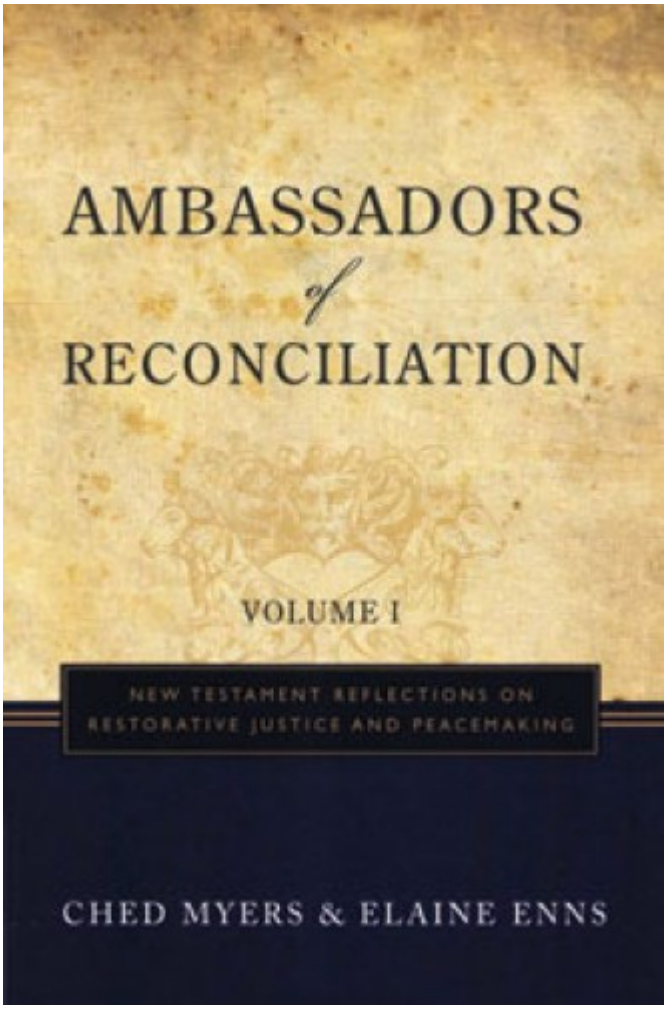
Ways of peace

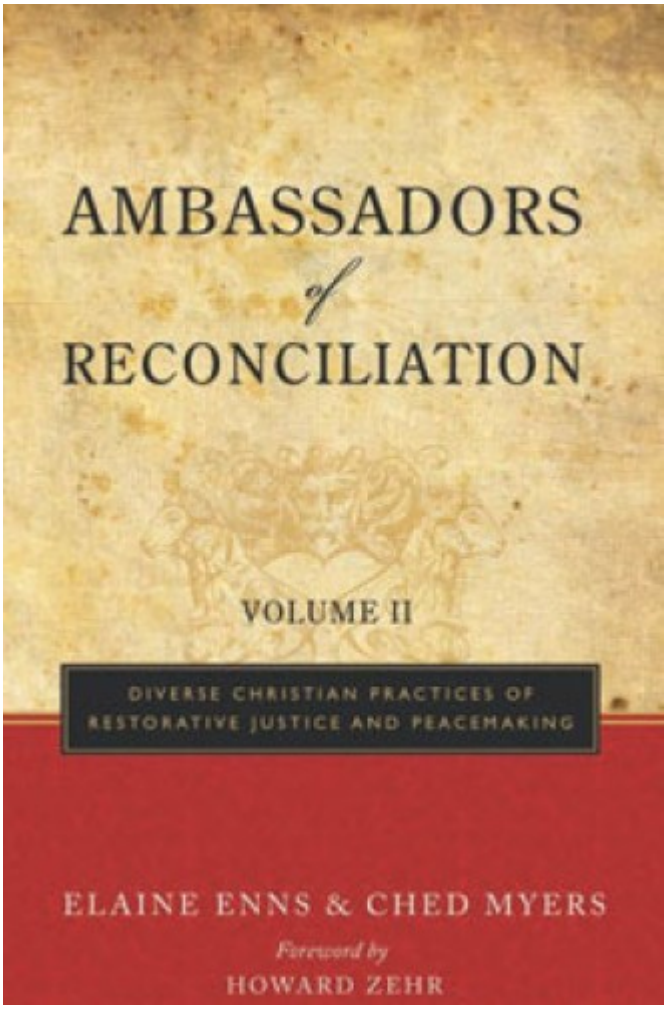
by Samuel Wells in the November 16, 2010 issue

In Review



Ambassadors of Reconciliation, Volume One

By Ched Myers and Elaine Enns
Orbis



Ambassadors of Reconciliation, Volume Two

By Elaine Enns and Ched Myers
Orbis

There isn't a tidy way to write about forgiveness. It's the whole gospel, for sure. But you've got to deal with the sin that preceded it and the damage that won't go away no matter how much reconciliation follows it. You've got to deal with the stop-start nature of relationships, the silence and paralysis of pain and shame, and the fact that we fail at least as much as we succeed. And then you've got to face the reality that much of the church, let alone the wider culture, isn't particularly taken with the whole notion of restoring sinners and offenders—it is more given to shunning or obliterating them.

Ched Myers and Elaine Enns never pretend otherwise. They met when they were speaking at a peacemaking conference in 1997. One imagines these books taking

shape in their imagination as they exchanged ideas and passions. The tension that animates the books is the same that undoubtedly lit up their first exchanges: Ched was an activist for nonviolence and biblical scholar who had scarcely interacted with people working on issues of restorative justice and conflict transformation; Elaine was more or less the opposite. The irony is that even among peacemakers, the suspicions between church/secular, academy/practice and ideology/policy are at least as fierce as anywhere else. These two volumes are an attempt to bring these worlds together into a conceptual whole.

Hence their carefully chosen terminology for the field: restorative justice and peacemaking. Their judicious definition locates the process of identifying harms, needs and responsibilities between the immediate need to reduce violence and the longer-term need for reparation and reconciliation. Perhaps the snappiest description for this sprawling field is one borrowed from a practitioner, who speaks of four categories: peacebuilding (negotiation), peacemaking (mediation and dialogue), peacekeeping (arbitration) and peacewaging (nonviolent struggle).

The shape of the project reveals the authors' difficulty in composing a linear argument. Enns and Myers offer three parallel tracks into the conversation: exegesis, analysis and biographical narrative. Mercifully, they don't waste energy discussing which of these is the best place to start: their mission is to draw diverse people into the conversation, and they recognize that each reader will be drawn to one approach more than another by disposition, commitment or learning style.

Myers is perhaps the most dynamic and provocative New Testament exegete of his generation, so the reader approaches volume one of this project with eagerness. It is given over to exegesis of four key texts. There are no surprises in his choice of 2 Corinthians 5:16–6:13 and Matthew 18, the most obvious candidates for scrutiny. But Myers also returns to where his scholarly career began by offering further reflections on Mark 1–3, and he finds in the letter to the Ephesians considerable potential. The findings are as stimulating and energizing as ever, but what is new is the way Myers fulfills his commitment to showing how contemporary practices and recent history illuminate the Bible. This kind of exegesis is often spoken of, seldom done and even more seldom done well. The particular lens through which Myers accomplishes this most often is through the story of Martin Luther King Jr.

Paul's experience in prison is cross-fertilized with King's in the Birmingham jail. Paul's vision of a society shorn of patronage, hierarchy, economic disparity and

racial hostility is read through the lens of King's beloved community. The relation of Moses to Jesus is compared to the relation of Lincoln to King. In particular Myers identifies the way King's social movement imitated the pattern of Jesus': both leaders spent time listening to the pain of the dispossessed, built popular nonviolent movements on spiritual and social foundations, proclaimed the beloved community and got into trouble for doing so, were seen as biblical prophets, were arrested after public protests, were such a threat to national security that their inner circles were infiltrated by informers, and were killed by an official conspiracy.

I don't read Myers's exegesis expecting to share every one of his exegetical judgments or theological experiments, but I am consistently drawn back to it because it captures the spirit and edge of the historical Jesus more successfully than anything else I know. This project sharpens that spirit and edge by aligning it with the most significant nonviolent movement in American history. It leaves me with the exasperation, exhilaration, insight, bewilderment and repentance that I imagine were part of the experience of the first disciples of Jesus. It's not a tidy feeling.

The analytical section that begins volume two is welcome because it brings the activist and exegete worlds and the mediation and restorative justice worlds together. The chapters on diagnosing violence, building peace and identifying privilege are invigorating; they are a useful primer in the nonpietist reunion of the personal and the political. For those seeking to energize congregations and classrooms with the social transformation of the gospel, there is much helpful vocabulary and categorization here. Typically for Enns and Myers, this section ends with testimony from a Native American activist that takes the edge off the tidiness of the analysis but grounds it in humanity.

Finally Enns offers eight narratives of contemporary pioneers in the field. These biographical sketches bring together diverse practitioners, from Christian Peacemaker Teams to Truth and Reconciliation Commission advocates to death-row partners to those who have met and been reconciled with family members of a person they have killed. These stories are fragile, moving and realistic. For many, they will provide the most accessible introduction to this complex conversation. Like other aspects of the project, they offer sensitive models for ways in which practitioners can appropriately foreground the work and examples of those who don't share their cultural privilege.

It's hard to speak simultaneously to the seminary, the sanctuary and the streets. Not only are these constituencies in tension with one another, they are frequently even

more aware of the heated differences of perspective within their own worlds. Enns and Myers boldly but humbly address this broad audience and do so with an always controversial and difficult-to-define subject. The project, like its authors, is at the edge of the church, the edge of the academy and the edge of the safety of professional boundaries and recognition. But it is at the center of the gospel.