

Joshua, Calvin and Genocide

Ronald Goetz, Ph.D.

“Joshua, Calvin and Genocide” is among Goetz’s earliest works. In reflecting on Calvin’s commentary on Joshua, Goetz establishes a controlling theme of his atonement theology: that God’s sovereign power entails God’s radical, indeed exhaustive, responsibility for everything that occurs in God’s world. Not only the “merciful triumphs of God’s will” but also the “wreckage” of history is God’s “doing” – and so God’s “terrible burden.” God’s responsibility, the divine burden, implies a dramatically different understanding of Christ’s work of atonement.

In the Bible, the book of Joshua may seem only a minor element in the Old Testament, easily sidestepped by anyone possessing even the least bit of theological dexterity.¹ But I am convinced that, in fact, it is a profoundly disturbing but central pivot around which much of the Old Testament drama revolves. If we have tended to evade this cruciality, John Calvin did not. Though I might find it necessary to disagree with elements of his interpretation, I nevertheless find Calvin a compelling guide into the text.

His is the most direct and honest commentary on Joshua that I know of, precisely because he treats the book of Joshua for the theologically decisive document which it is. If one resists the modern temptation to explain Joshua away, if one agrees with Calvin as to the importance of Joshua, the book will play a significant role in one’s whole theological perspective as it did for Calvin’s. I find it having a direct bearing on my own understanding of God’s love, of God’s culpability in the agony of human history, and of God’s acts for the redemption of the world, culminating in the atoning work of Jesus Christ.

I.

Near the end of his life, a seriously ailing John Calvin completed his commentary on the book of Joshua. The nineteenth-century Calvin scholar and translator, Henry Beveridge, after remarking on the high quality of the Joshua commentary—quite amazing in view of the deteriorating state of Calvin’s health—goes on to assess the work in a “higher and better light.” Beveridge is moved to speak of Calvin’s “dying

¹ An earlier version of this article appeared in *Theology Today*, vol. 32, no. 3 (October 1975). Subscription information may be found at www.ptsem.edu.

bequest to the church—a solemn ratification of the whole System of Doctrine which he had so long, so earnestly, and so successfully promulgated.”²

How times have changed! It is difficult to imagine a twentieth-century theologian who would, in anticipation of imminent death, spend many final, painful efforts in a positive theological interpretation of the notorious book of Joshua. Further, not many contemporary theologians are likely to receive this “dying bequest” with the same gratitude that Beveridge felt. Given the contemporary church’s generally liberal stance on the issues of religious tolerance, its vaguely semi-pacifistic disinclination to approve of war in general, and its downright abhorrence of what to many seems a contradiction in terms, that is, the holy war, the book of Joshua is embarrassment enough, with its ferocity and its religious advocacy of mass murder, theologized as a holy act of “sacrificial” banning (referred to in scholarly circles by the Hebraicized, in-group euphemism for such “biblical” genocide—the *hérem*). Calvin’s “bequest,” his cold-blooded acceptance of the Deuteronomic theology of the *hérem*, calling, as it does, for the indiscriminate slaughter of whole populations, seems hardly an enrichment of the church’s theological treasure; rather, more like a shameful albatross, the current conspicuousness of which is mercifully mitigated by the salutary fact that so few people these days who are not professionally interested read Calvin—or, for that matter, the book of Joshua.³

In fairness to Calvin, it must be acknowledged that as a human being he did recoil from the work of extermination reported in Joshua. He did not hold it to be a paradigm of “Christian” warfare, and indeed he argued that apart from God’s command “it would have been barbarous and atrocious cruelty had the Israelites gratified their own lust and rage, in slaughtering mothers and their children.”⁴ Nevertheless, an otherwise “indiscriminate and promiscuous slaughter” is not what it appears when it is done in accordance with the divine will. The annihilation of Jericho “might seem an inhuman massacre, had it not been executed by the command of God.

² Translator’s preface to John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of Joshua*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), vi.

³ I first came upon Calvin’s commentary on Joshua when I was studying in a leading Presbyterian theological college in England. It was a late nineteenth-century edition; yet I know I was the first person ever to read the book since I had to cut the pages.

⁴ *Commentaries on Joshua*, 97. Calvin’s quite “human” frugality also is in evidence in this section as he speculates on the thoughts of “many” Israelites as they viewed the terrible waste. Is God envious? he hears them wondering. Yet in “dismissing these considerations” they gave “proof of rare and excellent self-denial, voluntarily to cast away spoils which were in their hands. . . .” Ordinary virtues fade to nothing, it would seem, when measured against the divine will.

But as he, in whose hands are life and death, had justly doomed those nations to destruction, *this puts an end to all discussion.*"⁵

But not even the hard-nosed Calvin could let the matter rest at this, for he felt that *some* explanation of the divine judgment was required. The issue cannot be permitted to stand in all its naked terror, and, after having declared the discussion closed, he immediately reopens it:

We may add, that they [the Canaanites] had been borne with for four hundred years, until their iniquity was complete. Who will now presume to complain of excessive rigour, after God had so long delayed to execute judgment? If anyone object that children, at least, were still free from fault, *it is easy to answer, that they perished justly, as the race was accursed and reprobated.*⁶

John Calvin had a brutal sense of responsibility to his fundamental premises. Even in this attempt to provide some rationale by which he can point to the essential mercy of God, a mercy of which Calvin was deeply convinced and by which his life was doubtless affected, he digs himself more deeply into the very paradox he seeks to mitigate.

How can we, with our finite understandings, possibly ascribe boundless mercy to an omnipotent God who in moments of righteous anger visits enemies with a wrath far out of finite proportion to the magnitude of their sin, at least if their sin is measured against the sins of those whom the Lord loves? It would be difficult to make a case for a significant moral superiority of the Israelites over the Canaanites.

II

Deuteronomy tells us that God seeks to confirm in the conquest of Canaan the divine word to the patriarchs. Yet the ultimate Deuteronomic understanding of the call of Israel from among all other peoples, that is, the reason why the promise was given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the first place, lies not in any casuistic attempt to establish a moral superiority wherein an admittedly sinful Israel can be shown to be significantly less corrupt than the still far worse Canaanites. No! Israel's call is purely an act of God's unaccountable love (Deut. 7:6-8).

However, if this is how things stand, then the immorality of Canaan is neither here nor there in any attempt to show the justice of God in the establishment of the

⁵ Ibid. My italics.

⁶ Ibid. My italics.

people of Israel over the dead bodies of the Canaanites. Manifestly, Israel is being helped in *spite* of her sins, while the Canaanites are being destroyed *because* of theirs.

One illusory alternative to this dilemma would lie in the “demonstration” of the “fact” that believers, though they are morally imperfect, are, nevertheless, so vastly more righteous than the unbelievers, that their being loved by God has a relative justification in view of their own demonstrable moral superiority. Such semi-Pelagian Pharisaisms have frequently been tried (in fact they are the meat and drink of much legalistic piety). But surely self-righteousness constitutes the most embarrassing and fruitless of all apologetic starting points. Perhaps believers are better people than they would have been had they never experienced and responded to the grace of God. But this is empirically a moot point. To go beyond the confessional statement, “I am a better person because I have known God,” to argue that the Christian is a better person than an unbelieving neighbor is hopeless. Even the suggestion of one’s own moral superiority is itself a prideful absurdity, and the evidence is notoriously unconvincing. In matters of ultimate conviction, the best ideologies are no guarantee of a decent human being. Most of us have been confronted by obviously fine people whose convictions, if any, we deplore, and the monstrous evils that good people have perpetrated in good causes is a matter of well-documented, if appalling, record.

If we could grant to Calvinism its own terms, we would have relatively little *systematic* difficulty with the problem of divine judgment. Although we may be hard pressed to make moral sense out of the specific *a posteriori* acts of God’s wrath, on the larger *a priori* schema all wrath is neatly explained. We are all primordially guilty with Adam and thus all wrath is deserved wrath and our sinful acts simply confirmations of our original sinfulness. God’s gracious forgiveness of the elect comes as a merciful deliverance. No one deserves the divine deliverance from death. Thus, presumably if only one person from among the whole population of the world had been elected to salvation, God’s gratuitous mercy would thereby be demonstrated. The ultimate reason that some, or many, are damned is essentially a mystery—though as instruments of God’s wrath the damned provide examples of God’s holy severity. Such a schema lies behind Calvin’s willingness to call all discussion of morality of God *vis-a-vis* the genocide in the book of Joshua, out of order. God willed to demonstrate holy wrath through Joshua’s genocide, and the divine *fait accompli* should put “an end to all discussion”; all theology and rational reflection on the propriety of the acts of God must cease. We are left standing stupefied and silent before the brute acts of God.

Calvin insists again and again upon the need for our awe-full assenting silence. Concerning one of the many later massacres reported in Joshua, Calvin can boldly say, “God had commanded,” and thus “there is no more ground for obloquy against him, than there is against those who pronounce sentence on criminals. Though, in our

judgment at least, the children and many of the women also were without blame, let us remember that the judgment-seat of heaven is not subject to our laws.”⁷ Yet once again Calvin seems impelled to show the finite justice in the acts of God whose judgments are “not subject to our laws.” He goes on to plead:

And certainly, any man who will thoroughly examine himself, will find that he is deserving of a hundred deaths. Why, then, should not the Lord perceive just ground for one death in any infant which has only passed from its mother’s womb? In vain shall we murmur or make noisy complaint, that he has doomed the whole offspring of an accursed race to the same destruction; the potter will nevertheless have absolute power over his own vessels, or rather over his own clay.⁸

Clearly, one can agree with Calvin. *I*, certainly, do deserve a hundred deaths at God’s hands, but I am deliberately guilty. Were I not willfully guilty, I would not, humanly speaking, *deserve* any death at God’s hands. Is the newborn son of a mass murderer deserving of one death because his father deserves to die ten thousand times over? Granting that the potter owes no explanation to the clay – but are we clay?

III

Why couldn’t Calvin let the matter rest with the authoritarian *a priori* defense of God’s alleged commandments? Who can dispute the claim that God acts in mysterious ways? If God is perfect, so also are God’s commands. Our incapacity for understanding God’s ways, our actual abhorrence in the face of the apparent monstrousness of some of these “divine” demands, is emblematic of a failure from our side – not God’s. “Whatever my God ordains is right.” Therefore given such a premise, no justification of God is needed; indeed, it is presumptuous. Yet Calvin attempts to justify God. Given such clear-cut difficulties, what drives him to try this dubious defense of God which appeals to a human sense of right and wrong, when such an *a priori* assertion of the essentially incomprehensible divine fiat is logically unassailable?

How can we speak of the ethical relevance of divine justice if we assert its subsistence in deeds which violate all canons of human justice? Why bother to speak of God’s essential being at all? Must we assert that God is just or, for that matter, loving? Can we not simply say that God is and doesn’t give a damn whatever we think? Calvin

⁷ *Commentaries on Joshua*, 163.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 163-164.

would never wish to go in this nominalistic direction, for it would entail, among other things, an eventual denial of the very possibility of theology—a denial of any analogy between God’s being, revealed in the divine acts, and our categories of experience and comprehension.⁹ Nevertheless, in appealing *a priori* to the incomprehensible fiats of God, on the one hand, and in so manifestly failing to make sense out of appeals to human conscience as justifying God on the other, Calvin lays out the ancient problem of evil in terms which are especially acute. These terms emerge from within and not outside the “theological circle” and in such a way as to open the question: “Can theology, to say nothing of theodicy, be justified at all?” If the acts of God tell us nothing of who God is, but only reflect mysterious illusiveness, then the divine revelation shows us only the divine incomprehensibility.

The issue that Calvin raises is not the problem of evil as it might be alleged to make the existence of God incredible. In spite of the success claims voiced by various skeptics who have tried to demonstrate the non-existence of God on the basis of the problem of evil, no such argument carries with it the weight of logical necessity. There is profound psychological and spiritual force to the various attacks on God’s mercy and/or power grounded in the fact of evil, and indeed, if one loses confidence in the goodness or almighty lordship of God, it is a short step to denying the very existence of God. Yet no one loses faith because the non-existence of “the Father almighty” has been established as a logical concomitant of the fact of evil. Theists can, if they be clever enough, maneuver the argument back to a logical standoff, and the sovereign mysteriousness of God is always a useful “ace in the hole.”¹⁰ Still, argument from ignorance, or argument which rests its case in mystery, loses in existential and historical pertinence what it gains in metaphysical invulnerability.

The God to whom Calvin bears witness is not the God who speaks in order to stupefy those who hear. God speaks in order to affect their lives. Calvin could not effectively proclaim the living vitality of God’s word in the concrete present if he had wrapped his theology in the defensive cocoon of mystery. If the import of God’s acts for the past is obscure, how can we possibly infer their relevance for the present? Surely one reason for Calvin’s resort to analogies which purport to show that the terrible

⁹ Indeed, he expressly repudiates “the fiction of ‘absolute might.’” *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 2, ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: the Westminster Press), 950.

¹⁰ See Alvin Plantinga, *God and Other Minds* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967). Also, M.B. Ahern, *The Problem of Evil* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971). Both these works deal with the logic of the problem of evil, and demonstrate that the fact of evil does not rigorously entail the non-existence of a merciful, omnipotent God. God’s non-existence can no more be “proved” than can his existence be “proved.”

judgments of a sovereign God coincide, at least in part, with our sense of justice, lies in the political character of Calvin's ministry. In spite of his frequently cavalier handling of his opponents, his essentially fundamentalist use of Scripture, and his often rigid rendering of the sovereignty of God, Calvin, the preacher and spiritual leader of the Geneva theocracy, could not, and was not, inclined to proclaim the biblical faith on a strictly "take it or leave it" basis. He dogmatizes, but so also does he argue and plead, and in this sense, resorts to apologetics. Yet in so doing he weakens his system's built-in, iron-clad authoritarian justification of God and the servant Joshua in the reported acts of genocide, by appeals to the human sense of justice. Unless there is a basis for some kind of analogy, the justification of Calvin's theocratic ideal is weakened—for God's will, which the theocratic regime of Geneva sought to concretize, would be found too incomprehensible to be rationally acted upon.

IV

What is the reason for resurrecting Calvin's commentary on the book of Joshua? I find that as I reflect upon both Joshua and Calvin, I feel, in somewhat different form, my own personal version of the Reformer's bad conscience—as if a whole host of long-forgotten theological vultures were coming home to roost.

Beveridge was certainly right when he spoke of the Joshua commentary as a "solemn ratification of [Calvin's] whole system of doctrine." It is not, like some of Luther's anti-Semitic ravings, published near the close of his life, a deeply regrettable essay which we would prefer to attribute to the breakdown of his health and his good sense with the advancement of old age. The Joshua commentary is high-grade, vintage Calvin and, like Luther's *Bondage of the Will*, an appalling and fiercely predestinarian work, integral to his theology. It cannot be explained away, and it would be a disservice to Calvin to try to evade his last great work.

The Joshua commentary stands as a "ratification" of Calvin's system because it so powerfully reflects both the great strengths and great weaknesses of Calvin's theology in its final form. His deficiencies may be many, but one of his strengths lies in his willingness to recognize and never flinch from the brutal fact that all ultimate responsibility for what goes on in the world is God's. And this means that in order to speak of the love of God, we must sooner or later recognize that God is the one who has determined to terminate all finite life in the pursuit of his redemptive purpose. God's love is faithful to the point of ruthlessness. Love is demonstrated in acts too terrible to contemplate. Love for Israel is demonstrated in the Exodus and in the gift of the land of Canaan. At what cost! Plague, famine, the heavenly slaughter of infants, mass drowning, armed struggle—simply to set the people free as a proof of God's love. This

says nothing of the conquest and its bloody progress. It is possible to believe in and to hate Calvin's God. The benign God of popular preaching and apologetics may not be taken seriously, but neither is this God hated.

Without calling for a return to Calvin's line, one wonders if we of the "tough-minded" twentieth century have not too easily contented ourselves with pseudo solutions to the blatant theology of Joshua, solutions which do not actually address the problem, but simply provide a smoke screen for outright evasion. Can we go on repeating the familiar slogans of *Heilsgeschichte* theology, God acts in history, and still manage to extricate God from the burden of guilt which accrues from the aggressive and sometimes genocidal wars fought to God's glory?

In the popular text, *The Book of the Acts of God*, G. Ernest Wright comes to grief on the Joshua question. He accepts as valid the central conviction of the Deuteronomic historian, which is also a fundamental belief of almost every writer of the Old Testament, that is, Yahweh delivered Israel from Egyptian bondage and gave her the land of Canaan. Wright toys with such mitigating notions as the alleged immorality of the Canaanites and also, quite remarkably, points to the silver lining behind the clouds of Canaanite defeat. Eventually it was a "great thing" that they should taste defeat, for "in the long run" their surviving descendants (later to be called Phoenicians) became an immensely successful trading nation.¹¹ A divine consolation prize?

After these preliminary observations, Wright gets to the brute question itself. "Did God actually tell Joshua to carry out such terrible slaughter?"¹² Wright's answer is equivocal. On the one hand, God cares what happens in history; indeed God controls the "direction of history to his own ends," but we are responsible for the sin and destruction which actually occur in the very history which furthers God's purpose. Somehow divine control is to be divorced from divine responsibility. "To say that God is in control, even of our wars and cruelty, does not mean that he is responsible for the way in which men carry them out."¹³

Not realizing that it would all work out to be a "great thing" in the long run, that his great, great, great grandchildren would one day get rich, how are we to imagine that the Canaanite, surveying the slaughtered bodies of less fortunate children, would respond to the notion that the God who turned Israel loose upon Canaan is not responsible for the carnage?

¹¹ G. Ernest Wright and Reginald H. Fuller, *The Book of the Acts of God: Contemporary Scholarship Interprets the Bible* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1960), 110.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

Given the fact that by the period of the conquest there was no uninhabited land of any value to be found – that people were killing one another even over the *Lebensraum* of the desert – where are we to suppose the Israelites could have ventured so as to be established as the people of God without their making waves? Perhaps one can pass lightly over the carnage in Egypt, for they were the enslavers of God’s chosen people and their firstborn “deserved” to die. But what was the crime of the Canaanites? Apparently they committed the one crime which in the course of history is never forgiven – they were in the way. There is no procedure, or at least Wright has not found it, in which one can argue that the Israelites were “given” the land, and yet God is not responsible for the slaughter necessary for the Israelites to nail their “gift” down. One might argue with some point that the slaughters attributed to Joshua were exaggerated, that it was a Deuteronomic reverie – a grotesque exaggeration. Or one can argue that even when the *hérem* was carried out, it was never God’s command, rather a barbaric and excessive act which misunderstood the actual divine will. Both approaches have limited validity. Nevertheless, if God acts in history to advance the divine will, and if a people was chosen as obviously fallible as the Israelites, God is in some sense responsible when they act with excessive zeal and indisputably, God is responsible for the war in Canaan. Perhaps it could have been more cleanly fought, but if God “gave” Israel the Promised Land, then how can one dispute God’s culpability in the instigation of Israel’s war in which Israel laid claim to God’s “inheritance”? Surely the Canaanites were not be talked into leaving voluntarily. (One is reminded of the “voluntary” exodus of the modern Palestinian Arabs from the modern Israeli state.) Indeed not just in the case of Canaan, but generally to say that God acts in history is to imply at the very least that not only the merciful triumphs of God’s will, but also the wreckage of history are God’s doing and God’s terrible burden. Yet this is precisely what many Old Testament apologists will not admit. Usually only the outsiders, those unbelievers who call for a rejection of the biblical message on grounds of its inhumanity, are willing to see what is so obvious to even the most naïve reader of the Old Testament. And that is that the God spoken of in that terrible book is mighty in war – a Holy Terror.¹⁴

V

¹⁴ “From the earliest times, Yahweh’s mighty presence as Lord and Helper had never been experienced more intensely than in the day of Battle which was thus rightly termed ‘His day’. . . . Hence the holy war belongs pre-eminently to the ages in which men were aware of being in an especially close relationship with the exalted God, and of experiencing His saving presence.” Walter Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, trans. J.A. Baker (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 459.

For Christians the difficulty is intensified in that it's hard to make much sense out of the New Testament without the Old. Generally we have attempted to have the best of both worlds. The usual *modus operandi* is to show how the gospel of Christ supersedes the Old Testament.

There is a curious ironic contrast between the ways in which we generally interpret the problematic parts in a book like Joshua, and the way in which we try to read the Gospels. We would all agree that Joshua is hardly a book for Christians in positions of power to take to heart and seek to emulate. On the other hand, virtually no one is offering a literal reading of the radically non-resistant, indeed "impossible" ethics of Jesus—if his teachings constitute an "ethic" at all, as the "Christian" approach to political issues. However, our reasons are quite different. In the case of Jesus, it is not that we find his brand of love to be abhorrent; it is simply a problem of our incapacity and our unwillingness to be his *obedient* servants. It is usually with some regret that we must acknowledge that if Jesus' love does lead to Calvary, then Jesus must indeed "bear the cross alone." The book of Joshua, however, affords us with quite a different line of retreat. We are quite revolted by the policy of the total annihilation of Israel's enemies done to the glory of God and are quick to turn to the teachings of Jesus as if they afford us a kind of absolute authority which requires us "Christians" to reject the brutality of Joshua. We find the New Testament witness to the incredible love of our Lord a useful ground for defense of the biblical faith against the charge of inhumanity which the critics of Christianity bring to bear against the Old Testament. We cling to the love of Christ as proof of our humanity. Indeed we use the love of Christ as a façade behind which to hide, both from our critics and from ourselves—the fact that we have more in common with the ethics of Joshua than with the ethics of Jesus. America is a nation of invaders who with the conviction of their own manifest destiny all but exterminated the Native American nations. Granted we occasionally feel pangs of guilt—alas, it is conveniently too late. Having got what we wanted, remorse is a masochistic luxury we can well afford.

Once having achieved the conquest of our far richer Canaan, we are willing, if need be, to exterminate life upon the planet earth rather than give up what is "ours." Of course in Jesus' name, the church protests the waste and madness and sin of the arms race—from behind the safety of the atomic shield. We would prefer to be neither dead nor red—to let neither our left nor our right hand know what the other is doing.

In a world of terrible exploitation and radical injustice, the very fact that we are Americans causes some of us at least, to feel the sorts of contradictions I've been alluding to. We want to express some solidarity with the victims, but of course we want to hold on to what we have. Our sense of guilt mixed with our "need" to preserve the hard-core "necessities" of our lifestyles has produced many strange mutations—such as

the quasi-revolutionary stance that many middle class (Christian and otherwise) liberals have adopted, a kind of domesticated Marxism. Those who vaguely suppose that a revolution would signal a utopian advance toward a more humane political order might find the book of Joshua instructive reading, for it was brought to its present form just as the nation of Judah was breathing its last, and in part reflects the earnest effort of people of faith seeking to understand just what went wrong in the nation's struggle to achieve its version of utopia. Why was Judah undone? Part of the answer put forth by the Deuteronomic school was related to the nation's mongering with other gods. This was exacerbated by the presence of Canaanite pagans living in the midst of the holy nation. Surely in Joshua there is tacit recognition of the historical truism that utopia is never seen as a theoretical possibility unless one can begin with a *tabula rasa*.¹⁵ As long as there are those who remember and long for the old, in this case the Canaanite pagans who escaped extermination, every new revolutionary transformation will carry within it the seeds of the old cancer. Utopian revolution without extermination must degenerate into mere reform—and mere reform compromises with the evil it seeks to redress.

We don't really want revolution unless we are prepared to go all the way. Pacifist or semi-pacifist revolutionaries are dilettantes. Real revolutionaries, in the Marxist sense, are prepared to be butchers to prepare the ground for utopia.

If there is any truth to these sullen observations, then why is it that the book of Joshua, a book of considerable butchery, should be an offense to us Christian "revolutionaries"? Largely because if Joshua is taken seriously and read not necessarily as Calvin read it, but taken with some of his same willingness to try to face up to the book and its implications—we who are believers fear in our hearts that we might grow to hate God. Thus we try to get around Joshua by way of Jesus, and around Jesus by way of expediency—and we fail to bear fully as we ought what these two quite different pioneers of faith have to do with the question of the guilt of the living God.

VI

¹⁵ Calvin himself makes a similar point in his commentary on Deuteronomy 7:2: "Thou shalt smite them and utterly destroy them." See John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses*, vol. II, trans. Charles W. Bingham (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 395: "Therefore God often reproves the Israelites for being improperly merciful. And hence it came to pass that the people, whom they ought to have destroyed, became as thorns and briars to prick them (Joshua XXIII, 13, and throughout the book of Judges)."

Both Joshua and Jesus are men of faith. In faith, Joshua waged war (with or without genocide) against the Canaanites. Jesus, in faith, accepted the role of the suffering servant and in the course of his ministry made others his murderers. There is no way possible to live in the world without exacerbating the suffering and/or guilt of other human beings. And this is as true of people of faith as it is of people without faith. Christian faith helps some to be more effective killers (Patton) and others to be lifelong nameless victims.

There is no such thing as a Christian ethic which all Christians can regard as normative to their particular understanding of faith. In fact, one person's Christian ethic is spiritually repugnant to another person's Christian faith. (Augustine versus Pelagius; Luther versus Erasmus; Barth versus Brunner.)

It would seem that while faith does give rise to ethical action, it gives rise to no *a priori* mode of conduct and lifestyle. Every mode of Christian conduct may be criticized from someone else's Christian perspective—in this respect the Christian is no better off than the secular ethicists. They dispute about "blik's" while Christians appeal to the final judgment of God, but at present absolute values are not universally perceived, if perceived at all.

I am increasingly of the opinion that God's loyalty is the loyalty of a parent who stands by children irrespective of their deeds. God wills their righteousness but makes do with whatever they come up with. God can turn sin into redemption (the conquest of Canaan; the crucifixion of Christ). God's ways are not our ways. God loves all sorts of people though they be eye-deep in one kind of crime or another. We can't resolve this ethical dilemma by appealing to the words of Jesus: "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 7:21). For if Joshua and Saint Frances both did God's will, where does this leave us in any attempt to know the will of God?

There is another Scriptural passage that bears on this matter: "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit" (1Cor. 12:3). In the light of such a passage it is rather hard to excommunicate everyone whose ethics we abhor by claiming, "Of course he's not a Christian," for if he truly affirms Jesus is Lord, he is touched by the Holy Spirit and is obviously a Christian. Given our finite point of view, and given Paul's statement, a Christian is anybody who says he is.

What we are confronted with here are examples of divine high-handedness which ultimately require, for me at least, a radical rethinking of God's work in Christ. Why did God become incarnate? Partly, I am increasingly convinced, in order to stand trial before an outraged, confused and suffering humanity. Not a trial like Job's that ends in spiritual rape, where Job is left ravaged by the sheer awe of God's presence—but a trial like Jesus Christ's trial, and a sentence like the one Jesus Christ received. God

must suffer what we suffer, or God is not love but at best a merely detached empathy. God's sympathy is cheap since it costs nothing. Only if God shares our totally ambiguous lot can God *in love* demand that we endure it. The cross is not only the focal point of divine wrath against us; it is also the focal point of human rage against God. The human comedy has stored up a reciprocity of outrage that only the trial and death of one who was both the son of God and son of man can suffice. The God-man has taken the guilt of God and man up into himself, and answers the rejection of God and man without recrimination. Rather he answers with a fusion of suffering in the very being of God and his creature, man. Now that our humanity is raised to the suffering divinity of Christ, there is nothing more to say. Injustice collecting is infantile; it is finished—only the resurrection awaits its final accomplishment.