

Theology and Peace Conference — May 21-22, 2008  
“Ecclesia” Conversation with Paul Nuechterlein  
Presentation Outline

Theme: “...that he might create in himself one new humanity” — Eph. 2:15

1. Introductory Matters
  - a. ‘Research’ in the parish stays close to preaching and teaching.
  - b. Change is the crucial reality in today’s parish; leading a community of disciples in change is the crucial task for pastors.
  - c. In the past, leading change was about intra-community life; today, change is going on all around so quickly that the greater pastoral task is to help disciples cope with the change in the ‘outside’ world.
  - d. Yet are the ecclesial changes reactive or proactive to the cultural changes?
2. Rapid Change in the *Media* of Culture
  - a. Technology and consumerism of new media lead the way and the church will generally be reactive. Can the church keep up with the extreme speed of the change?
  - b. Tex Sample’s thesis about eras of mediating culture: oral, textual, electronic multi-media.
  - c. But Sample leaves out the original media of culture: ritual.
  - d. Question from the pov of mimetic theory: Is the multi-sensory nature of today’s ‘virtual reality’ a return to the multi-sensory experience of yesterday’s ritual? Are today’s M-rated video games in any way analogous to blood sacrifice?
  - e. Task of the parish: give guidance to parents and youth about spiritual health.
3. Navigating the Momentous Change in Western Culture Itself: Modern to Postmodern, Christendom to Post-Christendom, Imperialism to Post-imperialism.
  - a. Folks in the pew might not be aware of the nomenclature but they are aware of the effects. Example: Read Deut 6:10-12 and identify what we are sensitive to today that we probably wouldn’t have noticed fifty years.
  - b. Is it productive to try to do the cultural analysis in adult education? I’m not sure. One of the theologians who has addressed these issues most forthrightly and helpfully is Douglas John Hall. He addresses the transformation from Christendom to post-Christendom as a central task of doing theology today in North America, so it’s in every book of his. One small book where he makes it the whole theme is *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity*.
  - c. Otherwise, these changes and their effects are part of preaching and teaching in today’s church.
  - d. Secular culture is in some ways ahead of church culture on these changes. The conservative right is holding on to imperialism. The so-called mainline churches have been languishing. Question: Is the key to mainline church health to become proactive in this change rather than reactive? Is there a reason why it seems that some of the most articulate in the ‘emerging church’ movement are from conservative, evangelical churches rather than mainline? Why are the mainline churches being so slow?
4. The Gospel and Imperialism
  - a. Increasingly, I’m seeing a central purpose of God as creating in Jesus Christ one new humanity. Example: Lent 2A (this past Feb 17) is truly a confluence of lessons on these themes: Genesis 12:1-4a; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17.

- b. Is that the theme of mimetic theory as well? How to be a Holy Communion, a true community?
  - c. Or does mimetic theory simply describe how fallen human community is based on dualisms of insiders and outsiders, or with a hierarchy that leaves many marginalized?
  - d. Is imperialism an attempt at the Gospel's goal of one new humanity but perverted by the scapegoating mechanism?
5. Postmodernism as an Anti-Imperialist reading of texts and traditions of texts — in the Church, as a Post-Christendom way of reading our traditions
- a. A big task today is helping people read, and understand, our central Christian symbols in renewed ways:
    - i. The Resurrection — N. T. Wright is huge on this important matter, helping us to move from a Platonist hope in saving souls for heaven, to a Jewish hope for new creation — or as he sometimes puts it, life *after* life-after-death. See his new book *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*. Question: why would an imperialist reading strategy favor 'saving souls for heaven'?
    - ii. The Cross — here mimetic theory is front and center with new books like Mark Heim's *Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross* and Hardin's and Jersak's *Stricken by God? Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ*. Question: why would an imperialist reading strategy favor a wrathful, punishing God to appease?
    - iii. Reading Scripture — the latest trend recovers a reading of the Bible that is anti-imperialistic. N. T. Wright, Richard Horsley, Norman Gottwald, Walter Brueggemann, Warren Carter, Ched Myers, Walter Wink, Wes Howard-Brook, John Howard Yoder, and others.
  - b. Preaching and teaching — how do we transform our readings of scripture to be proactive agents of change?
6. Challenge for Mimetic Theory: The New Testament Understanding on Law
- a. MT sheds considerable light on societies whose order is based on ritual sacrifice — what about societies whose order is based on law?
  - b. The New Testament era lies during the transition between the two bases for order:
    - i. St. Paul's understanding of the Law, especially in Romans and Galatians
    - ii. The Sermon on the Mount, especially Matthew 5:17-48
  - c. Personal avenues for further research
    - i. My own Lutheran background and setting: "law and gospel" as a basic theological category
    - ii. Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a Lutheran who might be helpful
    - iii. Revisit Hamerton-Kelly's *Sacred Violence*
    - iv. Duncan Derrett (one of James Alison's guides and an expert on law)
    - v. Others? Mimetic theorists on the law?
7. Case Study: Gays & Lesbians in the Church (particularly in the ELCA)
- a. ELCA statements on sexuality and "orders of creation"
  - b. Bonhoeffer's striking down of "orders of creation" to focus on the "law of Christ"
  - c. MT as an opening to renew "natural law" in modern science's understanding of creation
  - d. MT and Romans 1