages and after the Reformation. This form of community needed revival, because of the fatal alliance that the Church forged in the 4th century. After Constantine the Great purportedly used bloody violence in allegiance to the Christian God (a God of peace and love, who revealed himself in the self-sacrifice of his Son), the Church decided to use this opportunity to further her interests. She became an institution in allegiance to the state. She began to persecute those who did not believe “properly”. She developed a system of domination of her own.

It may be that such compromises are inevitable. It may be that any counter-cultural institution, when it grows unwieldy, forms unholy alliances. But it is not the way of Jesus, who claimed that those who lose their lives are the true winners. A revolution of stubborn, steadfast love creates just, merciful, humane communities. Using war and violence can bring short-term rewards. But in the long-term, only the peace-work of reconciliation and healing overcomes all the side-products of violence. In other words, mechanisms of domination and power run against the grain of our world. A political and social system of non-coercive love goes with the grain of the whole universe. Or as we confess: With the resurrection of Jesus, God defeated the politics of violence.