

## **A Subversive King of Freedom and Love: The Crucified Christ (Erik Buys)**

[For a Dutch version of this essay, see [Tertio, nr. 1156 – 6 April 2022](#)]

### **Non-Violent Love**

“Since we got a dog, the relationship with my husband has improved significantly. Instead of hitting me when I irritate him, he kicks our new pet.” A couples therapist would be weirded out by such reasoning. Unfortunately, some interpretations of Jesus’ death on the cross form a terrible variation thereof. They depict Jesus like that dog: he undergoes divine punishment in place of an allegedly depraved humanity and, in doing so, restores the relationship between man and God. Still according to that view, you are saved if you acknowledge that; on the other hand, those who do not accept Jesus’ sacrifice will still experience disaster, especially during the so-called end times.

The gospel, however, describes Jesus’ sacrifice and (the relationship between) God and man in a completely different way. Good Friday provides an opportunity to reflect on the nature of the grace that unfolds itself on the cross. According to the New Testament witness, Jesus of Nazareth reveals a “mercy that does not desire sacrifice.” His disciples call him the redeeming Messiah because the reality of love, such as it embodies itself in him, radically liberates from the logic of violence.

### **In Word**

First, Jesus testifies to non-violent love in his speaking, for instance in his famous parable of the prodigal son. That story begins with an act of aggression: the youngest of two brothers asks his father for his inheritance and then leaves for a distant land. By doing that, the youngest son implies that his father is already dead to him. He cuts all ties with his father. The oldest son stays home, although he too receives his inheritance.

The youngest is keen on determining his own course, much more so than the oldest son. Hence, he is more interested in wealth than in his father himself. Jesus then recounts how the life of the youngest son is absorbed by seeking pleasure. At first that must have brought prestige. However, when the money for feasting is used up, the son is left alone. He survives as a swineherd, which brings him to a kind of repentance. Jesus paints his desire to return to his father in a realistic sense. It is not devoid of opportunism. His expression of regret to his father seems motivated by necessity rather than love.

The father’s reaction in the story is remarkable. Even before the son has proven the sincerity of his return, his father forgives him without reservation. A celebration is organized immediately. Perhaps this loving reception will lead to a greater sense of responsibility. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) writes, not coincidentally: “Grace is bestowed on us, not because we have done good works, but that we may be able to do them.” However, when the eldest son witnesses the celebration, it arouses resentment in him. According to him, respect is to be earned before it can be received. As the father rejoices over the son who “was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found,” the eldest even denies kinship with his brother. Paradoxically, that kind of demeanor betrays many similarities with his new enemy’s earlier attitude. Those who genuinely love others rejoice when they fully come to life. The eldest son, on the other hand, angrily reacts to his father’s joy and the validation his brother enjoys. Thus, he too rather approaches his father as someone he needs to affirm his status than as someone for whom he truly cares. The love of the father does not diminish, however. It remains equally available to both brothers. “Son, you are always with me, and all that I have

is yours,” he consoles his oldest son. Whether that love will be emulated is anything but certain.

Those who live out of love have no control over the behavior of others. Thus, a God who reveals himself to man as love is not a master of puppets who is in full control. Nevertheless, love is “free and omnipotent” in another sense: it gives itself regardless of the question whether it will be reciprocated. Moreover, it is not contaminated by the logic of violence. The parable of the prodigal son does not end with a father who commits violence in reparation for his wounded pride. The old man does not send for a servant, for example, to be whipped in place of his returned son. On the contrary, the father himself occupies the space where he can suffer some heavy blows. Perhaps the youngest son will leave again, and the oldest will remain offended. Love, however, patiently keeps providing opportunities for the restoration of relationships.

### **In Deed**

Jesus bears witness to non-violent love, secondly, in his actions. He does not, for example, follow the logic of a crowd that wants to stone an adulterous woman. He does not anxiously go for an image that might easily earn him the appreciation of the group. “He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first,” he concludes. Whoever throws a stone after that statement would make himself a god and thus ignore the heart of the Jewish law, namely “to love God as the one and only God.” The fulfillment of that commandment prevents the sacrifice of the adulterous woman. It is no coincidence that Jesus makes the following connection: “Love God, and your neighbor as yourself.” Man more fully becomes himself as a relational being when he substitutes nothing for God or, in other words, when he refuses to deify anything. Relationships gain new opportunities when man does not allow himself to be determined by natural and cultural laws. Diseases can be fought, for example, as can female circumcision. And if you stand up for a victim of bullying, you may very well lose prestige with the bullies and even more so the power over their possible reaction, but you will discover unexpected aspects of yourself. So, when you stand up for those who are rejected in any way, you save yourself. Jesus, who is ultimately crucified himself, therefore asserts: “Whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.”

Jesus points out the kinship between people and the ones they reject, as the father does in the parable of the prodigal son. The father loves the son who threatens to become the external enemy of his family, and thereby creates internal division. He prefers the democratic-like “peace of non-violent conflict” in his own house to the “violent peace based on sacrifice.” Jesus also constantly disturbs totalitarian echo chambers, as in his encounter with the adulterous woman. The opponents of Jesus suspect that he does that to gain popularity with vulnerable people. Yet Jesus demonstrates a keen insight into the tragic nature of such endeavors. He warns against the dynamic in which human beings destroy love for themselves and others: “What profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and is himself destroyed or lost?” Those who enjoy a kind of honor or prestige because of an untruthful image are not valued for who they are and lose themselves to the maintenance of an unrealistic self-image. Moreover, in that case, you also reduce others to mere means, serving to affirm the narcissistic idol of your self-delusion.

### **In Death**

Jesus does not ever lose himself to the violent dynamic in which power, wealth, honor, and pleasure are goals. This is evident, thirdly, when he dies. Unlike the logic of violence, the logic of love does not seek destruction to establish itself, not even of power, wealth, honor, and pleasure. It seeks fruitful relationships. It considers pleasure and honor as potential, but not necessary consequences of its dynamics. Under its influence, an alcoholic might free himself from his craving for his favorite liquor and become a blessing to his children again. In any case, someone like Sister Jeannine Gramick has apparently been free-spirited enough to work for the LGBT community for years, even without the ecclesiastical appreciation she eventually received from Pope Francis. In addition, love reshapes wealth and power into means at the service of a more humane society. For instance, precisely because their individual members are not attached to personal property, religious congregations have amassed the collective wealth with which they invest in schools, hospitals, and other services. And someone like Oskar Schindler did not use his power during World War II to make a profit, say, based on child labor, but to save more than a thousand Jews.

Jesus also does not aspire to power. That becomes clear when he answers the question whether he supports the existing regime: “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” Jesus is neither for nor against any existing system. However, choosing the path of non-violent love does require the continuous reform of rules, even those of the Sabbath, into means that liberate human beings: “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.” Simply destroying a culture is out of the question for Jesus. Hence, he does not side with those who are in power, nor with insurgents who want to take over power. Yet his opponents fear that he might provoke a civil war. That is why one of them, Caiaphas, decides: “It is expedient for us that one man should die for the people, and not that the whole nation should perish.”

Jesus, however, refuses to become a rival of leaders who establish peace based on violence. When he is arrested, he nips any violent resistance in the bud, saying: “All who take the sword will perish by the sword.” And when the Roman governor Pilate asks the imprisoned Jesus whether he is a king, embroiled in a power struggle, he replies: “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered.” In other words, Jesus is not heading for a civil war at all. Hence, Pilate judges: “I find no fault in him at all.” Nevertheless, Pilate too will follow the logic of violence: he has Jesus crucified.

Time and again, the “kings of this world,” from Pharaoh Ramses and King Herod to Vladimir Putin, imagine they can bring a form of salvation by killing. Violence, however, continues to reproduce itself in myths that place the responsibility for one’s own violence exclusively on some other. The attempt to differentiate themselves from each other through supposedly justified violence tragically turns rivals into doubles. Al-Qaeda, for example, justified the 9/11 suicide bombings as acts of self-defense against the West, even though a plan to destroy Islam does not exist. The U.S. then justified the Iraq War in 2003 as an act of self-defense against a regime that allegedly owned weapons of mass destruction and supported Al-Qaeda. However, those weapons were never found and the link between the then regime and Al-Qaeda remains unproven. The subsequent civil war in Iraq did give rise to the bloodthirsty Islamic State (ISIS). So none of the so-called acts of self-defense made the world a safer place, quite the opposite. The world suffers from the original sin of violence. False Messiahs produce the problem from which they claim to save the world. Unlike those so-called saviors, Jesus brings

salvation because he kills neither others nor himself. He remains the embodiment of a non-violent love that gives itself unto the cross.

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) pointed out that the crucified Jesus is completely free from the deadly addiction to honor, wealth, power, and pleasure: on the cross he is taunted, barely wears any clothes, hangs defenseless, and suffers horribly. This shows that Jesus takes a radically different path than the one the brothers in the parable of the prodigal son tend to take. He is not tempted to follow the path that gradually makes relationships impossible. The love that he inhabits even reshapes the deepest human fears: the fear of potentially contributing to murder outstrips his fear of death. In fact, his death subverts the mythical logic by which violence justifies itself, once and for all. Hence, just before he dies, he says: "It is finished." When Jesus is dead, he can no longer be tempted to call for violence. The last chance to draw him into the world of violence is gone then. So the story that justifies the violence against him turns out to be a complete lie. The truth is that he is actually innocent. In Jesus' death on the cross, violence paradoxically collapses on itself: it loses its *raison d'être*. The crucified Jesus is the living incarnation of the logic of love. That love grows from a death that keeps the life of human beings from violence: neither friend nor foe has had to die in a civil war. "The glory of God is a human being fully alive" (after Irenaeus of Lyons, 140-202).

The gospel shows that Jesus does not suffer blows to satisfy a supposedly violent deity, but because of a violence-ridden humanity. Jesus accuses his opponents of wanting to kill him because they are guided by "the devil." He calls the devil a liar and a murderer who "cannot cast out himself." In other words, the devil represents the mythical and tragic process by which people perpetuate the deadly violence they pretend to combat. Those who imitate the love that is God would refuse to kill. Hence, Jesus says to the same opponents: "If God were your father, you would love me."

Precisely because the divine identifies itself with a radically non-violent love in Jesus – and thus, like a defenseless lamb, enters the space where blows can be suffered –, man is given mastery over his own violence. There is no God, nor any other transcendent law to which man, as the so-called victim of an inescapable fate, can attribute his violence. In receiving responsibility for his own violence, man also receives the freedom to reject that violence, toward himself and toward others. The stories by which, for example, a man justifies violence against his wife, and his wife then does violence to herself, are among "the sins of the world." Jesus unmask such stories and the belief in them as unfounded fictions.

The unmasking of the mendacious foundation of violence comes to completion during Jesus' Passion. The harder the violence hits, the more defenseless Jesus becomes, and the less *raison d'être* violence has as a defense mechanism against this so-called "violent man." In contrast, the intensity of non-violent love increases during the Passion. The grace of Jesus' non-violence thus even reforms violence into an instrument of love, one that ultimately destroys itself. Just as the defenselessness of a newborn child possesses the power to unleash our love without being able to violently enforce it, the crucified Jesus has the power to create us as "new people," averse to envious rivalry or fear of being dominated. The grace given to us in the crucifixion is that we can become creatures of grace ourselves. The imitation of Jesus' love breaks the cycle of revenge and creates the space for mutual forgiveness. In it, people in all their diversity may reach reconciliation. Therefore, the peace of Jesus will be different

from the all-too-common peace of this world, which is built on violence. As that radically other kind of peacemaker, Jesus is the Christ: he truly liberates us from the logic of violence. Of course, the dynamic of grace has always been available, also outside the way it gives itself unto the cross in Jesus. But his crucifixion does reveal that, through that grace, we become partakers of a life that does not even die with a death.

