

Book Review: A Revolutionary Jesus: Violence and Peacemaking in the Kingdom of God¹

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“Yes, affirm Christians, violence is bad, and Jesus taught against it. However, some of those same Christians continue, in certain circumstances, violence may unfortunately be necessary.” (Preface, p. xi)

Jesse Nickel is an excellent example of the distinction between either idealist or utilitarian pacifists and those disciples of Jesus committed to his cruciform path of non-violence. Pacifism, as I’m using the term, is an *-ism*—an ideology—committed to non-retaliation, but with no necessary commitment to Jesus himself. The idealists are often more committed to the *idea* of pacifism than to justice on the ground or the real lives sacrificed when aggressors advance. Their case for nonviolence can seem naïve and performative to those faced with invasion or occupation. The utilitarians say, “No, non-violent resistance is not naïve. It is far more effective in bringing about peace and justice than militarism or insurgency. It actually works.” But their opponents then roll out the standard examples (Hitler is always the favourite) to say, “But when it doesn’t...” and the justifications for endless exceptions multiply.

Jesse Nickel’s *Revolutionary Jesus* offers a fresh alternative—radical in the Anabaptist sense of ‘back to the roots.’ In five chapters of accessible biblical scholarship, he reaffirms the Jesus Way of non-violent peacebuilding, cross-shaped discipleship, and invites readers to be the prophetic minority report who overcome evil with good. Nickel takes challenges to his thesis seriously and refrains from condemning those who see things differently. He seems to recognize his critics are not all armchair philosophers—some have witnessed or undergone violence and hope to mitigate suffering through ‘just war’ as a type of harm reduction. He also admits that they might see his way as utopian and unrealistic. Nevertheless, Nickel’s commitment is to reaffirm Jesus’s posture toward violence and to call those who claim his name (and to everyone groaning under death’s lash) to ‘take up their Cross’ and *follow*—i.e., to *put into practice* his way of peace.

¹ Jesse P. Nickel. *A Revolutionary Jesus: Violence and Peacemaking in the Kingdom of God*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2024).

The chapters are as follows:

Introduction - An overview of the way violence permeated the Roman world and Jewish expectations in Jesus's first century context.

1. **Violence, Jesus, and the Kingdom of God** – An examination of Jesus's eschatological focus and what he meant by 'the Kingdom of God,' where 'God is king' in ways contrasted to the violent eschatology of various second temple Jewish movements.
2. **Jesus and the Rejection of Violence** — A Gospels overview of both Jesus's teaching and ministry as announcements of the inauguration of God's kingdom. But how does this kingdom come about apart from violent means? For Jesus, God's kingdom is a repudiation of death and rejects violence as the means by which the kingdom arrives.
3. **Jesus and the Way of Peace** — Jesus not only rejects violence; he also makes peace (*shalom*—wellbeing, wholeness), and peacebuilding the central feature of God's kingdom. Nickel includes an in-depth discussion of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus's program for God's peacebuilding children.
4. **Violence Meets Victory** — Nickel identifies violence and death as among the 'powers and authorities' that Jesus triumphed over on the Cross. Gratefully, Nickel sees the Cross of Christ (which includes the whole Paschal narrative from Passion to Resurrection) as the centerpiece of the gospel and the climax of Jesus's story. Here, we see Christ's message of nonviolence enacted, a demonstration of how cycles of violence are broken and how self-giving love is stronger than death—and certainly more powerful than death-dealing as a pseudo-solution.
5. **Violence and Discipleship** — Now for the hard sell: the radical notion that Christian disciples must actually *obey* and *imitate* Jesus's way of peace. To *be* Christian in any real sense means following Jesus in precisely this way: *"The cross is where this teaching and this example climactically coalesce. If being a disciple demands allegiance, obedience, and imitation, then violence cannot have any place in the character or practice of those who lay claim to such an identity"* (146). Imitating Christ in this way must include imitating his love in both life and in death. Participating in the Jesus Way is what it means to be a 'faithful witness' in the pattern of St. Stephen the protomartyr.

Nickel's *A Revolutionary Jesus* is a worthy piece of biblical scholarship. But more than that, it is a challenging invitation to the Christian brand that has forgotten and forsaken the Jesus Way of peace for

the perversions of power and dominance, violence and death. Wherever the church has bowed the knee to nationalism, militarism, and imperial aspirations, it has abandoned the gospel. In that sense, Nickel is an evangelist to 21st century Christians as Jesus was to 1st century Jews.

Question: Nickel's book is a welcome update on Tolstoy's *My Religion* (without the heterodoxy), Yoder's *Politics of Jesus* (without the scandal), and Greg Boyd's fine work (without the word count). I want to say he also brings his own voice to the table, but in fact, my own objections are to Jesus' voice herein! Reading *A Revolutionary Jesus* demands more than a critique and far more than an unquestioning nod. For me, it means both revisiting my toughest questions about real-world practice and likely another round of repentance. For this we can be grateful.