

A RESPONSE TO DR. CHARLES STANLEY'S "A NATION AT WAR"
[\(Dr. Stanley's page\)](#)

The world today appears to be on the brink of a mimetic crisis unlike anything humanity has yet seen. The atrocities of ancient wars, of medieval conquests, and of modern technological butchering will pale in comparison to what we, as a species, are about to unleash on the creation and ourselves. Inasmuch as Holy Scripture does indeed address us about these issues, so we are called to speak on issues of human violence and war with clarity. We here at PreachingPeace.org believe that even though Scripture will always be the benchmark of the church, it has been grossly misinterpreted throughout the history of Christianity. Martin Luther put it well, "Scripture has a wax nose."

Dr. Charles Stanley, noted TV preacher and founder of InTouch Ministries, last week told the Christian viewing audience that the current administration's policy on war was not only morally justifiable, but also had been given divine sanction. Dr Stanley is not saying anything that isn't being said from thousands of pulpits around the United States. It is easy to find the same rhetoric elsewhere.

President Bush's speeches may reflect more on his speechwriter(s) than his own personal religious beliefs, but the rhetoric of religious language in political speech has jumped dramatically in the past months. Then so has Osama Bin Laden's. Both sides, in one form or another are seeing the coming conflict more and more in religious terms, as a battle between good and evil, light and darkness. Both sides participate in demonizing each other and each other's political, economic, social and religious stances.

In purely secular terms, it isn't hard to understand any government seeing the horrific potential of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). The United States was the first country to use a WMD on another country. We have no desire to experience the consequences of such on our own soil. We can therefore understand the recent consequence of fear from September 11th, 2001, namely the quiet (for the most part) acceptance of the Patriot Act, where we effectively surrendered some very important rights so that our government could act more effectively against terrorism. Those of us who live in or near New York City can especially testify to the importance of the security precautions taken this past year. We are grateful for the vigilance.

But, and this is a big BUT, no matter how high the (human) moral argument for this war, there is no conceivable way to connect this war with the will of God. Dr. Charles Stanley has done just this. His compromising of the gospel of Jesus Christ has many forerunners and his national television exposure demands a response. We would prefer to stand with the framers of the Barmen Declaration and acknowledge that "Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death." We reject the Americanized cultural Protestantism of Dr. Stanley.

We assert that Dr. Stanley's view of the gospel is not the gospel at all, nor does it have to do with God, if by God we mean the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, Dr. Stanley's view on the current war policy does not have the justification of God behind it in any way, shape or form even though it may have other secular grounds.

Like Dr. Stanley, we too have a high view of Scripture. However, unlike Dr. Stanley, we take seriously the person and work of Jesus Christ as the life that manifested the character of God, how God really relates to us. Dr. Stanley, as can be seen in his atonement theory espoused in other sermons, has altogether missed the implications of the gospel, instead preaching a christified version of the "founding myth." He is essentially a positivist semi-Arian: Positivist in that there is an exclusive revelation in the Bible, Arian in that the Son is unlike the Father. Jesus is just a link in a chain, more akin to Gnosticism than Orthodoxy to be sure. Dr. Stanley represents himself as a preacher of the Word of God, the Bible. He is simply explicating what the Bible says about practical matters. In short, he is doing Christian halakah and claiming God's authority for his instruction.

We reject Dr. Stanley's views. We reject his view of Jesus and Jesus' teaching. We grieve that the name of Jesus is being dragged through the mud by those called to preach the gospel. "Father, forgive them, they don't know what they are doing."

The rest of this essay is broken into three parts. First, we will address the broader hermeneutical implications of seeing Jesus as the gospel writers present him, with special reference to violence and war. Here we will look at Jesus' relation to the Hebrew Scriptures and ways that the Hebrew Scriptures have been related to the New Testament. We hope to lay to rest, once and for all, that Jesus or his followers could have anything to do with retribution or retaliation.

Second, we will go refer to Dr. Stanley's text from his website home page and show similarities to other different religious justifications of war. We will thereby demonstrate the mythic (in a Girardian sense) character of Dr. Stanley's preaching.

Third, we shall show where Dr. Stanley, in fact, does not preach the Word of God but rather "the traditions of men."

First, we observe that nowhere does Dr. Stanley evidence critical thinking. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "nothing pains some people more than having to think." Stanley might argue that he rejects the liberal character of modern scholarship and prefers instead the Protestant theory of verbal inspiration. This could be evidenced in the way Scripture gets flattened out in his appropriation of it. New Testament texts are juxtaposed to plenty of texts from the Hebrew Scriptures to justify the paradigm presented. The one time a text from the gospels is used, it is dismissed cavalierly. The Bible is proof-texted. The hermeneutical theory underlying the proof texting remains

hidden from view, but it is there. In short, Dr. Stanley fails to see what the New Testament documents are all about, namely, what does Jesus have to do with Moses?

There are several places to turn to demonstrate this thesis. We can point to the New Torah theme in Matthew, particularly in the Sermon on the Mount, or especially in the sayings on anger and retaliation. We can also go to Luke and point out the connections between the “travel narrative” and Deuteronomy, and the Prophet like Moses who would speak the Words of God and be rejected. Of course the Fourth Gospel has a staggering number of pointers in this direction. Then, of course there is Paul with his New Adam Christology and view of Torah.

The underbelly of this can be seen especially in the scene at Antioch described by Paul in Galatians, or in his epistle to the Roman Churches, especially if we esteem the thesis of Mark Nanos. In short, no New Testament writer is immune from having to understand the relation of the events that have occurred in Jesus to the Hebrew Scriptures. But this does not mean that they took over these texts wholesale, lock, stock and barrel. We have only to recall the Gospel of Mark, which over and over again reflects Jesus’ challenge to any form of institutionalized religion. Or point to Jesus’ preference for the Targums, the Aramaic paraphrases of the Hebrew Scriptures. Or his preference for Isaiah and the Psalms. The Hebrew Scriptures are authoritative in that they point to Jesus; they are not authoritative in and of themselves for those who are not Jewish. The presumption then is that when approaching Scripture, Christian interpreters must read all texts through the lens of the Story of Jesus. Norman Wright does a marvelous job of this in *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1992).

Dr. Stanley begins with a view of the authority of Scripture that is at odds with Scripture itself. Since all texts have the same authority, the Bible becomes for him a giant jigsaw puzzle that desperately needs a bureaucratic hierarchy to put it all together. (Paul Ricoeur would refer to this as a state of “first naivete.”)

With the ancient church, Pietists and the Orthodox community, among others, we acknowledge that God has given his Holy Spirit to people of faith. The text has not captured the Spirit, ergo, the text is not in-spirited, we are. But it is one and the same Jesus that bears witness and is borne witness to as we read Scripture. Dr. Stanley’s view of the relation of the New Testament to the Hebrew Scriptures is archaic, anachronistic, full of holes, and virtually useless as a hermeneutic. His entire message crumbles under this criticism alone. He is not representative of Christianity either historically or existentially. His view of the authority of Scripture is sectarian and unsatisfying intellectually.

Second, one can take his home page, substitute Allah for God and quotes from the Koran for quotes from Scripture and there will be little difference between what we hear expressed by some in the Islamic community and Dr. Stanley.

Perhaps more impressive are the links between obedience to God expressed as obedience to secular authority. Of course these links only appear when (and only when!) the religious convictions of the administration are similar to those of Dr. Stanley (you didn't hear this kind of talk when Clinton was President). This admixture of popular civil religion and Christianity is idolatry worthy of the ancients. One has to have divine sanction to justify the incredible slaughter that may shortly take place in our history. One could not even begin to undertake such a mission without belief in divine sanction.

Sadly, Dr. Stanley builds his whole authorization for this thoroughly unchristian combination of divine and secular authority on a frequently cited but badly exegeted passage from Romans 13. As Mark Nanos has admirably demonstrated, the authorities to whom the Roman Christians are to submit are not the Roman authorities (whose immorality Paul excoriates in the opening chapters of the letter) but rather the synagogue authorities, with whom the Roman Christians still worshiped, and whom Paul would not have the Christians scandalize, lest they make it more difficult for them to accept the Gospel. (The Mystery of Romans. Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1996)

We reject Dr. Stanley's assertion that Scripture authorizes the use of violence and warfare. We reject his interpretation and use of the Hebrew Scriptures as contrary to the Scriptures themselves. Readers of PreachingPeace.org will be aware that we reject any use of the Hebrew Scriptures which depends upon the presupposition that God is somehow violent. We have shown and will continue to demonstrate the fruitfulness of reading Scripture through the revelation of the Father in the Son, and the defeat of the principalities and powers in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Dr. Stanley believes that he is actually speaking only what the Bible says, adding nothing and subtracting nothing. He says he is making known the will of Jesus' Father, the Creator of the heaven and the earth. He claims that he expounds the viewpoint of God. The funny thing is that he does it all without reference to Jesus, except where he dismisses the Lukan form of the saying 'to turn the other cheek.' How could Dr. Stanley make known the will of God without reference to Jesus? What does Dr. Stanley understand about the social and political implications of the story of Jesus? What could Dr. Stanley possibly know about the social-historical-cultural background of Jesus? It would appear that the reason Dr. Stanley bypasses Jesus is because he doesn't know very much about Jesus.

This brings us to our third point. In flattening out the Biblical texts as he does, Dr. Stanley has no room for the extraordinary story of Jesus in the context of humanity so hell bent on destruction they will kill the agent of the Creator. Dr. Stanley's atonement theory (the penal satisfaction view) demands a violent God whose honor is restored when justice is served by brutalizing Jesus for what humanity did to anger God. If this God were human, we would have him arrested. Or we might justify sending our troops to some other country to get rid of him.

From the perspective of systematic theology we have so far identified three significant problems with Dr. Stanley's viewpoint:

1. His poor Trinitarian thinking is evidenced in his Semi-Arianism and subordinationist Christology.
2. His dependence upon a view of Scripture that has been debunked and exposed as a hermeneutic of violence and oppression.
3. His dependence upon the Anselmic theory of penal satisfaction and a very sick God.

Each one of these suppositions depends upon the violent God of western Christianity, but not that of the gospel. Dr. Stanley owes more to Eusebius, Constantine and Anselm than he does to Jesus, John or Paul. It is easy to see that Dr. Stanley preaches the 'dysangellion' of the mythic violent God not the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We would also observe that Dr. Stanley does not appear to reflect any knowledge of church history, for if he had, he would know that the early church rejected warfare for almost 300 years. They would have nothing to do with violence in any way, shape or form. And its not because they didn't have righteous rulers or justifiable causes or anything like that. They rejected all forms of anger and violence (as best as they were able) because their Lord and Master had set them an example. Generation after generation would eschew warfare to follow Jesus. This period of the church also gathered our New Testament canon, so to assert, as Dr. Stanley does, that war has a divine sanction, does not make much sense exegetically, historically or spiritually.

Perhaps in the greatest ironic twist of all Dr. Stanley ends his essay by delivering a challenge to all Christians. He says we ought "to respond to this conflict as He desires: with an attitude of prayer, submission, and an unwavering dependence upon your heavenly Father." This final challenge is completely out of character with the rest of the essay. It sounds more like the posture of a Polycarp, or an Origen, Tertullian or Clement. It sounds more like the author of the epistle to Diognetus, "Violence is not an attribute of God." It sounds more like the way of the cross than the way of triumphant glory. It sounds more like early Christian martyrs than contemporary Christian militants. In the final analysis we rise to Dr. Stanley's challenge with others who believe enough in the cause of peace to take a stand and say "No War in My Name" even as God has said it in Jesus Christ.

Let us take the real challenge of peace and forgiveness. It is harder to forgive than to avenge or retaliate. Let us reject all religion which preaches the gods of our own making that reflect our own evil desires. Let us embrace faith in the Creator Abba who is love and in whom there is no shadow of turning and who is in love with all of us. Let us think in as consistent manner as possible how we may, each in our own way, follow the path of the God of peace. Blessed are the peacemakers. Not peace through strength, but peace through forgiveness and reconciliation, the peace of God in the cross of Christ.