

critique

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Living with War and Engaging Opponents



CRITIQUE



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Except where noted, all articles are by Denis Haack.

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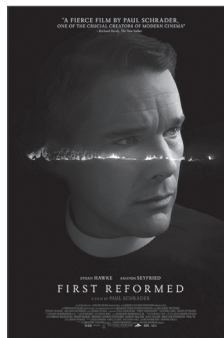
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On Being ~~Chided~~ Rebuked



A good friend chided me for showing frustration instead of patience with some friends. Actually, the correct term is *rebuked*, but “chided” sounds better for some reason, and I’d rather talk about the difference between the two terms than face my failure.

There is a striking conversation in *The Silmarillion* by J. R. R. Tolkien. Olwë is accused of renouncing a friendship but he objects. “We renounce no friendship,” he says. “But it may be the part of a friend to rebuke a friend’s folly.”

I was wrong (displaying frustration), it should be noted, while being entirely correct (frustrating things occurred). Some things that should be done weren’t getting done. Requests had been made more than once that they be done. My friend, in the midst of chiding, sorry, rebuking me mentioned she had been frustrated too.

I was wrong while being entirely correct, which is part of the reason I disliked our brief encounter after the worship service. The main reason though is just that I don’t like being chided.

I should add that my friend was righteous in how she chided me—gentle, loving, affirming, gracious. She even spoke the words of rebuke with a subtle wit, showing that she was on my side,

and that she was my friend and would continue to be.

In this my friend stands in a long and noble tradition of redemptive relationships that has its grounding in the word of God. As a Christian I believe that behind all reality is God, or to put it more accurately, the really, finally real is God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Nothing stands behind him. And as my spiritual mentor was fond of saying, God is there and he is not silent. And in a broken world, God’s gracious word chides fallen people—and get this—this is not onerous but is a gift of grace. Consider what St Paul writes to his younger colleague, Timothy:

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. (2 Timothy 3:16-4:2)

Observe the terms the apostle uses: *reproof, correction, rebuke*. The word of God chides us, in other words, and we should be eager to receive it as a gift of grace.

I know the text and its meaning. I have a graduate degree in theology. I even graduated *summa cum laude*. It’s on my diploma. That’s hanging in my office. It’s not the idea but the experience of ~~chiding~~, reproving, correction, rebuking—that I find distasteful.

Sadly, I am more eager to be considered correct in what frustrated

me than the fact I was openly impatient with people who are not merely made in God’s image but among my closest friends.

“Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you,” Proverbs 9:8 reads, “reprove a wise man, and he will love you.” I not only think this to be true, I want to be counted among the wise, not the cynical and hard-hearted. In the world of advanced modernity we are surrounded by scoffers, by people that claim all they do is excellent and that they have no need to seek forgiveness for anything. I do not want to be one of them. I want to be wise.

And so, here, very publicly, I say thank you to my friend who rebuked me for impatience last Sunday after church. You are correct in what you saw in me that needed ~~chiding~~ rebuking, in how you rebuked me, and in being my good and godly friend. I love and respect you for the risk you took. ■

Living with War: A Job-like Wondering Met with

by Preston Jones

● Making their way to Panama in late 1989 to overthrow the drug-running regime of Manuel Noriega, Chuck's army unit traveled aboard a transport plane. On the way, the soldiers relieved themselves in five-gallon buckets, which were then tossed from the plane. "I always wondered what happened to those," Chuck said. "I can imagine some guy sitting in his house watching TV when a five-gallon bucket of pee comes crashing through his roof." It was a light moment in an otherwise heavy if matter-of-fact conversation.

After parachuting from the plane, and as he was making his way toward an objective at the airport in Panama City, Chuck came across an arm. "At first I was, like, why is there a mannequin arm laying here?" So he picked it up, realized it was human, threw it down, and assumed that a helicopter gunship had blown a Panamanian to bits.

Not long after, a wounded enemy fell near where Chuck was standing from a smashed window about 20 feet up. Chuck watched him die.

Then came the latrine. A Cuban colonel, fighting with the Panamanians, lay wounded on the floor by urinals that had been shattered by hand grenades. A minute before, the colonel had wounded an American. Chuck had his pistol trained on the Cuban and watched as he slowly moved his hand toward his belt. A soldier behind Chuck pulled a trigger and dispatched the colonel. "I especially remember the smell of the cologne he was wearing," Chuck says. "Whenever I smell that cologne I think of the colonel." They found a pistol in the Cuban's belt.

Operation Just Cause was Chuck's first experience of combat. He'd see more late in his career—in Iraq and Afghanistan. Though he himself is a

man of feeling, he speaks of battlefield death without emotion. Killing in battle isn't pretty, but neither is it complicated. *I am me, you are the enemy. If I can capture or disable you, great. If I kill you, that's fine too.* He's never had problems with nightmares or post-traumatic stress disorder.

Somewhere in the course of discussions that covered a twenty-eight year military career, Chuck mentioned in passing that he was a "Bible-believing Christian." I don't recall the immediate context of the remark; I don't know why he said it at that particular moment. Curiously, it didn't occur to me to ask.

But later I was struck by the seeming incongruence of his description of battle and his equally frank, if curt, declaration of faith without any attempt, so far as I could see, to relate the two. How do being a Bible-believing Christian and killing a Cuban in a latrine go together? Chuck felt no need to relate the two. There was no tension. Maybe that's why I didn't ask about it.

Chuck's is one way, though not a common way, that Christian combat veterans process (or don't process) their experiences.

● The film *Indivisible*, which centers on the experience of Army Chaplain Darren Turner, shows another way. Early in the film we meet a devout chaplain who's gung-ho about going to Iraq. "I signed up to be where the need is," he says. Before leaving, he told his daughter, "I've always got my special armor on." It isn't clear to me that Paul's language about a shield of faith and a sword of the spirit (Ephesians 6) has anything to do with toppling the government of Saddam Hussein and dealing with the aftermath, but the connection was meaningful for Turner.

Soon enough, that connection was tested by non-uniformed insurgents with hit-and-run tactics and improvised explosive devices. Chaplain Turner held a dead little Iraqi girl in his arms. He traveled in Humvees that came under attack. He led a soldier to Christ, only to see the soldier killed in combat. He made *in-case-I-die* videos for his family. He unraveled under the strain.

He returned home angry, alienated and alienating. He treated his wife like trash. Christian service became a grinding job. He got out of the army and worked at a plant nursery. Rage and sleeplessness ruled. He almost lost his family. A senior chaplain told him that the difference between shallow faith and real faith is the test of doubt.

In a way the movie doesn't explore, Turner rethought his Christian commitment in light of what he had experienced. He returned to the army chaplaincy with a more complicated and deeper outlook, though we don't really get to see that. But we can guess about some of the things he worked through.

The movie shows his daughter praying that God would "bring daddy home safe," and Turner did survive. But he knew that all such prayers aren't answered. Just yesterday I read an unpublished letter from a soldier in Vietnam. "I prayed to God to help Linville," the soldier wrote in mid-1970, "but he left us anyway. It all seems like a bad dream."

Early on, Turner said to soldiers on the point of going out on patrol, "You don't have to be afraid. God's got your back." It was a presumptuous thing to say in so casual a way, and presumably post-deployment Turner knew that the world of war more often resembles the moment when the words *my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* were

Silence

most apt.

Indivisible doesn't give many details, but it does show that Turner's easy pre-war theology had been shaken. He could have given up his Christian commitment. Instead, he fought for it, kept it, and ended up with something more profound and real.

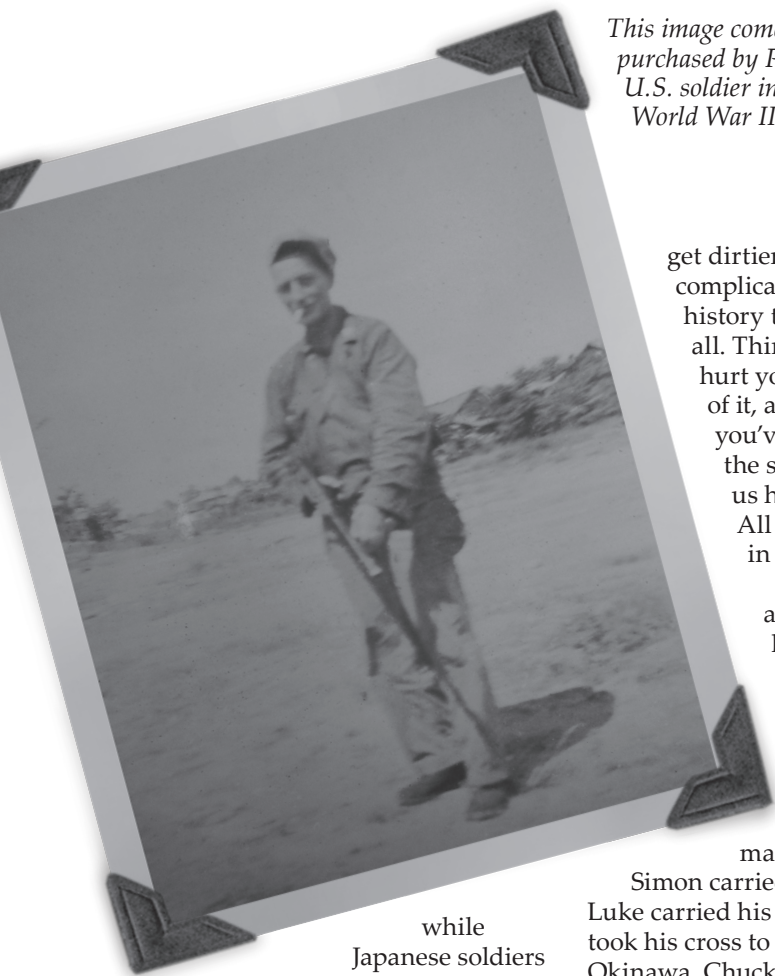
● Chuck's response to combat is unusual. Chaplain Turner's is more common. But, so far as I have seen in twenty years of interviewing combat veterans, the most common response is a Job-like wondering met with silence. Chris, an Iraq War veteran, recently told me that his faith has deepened since his year in a war zone, yet he still wonders if God will forgive him for things he did. Nothing illegal or willfully malicious, only the stuff of war.

Heads vaporizing, body parts flying, pulling a family photo from the pocket of a Vietnamese enemy you shot and thinking, *I just killed daddy*—none of this is easily squared with the basic moral teaching of the New Testament. And while "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me" is useful when I may be walking into an ambush, there isn't an equivalent if I am setting one. Even devout combat veterans who feel that their war was justified sense this, and they live with that sense.

It's a difficult and complicated thing. War veterans assure us that there's nothing blessed about laying a mine, thrusting a bayonet into an enemy or napalming a village. But neither is there anything blessed about doing nothing



This image comes from a photo album purchased by Preston Jones. Taken around 1965, it is of a U.S. adviser in Vietnam, looking at dead enemy Vietcong.



This image comes from a photo album purchased by Preston Jones. It is of a U.S. soldier in the Philippines during World War II.

get dirtier than others, but the complicated mess that is human history throws its muck on us all. Think of the people who hurt you without being aware of it, and then realize that you've almost certainly done the same to others. Most of us have done much worse. All of us stand before God in bad shape.

And some of us carry a greater share of the human burden. I put the combat veterans I talk with into this category. Like Simon of Cyrene, these were selected from the crowd and made to carry a cross.

Simon carried his cross to Golgotha; Luke carried his to Afghanistan. Ron took his cross to Da Nang, Eugene to Okinawa. Chuck, aware of it or not, carried it to Panama. Chaplain Turner brought his to Iraq. They remember the kids who died, the eyes of the enemy just before the blast, the smells, the sounds, the fury.

I have been struggling with how to close. I should try to offer some insight, a profundity, a great wrap up comment. But at the heart of hundreds of discussions with war veterans is a profound silence.

This occurs to me: I used to think that the book of Job ends happily. Job gained more livestock and kids and lived to a ripe old age. But, so far as we know, he never learned why he had been hurled into the catastrophe linked to his name. Thirty, fifty years later he still must have wondered what that was all about. But, even if he tried to

talk about it, no one really would have understood what he knew but couldn't quite put into words. He carried on and lived with it. He worshiped God but always wondered. There was a great silence.

I think a lot of combat veterans can identify with that. ■

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Preston Jones has recently posted dozens of interviews with war veterans at his YouTube channel. He is the author of *God's Hiddenness in Combat*, and teaches history at John Brown University.



Film credits for *Indivisible*

Director: David G. Evans
Writers: David G. Evans, Cheryl McKay, Peter White
Producers: Sarah Drew, David G. Evans and others
Cinematography: Bob Scott
Music: Paul Mills
Starring:

Justin Bruening (Darren Turner)
Sarah Drew (Heather Turner)
Jason George (Michael Lewis)
Tia Mowry-Hardrict (Tonya Lewis)
Skye P. Marshall (Sgt. Shonda Peterson)
Tanner Stine (Lance Bradley)
Madeline Carroll (Amanda Bradley)
USA, 2018; 119 minutes
Rated PG-13 (some thematic material and war violence)

while Japanese soldiers rampage through China or standing by as the Taliban basically turn women into slaves. This is the Christian combatant's dilemma: to strike is to embrace the darkness, and to do nothing is to embrace the same. If in retrospect we see that a conflict's cause was just, then that makes things easier. But even Chuck, in all his matter-of-factness, sees the awfulness of war.

From here, the conversation could turn to Just War Theory, but I can't remember a single combat veteran ever bringing that up. Save it for the faculty lounge.

Instead, I'll begin to end with something more appropriately ambiguous, murky, inconclusive.

I've concluded that it's impossible to get through this world with clean hands no matter how hard we try. Some hands

POETRY

Moon

Bloated and precise,
a fat circle
swollen in its roundness,
glowing as if
gorged on stars.
A hypocrite,
acting as if
inherently luminous,
face smooth
from afar—
gorgeous
from a distance—
yet pockmarked up close.
Appearing beautiful,
yet dusty,
dead and cold
as bone,
as a blind opaque eye
giving semblance
of sight,
yet sightless
as unearthed stone.

Rain

Storm clouds deepen,
tinting the land
a soft copper color.
Streams of cool wind whirl
amidst the warmth.
Splinters of silver
flash in the air.
Thunders are freed.
Sky-shadows break,
releasing curtains of gray.
Hesitating, for only a moment,
I step out into the rain.



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Scott Schuleit is the
associate pastor at Taft Street
Baptist Church. He enjoys
preaching, the arts, theology,
good conversation, and
spending time with his dear
wife Christina.

ENGAGING MY OPPONENT: ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ SPIRITUAL HEALING FOR BROKEN PUBLIC DISCOURSE

by Nicholas Denysenko

During the seven years that I studied and worked in Washington, D.C., I became familiar with a notorious term: “The Beltway.” If you have ever attempted to drive in or around DC, you have probably been on the Beltway at some point. Highway 495 forms a belt around D.C. and cuts through Maryland and Virginia. To be sure, driving on the Beltway puts one at risk of a long delay, missing an exit, or having an accident; it is terribly busy, and my wife likened it to the Indy 500. A related term is even more notorious: “inside the Beltway,” a reference to the political gridlock that unfolds every day in our nation’s capital.

If my reference to business conducted inside the Beltway evokes feelings of anger or suspicion about the federal government, or if you are convinced that the devil is the father of the details conceived there, then you have a sense of the spirit of anger prevailing in our times. People are angry with elected officials for making deals that are not in their best interest. People feel alienated by policies and their underpinning ideologies that appear to favor other interest groups without accounting for their own wants and needs. People fear the advent of the unknown; they are afraid of immigrants who come here in search of work, and of politicians and activists who advocate for new policies that challenge their current way of life and conflict with their core values.

The anger, fear, and alienation experienced by many in our time result in a number of behavioral patterns. Among the most troubling patterns is the gradual disappearance of dialogue. Increasingly, vicious polemical attacks that have the primary purpose of demonizing the position of the other have replaced dialogue. The evidence of such attacks is everywhere, and the relative anonymity of social media has opened an entirely new arena where one can invoke riotous, scathing condemnations of others without even knowing their names or seeing their faces. In other words, the purpose of engagement in our time is to attain a personal triumph over one’s opponent. The spoils of victory for the one who seems to have the upper hand in such engagements is the humiliation suffered by the other. Too often the fumes generated by a graceless and boorish victory function as fuel that renews the cycle of anger, alienation, fear, and suspicion. It also intensifies that cycle. Today, this scene unfolds in digital spaces that seem tailor-made for brutal public trash talking.

Historians and sociologists have devoted considerable resources toward unearthing the causes of global anger and alienation. Economic evolution is certainly one cause, especially when industrial decline, outsourcing, and automation result in the disappearance of jobs. But it is not only the absence of jobs and economic instability that fuel anger and alienation. The “culture of separation” that defined modernity and afflicts post-modernity permeates all aspects of life, including citizenship, religion, and national identity (Bellah et al, 1985, 275-7). The spike in racial conflict, incidents of anti-Semitism, the polarized positions on immigration,

suspicion and fear of Muslims, and an all-out cultural war on equal rights for LGBTQI people are also sources of anger and alienation, not only in the United States, but internationally as well.

Recently, the author and journalist John Judis demonstrated how President Trump fits into the pattern of creating a profile as an anti-establishment populist in his vow to restore manufacturing jobs and reform immigration. This movement had an echo on the left with Bernie Sanders (Judis 2016). Anger can become infectious and generate incredible and constructive energy; Americans witnessed this when students from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, gathered to protest the gun establishment. A similar energy threads through the recent women’s marches that took place around the globe. However, working together to discover the truth is not an attainable objective when the intensity of polarized polemical exchanges reaches a fever pitch; the point is to publicly humiliate one’s opponent and to expose them as flawed so that one’s own position will be endorsed.

Signs of hope are emerging from this dense forest of alienation and anger. For instance, we can find hope in a project that spurred a classically liberal sociologist from the University of California at Berkeley to take up residence among “right wingers” in Louisiana to learn who they were. In reflecting on her experience of dialogue, Arlie Russell Hochschild said, “Left and right need one another, just as the blue coastal and inland cities need red state energy and rich community.

The rural Midwest and South need the cosmopolitan outreach to a diverse outer world" (Hochschild 2016, 232-3). Hochschild observes that her immersion into the daily lives of the people she studied taught her that left and right have much more in common than they know and that commonality can serve as a springboard for cooperation. Her observation was possible only through a willingness to dialogue with others—an art that is largely lost in a culture that prefers division and separation for fear of the other.

A SPIRITUALITY OF DIALOGUE WITH THE OTHER: LOOK IN THE MIRROR

A Christian spirituality of dialogue can restore the art of engaging one's opponent if the engagement is truly dialogical.

Christian tradition acknowledges the harm caused by playing the blame game. Jesus's Sermon on the Mount is filled with teachings that chart a path of discipleship rooted in pouring one's self out for the sake of the other. Jesus commands us to forgive others. We are instructed not to judge others, nor even point out their faults. The disciple who casts his gaze on the faults of another will be exposed as a hypocrite, and not a disciple. The radical teaching of Christ requires that good must be returned for acts of evil. Discipleship compels the hearer to adopt Christ and his self-emptying love as the pattern of daily Christian living. Performing these acts is a mode of taking up one's cross, and the ultimate aim—the *telos*—is perfection (Matthew 5:48).

Christians must navigate the tension between Jesus's authoritative teaching from the mountain, which fulfills the Law of Moses, and the cultural ethos

that claims "nobody's perfect." The hearer finds little comfort in Christ's instruction to "enter by the narrow gate," because the perfection commanded by Christ seems impossible to achieve. Worshipping the crucified and risen one who personifies discipleship is a far cry from threading his precepts into the fabric of one's daily behavior. Yet the decision to forsake or ignore Jesus's new commandments from the mountain leads Christians to respond to anger with wrath, and to strike one's opponent with even more force than the blow thrown by the opponent.

Throughout history, Christians have attempted to apply Jesus's teachings as rules for communal living and engagement with the other. These examples occur in a variety of contexts, from Cappadocian monks in late antiquity to twentieth-century laity responding to dangerous ideologies.

One early example is the philosopher, bishop, and ascetic known as Basil the Great (330-379). In the Christian world, Basil is beloved because of the prayers attributed to him, his theological family ties (having an equally gifted brother and a saintly sister), his theological treatises that became the foundation for the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, and his ascetical writings. Instructive for our purposes is Basil's homily on humility. The context of this homily suggests that Basil was addressing people who lived in the late-antique city. Basil critiques those who indulge in the glory and honor that comes with political success:

But also because of political honors do men exalt themselves beyond what is due their nature. If the populace confer upon them a distinction, if it honor them with some office of authority, if an exceptional mark of dignity be voted in their favor

by the people, thereupon, as though they had risen above human nature, they look upon themselves as well nigh seated on the very clouds and regard the men beneath them as their footstool. They lord it over those who raised them to such honor and exalt themselves over the very ones at whose hands they received their sham distinctions. (Basil, trans. Wagner, 476)

Basil seems to be warning those in the public sphere against the kind of elitism that comes with rank or stature in the political hierarchy, and the temptation to view others as simply "their footstool." Basil describes the steps needed for the exalted to rightfully see themselves and others:

If you appear to have something in your favor, do not, counting this to your credit and readily forgetting your mistakes, boast of your good deeds of today and grant yourself pardon for what you have done badly yesterday and in the past. Whenever the present arouses pride in you, recall the past to mind and you will check the foolish swelling of conceit. If you see your neighbor committing sin, take care not to dwell exclusively on his sin, but think of the many things he has done and continues to do rightly. Many times, by examining the whole and not taking the part into account, you will find that he is better than you. Such reminders as these regarding self-exaltation we should keep reciting constantly to ourselves, demeaning ourselves that we may be exalted, in imitation of the Lord who descended from heaven to utter lowliness and who was, in turn, raised to the height which befitted him. (Basil, trans. Wagner, 483)

Basil proposes an ascetical practice that speaks directly to the kind of

exaltation to which one enjoying a high rank might be prone. Recalling one's past errors can help one avoid the temptation to exalt one's self and treat others like a footstool. Basil employs hyperbole when he suggests that we are to demean ourselves, but the point of adopting this habit is twofold: to learn how to see good in one's interlocutor, and to adopt the pattern of Christ himself. Our descent into utter lowliness is not for self-torture. Rather, it is to follow the pattern of Christ, whose lowliness was in service to others. The two practices work together: we find fault in ourselves first to confront our own ugliness; only then is one able to see that the person one engages is, in fact, naturally good.

Cultivating the habit of humility is designed to be relational and dialogical. In a longer passage, Basil advises hearers to be modest in all ways of life, to avoid embellishment of speech, and to be "free from pomposity" (Basil, trans. Wagner, 484). Adopting a habit of modesty in the way that we talk and think of ourselves leads to new ways of dialoguing with others. Basil offers simple instructions: "Be obliging to your friends, gentle toward your slaves, forbearing with the forward, benign to the lowly, a source of comfort to the afflicted, a friend to the distressed, a condemner of no one" (Basil, trans.

Wagner, 484). He goes on to instruct his hearers to avoid even listening into a conversation involving gossip; adopting the habit of attending to one's own sin sharpens the senses of seeing others and dialoguing with them. One learns how to act with radical charity toward the other through practice, but the root of this action is pursuing humility and refusing to exalt one's self, reserving that praise and glorification for God alone.

Basil's practical instructions for adopting an identity of humility re-emerge in the unique person of Paul Evdokimov, a lay theologian who was born in St. Petersburg in 1900 and immigrated to Paris in 1923 in the tumult of the Bolshevik Revolution (Plekon 2002, 109). Evdokimov received his doctorate in theology from St. Sergius Institute in Paris and assisted in hiding and defending Jews during World War II. While he worked as a director of residences, he was active as a writer and participant in local ecumenical dialogue. Evdokimov's writings touch on numerous subjects, but it is his sense of tradition that is most intriguing. Responding to the abrupt, fast-paced changes of his times, Evdokimov

proposed that lay people adopt a monastic way of life, by applying the principles of the desert in their daily lives. Their participation in the liturgy has the power to shape a habit of service extending into the world, embedded in everyday life (Plekon 2002, 124).

Evdokimov wrote that the process of welcoming the Holy Spirit begins by coming to terms with one's self. Knowing one's self requires a deep journey within: "Our vigorous penetration into the darkness of our heart of hearts, though it is a formidable undertaking, gives us the power to judge ourselves" (Evdokimov 1998, 167). He acknowledges that this is a rigorous journey, so he advises that one should put on an "ascetic diving suit" because the goal is to "seize our perverted will" (Evdokimov 1998, 167). As the ascetic comes to terms with the perverted will, he or she is ready to ascend. Evdokimov describes the point of this ascent as a conversion, and the objective is to become a human who loves. The love he speaks of is crucified love, not emotional love. Adopting an identity of true humility is a process that is never complete—the one who is converted always identifies as a sinner (Evdokimov 1998, 168).

How does this relate to the way we engage others, especially our opponents? Embracing humility is the "art of finding one's own place," and accepting that place without hoping for praise or exaltation. Evdokimov refers to the humility of two New Testament figures: John the Baptist, who is content to be the "friend of the bridegroom," and Mary, who is joyful in being the "handmaid of the Lord." Evdokimov asserts that self-centeredness makes the universe revolve around the human ego—egomania is manifest when one

THE ANGER, FEAR, AND ALIENATION EXPERIENCED BY MANY IN OUR TIME RESULT IN A NUMBER OF BEHAVIORAL PATTERNS. AMONG THE MOST TROUBLING PATTERNS IS THE GRADUAL DISAPPEARANCE OF DIALOGUE.

refuses to bow before the other.

Evdokimov assures us that “no confusion is possible between humility and humiliation, weakness or spineless resignation. Humility is the greatest power, for it radically suppresses all resentment, and it alone can overcome pride” (Evdokimov 1998, 169-70). What’s more, Evdokimov’s reinvigoration of asceticism enjoys a strong coherence with Basil’s. Both the ancient and modern theologians call upon everyone to submit to brutal self-honesty: admitting one’s own sin and striving to see the good in one’s interlocutors is not the same thing as punishing one’s self. Basil proposes an ascetical practice designed to embrace humility because for Christians, exaltation is reserved for God alone. Accepting one’s place as not exalted quiets the passions of resentment—passions which are rooted in desiring exaltation, a temporal honor that comes with victory over one’s opponent.

If Basil and Evdekimov emphasize the ascetical process of embracing humility, Maria Skobtsova teaches us how to see our opponents as brothers and sisters in Christ. Mother Maria wrote in France in the first half of the twentieth century to reframe the way her fellow Russian immigrants understood the experience of praying before icons. Her writing occasionally critiques the ossified ritual forms of the synodal period of the Russian Church—particularly in her famous essay that exposes the five types of Russian ritual spirituality as internally oriented (Skobtsova 2003, 140-186). Mother Maria’s essay on the mysticism of human communion charts a new spirituality rooted in the public ritual

acts of venerating icons during the celebration of the Divine Liturgy. Knowing that Russians recognized the connection between the ritual veneration of icons and their prayer before icons at the altars in their homes, Mother Maria suggests that one should learn how to see the world as an iconostasis (a wall of icons and religious paintings that separate the nave from the sanctuary in a church) in order to revere the people with whom we interact on a daily basis with the same piety we offer to the saints on the icons in church and at our homes (Skobtsova 2003, 80-81). Mother Maria is quite blunt in her description of the requirement for the Christian: to revere with piety men who act inappropriately, drunken neighbors, and lazy students. These too are icons, she says, bearing the image of the same God as the saints whose icons we venerate (Skobtsova 2003, 81).

Mother Maria goes on to argue that this is the purpose of the liturgy itself, as she claims—rightly—that the liturgy is offered for the life of the world. Mother Maria refers to the ritual act of offering when the deacon (or priest) lifts up the bread and the cup during the Eucharistic Prayer and the priest says, “Offering You your own of your own, on behalf of all and for all” (Skobtsova 2003, 81). The point of participating in the liturgy is not primarily for the consecration of bread and cup into the

Lord’s body and blood, but for people to be transformed so that their daily lives would consist of service “on behalf of all and for all.” This service is rooted, again, in Christ’s own pouring out of himself, his taking on human nature

in utter humility (Skobtsova 2003, 78-79). Like her contemporary Evdokimov and Basil of old, Mother Maria recognized the connection between adopting an identity of humility and engaging others with radical charity. Her example of seeing unpleasant people as icons is a way for us to sharpen

our spiritual senses, to learn how to see one’s enemy in a new way, and to act by loving them.

The habit of humility implies a willingness to dialogue, and dialogue is antithetical to the preference for division that pervades our contemporary culture. But dialogue is itself integral to Christian discipleship. The Czech Catholic theologian Jaroslav Pastuszak draws from Trinitarian theology to relate the Word of God (*Logos*) as intrinsic to human communication. When humans truly dialogue with one another, they have access to the divine perspective (Pastuszak 2015, 174-176). Obviously, dialogue can contribute to sustaining human life: building edifices, creating treaties, developing new medical technologies all depend on dialogue (Pastuszak 2015, 174). Pastuszak laments the postmodern

**EMBRACING HUMILITY IS THE
“ART OF FINDING ONE’S OWN
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tendency to make the material and spiritual spheres mutually exclusive: he claims that withdrawal into orbits such as religious and secular leads people to individualism, which breeds egocentrism (Pastuszak 2015, 168). A willingness to dialogue may result in encountering the other person's strangeness, but Pastuszak claims that participating in that dialogue permits the partner to encounter God in the other, and God in himself as well (Pastuszak 2015, 178).

The prospect of encountering strangeness in the other person seems reason enough to hesitate from joining the dialogue. It is a hesitation many of us experience if we are not prepared for how we should act, especially if dialogue is understood as a demand for capitulation to that otherness, or if one fears that fidelity to one's own principles will result in conflict. In other words, dialogue is dangerous: the fear of the unknown outcome of irreconcilable differences opens the door to opting for division instead. But withdrawal from dialogue enhances fear because it prohibits us from seeing and encountering the other, so the images we conjure of others are distorted.

Another Czech theologian, Tomáš Halík, hearkens back to the ascetical tradition when he says that war is to be waged against one's own moral failings, not against the dialogue partner (Halík 2015, 107). Halík and Pastuszak both argue that Christians should be willing to dialogue with secular humanists as well as people of other religions for the purpose of finding common ground. Their harmonic warning about the perils of Christian triumphalism used

as a weapon against the other fits our thesis, as Halík says that this tactic is a secularization of the Church's eschatological vision (Halík 2015, 109). In other words, using Christian language to demonize our neighbors makes them into angels of darkness and us into God. Nothing good comes from this paradigm, and the triumphalists end up as idolators.

One might protest that the intent of dialogue has changed in our times. Rod Dreher recently commented about an invitation to a "pride prom" at Marquette University, which Dreher said was not a dialogue, but a "strategic move by heterodox/liberal people to establish a beachhead from which to dislodge and defeat orthodoxy" (Dreher 2018). The unknown outcome of dialogue can generate fear of danger. Basil, Evdokimov, and Mother Maria promote the urgency of dialogue and the habit of humility even in dangerous, life-threatening contexts. This was especially the case for Mother Maria, who was part of the French Resistance and died in Ravensbrück concentration camp. Her contemporary Dietrich

DIALOGUE IS DANGEROUS: THE FEAR OF THE UNKNOWN OUTCOME OF IRRECONCILABLE DIFFERENCES OPENS THE DOOR TO OPTING FOR DIVISION INSTEAD. BUT WITHDRAWAL FROM DIALOGUE ENHANCES FEAR BECAUSE IT PROHIBITS US FROM SEEING AND ENCOUNTERING THE OTHER SO THE IMAGES WE CONJURE OF OTHERS ARE DISTORTED.

EMBRACING THE WAY OF HUMILITY OPENS THE DOOR FOR THE HEALING AND TRANSFORMATION OF THOSE WHO HARM THEMSELVES BY CHOOSING ABUSE OVER CHARITY.

Bonhoeffer also emphasized the urgency of dialogue during a time of grave danger. He was committed to maintaining transnational dialogue among all the Churches when fidelity to a nationalist Church was popular. Keith Clements asserts that Bonhoeffer promoted ecumenism as a way to work together to establish a new and just order (Clements 1999, 158). But Bonhoeffer himself offers the most important point about dialogue:

Peace is confused with safety. There is no way to peace along the way of safety. For peace must be dared. It is the great venture. It can never be safe. Peace is the opposite of security. To demand guarantees is to mistrust, and this mistrust in turn brings forth war. To look for guarantees is to want to protect oneself.

Clements says that this excerpt is quoted so often it has become something of a sacred text. It is relevant here because it is compatible with our thesis on the habit of humility.

Learning how to humble oneself and approach the other with love will result in making oneself vulnerable to both the other and to God.

The witness of people such as Evdokimov and Bonhoeffer demonstrates that the Christian traditions of humility and approaching one's opponent with love comes to life in the flesh and blood of ordinary human beings.

Evdokimov, for example, protected Jews during the period of Nazi oppression and devoted his life to serving underprivileged youth, many of whom were immigrants (Plekon 2002, 109-110). Bonhoeffer strengthened his commitment to ecumenical dialogue even though finding a quiet place within the nationalist and isolationist cells of the Church in Germany would have been safer for him (Clements 1999, 167-168).

The Christian virtue of humility has deep roots in tradition, beginning with Jesus himself and threading through each generation up until today. Humility leads the Christian to dialogue with the other, enabling the Christian to see the good in the other. These teachings depict a beautiful humanity, one that is able to live together in peace without erasing differences. Why, then, has this tradition essentially been ignored while the tendency to slander and humiliate one's opponent has ascended?

Let us turn again to scripture. Like the gospel of the cross, human humility is foolishness to the world because refusing to exalt one's self seems to cede all competitive advantage to one's opponents. Jesus spoke clearly about the preponderance of narcissism. He recognized the egocentrism of the Pharisees, who "love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, greetings in the marketplaces" (Matthew 23:6-7). No institution or profession is exempt from this crisis of discourse—not even the Church. Institutions systematize incentives for advancement, stimulating competition among those who want the most "exalted" position. In these scenarios, the

gospel tradition of humility simply gets in the way of systems that reward not only achievements (this is a good thing), but the sycophantism and competitive positioning that make it impossible for one to truly see the other. Turning to the gospel image of people who adopt Christ's utter humility as a pattern would stifle the system, just as Jesus's appearance and merciful acts in Seville threatened the religious order perfected by the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (the Grand Inquisitor knows that Jesus has "come to hinder us," so he threatens to burn him as the "worst of heretics"). For much of Christian history and in our own time of exalting in our opponent's humiliation, the holy tradition of Christian humility has become a heap of ashes. Adopting an identity of humility seems impossible because it has always been and remains countercultural—and it always will be.

There are two stumbling blocks that make people of good will pause before committing to humility. The first is the idea of submission: doesn't the habit of humility amount to submission to aggressors? On the contrary, humility does not necessitate forsaking one's own principles to avoid conflict. Humility cannot be translated as submission to verbal and physical aggression. Humility does not call for anyone to tolerate abuse. The radical humility of Basil, Evdokimov, Mother Maria, and Bonhoeffer is rooted in the cross of Christ. It is formed by the constructive and transformative power of God's kingdom. Refusing to respond to aggression with more aggression exposes the human decay caused by uncivil discourse. The one who abuses damages their own soul by covering the human faces of their opponents with

the false masks of demons. Embracing the way of humility opens the door for the healing and transformation of those who harm themselves by choosing abuse over charity.

The second obstacle is the notion that only a chosen few are capable of perfect humility. There is a difference between impossible and hard, and Christians need to remember that the way of the cross is narrow. It requires both human effort and divine mercy. Different religious traditions agree that following God is a lifelong struggle, exemplified by Jacob wrestling God, by the excruciating battle against one's self reported by Augustine and Martin Luther, and by the tears described as drops of blood shed by Christ himself. Humility cannot be learned in a day, nor can one do it alone. It is a gift from God, and one spends a lifetime learning how to use that gift in the context of a community. It may be that the course of humility resembles the themes of Baptism, when a Christian partakes of Christ's Pascha, with Christ himself nailing our capacity to sin to the cross. Living out one's Baptism each and every day makes it possible to accept our state humbly and to see others as they really are.

We have reflected on things that seem impossible. What is possible is for communities to commit themselves to cultivating a culture of humility and professing fidelity to dialogue. Our uncertain times generate fear of the unknown, and the absence of a Christian response to broken public discourse only adds to the layers of fear and anger. We need a new—or old—strategy to respond to increasingly

intense attempts at annihilating an opponent. Adopting an identity of humility, patterned after Christ, and committing to dialogue with others does not require one to capitulate one's own position. As Evdokimov said, humility is not self-humiliation. Affirming the good that can be recognized when one considers the entirety of the other makes it possible to transform an enemy into a friend, as Martin Luther King, Jr. famously said in a beautiful homily on loving your enemies. This spiritual response to the broken public discourse of our time could turn the tide and make peace flourish. In his *Small Catechism*, Martin Luther delivers the following teaching on the eighth commandment:

We are to fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations. Instead we are to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light. (Luther 2005, 321)

Luther's teaching could become the norm, and not the exception, if Christians reintroduce a culture of humility and dialogue into public discourse. May it be so. ■

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The Sickness Unto Death

by Greg Grooms



First Reformed is a film about depression and despair. While the two may go hand in hand, they are not the same. Depression is the *unshakeable feeling that life is pointless*. Director Paul Schrader's character Mary (Amanda Seyfried) describes it well—"This dark curtain just fell." When we initially meet *First Reformed*'s central character, the Reverend Ernst Toller (Ethan Hawke), he's very depressed for many good reasons. He's lost a son in the Iraq war, his wife has divorced him, and he's pastor of a dying church with a distinguished history.

The initial shot in *First Reformed* is a long, forbidding picture of the First Reformed Church of Snowbridge, New York. We learn that it will soon celebrate the 250th anniversary of its founding and that the building is to be reconsecrated with the mayor and the governor in attendance. It boasts bullet holes from the Revolutionary War and a cellar that hid runaway slaves on the Underground Railroad, but now its Sunday morning

worshippers number less than a dozen. *First Reformed* has become a tourist attraction, dependent upon the Abundant Life megachurch down the road for its financial survival. It is, as Abundant Life's Reverend Jeffers (Cedric Kyles, aka Cedric the Entertainer) describes it, "the museum," and Toller is more its caretaker than its pastor.

Toller is also dying of cancer, which he "treats" with a mixture of denial, Scotch-and-Pepto Bismol cocktails, and self-imposed asceticism. His manse looks like a monk's cell: a single bed, a desk and chair, and a bathroom lit by a bare light bulb. His is a life without life, without color, without hope, but his depression doesn't give way to despair until after he meets Michael (Philip Ettinger) and his wife Mary.

If depression is the *feeling* that life is without purpose, despair is the conviction that this is so. Michael isn't only depressed, he's in despair because he is convinced that we face a looming environmental disaster in 2050: two foot higher seas on the east coast, low lying areas around the globe under water, central Africa with a 50 percent reduction in crops due to drought, our western reservoirs dried up, climate change refugees, epidemics, opportunistic diseases, anarchy, martial law and more. (Michael may be speaking for Schrader here. In an interview with *Variety* Schrader said he didn't expect human beings "to survive this century.") What causes these fears to take root in his heart and produce despair? Mary is pregnant, and when he asks, "How do you bring a little girl... you know, a child that's so full of hope and naïve beliefs, into a world where that little girl, she grows up to be a young woman and she looks you in the eyes, and she

says that you knew this all along, didn't you?" Toller has no answer.

Toller's faith seems much weaker than Michael's despair, so much so that he makes no attempt to inspire Michael biblically, offering instead a little warmed-over Kierkegaard. "Courage," he says, "is the solution to despair; reason provides no answers." It isn't surprising that his words fall on deaf ears. Michael's fears, however, give substance to Toller's depression, they justify his feelings, and that convinces him powerfully. To be sure he does his best to restrain Michael's growing thirst for violence, and when Mary finds a suicide bomber's vest Michael made, Toller is horrified and takes it away. But neither his words nor his actions prevent Michael's death, and his death has profound consequences.

It brings Toller and Mary together. One evening in a panic she shows up at Toller's rooms and tells how Michael used to calm her. They'd do what she called the Magical Mystery Tour: lying on top of one another fully clothed, looking directly into each other's eyes, they'd breathe and move in rhythm. When Toller suggests he and Mary try it, they do. What follows is rather fantastical. After a moment they float up into the air together, the room disappears, replaced by an image of the night sky, followed by a series of other images. First the scenes are lovely—a snow-covered mountaintop, the ocean, forests—then increasingly disturbing—pictures of traffic, hills of worn out auto tires, smokestacks belching smoke, a desolate logged-over countryside, heaps of burning garbage, then fade to black.

Michael's death also pushes Toller from depression into despair. The reconsecration of First Reformed is funded by Abundant Life, which is funded by a

wealthy industrialist with a reputation for doing environmental damage. As the day approaches, Toller sees in it an alternative to the sham ministry that has been his life's work for so long. He sees it as an opportunity to vindicate Michael's concerns, perhaps to avenge his death, and to at least symbolically strike a blow against the forces that he is convinced are destroying God's creation. So when the day arrives he prepares himself: washing, shaving, carefully combing his hair before donning Michael's bomber vest. His intentions are clear, but they're thwarted by the unexpected arrival at the church of Mary, whom he has warned to stay away. His choice of what to do next is the turning point and the finale of the story.

I recommend *First Reformed*'s artistry to you without reservation. It's stunning in its austere beauty. I've not seen a film since *The Lives of Others* that uses color, or the lack of it, so powerfully. Brian Williams' soundtrack seamlessly mixes music and silence, underscoring the message of the film without calling too much attention to itself. For example, his juxtaposition of an old hymn—"Are you Washed in the Blood of the Lamb?" (*Are you walking daily by the Savior's side? Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?*)—with Neil Young's "Who's Gonna Stand Up?" (*Who's gonna stand up and save the earth? Who's gonna say that she's had enough?*) is brilliantly ironic. Schrader isn't so much a prophet predicting disaster in *First Reformed* as he is an artist bringing his fears to life, and he does it so very well.

What's lacking in *First Reformed* is a theology to answer Michael's question. Last May in an interview with *Now*, Schrader said, "I'm a Christian. I go to church on Sundays; I've chosen

to be a believer. I have been a believer most of my life and this is one of the things you deal with." Not only does he share the bare bones of my beliefs, he was raised in the same branch of the Christian tradition in which I work and live, the Reformed tradition. One of the elements of that tradition that attracted me to it most strongly is one that is missing in *First Reformed*. It is the true antidote to despair: not courage, but hope, a hope that isn't naïve. I share Schrader's worries about our abuses of the environment not only because my children and grandchildren will suffer from them, but because God will hold me responsible for them, too. But I also have a hope that isn't apparent in any of his characters, although I pray it lives in him, i.e., God is at work in all things for the good of those that love him and are called according to his purpose, and as grave as the problems of this world are, his grace is greater and he holds the future. I agree with William Willamon. When asked, "Are you optimistic about the future?" he replied, "No, but I have hope."

Watch *First Reformed* with friends who enjoy a serious conversation. You'll not be disappointed. But do not dare to take it lightly. There's a weight to *First Reformed*'s glory that must be reckoned with. ■

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Greg Grooms lives with his wife Mary Jane in Hill House, a large home across the street from the University of Texas in Austin, where they regularly welcome students to meals, to warm hospitality, to ask questions, and to seriously wrestle with the proposition that Jesus is actually Lord of all.





QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What's your first impression of *First Reformed*? What feelings does it evoke in you? What questions does it leave you thinking about?
2. Are you drawn to any one character in *First Reformed*? If so, who, and, as best as you know, why?
3. Have you ever struggled with depression or despair? What if anything helped you deal with it?
4. Put yourself in Toller's shoes for a moment. Which of his very heavy burdens do you feel most closely? If you were asked by him for advice on how to bear them, what might you say?
5. Again, please put yourself in Toller's shoes for a moment. How would you answer the hypothetical question Michael fears his daughter might ask him?
6. Michael's despair is quantifiable. He thinks the environment is going to collapse catastrophically soon. Do you share his conviction? If not, why not? If so, what are you doing about it?
7. Director Paul Schrader thinks the human race will not survive this century. Do you agree? If not, why not?
8. If you were privileged to watch *First Reformed* with writer and director Paul Schrader, what questions would you ask of him?
9. Discuss the ending of *First Reformed*. Were you surprised by it? Pleased? What do you think happens in the 24 hours after the film ends?
10. How would you define hope? How does it differ with optimism?



Film credits for *First Reformed*

Director: Paul Schrader

Writer: Paul Schrader

Producers: Brian Beckmann and others

Cinematography: Alexander Dynan

Music: Brian Williams

Starring:

Ethan Hawke (Toller)

Amanda Seyfried (Mary)

Cedric the Entertainer (Jeffers)

Victoria Hill (Esther)

USA, 2018; 113 minutes

Rated R (some disturbing violence images)