



Resurrecting and Rearming
the Warrior God
Crucified by Gregory Boyd

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I have just worked through parts of Gregory Boyd's two-volume work, *The Crucifixion of the Warrior God: Interpreting the Old Testament's Violent Portraits of God in Light of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017). I was able to download and read the book's Introduction on the Fortress Press website and to view parts of a few other chapters that were available on Amazon.¹ This is therefore not a review of Boyd's work, but merely a reaction to several of the passages that I read.

The rest of this article is an open letter to Greg.

September 23, 2017

Dear Greg,

I have never met you and have only seen your photo and a couple of other things about you on internet pages. From what I have read there and especially in what you have written, I must say that you seem to me to be a genuinely caring person with a pastoral heart.

¹ The link at the Fortress Press website is <https://www.fortresspress.com/store/product/9781506420752/The-Crucifixion-of-the-Warrior-God>. Other parts of the two-volume work are available at the Amazon website [here](#). Throughout the main text of this article, where only page numbers are placed in parentheses, I am referring to this two-volume work, and will speak of it as a "book" even though it is actually composed of two books. Because the page numbering of Vol. 2 is continuous with that of Vol. 1, I will not refer to the volume number.

I was particularly struck by the Postscript of the other book that you have just published with Fortress Press, only months after the two-volume work just mentioned, which is titled *Cross Vision: How the Crucifixion of Jesus Makes Sense of Old Testament Violence*. There you tell of a woman who approached you after one of your presentations on the book's topic with tears streaming down her face. She told you that she had finally been able to *fully* give her heart to Jesus because you showed her that, contrary to OT depictions, God never "demanded that people mercilessly massacre untold numbers of innocent babies." She threw her arms around you to hug you tightly "while joyfully crying out, '[God] didn't do any of those terrible things!'"² I sincerely mean it when I say that this passage touched me deeply. I have had people respond positively to the things I teach or present, but I have never had anyone react in precisely that way. I am sure that her image will remain etched in your mind for the rest of your life.

The passages I have read from your book *The Crucifixion of the Warrior God* have also been very interesting. You have made me see many new and marvelous things in the

² Gregory A. Boyd, *Cross Vision: How the Crucifixion of Jesus Makes Sense of Old Testament Violence* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 247-48. Parts of the book can be seen at the Amazon website [here](#).

biblical text that I have never seen before. I thank you and thank God for that.

I must also tell you, however, that the more I read of your work, the angrier and more indignant I became. I will explain that below. First, though, I should mention that I disagree strongly—I wish I could even find a much “stronger” word—with your views on nonviolence, which are similar to those I have encountered elsewhere many times before. Let me explain with a few examples.

Earlier this year, one of my students, José, a Pentecostal pastor who takes four hours each way on public transportation in order to attend classes at our theological school, was pulled from his pulpit by a Roman Catholic man right in the middle of a midweek worship service with the women of his congregation. The Roman Catholic man, who disliked José simply because he is a Pentecostal pastor, threw José on the floor and began beating him there with his fists. At first José thought, “I must turn the other cheek and let this man keep hitting me.” However, the man did not stop. Finally, José said, “I must hit him back or he will not stop and I might even die.” I disagree strongly, of course, with the interpretation of Jesus’ words about turning the other cheek that initially moved José to passivity in the face of this violent attack.³ For me, José was perfectly right to practice physical violence in order to overpower and subdue the man who would not stop punching him. In this case, it meant not only attempting to restrain him, which was impossible, but to strike him back as hard as possible until he could flail at José no

longer. José told this story at school with bruises all over his face. Nonviolence here was not an option. I do not know whether you would agree, Greg.

A second observation that I have about nonviolence relates to shunning. To me it is fascinating that some Mennonites, even to the present day, still practice shunning, even though they are known for being some of the most outspoken advocates for nonviolence. I have seen the wonderful work in favor of peace that Mennonites do in Mexico and other places in Latin America, and I am well aware that the vast majority of Mennonites in the world are against shunning and even denounce it strongly. Nevertheless, in some places it is still practiced, even to an extreme, through primarily by certain other religious groups in the world, both Christian and non-Christian.

From my perspective, shunning is a form of extreme violence. Imagine your mother being forced by your religious community to shun you completely. I have been told that in some Jewish contexts, they even have a funeral service *in absentia* for those who must be shunned for the rest of their life. You could talk to your mother, beg her to speak to you or at least acknowledge your existence, and she would refuse. If that happened to me, I would plead to my mother, “Please at least give some indication that you know that I am here in your presence. Look at me! Slap me! Hit me! Kick me! Pull my hair! Do the worst thing you can imagine to me! But I beg you, do not treat me as if I did not even exist!” Those who would demand that she shun you (probably against her will) would also be practicing one of the most cruel forms of violence toward her by threatening her with being shunned as well

³ For my interpretation of Jesus’ words in Matt. 5:38-39, see Thesis 49 of my 94 Theses at <https://94t.mx>.

should she not submit to the male elders or authorities demanding this of her.

Jesus speaks of not fearing those who “kill the body but cannot kill the soul” (Matt. 10:28). If my mother shunned me totally, she would be killing my soul without even touching my body. Is it not worse to kill a soul rather than a body? If all of the people who form part of the only community social network that I have ever had, my only support group, which included extended family and friends, would begin to shun me for life, I might even opt for suicide. If I did, would these “nonviolent” people not be the ones who physically murdered me without even having laid a hand on me? With regard to my mother, might she not even prefer to be dead rather than to have to spend the rest of her life thinking constantly about me, knowing that she could never embrace me, never offer me help, or never even look into my face again? Would it not be a slow death for both of us if she had to act as if I were totally invisible whenever I sought out her presence and if she could never even speak to me in the way that people often talk out loud with their departed loved ones? Or never again even pronounce my name? Fortunately, I have never had that kind of experience, so I can only imagine what it would be like. But the pain must be unbearable, the same pain of losing a parent or child physically through death, or perhaps even worse. If a loved one dies physically, one can grieve and attain some sense of healing, and even visit a grave and put up flowers without being rejected. But I do not know if shunning allows one to go through the grieving process. If not, the rest of your life is constant grief and you can never get over it.

A third example I like to use is that of surgery and amputation. The surgeon who cuts into your body with a scalpel to operate on you and then removes or alters tissues in your body is doing you violence. The doctor who must cut off a gangrened limb is doing you violence. Women who must have their breasts surgically removed also endure violence. This violence is undoubtedly physical, but it is also emotional. For a person to have to live without a limb or for a woman to have to live without breasts is extremely traumatic. Yet I think we would all agree that this type of violence is necessary and justified under certain circumstances.

I think you get my point, Greg, though I imagine from what I have read of your work that you or other defenders of nonviolence would have responses for these things. So feel free to share them with me and others some way if you wish. Honestly, I would appreciate that very much. But let’s talk about the topic that the woman who embraced you brought up: babies.

I wish to cite two different versions of the same article by Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco titled, “The Treatment of Children in the ‘Dirty War’: Ideology, State Terrorism, and the Abuse of Children in Argentina.”⁴ Please read

⁴ Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco, “The Treatment of Children in the ‘Dirty War’: Ideology, State Terrorism, and the Abuse of Children in Argentina,” in *Violence in War and Peace: An Anthology*, ed. N. Scheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 378-88. The .pdf can be found by clicking [here](#). This is an abridged version of the original article with the same title found in *Child Survival: Anthropological Perspectives on the Treatment and Maltreatment of Children*, ed. Nancy Scheper-Hughes (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel, 1987), 227-246. A Google

this article if you get a chance. It recounts the experiences of those who endured torture during the military dictatorship in Argentina and Uruguay from 1976-1983. Suárez-Orozco cites accounts of “the historical rediscovery of torture in the Argentine chambers of death. In these ghastly texts, children emerge as valuable commodities to be strategically exploited in a demented ‘dirty war’ fought between the Security Forces and their phantom, demonic enemies” (S-O 2004: 228; 1987: 378). According to Suárez-Orozco, “A particular ritual devised by those running the Argentine death machinery was the torture of children in full view of their parents, or vice versa.... Each time an agent discharges an electrical current through the body of an infant in front of his/her parents, or through the penis or vagina of ‘subversives,’ in front of their children, a perverse poly-semantic ritual is enacted” (S-O 1987: 378).

Which do you think is worse, Greg? To be tortured yourself or to watch your children be tortured in front of your eyes? Which do you think would break you down faster?

Now hear first the story of Alicia B. Morales de Galanba, who in 1976 was living in Mendoza, Argentina, with her children Paula Natalia (1½ years old at the time) and Mauricio (two months old). One day Alicia’s friend María Luisa Sánchez de Vargas was at Alicia’s home with her two daughters, Josefina (age 5) and Soledad (1½), when armed men broke in and subsequently arrested them. All of the children were taken from their mothers. A short time later, María Luisa was reunited with Alicia in jail. Maria

book view of this article can be seen by clicking [here](#). I will refer to these two versions by year (S-O 2004; S-O 1987).

Luisa told Alicia that she had seen her husband, José Vargas, who had also been imprisoned. José “told his wife that their daughter, Josefina, was taken to witness a torture session. They had made her witness his torture so that he would talk.” Without the parents knowing it, Josefina had also been taken to the bus station to identify family members and acquaintances in order for them to be arrested as subversives as well.

Then María Luisa shared with Alicia that “a few days before, she was taken to her parents’ house, in San Juan. She said that she really thought that it was to give her parents the pleasure of seeing that she was alive and to make her renew contact with her girls. Then she said: ‘But no, instead they took me to a funeral. And you know whose? It was the funeral of my daughter, Josefina’...” After her release from jail, the five-year old Josefina had found a gun in a drawer at her grandparents’ house and had shot herself (S-O 2004: 381; 1987: 231-32). Suárez-Orozco comments that Josefina “could only erase the atrocities she witnessed by killing herself soon after witnessing the grotesque spectacle involving her father” (S-O 2004: 382; 1987: 232). Another important factor in Josefina’s suicide may have been that she realized that the persons she had identified at the bus station were also now being tortured. This meant that, in her mind, she was in large part responsible for their torture.

Suárez-Orozco then tells of a renowned torturer who asked a military physician (himself a torturer) “‘how much should a child weigh before we can torture him. Vidal [the Doctor] responded ‘after 25 kilos you can run electrical charges through their bodies’” (S-O 2004: 382; 1987: 232). We can only

wonder how many children had been experimented on before Dr. Vidal was able to provide an answer to this question.

Suárez-Orozco goes on to share the story of another man imprisoned together with his family. Let us call him “Juan,” his wife “Socorro,” and their little baby girl “Bebita.”⁵ Juan recounted that, after he had failed to answer questions posed to him,

security officers began brutally kicking and hitting with a belt his wife and their children, a 13-year-old, an 8-year-old, and a 3-year-old who were witnessing the inferno. Then, he said, the officers turned to their 20-day-old daughter and, to their horrified disbelief, they started shaking her violently and holding her head down by her feet, yelling “if you don’t talk, we’ll kill her.” Next they filled the tub with water and submerged the mother [Socorro] several times, drowning her in front of her children (S-O 2004: 382; 1987: 234-35).

Suárez-Orozco describes how a Uruguayan mother was breast-feeding her baby Simon at home when soldiers came and wrestled him away, never to be seen by her again, and mentions that children were routinely assaulted “with electrical prods *in the presence of their parents....*” He adds,

⁵ Socorro is a common name for females in Spanish and means “help.” In the Old Testament, God is repeatedly said to be our “socorro” in times of trouble (Ps. 63:7; cf. 46:1) and in passages such as Ps. 121:1-2 (“I will lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help [socorro] come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth”). “Bebita” is not a name but just means “little baby girl.” I have not checked the original reports cited by Suárez-Orozco, where the real names of those involved might appear.

“Expressively torturing children, or torturing parents in front of the children, can also be seen as a *ritual of separation* in which the torturers proceeded to ‘surgically remove’ with electrical prods the subversive’s precious ‘appendix’ before turning him/her [over] to a security or upper-class family for proper Christian upbringing” (S-O 2004: 383; 1987: 235-36). Suárez-Orozco explains:

Pregnant women, or their husbands, were made to ‘talk’ by placing electric prods inside them, close to the uterus, to discharge electrical currents on the fetus. For example, one pregnant woman who survived her calvary reported that she was brutally tortured during the sixth month of her pregnancy. Subsequent to her release she gave birth to an abnormal child diagnosed as having brain damage (S-O 2004: 383; 1987: 236).

I will end my discussion of Suárez-Orozco’s article with one other lengthy quotation in which he cites Argentine journalist Jacobo Timerman:

Of all the dramatic situations I witnessed in clandestine prisons, nothing can compare to those family groups who were tortured often together, sometimes separately but in view of one another, or in different cells, while one was aware of the other being tortured. The entire affective world, constructed over the years with utmost difficulty, collapses with a kick in the father’s genitals, a smack on the mother’s face, an obscene insult to the sister, or the sexual violation of a daughter. Suddenly an entire culture based on familial love, devotion, the capacity for mutual sacrifice collapses. Nothing is possible in such a universe, and that is precisely what the torturers know.

The fathers' glances: of desperation at first, then of apology, and then of encouragement. Seeking some way to mutually help one another—sending an apple, a glass of water. Those fathers, thrown on the ground, bleeding, endeavoring for their children to find the strength to resist the tortures still in store for them. The impotence, that impotence that arises not from one's failure to do something in defense of one's children but from one's inability to extend a tender gesture. From my cell, I'd hear the whispered voices of children trying to learn what was happening to their parents, and I'd witness the efforts of daughters to win over a guard, to arouse a feeling of tenderness in him, to incite the hope of some lovely future relationship between them in order to learn what was happening to her mother, to have an orange sent to her, to get permission for her to go to the bathroom.... (S-O 2004: 386; 1987: 242).

By the way, Greg, please do not say or think that these things no longer happen in the world, as many Americans would. You have no idea. Also, I do not know if the "encouragement" of which Timerman speaks involved parents encouraging their children to withstand the torture or instead encouraging the torturers as they torture one's children. Under these circumstances, the latter would by no means be out of the question. It would be a way to try to get the torturers to stop sooner. If you are the one they want to torture by means of your child, there's no point in them continuing to torture your child in front of you if they think that you really don't care and even *want* them to do so. So encourage them with the look on your face, which tells them, "Go ahead and torture my child as much as you want! That's fine with me!" That takes all the fun out of it for the torturers, and

maybe they will stop as a result. In contrast, encouraging your child to hold out longer might actually prolong his or her torture.

So now, Greg, let's look at your book and talk about God, the cross of Jesus, and little babies. The first question many people ask is, "Where was God in all of this?" It has become common among Christians to respond that God was there suffering with those being tortured and their loved ones, giving them strength, comforting them, and even giving them the "wisdom" to find ways to try to get the torturers to stop carrying out the tortures. One might conjecture that God mysteriously acted in some way to make the torturers stop sooner than they would have otherwise, or helped those who had electrical current run through their bodies feel less pain than such a person would normally experience. There are even some Christians who would say that God would do such "favours" only for believers in Jesus, so that they would suffer less than unbelievers, who might even be regarded as deserving of such treatment on account of their "sins." Of course, we can never know, but for me such explanations are entirely unsatisfactory.

In fact, while I do not believe you intended what you wrote in this way, your words on p. 1256 of your book can be read as supporting the last of the ideas just mentioned. There you write that the biblical authors

reflect the understanding that punishment is related to sin as effects are related to causes. The punishment for sin, in other words, is intrinsic to the sin that is being punished, which is precisely why God need not act violently when he allows intractable sinners to fall under judgment. Indeed, the only thing God needs to do to allow rebels

to experience his judgment is to stop mercifully protecting them from the self-destructive consequences of their rebellion. Hence, we have seen that Scripture frequently describes people being punished by their own sin and as bringing judgment upon themselves.

In the scenes of torture from Argentina, Greg, whose sin is being punished? Is it the sin of the “rebels,” the subversives who do not submit as they should to the government, as Paul supposedly commands in Rom. 13:1-7? In that case, maybe they even got less than they deserved, though you would have to acknowledge that innocent persons suffered as well. Were José Vargas, María Luisa, Josefina, Socorro, Bebita, and the mother of Simon being punished for the sin of rebellion and subversive behavior? Was it only human beings who understood the behavior of these “subversives” as sinful, or was it God as well? Or were the wives and daughters being punished for not having fulfilled their moral and civic obligation by going to the authorities and denouncing their husband or father as a rebel so that the police might arrest him? In that case, even the women and children deserved what they suffered. Perhaps you would like to illuminate José, María Luisa, Simon’s mother, and even the grown-up Bebita today as to why their loved ones were tortured to death or disappeared from their sight forever and how this related to their sin.

You might also clarify to them, however, that the God of whom you speak does not punish people personally. The only thing he does to allow “rebels to experience his judgment is to stop mercifully protecting them from the self-destructive consequences of their rebellion.” In other words, God had nothing to do with the torturers in the death chambers.

He just stood by and watched Socorro be drowned to death in front of her kids and observed electrical current being passed through children in front of their parents, while saying to them in effect, “I am sorry, but because I refrain from coercion, my hands are tied. But I do want to console you all with the fact that, long before these terrible things happened to you, my Son bore all of your sin, as well as the sin of your torturers, when he died on the cross.” Isn’t that great news! The Gospel of the Lord! There is divine pardon for all thanks to Jesus’ own experiences of torture!

Of course, you might instead say that those tortured were innocent of any wrongdoing, since they were peacefully and (perhaps) nonviolently opposing a repressive military dictatorship. In that case, where does divine punishment come in? While some of those who ordered and carried out the torture were later punished, and it might be said that God caused the oppressive military junta seven years later in 1983 to “self-implode” (to use your term, p. 1255), many of those responsible for the torture were never punished, neither during the dictatorship nor after it. Of course, they had to live with their consciences for the rest of their lives, if they still had any conscience left. So do we have here a case of the innocents suffering the “punishment” that the guilty deserved (due to divine non-intervention), or of God simply letting the guilty escape punishment? In either case (or both), would you be willing to explain this to the survivors I mentioned two paragraphs above, as well as to the woman who may still be caring for the brain-damaged child that she bore as a result of the electrical shocks applied to her uterus through her vagina? Oh, and could you also explain your ideas to the

torturers as well, or at least the ones who now live with a guilty conscience?

It is such a relief to know that God was not involved in the torturing of those babies and their parents, since he did nothing but stand there idly and watch from heaven or alongside them in the torture chambers. Or maybe he didn't even watch and looked the other way because it was too gruesome for him to see. Either way, we sure can't accuse him of doing anything wrong, can we? He stuck to his guns on his practice of nonviolence, just as Jesus "absolutized" his prohibition on violence, as you say (p. 210). It was great to learn from you that, "because [God] does not want to dehumanize people, he relies on influential rather than coercive power to accomplish his purposes" (p. xxxv). I sure am glad that God did not dehumanize those tortured and those torturing them by using coercive power on anyone there, and instead limited himself only to the use of influential power.

I am sure that you would want all of us who are Christians to pray for victims of torture, Greg. I do. Those Christians in Argentina, Uruguay, and elsewhere who were alive during the time of the military dictatorship and were aware of what was going on in the torture chambers no doubt interceded to God on behalf of those tortured and their loved ones. Of course, there were undoubtedly other Christians who interceded on behalf of the torturers and believed that those being tortured were evil persons who were receiving just and divine punishment for the sin of attempting to undermine the divinely-established order. Many of these "Christians" were delighted that the children forcibly taken from such parents, who would

have otherwise perverted their children's minds through their subversive ideas, could now be raised in a good Christian environment and even attend church and Sunday school every week. In that case, the children sure were lucky to be placed in a Christian rather than an atheist or communist home!

However, on the basis of your distinction between coercive and influential power, Greg, it would have been incorrect for anyone to pray that God intervene to put a stop to the torture going on. All that the Christians whose loved ones were being tortured could ask God was that he try to "influence" the hearts of the torturers so that they might stop and also that God try to "influence" those being tortured so that they might find somewhere the strength, guidance, comfort, and hope that they needed to withstand the torture and watch their loved ones suffer and die in front of their eyes. I am so happy to hear that God does not intervene actively to put an end to it when people are running electrical currents through babies or pregnant women! What a precious, tender, and wonderful God! We can be so thankful that he takes such pains not to dehumanize anyone, even though it grieves him to act that way, as you indicate:

the fact that it grieved the Father to allow his beloved Son to be afflicted warrants the conclusion that God is always grieved when he decides he must allow people to suffer his "wrath." Indeed, since God loves those he judges immeasurably more than they love themselves or their loved ones, we can only conclude that God suffers immeasurably more when he must allow people to come under a divine judgment than do the people who suffer this judgment. God is therefore always reluctant to turn people over to their sin. Yet, when

God sees that his merciful protection of people from the destructive consequences of their choices is only serving to further harden these people in their sin, God has no choice but to withdraw this protection and allow their sin to ricochet back on them as a divine judgment (p. 1255).

It is good to know that in his Son's death on the cross, God suffered "immeasurably more" than José, María Luisa, and their daughter Josefina and also more than Juan, Socorro, and Bebita, who is probably still alive. I wonder if any of them ever said or heard something equivalent to what parents used to say to their children before giving them a whipping: "This is going to hurt *me* a lot more than it will hurt *you!*" If so, then they no doubt understood very well what you are saying in the paragraph just cited. I'm sure they would be very comforted to learn that what they suffered is peanuts compared to what God suffered when he watched them and their loved ones being tortured. And how marvelous to have a God who is so "merciful" that he allows people like the six persons just named to make their own choices freely and that, when they insist on making the wrong choices, he withdraws his protection from them and allows the consequences of their decisions to ricochet back to them as a divine judgment. We sure wouldn't want to see that ricochet interrupted, would we, Greg?

In your application of the same principles to Jesus' death, you write that, in order for God to judge our sin, "the Father did not need to become angry with Jesus or to act violently toward Jesus. Nor did he need to cause anyone else to act violent toward Jesus. To the contrary, we have seen that for Jesus to become our substitute, the Father merely needed to withdraw his protective presence,

thereby delivering Jesus over to wicked people..." (p. 1255; cf. p. 492). First, isn't it wonderful to be able to tell the victims of torture, "Jesus died as your substitute for your sins so that you do not have to endure punishment for those sins any more. He bore them in your stead." Second, you can tell them that, as he had done with Jesus, when God simply "'withdrew his protective presence' from you while you and your children or parents were undergoing torture and your suckling babies were wrenched away from your arms forever, God was not punishing you. Actually, he was doing that out of love for you, since to intervene actively to help you would have meant dehumanizing you. To say that, of course, implies that rather than withdrawing his protective presence from you, he could have kept that protective presence in place, and in that case you would not have had to endure any torment at all. Ah, but let's not forget: Even though you may not have been sinning by opposing the government as subversives, throughout your life you had and have committed many other sins that deserve punishment (or at least a good ricochet). Therefore, when you were being tortured, God was standing back, not to let you suffer for the sin of subversion, but to let you suffer the consequences of your other sins."

But wait a minute! Didn't Jesus bear their sin on the cross as their substitute, so that they do not have to bear that sin any longer? According to you, Greg, by faith we "discern God out of love stooping to bear this sin and violence" and come to understand that "the sin of the world was nailed to the cross with Christ (Col. 2:14)..." (p. xlii). Isn't it great that "when Jesus's sacrifices all [*sic*] and bears the sin of the world [*is*] the moment when God's character most brilliant [*sic*] shines through

him....' (p. 179)." I'm so glad that you are able to teach those victims of torture about sacrifice and self-sacrifice, Greg. You could also probably tell them quite a bit about "familial love, devotion," and "the capacity for mutual sacrifice," to use Jacobo Timerman's phrases.

Greg, you also share the wonderful news that, on the basis of the affirmation in 1 Pet. 2:24 ("he himself bore our sins in his body on the cross"), we are able to know how St. Peter himself understood Jesus' death:

Peter's understanding of the atonement is not that this deflects God's "wrath" and thus allows God to forgive our sins, as advocates of the penal substitution view of the atonement maintain. Rather, Jesus bore our sins "so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness." And this is how Peter applies Isaiah's proclamation that "by his wounds you have been healed" (1 Pet 2:24; cf. Isa 53:5). In Peter's view, we see, Jesus' substitutionary death heals us from the disease of sin and empowers us to "live for righteousness." And as we have been seeing throughout this chapter, to live righteously is synonymous with adopting a cruciform mindset and lifestyle (p. 204).

I know you care passionately about people and about your ministry, Greg. So do I. But would you be interested in explaining to people like María Luisa, Juan, Simon (whatever his name is now), and Simon's mother that, because Jesus bore their sins in their place, they now should adopt "a cruciform mindset and lifestyle"? Or that they should have already adopted that mindset and lifestyle back in 1976 when they were going through the things mentioned above (if they had not yet given their hearts to Jesus in order to make that mindset and lifestyle theirs)? Won't they be thrilled to learn about

God's humble, "self-abasing love," which defines the call of a disciple (pp. 190, 195, 198)? Perhaps you could explain the word "cruciform" to them, since they may never have heard that term before and may not understand the concept. That may help them become good, self-abasing, cruciform disciples of Christ.

Frankly, Greg, this is another thing that really upsets me about your book. You say some really wonderful things. I loved it, for instance, when you said that we have an "agape-loving" God. What a great phrase! But you often seem to imply that both God and Jesus *wanted* Jesus to die on the cross, as if it were an objective that they had. This puts you in company with the vast majority of Christians I know, including especially biblical theologians who write on the salvific significance of Jesus' death, but this is where I break company sharply with you and them.

For example, you write that Scripture "bears witness to the Christ whose identity, life, and ministry were oriented around his passion" (p. xxx). Alluding to the ideas of J. T. Forstell (actually, Greg, it is Forestell), you affirm that "the cross is the summation, culmination, and perfect expression of the central theme of Jesus' whole ministry, which is about putting on display ('glorifying') the loving character of God" (p. 187). Now, I interpret your words here to mean that Jesus knew ahead of time at least some things about the passion he would endure and on that basis oriented his life and ministry around it, and that he also thought that by dying he could "display" to the world his own loving character as well as that of his Father.

This implies that Jesus' suffering and death on the cross were an end in themselves,

designed by God to accomplish some greater end. It is as if Jesus said, “I will go up to Jerusalem and get myself beaten, whipped, bloodied, and crucified, in accordance with my Father’s will, so that I can show the world how much both I and my Father love everybody. Through my passion and crucifixion, I will put that love on display for all the world to see. In this way, I will also bear the sin of the whole world in the sense of enduring the consequences of every sin ever committed—past, present, and future.” To me that is clearly what you are saying, Greg, though I recognize that the wording is mine, not yours. I am sorry, Greg, but I cannot find words to express my reaction to such ideas: repugnant, hideous, perverse, depraved, sick, and revolting are not nearly strong enough.

Precisely in order to damn ideas such as those to hell for eternity, I wrote my own two-volume work, *Jesus’ Death in New Testament Thought* (Mexico City: Comunidad Teológica de México, 2018).⁶ And in fact, what I find most appalling of all is not simply the ideas themselves, but the fact that for centuries people have said that those ideas are in the Bible. They are not. I have demonstrated that beyond a shadow of a doubt in *JDNTT*, and I defy anyone to prove me wrong. Try me. Please. There I have crushed those ideas to pieces in order to grind them under my heel.

You may not understand the distinctions I am about to make, Greg, but give it a shot. Jesus’ ministry was not oriented around his passion (and I mean his passion as suffering and death, not his passion for serving others). His passion was instead the harrowing result

of his ministry, and his ministry was the result of his immeasurable love and that of his Father. The objective of God and of Jesus was not to put God’s love on display. Rather, their objective was to love others to death until they too might be brought to love in the same way. There is a world of difference between seeking to display love and loving others, just as there is a world of difference between Jesus orienting his life and ministry around his passion and his enduring the passion as a result of what he sought in his life and ministry. But I have my doubts as to whether you will understand those differences clearly without reading through my book.

And I will go even further than that. For me, Jesus’ ministry was one of the most violent things God ever perpetrated in the history of the world. The objective of Jesus and God was and is to *compel*, *constrain*, and *coerce* (not merely “influence”) others to love in the same way (see 2 Cor. 5:14 in the original Greek) and even in a sense to “torture” any who resist that love until they finally can stand it no longer and break down so as to have no choice but to give in. But I will get to that in a moment.

Greg, in some passages from your book, I must say, you really hit the nail on the head. Like your discussion of Matthew 23, where you rightly point out that Jesus was not ridiculing or hurling insults at those he denounces as hypocrites, blind fools, white-washed sepulchers, vipers, and murderers who turn others into “twice as much a child of hell” as they themselves are. As you note, his words are aimed at “shocking” those oppressing others in God’s name to change their conduct, as well as unmasking, exposing, and denouncing the injustices they perpetrate

⁶ Following the practice I mentioned above with regard to *The Crucifixion of the Warrior God*, I will here call my own two-volume work a “book.”

through their interpretations of the law of Moses (p. 217). You might have added that Jesus ends his barrage of invectives with a profound lament over Jerusalem's coming destruction (Matt. 23:37-38). What I cannot believe, however, is that you apparently do not regard Jesus' words in this passage as violent.

Equally mind-boggling to me is your argument that Jesus' action in the temple was nonviolent because he was merely cracking the whip he made in order to control the movement of animals (p. 215). I would agree that he did not strike any people with the whip, but according to the Gospels he drove out not only animals but people as well (in your words, merely "controlling their movement" – Come on, Greg!). How can you consider this nonviolence? He may not have hit any person or animal with the whip, but he certainly was threatening everyone in a violent way with even greater violence if they did not stop what they were doing. Is turning tables and benches over and driving people and animals out of the temple not an act of violent coercion? How can you expect anyone to take your argument seriously when you write things like that?

Yet in fact, what is amusing in your argument becomes cruel and sadistic once more when you share your "nonviolent" interpretation of Revelation 19 (p. 200). There Jesus is depicted as the "Word of God" mounted on a horse leading the armies of heaven to engage in war and killing the great and mighty with his sword (vv. 11-21). At first, you are right on target when you point out the absurdity of a lamb ferociously waging war against a monstrous beast and note that the sword with which he kills "both

free and slave, small and great" (v. 18) is merely his Word. Yet if that Word slays multitudes, is it not still violent? The passage even invites the vultures to gorge on the flesh of those killed! However, you then write that,

adopting gruesome violent imagery from the OT, John depicts the slaughtered lamb as a mighty warrior soaked in the blood of a hard-fought battle (Isa 63:1-3). Yet, whereas the traditional imagery reflected a warrior covered with the blood of his *slain enemies* while *returning* victorious from battle, the lamb of God is soaked in his *own* blood as he rides *into* battle (Rev. 19:13). And those who comprise the lamb's army fight the same way.

What do you mean by this, Greg? If the Lamb of God is "soaked in his *own* blood as he rides *into* battle" rather than that of his enemies, did he intentionally lacerate himself, perhaps to put on display to all his love and that of his heavenly Father? Who is responsible for the blood in which he is soaked? Is it not his enemies, whom he is now heading out to annihilate? Is the blood the result of Jesus simply passively letting others cut or pierce him? Or is God himself the one responsible for his Son's being soaked in blood without him even having engaged his enemies yet? If "those who comprise the Lamb's army fight the same way," are they also to let themselves be bloodied, or perhaps even bloody themselves, before they ride out to engage the enemy? To me, that is what your words clearly imply. And will not the Lamb and his army also be splattered with the blood of their enemies during the fight? They are riding out with swords in hand, and when they finish, the battlefield is littered with dead bodies. Did the Lamb and his army just wave a "nonviolent" magic wand to make their

enemies miraculously fall over dead without slashing their throats with their swords? Why do the Lamb's armies ride out on horses? Are they just out for a pony ride to do some sightseeing, perhaps to watch how vultures pick apart butchered corpses? The passage speaks of "making war," not going out for a trot.

What is the difference between this view of Jesus' death, together with the death of the martyrs or "witnesses" (*martyres*) of which Revelation speaks, and the suicide of Josefina? First of all, I would again insist, how can you say that Jesus bore the sin of the world as the substitute of anyone else so that they need not bear their own sin or that of others? Think of all the sin that Josefina bore: she not only had to watch her family be destroyed and her father be tortured, but the torturers even forced her to be complicit in the torture by selecting the victims to be arrested and perhaps tortured. The idea that Jesus bore the sin of others with the result that people like Josefina do not need to bear sin is absolute nonsense. And second, who is ultimately responsible for her death? Is she the one guilty for killing herself (perhaps because she did not trust in God as she should have)? Maybe she should be denied Christian burial, like other victims of suicide in some "Christian" traditions, and is now condemned to eternal damnation because, according to many Christian churches and leaders, people who take their own life supposedly can't go to heaven.

Are we supposed to let others beat the living daylights out of us, crucify us, or put a gun to our heads and pull the trigger because we proclaim a gospel message that angers them or because they have the same agenda as

the military dictators in Argentina and Caiaphas and his cronies did? What is the difference between passively letting others crucify us and crucifying ourselves? If someone is holding a gun to our head, or to their own head, are we not to attempt to wrest the gun out of their hands before they pull the trigger, even though we must use physical force to do so? Should Josefina's grandparents have simply "withdrawn their protective presence" from her if they had seen her pointing the gun at herself? Ultimately, what is the difference between Josefina pulling the trigger to murder herself and one of her torturers doing so? And enlighten me regarding the difference between Josefina killing herself and Jesus in essence killing himself or having his Father kill him, in effect letting others hold a gun to Jesus' head and pull the trigger. Is that what we his followers are supposed to do as well?

From my perspective, your interpretation of the cross leads people to do what Josefina did: commit suicide, whether it be physical or emotional, in order then to equate suicide "for the good of others" with love. I know that you would probably respond that there is a big difference between killing ourselves and passively allowing others to kill us. But is there really? What is that difference? Explain it to me.

At the risk of sounding presumptuous, Greg, I must tell you that I personally do understand the difference. For me it is like night and day. If you do not understand the difference and wish me to explain it to you, you will have to read my book. And neither you nor anyone else will ever understand that difference until you acknowledge that the ideas associated with the most common

interpretations of the salvific significance of Jesus' death, such as substitution, participation in Christ and his death, and the *Christus Victor* motif as it has traditionally been presented, are entirely foreign to New Testament thought, as I have shown in my book.

Your interpretation of the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18:21-35 also indicates to me that you have not grasped clearly how torture works. You are mistaken when you say that "no servant could possibly incur or pay off a debt of ten thousand talents—the equivalent of two hundred thousand years of labor" (p. 222). Actually, Greg, this servant would be something like the CEO of JPMorgan Chase, except that back in Jesus' day you had rich individuals rather than banks or corporations making loans, and individuals such as kings rather than federal governments providing the capital. You are also wrong when you write: "Still less could a king hope to collect such a debt by having the indebted servant incarcerated and tortured," and when you claim that no king would forgive such an enormous debt (p. 222). Is the financial crisis of 2008 so long ago that you don't remember it? Once handed over to the torturers, the servant and his family and associates can find ways to raise the money necessary to liberate him, but the point of the parable is that the only way that they can do so is by ceasing to be oppressive and entering into solidarity with others so as to bring them into solidarity with the incarcerated servant. By initially forgiving the servant such a huge debt but subsequently imprisoning him when he has a fellow servant who owes him 100 denarii cast into prison, the king is sending a clear message out to everyone in his kingdom: if the king will not hesitate to imprison and torture such a high-ranking and powerful

servant, then what will he do to those of lower rank who treat others in the same way? The twist is that the servant is imprisoned and tortured, not for failing to pay back his loan (which was forgiven), but for refusing to forgive other people their loans or give them more time to pay them back. I cannot explain the whole parable now, Greg, but by handing the first servant over to the torturers, the king is paradoxically helping to create a society in which people must help one another and especially help those in greatest need.

Greg, if you want to understand why Jesus and the authors of the New Testament writings such as the book of Revelation constantly threaten with hellfire evildoers (or simply those who fail to help others, such as those who do not feed, clothe, or visit those in need in Matt. 25:31-46), you must understand what was going on in the torture chambers of Argentina. The superiors of the prison guards who actually did the torturing had no doubt made it clear to those guards that if they refused to do things such as apply electrical current to children in front of their parents, those guards would be forced to endure the same treatment themselves: their own children and loved ones would be tortured in front of them. The guards thus thought that they had no choice but to follow orders. It was either torture these children or watch their own children get tortured.

So what do you tell these guards, Greg? Is there any way to convince them to stop torturing children and their parents? I can think of only one thing you could say to them that might make them stop, and that is to tell them what Jesus himself and his first followers in essence announced: if you torture others, you may avoid being tortured by those

in positions of authority over you. But some day you will have to face a Great Big Torturer who will torture you much worse and for a much longer time than any human, earthly torturer. So choose which torture and torturer you prefer.

By the way, you won't get anywhere by saying such a thing to the dictators and generals and those in places higher up who are ordering the torture. The way to attempt to stop torture is to address instead the people on the bottom who are being forced to implement the torture. That's why Jesus constantly directs his words of warning, not to the rich and the powerful, but to those of lower rank. That is also why Jesus did not go after the chief priests at the temple but rather lashed out at those who were doing their dirty work for them and lining their pockets by trading and exchanging money under their direction. The way you overthrow dictators and tyrants is not by attacking them directly. That is suicide. Rather, you get the people on the bottom to stop fearing them and colluding with them. You topple an oak, not by chopping off its highest branches, but by repeatedly taking an axe to its base until it falls over.

Of course, you can't tell people in one breath that there is a Great Big Torturer who will torture them eternally unless they stop torturing others only then to whisper to them in the next breath, "but between you and me, that will not really happen, because God is loving and would never actually torture anyone, and much less for eternity." You have to convince them that God really is a brutal and ruthless torturer who will never let those who do evil out of his grasp.

Yet how can we speak of a God of unconditional love who tortures people for eternity? Your own observation about Revelation 19 provides the clue, Greg: just as the violent image of a sword stabbing someone can be interpreted metaphorically as an allusion to the manner in which God's Word of grace pierces human hearts, so also can we take violent imagery there and elsewhere in Revelation and the New Testament and understand it metaphorically as referring to God's love. Let us consider one of the most violent passages of Revelation as an example. In Rev. 14:9-11, John writes:

Then another angel, a third, followed them, crying with a loud voice, "Those who worship the beast and its image, and receive a mark on their foreheads or on their hands, they will also drink the wine of God's wrath, poured unmixed into the cup of his anger, and they will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and its image and for anyone who receives the mark of its name" (14:9-11).

At first glance, few passages in the New Testament are as violent and threatening as this one. But let us use imagery from elsewhere in the book of Revelation to interpret it. In Rev. 1:14, 2:18, and 19:12, we read that the eyes of Christ as the Son of Man and Word of God are "like a flame of fire." What else can this fire be but his burning love? Likewise, if we remember that God's wrath is the result of his love, which refuses to accept it when people do evil to one another, then we can understand the fire that pours forth from the mouth of those who prophesy

in God's name in 11:3-5 as an allusion to God's word of love for all peoples. In Chapter 2 of my own book *JDNTT*, I go into considerable detail regarding the biblical notion that God's wrath is an expression of God's unconditional love, rather than contradicting it.

Perhaps the most obvious indication that the author of Revelation is metaphorically referring to God's love in passages such as these is that he speaks repeatedly of God's enemies drinking and even becoming drunk with wine. Is that how one treats enemies, by throwing a party for them? How can a wine-cup be associated with the "fury of God's wrath" (14:10; 16:19) when wine makes the heart content? And the wine that those enemies drink is the blood of the saints and prophets, that is, those who love and serve God (16:6). How could any believers in Christ in the first century hear the words "wine," "vine" (14:18), "blood," and "wine-cup" or "chalice" (*potērion*) in the same context without thinking of the *agapē* feast in which they celebrated Jesus' love and recalled his last supper with the disciples, at which he spoke of drinking of the fruit of the vine with them again in his Father's kingdom (Matt. 26:27-29; Mark 14:23-25; Luke 22:17)? The blood of Jesus and that of his witnesses can hardly be understood as referring to anything but a willingness to give up one's life so that the alternative community that Jesus had sought to establish in life and death might become a reality, a community in which all revolves around love. Jesus' followers wash their robes in that blood, making those robes not red but white (Rev. 7:14). So when the "whore of Babylon" becomes "drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus" (17:6), what is she becoming drunk with but the love for the

world that they showed through "the word of their testimony (*martyria*)," since like Jesus their Lord they "did not cling to life even in the face of death" on account of their commitment to serving God and others (12:11)?

In other passages of Revelation, the smoke that never ceases to go up to God's presence is the sweet smell of incense, which is one of the few things that human beings produce that is designed exclusively to appeal to their sense of smell. In Rev. 8:3-5, an angel with a golden censer that is burning the prayers of the saints, which rise up to God as incense and smoke, fills the censer with fire from the altar and then throws it down on the earth, producing thunder, lightning, and an earthquake. Is this angel not casting the fire of love upon the earth so that it may burn everywhere (cf. Luke 12:49)? Similarly, Rev. 15:7-8 speaks of an angel taking in his hands golden bowls "full of the wrath of God," with the result that "the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power." Is not the foul-smelling smoke that rises from burning sulfur intended to contrast in some way with the sweet-smelling smoke of "incensed" love that rises up endlessly to God and fills up the sacred space in which he dwells? Or is not the water of the lake that burns with fire and sulfur into which God's enemies are thrown (19:20; 20:10; 21:8) related in some way to the sea of glass mixed with fire alongside which God's people sing praises with their harps (15:2-4)? The sound of those harps is like the sound of many waters, and the voice of those who sing rumbles like thunder, praising him "who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water" (14:1-3, 7; 19:6). That water is the blood of God's saints and prophets (16:4-6).

Language of water, seas, and lakes together with allusions to torment brings to mind the story of the Gerasene man possessed by a legion of demons, who subsequently enter into a herd of pigs and plunge themselves into a sea (Mark 5:1-20) or a lake (Luke 8:26-39). Oddly, when Jesus arrives in the region, the demon called "Legion" runs from a distance in order to fall down at Jesus' feet and then begs him not to torture him (or perhaps to stop torturing him). Why should one run *towards* one's torturer rather than away from him? Likewise, why does Rev. 11:10 affirm that the word of God's prophets tortures or torments the inhabitants of the earth?

Here is what I think, Greg: this torture is the torture of love. God and Jesus torture evildoers by loving them to death. They make evildoers drink the unmixed wine of love from the cup they have poured for them until they are so drunk with that love that it takes total control of them and they can no longer resist it (Rev. 14:9-11; 16:6; 17:6). The fire of that love sears through from Jesus' eyes into their hearts until it burns brightly in them as well, and its sweet-smelling smoke takes away the foul odor of sulfur. God's prophets, like Jesus himself, slay their hearers with the word of God's love. Those who have violently opposed God's love are submerged into a lake in which that love fills their lungs until they have no choice but to breathe love rather than hate.

In your book, Greg, you look quite a bit at the writings of Origen. I think Origen was right on in his doctrine of *apokatastasis*: ultimately, God's love will conquer all, especially his enemies, both human and non-human. Those who oppose God will be

tortured forever by that love in the sense that it will eventually break down their resistance so that they are left with no choice but to join the throng of those who bask in that love eternally, bathing in the light of God and the Lamb rather than being scorched by the sun (Rev. 21:22–22:5; cf. 1:16; 7:16-17).

You see, Greg, I do not believe that the God of Jesus and Scripture is nonviolent, as you do. Rather, the God whom I find in Scripture practices "nonviolent violence," as well as "violent nonviolence." I do not believe that Jesus' death involved the "permanent crucifixion of the warrior god," as your book asserts, and I am not even sure if you do, since you seem to accept approvingly the imagery of Jesus who wages war with the sword of his Word in Revelation 19. I do in fact believe that God is a "viciously violent warrior," and I energetically and resolutely refuse to "renounce this warrior god once and for all," as you say that I must (pp. xlii, 1261). I do agree with you entirely, however, that human beings have "used God and/or gods throughout history" in "sinful, violent ways" that reflect their own evil aspirations, and "have used this violent god-in-their-own-image to give divine authority to these aspirations" (p. 1261). Together with you, I condemn this in the strongest of terms. However, I will not condemn in itself the imagery of God as a violent warrior. On the contrary, I would contend that we must not only *resurrect* the warrior God you have crucified, but also *rearm* him as heavily as possible.

To explain this more clearly, Greg, I would point you to the words Jesus is said to have pronounced on the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they

do" (Luke 23:34). From my perspective, those are some of the most violent words ever pronounced by Jesus. It is as if he were reaching down from the cross to those who were crucifying him, pinning their head to the ground and sticking his knee in their back in order to tell them, "You can crucify me, beat and bloody me, spit on me, mock me, and drive a crown of thorns into my scalp, but you will never defeat my vicious love for you. Instead, I will ask God to put his arms around you even more tightly, not to squeeze the life out of you, but to suffocate your hatred and smother you in love. I have spoken the words of my prayer to God out loud for you to hear rather than merely silently in my head for God alone to hear so that those words will hound you day and night and never give you a moment's peace. I refuse to let you keep being persons who crucify others in the way that you are crucifying me. I will give you no rest, respite, or relief until you break down and cry like a baby. My love is relentless and brutal and will not let up until it has pulverized every ounce of the fear that has turned you into its slave. The words of my prayer will ring in your ears and pummel you incessantly until you have no choice but to fall exhausted into my arms and beg for mercy."

How could Jesus have said anything more violent than that? What dagger could ever have ripped into their heart more virulently than those spoken words, "Father, forgive them"? Those are fighting words! And they are one of the most devastating weapons that both Jesus and the warrior God who sent him wield fiercely, ferociously, and indefatigably.

Greg, I have never experienced torture of the type that was inflicted on people like José and Josefina and Socorro and Bebita during

the military dictatorship in Argentina and Uruguay. Because of that, I do not know whether I would be able to forgive those who inflicted such torture on me or my loved ones. Words are easy and talk is cheap. Therefore, I would never pretend to tell the victims of torture how they should feel toward those who tortured them or whether they should forgive them.

But I will say this: I truly believe that the best way to torture those who have tortured you in any way is for you to say in their presence, "Father, forgive them." You can curse them, heap abuse on them, call down God's wrath and vengeance upon them, and do everything in your power to make them suffer many times over the living hell that they have put you through. But from what I have seen in my own lifetime, this will accomplish little if anything. They will be impervious to your words, which will simply roll off their back. Even if you are able to inflict physical pain on them, you will not be able to hurt them in the way that you would like, and they will never give you the pleasure of letting you see *them* suffer in the way they saw *you* suffer.

I know of only one way that you can utterly destroy them and inflict on them such pain as they have never experienced before. That is to take them compassionately into your arms and to say to them in all sincerity from the bottom of your soul, "I love you and I forgive you. And I will never stop torturing you with my love and forgiveness until I see you collapse at my feet." In this way, your hands will be like two electrical prods forcing current through their body for the purpose of seeing all of the energy and violence with which they tortured you sapped out of them.

Actually, by doing this, you may end up destroying not only them but yourself as well. It may be worse torture for you than anything that they ever put you through, and you may end up collapsing alongside of them. But you will never find a revenge that is sweeter. Because you will have discovered the power to take away life by giving it, the power to obliterate the past and detonate the birth of a new world. Nothing you could ever do would be more violent than this.

Of course, there is no guarantee that this violent way of torturing your torturers by forgiving them in the way that Jesus and the warrior God he proclaimed would have you do will bring them to change their ways and feel remorse for what they did to you in the past. What it *will* unquestionably do, however, is to free you from the torture they continue to inflict mercilessly on you by means of the anger, hatred, and lust for revenge which they instilled in your heart and which will forever consume, poison, and crucify you as long as you refuse to forgive them. Thus, no matter how your torturers react to your embrace, you will have annihilated them, because they will no longer be able to torture you endlessly and will therefore cease to exist as your torturers. It is possible, however, that this annihilation will not only raise you from the dead as a new person but raise them from the dead as well, turning persecutors who provoke tears into pacifiers who put a stop to them.

Greg, I do not pretend to know why so many cruel and violent actions are attributed to God and Jesus his Son in the Bible. As I say in Thesis 33 of my *94 Theses* and explain in "Comments on Some of My Theses," when God's people in antiquity endured great suffering and had to interpret or explain it, I

think they took as a starting-point their conviction that God loved them unconditionally and desired nothing but their well-being and happiness, together with that of everyone else. They had to reconcile this conviction not only with the evil that they endured at the hands of others (as well as the hand of nature), but also the evil that they inevitably practiced themselves. When they experienced tremendous pain and hardships, they refused to renounce their faith in the loving God who gave their life meaning. This left them no alternative but to explain their suffering by affirming that God had some loving purpose in imposing suffering on them or allowing it to happen. (Actually, while many regard as important the distinction between God actively *perpetrating* violence and God passively *permitting* violence to happen, ultimately that distinction is meaningless, because if God can prevent something bad from happening but chooses not to, then his assent is also complicity and his inaction is action.)

However, I do not accept your idea that "God had to accommodate his self-revelation to the spiritual state and cultural conditioning of his people in the ages leading up to Christ. Only gradually could God change people's hearts and minds so that they could receive more and more truth about his true character and about his ideal will for them" (p. xxxv). On this basis, Greg, you claim that we now have an understanding of God's character that is superior to that which those who wrote the Old Testament had (pp. xxxiv-xxxv). From my perspective, to speak of God *having* to do certain things in a certain way is both blasphemous and nonsensical. In fact, rather than saying that human beings had to evolve in order to be able to understand God's love

better, I would prefer to speak of God himself evolving and learning how best to love the world.

We find evidence of this idea in Genesis 6-9, where God is said to have been sorry and grieved for having made humankind after seeing that "every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually" (6:5-6). He then is said to destroy the vast majority of human beings (including countless little babies, no doubt) through a flood in order to provide the world with a new start, yet afterwards he seems to realize that he made a mistake and promises never to do anything similar again (9:11). From then on, allusions to God's cruelty seem to diminish gradually from Genesis to 1-2 Kings, yet those allusions by no means disappear and may even be seen as intensifying at times. And, of course, as we have seen, the last book of our Christian Scriptures presents us with a God who is extremely harsh and violent and speaks of his Son as a warrior. Yet I would nevertheless argue, as I have above, that the understanding of God's violence that we find in Revelation and elsewhere in the New Testament has evolved into something that is quite different from that which we find back at the beginning in Genesis.

I would add, Greg, that I don't think we need to go to the lengths that you do in order to try to defend the God of Scripture or remove his claws. On the contrary, I think God does a pretty good job defending himself. But I also believe that God would certainly like us to get our understanding of him and his violence straight so that we stop proclaiming a God who seeks to suffer out of love and instead begin to proclaim a God who

suffers only because he loves. Furthermore, my own thinking on the problem of suffering is very different from yours, as you will see if you read my book. I do not try to justify anything God does or answer questions such as why God would not intervene to stop the torture in places like Argentina. I prefer just to let God be God. I think Jesus did as well, since according to the Gospels he never addressed questions of that type, but simply dedicated himself to doing whatever he could to alleviate the suffering of others.

To tell you the truth, Greg, I *want* a violent warrior God. I don't want a God who simply stands back and waits for evil to "self-destruct" or who uses "the self-acquired evil character of Satan and other fallen powers against them, causing the kingdom of darkness to self-implode" (pp. 492, 1255). Frankly, Greg, I don't see evil self-destructing or self-imploding any time soon. I want a God who actively wields a sword against evil with all the fury of his wrath and calls us to do the same by practicing nonviolent violence and violent nonviolence, rather than having us stand back with him as he withdraws his protective presence from others and waits for ricochets to happen. I want a rebel God and a rebel Jesus who call on people to stand up to dictators like the mothers and grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina began to do in 1977, demanding that their children be returned to them or accounted for and refusing to be silenced, and even to manifest their anger and opposition to dictatorial governments by banging violently on pots and pans, as protesters in Chile, Argentina, and other countries in South America and elsewhere have done for decades.



Also, Greg, I don't want a "condescending" God "whose eternal nature is *antithetical* to his surface appearance" (pp. 496-99). I want the real thing, a God who shows his true colors and takes off his gloves by resolutely taking a stand next to me and encouraging me to fight for a different world. I want a God who is unrelenting, unyielding, and uncompromising in his struggle against evil and injustice and has "sounded forth the trumpet that will never call retreat" (*Battle Hymn of the Republic*). Give me a God who doesn't ask me to sit back with him and watch little babies be tortured so as to avoid "dehumanizing" people through "coercion," but instead compels me to take *action*, though with wisdom, prudence, intelligence, and understanding rather than with condescension, naiveté, knee-jerk reactions, or a bleeding heart. I want a God who fights violence with nonviolence, as your God does, but I want him to do so armed to the hilt with the intimidating and intoxicating arsenal of weapons he possesses, not only annihilating violence with nonviolence, but also obliterating your brand of nonviolence with violence—not just *any* sort of violence, but violence of the right kind that is *destructive* only so that it may be *constructive*.

I am sorry, Greg, but after browsing through parts of your book, for the time being I do not wish to read any further, because many of the things you write will only make me angrier, and I don't want to be angry. In fact, I would like for us to be friends. Also, I would by no means discourage people from reading your book. On the contrary, I would highly recommend that they work through it if they are interested, since you address subjects that are extremely important and urgently need to be discussed. As I have, they will find some wonderful things in your book and thank God for that. But I also hope that at least some of the things you write will provoke them to anger as they have provoked me, and that this will enable them to love others as passionately as you and I do, if they do not do so already.

Finally, Greg, while I have never had a woman come up to me after a presentation and embrace me with tears in her eyes, as you have, I did have one experience that was quite similar to yours. With that I would like to end my letter to you. A number of years ago, I was asked to give a Bible study at an ELCA Global Mission event. As I recall, the text I chose was Isaiah 1, which is a very violent passage. There, through his prophet Isaiah, God rails at his people for all of the injustice and wickedness that they are committing in his name. After telling them that he is fed up with the hypocritical worship they offer him, calling their city a whore, and branding them as murderers, God tells them how he will pour out his wrath on his enemies and avenge himself on his foes. In my Bible study, I used this passage to speak about how we must become indignant at all of the injustices and atrocities that are constantly taking place around the world—including especially those

committed in God's name—and manifest our love by seeking to do what God does in this text: promising to struggle tenaciously against evil and dedicate ourselves to working on behalf of what is good, just, right, and loving. I am copying and pasting the NRSV translation of Isaiah 1 at the end of this document, Greg, so that you and anyone else who reads this can see the wrath and violence it contains, but at the same time see how it speaks of the unconditional love of an unrelenting God.

After I had ended my presentation and everyone was filing out of the room, a sweet woman of about the same age as the one you describe came up to me and said, "I have been attending church regularly since I was a little girl, but in all those years, this is the first time I have ever heard a pastor tell me that I should get angry. Thank you."

Blessings and peace,

David A. Brondos

Mexico City, Mexico

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Image: EFE in debate.com.mx

Isaiah 1 (NRSV)

The vision of Isaiah son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth; for the Lord has spoken:

I reared children and brought them up,
but they have rebelled against me.

The ox knows its owner, and the donkey
its master's crib;

but Israel does not know, my people
do not understand.

Ah, sinful nation, people laden with
iniquity,

offspring who do evil, children who
deal corruptly,

who have forsaken the Lord, who have
despised the Holy One of Israel,

who are utterly estranged!

Why do you seek further beatings? Why
do you continue to rebel?

The whole head is sick, and the whole
heart faint.

From the sole of the foot even to the head,
there is no soundness in it,

but bruises and sores and bleeding
wounds;

they have not been drained, or bound
up, or softened with oil.

Your country lies desolate, your cities are
burned with fire;

in your very presence aliens devour
your land;

it is desolate, as overthrown by
foreigners.

And daughter Zion is left like a booth in a
vineyard,

like a shelter in a cucumber field, like
a besieged city.

If the Lord of hosts had not left us a few
survivors,

we would have been like Sodom, and
become like Gomorrah.

Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom!

Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!

What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?, says the Lord;

I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts;

I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats.

When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand?

Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile;
incense is an abomination to me.

New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation—

I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.

Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates;

they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them.

When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you;

even though you make many prayers, I will not listen;
your hands are full of blood.

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes;

cease to do evil, learn to do good;
seek justice, rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord:

though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow;

though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.

If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land;

but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword;
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

How the faithful city has become a whore!

She that was full of justice, righteousness lodged in her—
but now murderers!

Your silver has become dross, your wine is mixed with water.

Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves.

Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts.

They do not defend the orphan,
and the widow's cause does not come before them.

Therefore says the Sovereign, the Lord of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel:

Ah, I will pour out my wrath on my enemies, and avenge myself on my foes!

I will turn my hand against you;

I will smelt away your dross as with lye and remove all your alloy.

And I will restore your judges as at the first, and your counselors as at the beginning.

Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city.

Zion shall be redeemed by justice, and
those in her who repent, by righteousness.

But rebels and sinners shall be
destroyed together,
and those who forsake the Lord shall
be consumed.

For you shall be ashamed of the oaks in
which you delighted;

and you shall blush for the gardens
that you have chosen.

For you shall be like an oak whose leaf
withers,

and like a garden without water.

The strong shall become like tinder, and
their work like a spark;

they and their work shall burn
together, with no one to quench them.