

# OPEN FORUM

The heart of Scott Jones' article in the Nov/Dec 2002 issue ("Save Souls") is found in the two sentences: "The Great Commission in Matthew 28:16-20 must be seen in the light of the Great Commandments in Matthew 22:32-40. This is the theological foundation for healing the century-long split between evangelism and social justice."

Scott seems to be saying that our "going out" (the Great Commission) is grounded in our love of God and our love of neighbor (the Great Commandment). He reinforces that idea later by saying, "Our motive for it (evangelism) must be based on our love of God and our love of the neighbor." He seems to equate the Great Commission with evangelism and the Great Commandment with social justice. That linkage seems to suggest to Scott the "theological foundation for healing the split between evangelism and social justice."

I'm not convinced. Something is missing. It seems to me that we have centered upon social justice in the United Methodist Church, to the neglect of evangelism, precisely because we distrust the Evangel (the Good News).

And the Good News, the Evangel, is spelled out in its raw historical form in the 26th, 27th, and 28th chapters of Matthew—the Crucifixion/Resurrection events of Jesus Christ. The Great Commission comes at the tag end of Matthew 28, and it is introduced by his statement of the risen Christ: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." (Matt. 28:18b)

In this multi-cultural world, in this world of many religions, in this politically correct world, do we really believe that "all authority in heaven and earth" has been given to Jesus?

Our motivation for evangelism is not

based upon what we do—not even in following the Great Commandment. It is based on what God has already done for wretched sinners like ourselves. And social justice? It follows. Sometimes beautifully; sometimes imperfectly. But it has to follow, for it's lodged in the hearts of believers.

## **John Skien**

Grants Pass, OR

I have just read the article on confronting evil by Robert Ratcliff (Mar/Apr), and loved it. (I took my wife and daughter to see part 1 [of the Tolkien trilogy], I was entranced. My wife took a nap and it took a great deal of explaining and then renting the DVD for my daughter to understand why her father was so enthralled with this epic story.)

I hate when I get feed back that is not relevant. I am writing because I wish more of our church leaders would speak out against the violence and evil that we as Americans are doing vicariously through our government and more through our stock portfolios (multi-national corporations.) We do not hold a monopoly on how the world should live or believe, or eat or wear or watch or listen too. I hope that we do not continue our march toward war. I pray that God's prophets will speak more boldly, like Mr. Ratcliff!

## **Lee Biggs-Scribner**

Ft. Worth, TX

Your March/April 2003 *Circuit Rider* brought before us seven perspectives on evil. One of the seven was most helpful. Six were less helpful.

Robert Ratcliff did well to place Tolkien's moral vision before us, but wrote that there was no good or right use of power. But this cannot be true! Each is a steward of the power (advantage) given

him by God, and it can be well used or badly used.

Miroslav Volf's challenge cuts short his advised steps of our repentance and their forgiveness, forgetting that some sins are worse than other sins. Yes, we are all sinners, but Volf's sins are no where near as evil as those of bin Laden and Sadam. Can we not agree on this? There are monstrous sins and sinners. "The enemy of the community of humans" can be forgiven only if he seeks our forgiveness; that is, if he repents. Far from repentance, bin Laden and Sadam are arrogant in their continued destruction. Until then, justice, long the liberal term though neglected in these articles, has to be freed to lay forth its full tradition of truth, righteousness, judgment and mercy.

Tyron Gordon inadvertently makes love maudlin, which is to say, useless. Love has to be the Christian's second response and not our first. Let the enemy see the full extent of his damage in evil. Let the enemy first be pursued by justice. We Christians of the late 20th century forget that justice has mercy as its final expression, and mercy has justice as its first obligation.

Tom Gildemeister did splendidly to argue for the full return of the outcast terms 'sin' and 'evil.' He is correct that the Christian faith for 30 years has jettisoned much of its best insight, and now we're blinded to the presence of evil. He is profoundly correct when he notes "we have confused ontological categories with ethical categories." Bravo, sir!

Andrew Sung Park sees the perpetrators of evil as prioritized in the church's priority, to the neglect of evil's victims. Maybe! Recent years have tempted us all toward victimhood, and we're worse off because of it. Is there any way to validate that we've been too hard on the oppressors?

Mark Ralls, well-intended, risks paralyzing his readership if we cannot speak of Hitler as an evil man, or Stalin as an evil man, of Sadam and bin Laden as evil men. As a theologian, surely Mark has experienced at some point the personification of evil. Surely we do not have to return to Hannah Arendt's disastrous miscalculations. There are evil people and these have to be confronted.

Carol Newsom wrote less of evil's content and more of the descriptive destitute, to say that "the destitute may know more of God's grace than do the comfortable." Yes, but by ignoring Sadam and bin

Laden, Dr. Newsom dissolves the harsher terms of evil to reconsider evil in the confines of a clinical laboratory. That we are all "children of God," with some worse behaviors than others, makes again the mockery of justice and of truth.

It might be said that North America was not prepared to be hit by evil, as we are not prepared to recognize evil. If so, this indictment includes the saccharin and now near-traditional-less Church.

**Robert P. Schuler**  
Riverside, CA

**Editor's Note:**

*The articles by Volf and Newsom are excerpts of longer, previously published works.*

Kudos to *Circuit Rider* and Robert A. Ratcliff for the attention paid to J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. However, in promoting the self-emptying love of Christ, Ratcliff implies that both the Bible and Tolkien advocate a solely pacifistic form of self-emptying.

Ratcliff leaves out any mention of the book of Revelation, in which Jesus returns in glory to, by force, definitively confront and destroy evil forever. Similarly, in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, the enemies of Sauron reluctantly use force to confront Sauron. They don't rush to it; but they employ military force in a way that consumes and deflects Sauron's attention so that Frodo can actually get to Mount Doom.

Frodo stumbles to Mount Doom at a terrible cost to himself. At no less cost to themselves do the enemies of the evil Sauron also march in force against Sauron. Both these responses are self-emptying. Is one somehow better than the other because he doesn't carry a sword?

Christians in America must responsibly and self-emptyingly consider the use of force in confronting the authors of the 9/11 attacks, Saddam Hussein, the leaders of North Korea, and others. Namely, we must welcome the discernment and power of the Holy Spirit to empty ourselves of any agenda that is not the Lord's.

But self-emptying cuts both ways: for pacifism, however seemingly high-minded, is itself an agenda. Who are we to claim the Name of God and the cross and promote a pacifist agenda in the face of terrible evils that demand that we stand up for the good and be willing to die for it? At the same time that we humbly shrink back from identifying "American inter-

ests" with the will of God, we must also be willing to put our lives, interests, and agendas at the disposal of God—including the willingness to use military force.

**Randy Beeler**  
Bryan, TX

I appreciated the recent issue, "Confronting Evil." I've noticed that educational resources/curriculum seldom, if ever mention evil, Satan, or the Devil. Consequently, many of my Sunday School teachers feel it is inappropriate to discuss evil and take offense if they are asked to. Teachers don't mind if I bring up evil, Satan, or the Devil as part of a Bible story or song but they don't feel comfortable [raising the issue themselves.]

My suspicion is that we are less apt to blame God for our troubles when Satan is given credit for evil in the world. But when we stop talking about Satan and evil, then we blame the only power we are familiar with—God. If God is the source of evil it is hard to trust Him for salvation from evil.

I hope our educational resources mention not only Who saves us, but who we are saved from.

**Dave Hughes**  
Granger, IN

"Hate the sin but love the sinner" seems but a disingenuous way of separating the good guys from the bad guys. How can we judge? Do you who judge others do the same things yourself? Is God's project really "increasing love and justice in the world?" Isn't that why we are going to war with Iraq? Rather, I think maybe God's project is completed in Jesus the Christ and doesn't need me in the least. I am, and remain, a sinner saved by grace. Nor do I need "heaven" as an incentive to know that. If we really want to confront evil perhaps the best place to start is within and our need to be born again of water and the spirit. Please do not misunderstand that then we could work God's project for God. The response, then, would be praise and not looking to my neighbor's righteousness. Life begets life. Having said that, I think the most demonic force alive today is not those who perpetuate outward attacks like 9/11, but in our church when we teach that by acting in a certain way, being straight, not having a medical procedure, being a "Christian," not being a Muslim will get us to "heaven." If the Holy Spirit is present there is

God, there is Christ. Where is the judge? Who is in a position to condemn? When the Holy Spirit is present the quid pro quo nonsense of heaven and hell is revealed for what it is, nonsense. We say "where the spirit of God is, there is the one true church, apostolic and universal." What more could a woman want?

**Al Milligan**  
Odebolt, IA

## Wesley Websites

[www.umc.org](http://www.umc.org) includes calendar of events, resources, history groups, and links related to John Wesley's Tercentenary celebration.

[www.wesley2003.org.uk](http://www.wesley2003.org.uk) is a new web site that looks forward to the 300th anniversary of the birth of John Wesley. The site features an introduction to his life and times and his involvement in early Methodism.

[www.umc.org/umw/wesley/index.html](http://www.umc.org/umw/wesley/index.html) website called "John Wesley: Holiness of Heart and Life - An Invitation to Spiritual Growth" This site includes information on Wesley's sermons and works, hymns, people of Wesley's day and historical information.

John Wesley's Sermons are online at: [www.umc.org/UMhistory/Wesley/sermons/index.html](http://www.umc.org/UMhistory/Wesley/sermons/index.html)

[www.umc.org/UMhistory/Wesley](http://www.umc.org/UMhistory/Wesley) The Wesleys and their Times website includes several materials written or edited by John Wesley.

[www.WesleyanStudies.org](http://www.WesleyanStudies.org) is the homepage for "Wesleyan Studies." Its editorial board comprises scholars from United Methodist schools of theology such as Duke and Garrett Evangelical as well as scholars from non-United Methodist institutions. This website reports that it offers "News, Critical Reflection and Broader Linkages in the Fields of Wesleyan and Methodist Studies."

# CIRCUIT RIDER

## Reviews

*CIRCUIT RIDER Reviews* is a new service to our readers. In each issue, 6 to 10 books, selected by Book Review Editor Kenneth Carter, will be reviewed by several of your clergy colleagues. Listed below are the titles of books reviewed in the May/June 2003 issue (electronic edition only).

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### Books reviewed in this issue:

*Fling Open the Doors:  
Giving the Church Away  
to the Community*  
by Paul Nixon

*Prayer: 50th Anniversary Edition*  
by Karl Barth

*Preaching: An Essential Guide*  
by Ronald Allen

*The Spiritual Leader's Guide  
to Self Care*  
by Rochelle Melander and Harold Eppley

*Standing in the Circle of Grief:  
Prayers and Liturgies for  
Death and Dying*  
by Blair G. Meeks

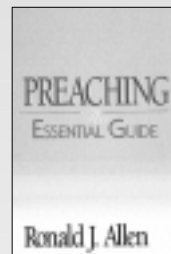
*The Ten Commandments:  
A Preaching Commentary*  
by John Holbert



Book Review  
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