

**Way of Torture, Way of the Cross:  
A Bible Study for  
Lent and Other Occasions**

**Participant's Resource**

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## Session 1: In Whose Image?

### A. BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

Two biblical and theological affirmations provide the background for this lesson. The first is the concept of peace. The second is the conviction that all persons are created in the image of God.

The Bible has much to teach us about security and peace. *Shalom*, the Hebrew word for peace, occurs in many places throughout the Old Testament. More than simply the absence of strife and fear, it involves God's promise of wholeness, through the gift of the covenant, and includes health, prosperity, security, communal harmony, and spiritual well being.<sup>1</sup> In the Old Testament we often find it combined with related words and concepts. The prophets relate *shalom* powerfully to integrity, faithfulness, truthfulness, and justice. *Shalom* is essentially the antithesis of wickedness. It embodies the will of God by removing everything that contradicts it.<sup>2</sup>

Peace in the New Testament continues and deepens this theme. The grace by which peace has been restored in Christ becomes the center of the Christian message. Jesus Christ is our peace (Eph 2.14). Through his saving obedience in life and in death (Rom 5.19), he removed the hostility between God and humanity, reconciling the world to God (2 Cor 5.19). The peace of Christ carries social implications. It breaks down ancient walls of hostility, beginning with Jews and Gentiles (Eph 2.14), and extends to every earthly conflict. In their witness to Christ and his peace, Christians are called to work for reconciliation on earth.<sup>3</sup> They can no longer treat enemies merely as enemies, but must strive to turn enemies into friends (cf. Rom 12.20-21).

The biblical promise of peace, as attested by faithful human action, requires means appropriate to this end. The methods by which earthly peace is sought matter as much as the peaceful end itself. Torture and abuse, being wrong in themselves, are not the way to security and peace. Not even enemies, whether real or perceived, may be tortured, least of all merely on suspicion. Contrary to some voices in our society today, any policy that allows torture and inhumane methods of interrogation cannot bring the security for which we long.

Today, the tortured often remain nameless to us. They exist mainly as faceless others, having a strange religion and dark skin. From a distance, perhaps they hardly seem real. It is difficult to imagine them as brothers or sisters, fathers or mothers, sons or daughters. And without due process of law, we do not know whether they are guilty of any crime.

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<sup>1</sup> *Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George A. Buttrick et al., (New York and Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), s.v. "Peace."

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

Nevertheless, Holy Scripture tells us something about who they are. Persons who are tortured and abused at the hands of military and intelligence personnel are human beings made in the image and likeness of God. Genesis 1.27 makes this point clear when it says, "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." Likewise, in the prologue to John's Gospel, we find the wonderful disclosure that Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, is the life and light of all people (John 1.4). Biblical texts like these teach us that all human beings are stamped with the indelible imprint of God. Therefore, we must accord every person with basic respect. The essential dignity of every human being can never be lost, because it is a divine gift, not a human attainment.

Knowledge of the cultural context of the ancient world deepens these insights. In the ancient Near East, it was common for a ruler to create a statue in his likeness. The statue would reflect his presence, his power, and his authority. Even when the ruler was many miles away, the people sensed his reality because of the statue.<sup>4</sup> The Hebrew word that is translated "image" in English conveys a similar message. The creation of human beings – both male and female – in the image of God means that every human being reflects God's glory.<sup>5</sup> Every life is sacred because every man, every woman, and every child bears the image of God. When a human being is tortured or treated in a cruel, inhuman or degrading way, the image of God is defiled. Torture violates the bearer of God's image on earth: the planners and perpetrators as well as the victims.

## **B. REFLECTIONS ON TORTURE AND ABUSE**

The following set of questions and responses on torture come from the Nobel Peace Prize recipient organization, Amnesty International:

### **1. What is torture? What is ill-treatment? What's the difference?**

Torture is defined in the UN Convention against Torture as the intentional infliction of severe physical or mental pain or suffering for purposes such as obtaining information or a confession, or punishing, intimidating, or coercing someone. The term is applied to those forms of ill-treatment that are particularly severe and are deliberate.

It is not possible to make a sharp distinction between those forms of treatment which amount to torture and those which amount to other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment (ill-treatment). But from a practical standpoint, any such distinction is not significant because all forms of torture and ill-treatment are absolutely prohibited under international law – and it is not simply a matter of law. The universal legal prohibition is based on a universal philosophical consensus that torture and ill-treatment are repugnant, abhorrent, and immoral.

### **2. But aren't there extreme circumstances where those international legal prohibitions no longer apply?**

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<sup>4</sup> Professor Choon-Leong Seow, Princeton Theological Seminary faculty, Interview, Princeton, NJ, December 6, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

The prohibition of torture and ill-treatment is a rule of customary international law. It applies to all states irrespective of whether they are party to international treaties setting out the prohibition. It applies in all circumstances, with no exceptions of any kind, and cannot be suspended in any circumstances, even in times of war or public emergency. The prohibition is explicit throughout international human rights law. Torture and ill-treatment are also prohibited in all circumstances under international humanitarian law, the body of law applicable in armed conflict. This means that states have recognized that even in time of war such practices must be prohibited even if some military advantage may be gained. The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, which covers the most serious crimes under international law, prohibits torture and ill-treatment as a crime against humanity and as a war crime.

Because torture and ill-treatment are wrong, always and everywhere, all governments should publicly denounce them in the strongest possible terms, and take practical steps never to allow torture and ill-treatment to happen at home or abroad. They should also bring to justice, in a fair trial, those who commit or participate in acts of torture or ill-treatment, just as they should bring to justice those who commit crimes against humanity and attacks on civilians.

### **3. Isn't a bit of sleep deprivation or other forms of discomfort which do not cause lasting physical harm acceptable when interrogating suspected terrorists?**

Sleep deprivation, “stress and duress” and other so-called “lesser” means of coercing detainees into disclosing information are prohibited by the international legal ban on cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. Holding a prisoner under water until they think they are drowning is cruel and inhuman. Photographing a person naked and subjecting them to sexual humiliation, denying them the most basic forms of decency and privacy, is degrading. Other cruel measures include those which break a person’s resistance by causing confusion and disorientation – such as sleep deprivation; sensory deprivation, including holding people in dark cells; hooding; sensory overload such as sustained and excessive noise; subjecting people to extremes of heat or cold, and stress positions.

These types of measures, even if they do not leave physical scars, have been shown to cause mental harm which can persist for years afterwards and may never heal completely. Sleep deprivation leads to cognitive impairment, including attention deficits and impaired memory, reasoning, verbal communication, and decision-making. The effects of prolonged isolation can be especially devastating and can include an inability to think or concentrate, disorientation, hallucinations, depression, and other severe mental health problems, including self-harm and attempted suicide.

The effect of such measures is often cumulative. For instance, depriving a person of 15 minutes’ sleep would not be more than annoying, but long-term deprivation of sleep has been shown to cause serious and long lasting psychological damage. The same is true of stress positions and sensory deprivation. Where such measures are used in combination and over a sustained period, there is a double accumulation, of methods and duration.

Any policy or legal system which permits the use of torture or ill-treatment, even if limited to

only extreme circumstances, undermines the principled opposition to the use of inhumane methods and, as a practical matter, it is impossible to identify a clear stopping point. Amnesty International is not aware of states which, in order to obtain information, “only” ill-treat detainees but never use torture. From a moral and practical standpoint, if we accept that it is permissible to apply physical and psychological pressure in interrogation, at what point do we stop increasing the pressure if the person refuses to talk? Once the rule absolutely prohibiting inhumane treatment is breached, the tendency is always to escalate, and before long there is a deterioration to the use of methods which amount to torture.

Despite this, the US authorities, like those of other states which have practiced torture and ill-treatment, have sought to evade the international prohibition. They have suggested very narrow definitions of torture, described certain forms of ill-treatment as “stress and duress” techniques, and claimed that certain forms of treatment are not necessarily illegal but can be justified on grounds such as military necessity or self-defense, even though neither legal principle would ever justify the use of torture or ill-treatment. Moreover, torture and ill-treatment do not become permissible by being called something else, and euphemisms cannot be used to evade legal and moral obligations.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> “Torture and Ill-treatment: The Arguments,” Amnesty International, <http://web.amnesty.org/pages/stoptorture-arguments-eng>.

## Session 2: Following the Tortured One

### A. Biblical and Theological Background

The power most directly involved in crucifying Jesus was the imperial power of Rome. The charges were political, at least in part – that he was an insurgent, an enemy of the state, a threat to national security.

It must not be forgotten that Palestine had been invaded and occupied by Rome. At the time of Jesus, roving bands of guerillas actively resisted the occupation. When these so-called “*leistai*” – bandits, brigands, religiously-inspired freedom fighters – were captured, the Romans had them openly crucified as a deterrent. Although Jesus himself taught nonviolence, his ministry was seen by the occupying powers as a threat. For one thing, he drew Roman attention because he had a large following that hailed him as “King of the Jews.” For another, he issued what seemed to be a direct challenge to the reign of Rome, announcing an alternative reign (the coming Kingdom of God). According to Jesus, it was the reign of God, not of Rome, that demanded one’s ultimate allegiance (Mark 1.15).

The New Testament describes the death of Jesus as an act of political expediency. Caiaphas, the Jewish high priest, warned a group of his associates, “You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed...So from that day on they planned to put him to death” (John 11.49-50 and 53). Similarly, Pilate, though torn about what to do, gave in to pressure from the crowd, “So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, “I am innocent of this man’s blood; see to it yourselves” (Matt 27.24). Although Scripture makes clear that the charges trumped up against Jesus were false, Pilate treated him as a political prisoner, condemning him to a form of capital punishment reserved only for fugitive slaves and political rebels – crucifixion.

A Roman commentator, Seneca the Younger, remarked:

Can anyone be found who would prefer wasting away in pain, dying limb by limb, or letting out his life drop by drop, rather than expiring once for all? Can any man be found willing to be fastened to the accursed tree, long sickly, already deformed, swelling with ugly welts on shoulder and chest, and drawing the breath of life amid long-drawn-out agony? He would have many excuses for dying even before mounting the cross.<sup>7</sup>

How can Christians proclaim an unjust death so horrendous as “good news”? One of the central claims of the gospel is that “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us” (2 Cor 5.19).

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<sup>7</sup> Seneca the Younger, Epistle 101, quoted in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), s.v. “Crucifixion.”

This means that God is not simply “up in heaven” passively watching humans below on earth, wishing us well but doing little to make good on this wish. Instead, Scripture tells us that the God of Israel, who delivered them from Egyptian captivity, has acted yet again as divine deliverer – this time through the events of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. In Jesus Christ, God is *for* us and *with* us, entering our human condition, sharing our griefs and sorrows, and abolishing sin's guilt and power. In Jesus Christ, God is relentlessly at work in the world to reconcile and redeem broken humanity – that is the Gospel's radical good news.

On the cross, we can see the divine embrace of human brokenness. Death by crucifixion meant death by torture. On Golgotha, God is completely one with the tortured human Jesus we call Lord. In him, God has embraced the sufferings of the world and made them his own. God has entered into unbreakable solidarity with all who are forsaken and abused.

The story of God’s severe mercy does not end on the cross. The Christ who died in the throes of torture could not be held by the bonds of death. On Easter day, God said *yes* to Jesus and *no* to torture, *yes* to life and *no* to death. The means of terror were forever banned as instruments of peace. They did not have the last word for Jesus; they must not tempt Christians today. Jesus allowed himself to taste torture and death to disclose how abhorrent they are in God's sight. He terminates the resort to torture just as he brings an end to the law (Rom 10.4). His resurrection manifests a humility more resilient than vengeance, a faithfulness more powerful than fear, and a love that triumphs over death. The resurrection points to a hidden divine cunning in history, the power of an invincible forgiveness that will not rest until it reclaims the world.

## **B. REFLECTIONS ON TORTURE AND ABUSE**

In recent months, many allegations have surfaced about the systemic use of torture by U.S. forces in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the military base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba to extract information thought to be useful for protecting U.S. citizens. Even more recently, news reports have brought to light that U.S. intelligence agencies have “rendered” prisoners from their country of capture to secret “black site” prisons in countries friendly to the U.S. In these “black site” prisons, certain detainees have been tortured by non-U.S. personnel. In these cases, it appears that the U.S. government has “outsourced” torture and cruel, inhumane, and degrading practices in order to be able to say to the public, “We don’t torture.” Human rights groups like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Human Rights First have been gathering substantive evidence for some time which indicates that the U.S. has intentionally and systematically used torture against prisoners thought to have knowledge of plots that could result in loss of American lives.

In the name of American security and peace, U.S. military and intelligence personnel as well as some American allies have engaged in acts of torture. The account of detainee abuse below took place at one of Saddam Hussein’s notorious prisons, Abu Ghraib. This shocking and disturbing account represents only the “tip of the iceberg” of mistreatment at the hands of American military and intelligence personnel at several locations during “The War on Terror.”

He cuffed my hands with irons behind my back to the metal of the windows, to the point my feet were off the ground and I was hanging there for about 5 hours just because I asked about the time, because I wanted to pray. And they took all my clothes and he took the female underwear and he put it over my head. After he released me from the window, he tied me to my bed until before dawn. He took me to the shower room. After he took me to the shower room, he brought me to my room again. He prohibited me from eating food that night, even though I was fasting that day....I don't know if they took a picture of me because they beat me so bad I lost consciousness after an hour or so.<sup>8</sup>

Non-Muslims may miss some of the significance of the details of this account. For example, Muslims believe that God commands them to pray at five prescribed times every day. Mindfulness of the clock shapes the daily life of devout Muslims. During the entire month of Ramadan, Muslims fast during daylight hours and eat only at night. Similarly, Muslims have strict modesty codes with respect to care of their bodies and the interaction between genders. When seen in relation to Muslim religious practices, we see that the pattern of abuse to which this prisoner was subjected was far from random or capricious. Rather, the abuse of this prisoner intended to evoke feelings of intense religious humiliation and shame. Such abusive acts appear to have more intentionality and purpose than first meets the Christian eye.

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<sup>8</sup> Detainee testimony (01/18/04), in *The Torture Papers: The Road to Abu Ghraib*, ed. Karen J. Greenberg and Joshua L. Dratel (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 503.

## Session 3: Breaking the Cycle of Violence

### A. BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

#### Conquering Evil with the Goodness of Love Romans 12: 14-21<sup>9</sup>

“Mom, he hit me first!” “I’ll tell you what. If I can ride *your* bicycle, I’ll let you use *my* baseball glove.” “You know, sweetheart, they’ve had us over twice now; I really think we need to *reciprocate*.” “All right, I’ll give you my support on this vote. But when *my* bill comes before the house next month I expect *your* support in return.”

Reciprocity. It is fundamental to the way we do things as humans. I do this for you, so you do that for me. You treat me this way and I’m going to treat you the same way in return. *Simple reciprocity—returning like for like*. We’re invited to someone’s house for supper and we feel that we should return the favor. Our most basic moral models of fairness are based on simple reciprocity, the returning of like for like. We learn them in childhood and by the time we reach early adolescence reciprocal fairness is a fundamental part of our common moral sense. Our relationships and moral reasoning are guided by reciprocity as adults.

See if you can recall your reaction to the World Trade Center Bombing. We felt many things: shock, grief, horror, anger. But as the dust began to settle, we also responded in terms of simple reciprocity. We’ve been attacked, so we are justified in attacking them in return. It was almost as if our most deep-seated sense of moral fairness had been violated. And to restore the moral order we needed to set things right, to return like for like. Simple reciprocity—It’s a really deep part of our common moral sense.

The passage we are looking at today calls into question the adequacy of simple reciprocity as the basis of the Christian moral life. Many of us hear in Paul’s teaching a pretty clear echo of Jesus’ teaching on love of the enemy as it is portrayed in both Matthew and Luke. Remember that? Love your enemies: Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who treat you spitefully. In this Romans passage, these same themes reappear. They take the form of a series of paired contrasts. One side is a negative prohibition; the other side is a positive prescription. The prohibition is aimed directly against our natural, reciprocal response when others do us harm. The positive prescription points us to an alternative way of responding. Look at the text with me. Let’s start with v. 14.

- V. 14- If you’re persecuted, then simple reciprocity would lead you to hope for the worse for your persecutor. Especially, if you’re in a position of powerlessness and can’t respond directly to those who are persecuting you, you may hope that God will bring this about. God...damn

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<sup>9</sup>Richard R. Osmer, sermon, preached in Miller Chapel at Princeton Theological Seminary in 2004. Used by permission.

them! But Paul says, do not curse those who persecute you. Rather, bless them—call on God to shine his gracious favor upon your persecutor. Look next at vv. 17-18.

- Vv. 17-18 – If someone does you evil, simple reciprocity would have you retaliate in kind; they hit you, then you hit back—like to like, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. They send in their suicide bombers, so you retaliate by assassinating their leaders or dropping bombs on their homes and cars. But Paul says, don't retaliate. Rather maintain conduct that is *noble* in sight of all and live *peaceably* with all, as far as that depends on you. Finally look at v. 19.

- V. 19 – If someone hurts you or your family, simple reciprocity is likely to lead you to set yourself up as judge and jury, rendering your own judgment about the punishment they deserve. You might even go so far to put this judgment into effect yourself. But Paul says, don't avenge the harm you've been done yourself; rather leave judgment to God.

In each of these paired contrasts, Paul rules out simple reciprocity in response to evil. Christians are *not* to return like for like. They are to bless their enemies, to live peaceably with all, and to leave judgment to God. Many have wondered if it's really possible to live in this way. Maybe...in our interpersonal relationships, if we are especially moral. But few have believed that this teaching can serve as the basis of a public ethic that can guide our common life and international relations. But Paul offers us two important clues in this passage about how we might construct a public ethic on the basis of this teaching.

- The first clue comes in v. 15. There, Paul writes: "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep." This is a paradigmatic picture of empathy. To empathize is to feel what another is feeling. It is to enter into another person's or another group's experience and to share in that experience as an act of love. Most children are born with the capacity for empathy. Just go into the church nursery on Sunday morning. One baby begins to cry and pretty soon others join in. We live only 50 miles from the World Trade Center and some of us have visited the site where the Twin Towers once stood. We can imagine the flames and chaos and people falling to their deaths. We empathize with those who died there. But empathy in situations of conflict is quite fragile. Our anger and fear lead us to distort our perception of others. Right before we go to war, we almost always dehumanize our enemy. But Paul's teaching points us toward a different public ethic. In situations of conflict, we are to work especially hard to empathize with our enemy. We are to take our own experience of flames and carnage and death, and we are to use it to feel and imagine what it's like to have bombs rain down from the sky in the middle of the night, to huddle together with your children in a corner of your home—helpless really...to protect them. When we empathize with our enemy, it makes it impossible to identify with a public ethic that glorifies violence as a means of settling conflict.

- The second clue that we might heed in constructing a public ethic comes in v. 20. There, Paul writes: "If your enemies are hungry, feed, them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Paul is telling us that Christian love involves surprising actions toward those who do us harm, actions that may change our relationship with our enemy. Public leaders have taken these sorts of initiatives in the past. During the Cold War when the arms race was heating up, it was common to test nuclear bombs in the open air. This was the practice of our country and the Soviet Union. In a surprise move,

Dwight Eisenhower announced a temporary ban on all open air testing in 1958. The Soviet Union followed our lead and there was no open air testing for three years. But then, it started up again. John Kennedy once more took the initiative and halted all open air testing. This led to the 1963 Atmospheric Test Ban Treaty.

The conflicts we face today are different. But the need remains for people who refuse to dehumanize their enemies and work hard to feel and imagine the harm our violence would bring them. And the need remains for public leaders bold enough to take surprising initiatives that alter the context of our relationship with our enemies. These are the elements of a public ethic based on Christian love. We may travel down the road of simple reciprocity, returning like for like. We may even be successful at regime change. But if we take that path, we can be sure that the harm we do to others will be returned to us. And when that happens, all we can do is repent. For it will be the judgment of God.

## **B. REFLECTIONS ON TORTURE AND ABUSE**

Presbyterian minister and former candidate for Moderator of the General Assembly, Rev. Harold E. Kurtz, tells the story of his family's experience in World War II. His father served in World War I, and he was one of five brothers who enlisted immediately when WWII broke out or as soon as they were old enough. One of his brothers went down in a P-51 and was a prisoner of war for eleven months.

As we served and as my parents waited, we all felt strongly that we were fighting an evil - an evil regime whose vicious tactics we would never employ. We acted on values that we could be proud of. I flew with the Troop Carrier Command. On return flights after making deliveries to the front, we would stop at field hospitals and pick up the wounded. We arranged bunk-like stretchers on both sides of the plane to carry as many as possible, and delivered those critically wounded to the base hospital. Friend and foe alike. No one even asked. I was also trained as a glider pilot. When the army needed to jump the Rhine River, I landed with a glider-load of airborne troops behind the German lines. We fought them for a strip of land needed for a pontoon bridge. We rounded up hundreds of POWs. When the area was secured, low-flying B-24s dropped "para packs" of ammunition and food from their bomb bays. As we fought the Germans outside our perimeter, we shared our K-rations with the POWs inside....

What has happened to my country now? I am mystified by the continuing debate about torture. In the country I and my brothers fought for, torture wasn't even mentioned as a possibility - that was the enemy's tactics. That's part of the reason they were the enemy. I am an evangelical Christian. Jesus tells us to eliminate our enemies - by making friends of them.

Back on the farm, the harvest of 1944 was very difficult. Dad, Mom and little sister Joyce were alone. Meanwhile, the United States was finding it hard to keep and feed all the German POWs in camps in Europe. They started bringing prisoners to the States in returning troop ships. A camp was established near our home in eastern Oregon. Word was sent out that farmers could hire willing prisoners as farm laborers. They would be brought to the farms by guards, and the

farmers would pay a daily wage. Most prisoners were delighted to have something to do, and especially to be paid for their work. Dad decided to use their help with the harvest. Three or four POWs would be brought to the farm each day. Dad and his prisoners worked well together even without a common language. The prisoners brought their lunch. But dad and mom were concerned about those young Germans; mom worried about their diet. Every day at noon, she cooked up a big pot of stew or soup to add to their lunch. I am sure that as she stirred the soup, she prayed that someone would care for her POW son.

My dad must have had similar thoughts. One day when it was cold and windy and mom was gone, dad talked the guard into letting the prisoners into the house for lunch, although it was against regulations. Inside, one of the prisoners saw my dad's guitar sitting in a corner and asked if he could play it. The prisoners sang a song they must have learned from their guards: "Don't Fence Me In!"

In that same bitter winter in Germany, my prisoner brother was put in a railroad cattle car and shipped south. Half of his fellow POWs died on the way. I am certain all of those German prisoners who worked on our farm went back to Germany not as enemies, but as friends.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>*What has happened to my country?* Commentary by Rev. Harold Kurtz, Senior Associate, Presbyterian Frontier Fellowship. Excerpted from PCUSA NEWS, #9031, (PCUSANEWS@HALAK.PCUSA.ORG). Used by permission of the author.

## Session Four: Following the Resurrected One

### A. BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. . . . Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."      John 20.19-22

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another, do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."      Romans 12.14-21

Two passages form the basis for these reflections. The first continues the story of the tortured One, who has now been raised from the dead. He appears to his disciples to commission them and bestow the Holy Spirit. The second depicts the community of disciples who have been joined to Christ through their baptism, being baptized into his death and new life. It makes clear that discipleship means being conformed to Jesus, to the way he lived and what he taught, empowered by the grace of the Spirit.

John's account of Jesus' appearance to his disciples is important to our discussion of torture. The brutal, public execution of Jesus created fear among his followers who are now cowering behind locked doors. This sort of fear is one of the reasons that religious and political authorities across the ages have used public execution and torture as a means of social control. When the risen Lord appears to his disciples, however, they experience a very different kind of fear. The One who was dead is now alive. Twice Jesus says to them, "Peace be with you." This is not an ordinary greeting. It is an attempt to reassure them in the face of an unexpected manifestation of God (something seen when angels appear, as in Luke 2.10). The apparent victory of the authorities over the One who embodied God's love is now proven false. Evil does not triumph over the power of God's love. Yet the risen Jesus still bears the wounds of his torture. He makes a point of showing his disciples "his hands and his side," where he was nailed to the cross and pieced with a spear (John 19.34). Why? In a world of sin and death, the incarnation of God's love meets suffering, resistance, and even death. When Jesus commissions his disciples, he is sending them as parables of his love. ("As the Father has sent me, so I send you"). They are not to continue what he alone has done in his office as Savior, but to proclaim it. The Savior

sends his disciples to attest and mediate his saving love. Indeed he attests and mediates it through them. He breathes into them the Holy Spirit, just as God breathed into Adam the breath of life (Gen 2.7). A new creation is taking place in their lives, which anticipates the restoration of all things, of which his resurrection is the first fruits.

Romans 12 has been called the *magna carta* of the Christian life. It is the great charter of true community and discipleship. It depicts a new and difficult way of being in the world. This new way is a life of “living sacrifice” and a form of “spiritual worship.” It is difficult because it cannot be lived in conformity with the world. It means being transformed by the renewing of a mind that does not always want to be renewed. The Greek word used here for “renewal” suggests something of Christ’s resurrection. It points toward the transcendent power of God and the “newness” of the new creation. The mind that gravitates toward coercion and violence is a mind conformed to the world. It needs to be transformed and raised from the dead. Otherwise it fails to receive the grace of the resurrection. But when this power is received, it is paradoxically made perfect in weakness.

What does it mean to participate in the mission of God’s love, the mission of the Incarnate Son of God which Jesus commissioned his disciples to continue? Verses 14-21 appear to be based on the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5.38-48; see also Luke 6.27-31). Three important features of Christian love are drawn out, based on Jesus’ teaching and example. First, disciples are to resist the natural inclination toward vengeance, the returning of harm for harm. This inclination is very deep in the human psyche, appearing early in childhood. It is based on simple reciprocity: You be nice to me, I’ll be nice to you; you hurt me, I’ll hurt you back. First Jesus and then Paul exhorts Christians not to give in to this natural inclination. They are to meet harm with acts of kindness, to bless those who harm them (vv. 14, 17). They are to leave vengeance to God (v. 19). Second, disciples are encouraged to practice love in the form of empathy, to enter into the feelings and condition of others. They are to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep (v. 15). Just as God’s Son entered fully into our human condition – even suffering the plight of people who are the victims of political repression and torture – so too, Jesus’ disciples are to empathetically enter into the condition of others. Third, their empathy is to give rise to loving actions. They are to live peaceably with all (v. 18). Instead of responding to their enemies with vengeance, they are to feed them when they are hungry and to give them drink when they are thirsty (v. 20). Such actions will “heap burning coals on their heads” and may even transform a relationship of hostility into one of friendship or mutual respect.

In these three ways, Christian disciples participate in the Son of God’s mission of redemptive love. As Paul puts in the final verse of the chapter, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” This is the pattern of Jesus’ life and crucifixion. It was divinely validated by his resurrection. Jesus’ disciples are to make it their own.

## **B. REFLECTIONS ON TORTURE AND ABUSE**

The following is taken from the website of the Washington Post (<http://www.washingtonpost.com>). It includes a letter sent by Army Captain Ian Fishback.

Captain Fishback, a decorated graduate of West Point, served two combat missions in Iraq and Afghanistan. He is described by friends as a devout Christian who carries a copy of the U.S. Constitution in his pocket. After receiving Captain Fishback's letter, Sen. McCain introduced legislation barring abusive interrogation.

Today we publish a letter that a U.S. Army Captain sent to Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), expressing his frustration at the absence of clear standards governing how the military should treat detainees. In the letter (which did not come to us from the Captain or the Senator), Capt. Ian Fishback expresses his view, based on service in Iraq and Afghanistan, that this "confusion contributed to a wide range of abuses including death threats, beatings, broken bones, murder, exposure to elements, extreme forced physical exertion, hostage-taking, stripping, sleep deprivation, and degrading treatment."

How can it be that an officer of the United States armed services, concerned about detainee mistreatment that he has personally witnessed, could struggle in vain for seventeen months to learn the standards of humane treatment the military is applying?

### **A Matter of Honor<sup>11</sup>**

The following letter was sent to Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) on Sept. 16:

Dear Senator McCain:

I am a graduate of West Point currently serving as a Captain in the U.S. Army Infantry. I have served two combat tours with the 82nd Airborne Division, one each in Afghanistan and Iraq. While I served in the Global War on Terror, the actions and statements of my leadership led me to believe that United States policy did not require application of the Geneva Conventions in Afghanistan or Iraq. On 7 May 2004, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld's testimony that the United States followed the Geneva Conventions in Iraq and the "spirit" of the Geneva Conventions in Afghanistan prompted me to begin an approach for clarification. For 17 months, I tried to determine what specific standards governed the treatment of detainees by consulting my chain of command through battalion commander, multiple JAG lawyers, multiple Democrat and Republican Congressmen and their aides, the Ft. Bragg Inspector General's office, multiple government reports, the Secretary of the Army and multiple general officers, a professional interrogator at Guantanamo Bay, the deputy head of the department at West Point responsible for teaching Just War Theory and Law of Land Warfare, and numerous peers who I regard as honorable and intelligent men.

Instead of resolving my concerns, the approach for clarification process leaves me deeply troubled. Despite my efforts, I have been unable to get clear, consistent answers from my leadership about what constitutes lawful and humane treatment of detainees. I am certain that this confusion contributed to a wide range of abuses including death threats, beatings, broken bones, murder, exposure to elements, extreme forced physical exertion, hostage-taking, stripping, sleep deprivation and degrading treatment. I and troops under my command witnessed some of these abuses in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

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<sup>11</sup> *Washington Post*, September 28, 2005.

This is a tragedy. I can remember, as a cadet at West Point, resolving to ensure that my men would never commit a dishonorable act; that I would protect them from that type of burden. It absolutely breaks my heart that I have failed some of them in this regard.

That is in the past and there is nothing we can do about it now. But, we can learn from our mistakes and ensure that this does not happen again. Take a major step in that direction; eliminate the confusion. My approach for clarification provides clear evidence that confusion over standards was a major contributor to the prisoner abuse. We owe our soldiers better than this. Give them a clear standard that is in accordance with the bedrock principles of our nation.

Some do not see the need for this work. Some argue that since our actions are not as horrifying as Al Qaeda's, we should not be concerned. When did Al Qaeda become any type of standard by which we measure the morality of the United States? We are America, and our actions should be held to a higher standard, the ideals expressed in documents such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

Others argue that clear standards will limit the President's ability to wage the War on Terror. Since clear standards only limit interrogation techniques, it is reasonable for me to assume that supporters of this argument desire to use coercion to acquire information from detainees. This is morally inconsistent with the Constitution and justice in war. It is unacceptable.

Both of these arguments stem from the larger question, the most important question that this generation will answer. Do we sacrifice our ideals in order to preserve security? Terrorism inspires fear and suppresses ideals like freedom and individual rights. Overcoming the fear posed by terrorist threats is a tremendous test of our courage. Will we confront danger and adversity in order to preserve our ideals or will our courage and commitment to individual rights wither at the prospect of sacrifice? My response is simple. If we abandon our ideals in the face of adversity and aggression, then those ideals were never really in our possession. I would rather die fighting than give up even the smallest part of the idea that is "America."

Once again, I strongly urge you to do justice to your men and women in uniform. Give them clear standards of conduct that reflect the ideals they risk their lives for.

With the Utmost Respect,

**Capt. Ian Fishback**

1st Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division,  
Fort Bragg, North Carolina

## SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION:

- Work to become more knowledgeable about the issue of torture.
- Talk to three people in the congregation who are not in this Bible study group about torture and abuse. Encourage them to get involved and to take action.
- Educate yourself and your church about these issues in some of the following ways:
  - Invite outside speakers to address these issues in a special forum held during the Sunday School hour.
  - Search websites that provide information about these issues and regularly publicize their findings in church newsletters. Some important sites include Amnesty International ([www.amnesty.org](http://www.amnesty.org)), Human Rights Watch ([www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org)), Human Rights First ([www.humanrightsfirst.org](http://www.humanrightsfirst.org)), and Church Folks for a Better America ([www.cfba.info](http://www.cfba.info)). Make a donation to one of these organizations.
  - Study those parts of the Geneva Convention that deal with the treatment of prisoners of war (<http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/91.htm>) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights ([www.un.org/Overview/rights.html](http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html)).
  - Make peace-making a church wide theme that is studied by all classes in the church school during a four-week period. Many denominations have developed curriculums for this purpose.
- Reflect on the arguments offered on both sides of the “ticking time bomb” issue. Discuss this question with at least one other person during the coming week.
- Read at least one magazine or newspaper article about torture and think about it in relation to this Bible study.
- Write a letter to the editor of the publication expressing your views on torture.
- Ask the pastor of your church to include in the pastoral prayers a prayer for those who are tortured.
- Pray daily for those who are tortured and for those who torture.
- Search your community for local groups organized in the fight against torture. Find out their position and plans and support them.
- Encourage your pastor to preach on these issues and provide support when he or she does so.
- Attend conferences on these issues and encourage friends to attend with you.
- Write letters of support to people like Ian Fishback.
- Write to members of Congress to express your views. Write letters of support to political leaders who are attempting to address these issues through political legislation.
- Talk to your children about these issues. Witness to friends and colleagues about your concern as both a Christian and an American citizen.
- Consider keeping the group going after the conclusion of the Bible study sessions.
- Keep a list of email addresses of participants in this Bible study and use it to maintain contact and to provide opportunities for action related to the torture and abuse crisis.
- Organize a silent, Sunday-morning vigil outside of churches that are lending both tacit and public support to our government’s inhumane treatment of prisoners.