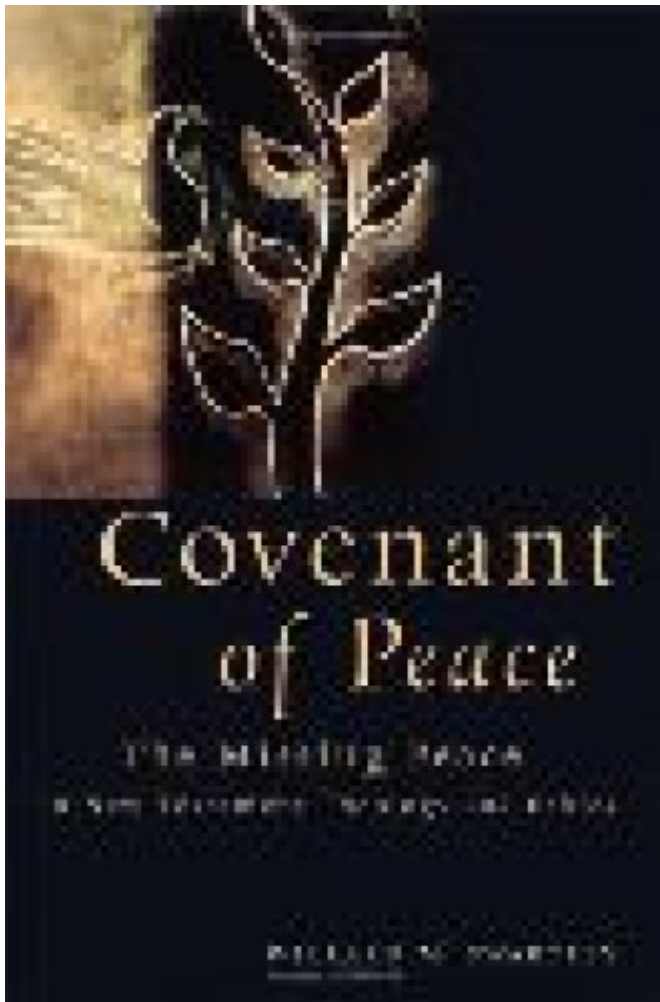


# The heart of the gospel

By [Richard B. Hays](#) in the [May 1, 2007](#) issue

## In Review



## **Covenant of Peace: The Missing Peace in New Testament Theology and Ethics**

Willard M. Swartley  
Eerdmans

Willard Swartley's powerful, comprehensive study of the theme of peace in the New Testament is his magnum opus. Swartley describes the book as a study of a single neglected theme in scripture and offers it as "a companion volume to texts in New Testament theology and ethics." But this volume is something much more. Not just an overgrown dictionary article on *eirene* in the New Testament, it is nothing less than a comprehensive theology of the New Testament presenting peace as the heart of the gospel message and the ground of the New Testament's unity.

In this respect, Swartley's achievement is reminiscent of John Howard Yoder's landmark study *The Politics of Jesus*: he presents readers with the radical—and remarkably persuasive—claim that to focus on peacemaking is to recover what the New Testament is all about. But Swartley's book is far more exegetically detailed than Yoder's. *Covenant of Peace* is the work of a seasoned teacher who has digested huge amounts of technical material and presents it with exemplary clarity. At the same time, it is a work of theological passion, calling the church to a renewed commitment to peacemaking as the foundation of its identity—a necessity if it is faithfully to follow Jesus and respond to the message of scripture.

A distinguished Mennonite New Testament scholar and professor emeritus at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana, Swartley makes a strong case that previous studies of New Testament theology and ethics have neglected or underestimated the pervasiveness of the theme of peace—including this reviewer's own work, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, which takes nonviolence as a central motif in the New Testament. Swartley's point is an important one: avoidance of violence is not the same thing as proactive peacemaking. It is the latter imperative that Swartley finds throughout the pages of scripture.

The New Testament's understanding of peace represents a christologically centered interpretation of the Old Testament's vision of shalom. Through analysis of tradition history, Swartley contends that Jesus' proclamation of the reign of God is deeply rooted in Hebrew scripture, especially Isaiah 52:7: "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'" Israel's messianic hope, on Swartley's reading, is that God will provide a new "shepherd" on the throne of David who will establish "a covenant of peace" (Ezek. 34:23-25, the text from which the book's title is taken). The peaceful reign of God is to be sharply distinguished from the *Pax Romana*, which maintained order through forceful

subjugation of other nations. Swartley cites a powerful text from the Roman historian Tacitus that records the protest of one unwilling subject of Roman power: "To plunder, butcher, steal, these things they misname empire; they make a desolation and call it peace."

Against this backdrop, Swartley surveys the individual New Testament writings and highlights the presence of peacemaking motifs in each one. Here, for example, is his summary of Matthew's message: "Matthew not only subverts the imperial domination mode, whether in Judaism's messianic hope or in Gentile Roman rule, but he accentuates loving enemies, peacemaking, and good deeds done by the Father's children so that people glorify the heavenly Father. . . . These behaviors are the identifying marks of God's reign inaugurated by Jesus." Not surprisingly, Swartley makes a strong case for his thesis in his analysis of the Gospel materials. Along the way, readers will find numerous thought-provoking discussions of familiar material, such as Swartley's analysis of the Last Supper, interpreted preeminently as a ritual of peacemaking.

Perhaps more surprising, however, is the strength of Swartley's case for the centrality of peace in other New Testament writings that are less often linked with this theme. Swartley provocatively announces in the first sentence of his chapter on Paul that "Paul, more than any other writer in the New Testament canon, makes peace, peacemaking, and peace-building central to his theological reflection and moral admonition." As Swartley recognizes, this claim stands in stark contrast to most scholarly discussions of Pauline theology, which have found various other centers for Paul's thought (justification by faith, union with Christ, God's apocalyptic triumph, etc.). But Swartley patiently marshals the evidence in support of his reading. It is Paul, after all, who arrives at the climax of the opening chapters of Romans with this great declaration: "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God" (Rom. 5:1). It is Paul who repeatedly employs the epithet "the God of peace." And it is Paul whose pastoral counsel to his churches aims above all else at peace-building in community.

Swartley's case is bolstered by his decision to treat Ephesians as an authentic Pauline letter, for Ephesians focuses on Christ as "our peace" and as One who came proclaiming peace and breaking down the wall of division between Jews and Gentiles (Eph. 2:14-18). One wonders, however, whether Swartley's position would be even stronger if he accepted the broader scholarly consensus that Ephesians is a second-generation product of the Pauline school. In that case, we would hear in Ephesians

another distinct voice within the New Testament, another witness who reads Paul's gospel as focused on the theme of peacemaking.

Readers should also attend carefully to Swartley's clear treatment of Revelation, the New Testament book most often thought to endorse bloodthirsty violence.

Swartley's chapter is titled "Revelation: Nonviolent Victory!" (with the exclamation mark). Swartley follows Yoder, Adela Yarbro Collins, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Richard Bauckham and other scholars who read the Apocalypse as a manifesto of nonviolent resistance, calling the followers of Jesus to emulate his example of suffering persecution and death, giving his own life rather than taking the lives of others.

This motif of imitation of Jesus is central to Swartley's reading of the New Testament as a whole. In an important chapter on "Discipleship and Imitation of Jesus the Suffering Servant," he summarizes the evidence and brings it into dialogue with René Girard's analysis of mimetic desire—the envious impulse that generates the perpetual violence of human experience. Swartley argues that the New Testament offers, by contrast, the hope of a "transformation of desire that enables a positive, *non-acquisitive mimesis*" (emphasis his). Thus, it is precisely through mimesis of Jesus that we can escape the cycle of scapegoating and violence by embracing the pattern of enemy-love and peacemaking. Swartley's position differs from Girard's in one crucial respect: for Swartley, the death of Jesus does not merely unmask mimetic violence; rather, the cross is mysteriously an act of God that brings about atonement and peace through Jesus Christ's act of self-donation.

Swartley's superb study could be strengthened by more explicit discussion of the trinitarian basis for the New Testament's mandate for peacemaking. The gospel of peace is that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself." Jesus was not just a victim of human malevolence or a sacrifice offered up to appease a blood-lusting God; rather, Jesus is God, embodying the love that receives enemies not by killing them but by dying for their sake. Thus, at the deepest theological level the New Testament's call to peace is grounded in the mystery of the Trinity. Swartley affirms this truth, but the affirmation remains more in the background than the foreground of his argument.

A study of such scope and ambition can always be criticized on various particular points, but the overall weight of Swartley's case is impressive. This is a book to be reckoned with by anyone who writes on New Testament theology and ethics. Most of all, it is a book to be studied and digested by everyone charged with the task of

proclaiming for our time the good news of God's peaceful reign.