

# Jesus and the nonviolent revolution

andré trocmé



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ANDRÉ TROCMÉ

Edited by Charles E. Moore

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# Introduction

**F**ew books stand the test of time as this one has. Perhaps the fact that it is still so relevant rests in the circumstances of its genesis – in the courageous life of its author. Since it first appeared in English in 1972, André Trocmé's *Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution* has influenced a whole stream of New Testament thinkers and peace activists. Dozens of books about Christian ethics make reference to it, and proponents of nonviolence turn to it repeatedly for guidance. For example, significant portions of John Howard Yoder's classic *Politics of Jesus* are based on Trocmé's thesis. However, one cannot fully appreciate Trocmé's ideas without some understanding of the man and of the amazing life story that forms the context for his message.

## **The Story of Le Chambon**

André Trocmé was born into a French-German family in 1901, at the dawn of a turbulent period that would eventually catapult all Europe into armed conflict. As a young man, André's youthful enthusiasm and impulsive deeds made him stand out. When the German army was rapidly marching into Northern France, he excitedly hung a French flag from the topmost branches of a towering tree near his house.

During the First World War, André saw first-hand the horrors and senselessness of that war. At the age of thirteen he simply could not accept that his German cousins, his mother being German, might fight against his own half brothers. The shock of this, along with the senseless death of his

mother from a car accident just prior to the war, and his encounter with numerous pacifist theologians after the war, cemented his orientation as a pacifist. Moreover, as a young student, he realized that military armistices could not establish peace between nations or reconstruct the moral fabric of a society.

Years later he would be described by one writer as “a man of mystical fervor, aggressively loving, almost explosive in his rush to save lives.” But his path was not always so clear. As the specter of National Socialism began to haunt Europe, Trocmé, despite his aversion to violence, conceded that it might be necessary to plot against and assassinate Hitler. In the end he joined an altogether different kind of conspiracy, one that chronicler Philip Hallie called “a conspiracy of goodness.”

By the time Hitler’s war machine came to full force, Trocmé, now married and a father of four, was co-pastor of the French Reformed Church in Le Chambon sur Lignon. A farming village on a pine-studded plateau in the mountains of south-central France, Le Chambon seemed an unlikely breeding place for the radical resistance for which it would soon be famous. Yet it became a magnet to a stream of refugees that included both French and foreign Jews, providing shelter and safety from their persecutors.<sup>1</sup>

Already before the first Jews arrived, others fleeing from Franco’s regime in Spain, and later from the Nazis, found this Protestant sanctuary, consisting of twelve villages, willing to bid them welcome. In the parish of Le Chambon, Trocmé and his fellow pastor, Edouard Theis, united the people in the effort to protect these fugitives, exhorting their parishioners to live not in fear of the state, but according to moral conviction. What eventually became a massive, organized network to protect and even educate Jewish children who had been taken out of internment camps, started at the grassroots with these first refugees. Villagers and farmers opened their homes to the refugees, sometimes to stay, sometimes to wait until accommodations could be arranged elsewhere or until they could be smuggled across the Swiss border. Besides the hospitality of individuals, by the middle of the occupation financial aid from outside the village was supporting seven larger

houses of refuge. Several humanitarian organizations helped to established boardinghouses for refugee children as well as a student center.

So it came about that resisting authority became a normal part of daily life on the Plateau Vivarais-Lignon. In Chambon itself, the students at the private school L'École Nouvelle Cévenole, which Trocmé and Theis had founded, refused to salute the flag or hang the picture of Pétain, the Vichy leader, in every classroom. On a national holiday, Trocmé's parish ignored Pétain's order to ring the church bells at noon. They would ring the bells only for God. A tight network also provided the refugees with false identification cards that allowed them to pass as non-Jewish. But though it was truly resistance, the fighters in this nonviolent underground were not fueled by anger or hatred. Some maintained connections with partisan fighters in the area, while throughout the rescue effort anonymous messages and phone calls trickled in at just the right time warning of the possibility of raids by the Vichy police. Because of the risk of discovery, town residents never talked in public about their deeds.

Trocmé and Theis, at considerable personal risk, was at the forefront of much of the village's activity. On June 22, 1940, France surrendered to the Nazis and agreed to arrest and deport to Germany any refugees Hitler's government might demand. The next day, during a Sunday service, Trocmé and Theis both preached about resistance.

Tremendous pressure will be put on us to submit passively to a totalitarian ideology. If they do not succeed in subjugating our souls, at least they will want to subjugate our bodies. The duty of Christians is to use the weapons of the Spirit to oppose the violence that they will try to put on our consciences. We appeal to all our brothers in Christ to refuse to cooperate with this violence...

Loving, forgiving, and doing good to our adversaries is our duty. Yet we must do this without giving up, and without being cowardly. We shall resist whenever our adversaries demand of us obedience contrary to the orders of the gospel. We shall do so without fear, but also without pride and without hate.<sup>2</sup>

Their sermon, if daring, was also timely. The Vichy government lost no time in implementing the Nuremberg laws and immediately began arrests. Jews and other refugees were zealously herded into internment camps. But Trocmé, true to his preaching, was not about to admit defeat. With the approval of his church council, and at the request of the American Friends Service Committee, he began to search for ways to provide refuge in Le Chambon for the children rescued from the camps—a dangerous and illegal undertaking. There the recently founded *École Nouvelle Cévenole*, as well as the public school, stood ready to assimilate them. He also urged his congregation to continue to shelter fugitives of “the people of the Bible,” and encouraged them to stay firm.

In the summer of 1942, Minister Georges Lamirand, head of the Vichy government’s youth organization, showed up in Le Chambon and delivered a speech on the “New Social Order.” The speech over, he was immediately handed a letter by the local youth, protesting the recent roundup of nearly 13,000 Jews in Paris. They informed him in unequivocal terms that they intended to protect persecuted people whenever and however they could. Trocmé was clearly the source of this defiance, and soon after was warned of the dire consequences facing him if he did not turn in the names of all hidden Jews. Trocmé refused, saying, “We do not know what a Jew is; we only know people.” For three weeks the police scoured the village and its surrounding areas, but the rescue network was so tight that they came up with only two arrests.

In August, under surveillance and with rumors circulating that he might soon be arrested, Trocmé preached to an overflowing church on Deuteronomy 19, concerning the entitlement of the persecuted to shelter, “so that innocent blood will not be shed.” His own response was clear: “These people came here for help and for shelter. I am their shepherd. A shepherd does not forsake his flock.”

Eventually, though, Trocmé’s activities were brought to a halt. In February of 1943 he and Theis, his co-pastor, as well as the director of Le Chambon’s public school, were arrested and shipped to a French internment

camp. Surprisingly, after four weeks of imprisonment all three men were freed, even though they refused to sign a declaration of obedience. However, Trocmé and Theis were warned that their lives were in danger, so the two men went into hiding for the next ten months but secretly stayed in contact with rescue efforts. Four months after their arrest, the German police finally raided Les Roches, the center for young adult refugees near Le Chambon. This hit close to home for Trocmé; his cousin Daniel, director of Les Roches, was arrested along with seventeen students. He was later murdered by the Nazis at Maidanek, just weeks before the concentration camp was liberated.

The great war finally played itself out. The fighting ended, and the need for secrecy passed. The people of Le Chambon and of the surrounding plateau had kept thousands of innocent lives from harm right to the end, despite repression and intimidation. Ultimately, the rescue network provided a haven or safe passage for an estimated 2,500 refugees, with a large percentage being Jews and children.<sup>3</sup>

### **Missionary of Nonviolence**

Trocmé, in the words of Marlin Miller, who helped translate this book, “was one of the rare Christian pacifists who refused to choose between impassioned action and intellectual clarity.”

His efforts, which sprang from his clarity of purpose, would be devoted to peace and reconciliation for the remainder of his life. World War II over, Trocmé served from 1948 to 1960 as European secretary for the Fellowship of Reconciliation, traveling and lecturing all over the world. His House of Reconciliation, an international peace center in Versailles, positioned him as one of the links in a chain that united such leaders of nonviolence as Martin Luther King, Jr., Toyohiko Kagawa, and Gandhi.

Driven by his faith, Trocmé and his wife, Magda, set out in 1956 to study the conflict in war-torn Algeria. For a short while there they volunteered their personal time in overcoming illiteracy. They also learned more about the plight of French resisters who refused to serve in the French army. This

concerned Trocmé tremendously. He thus worked with the Mennonites to help found Eirene in Morocco, which has now become a worldwide service program for conscientious objectors and development workers.

In 1960, for what was to be the final decade of his life, Trocmé returned to pastoral ministry. Because of his absolute pacifist stand it was difficult for him to find a French church to lead. Finally, he was invited to become pastor of a large Reformed church in Geneva, Switzerland. Despite the bourgeois lives of his congregants, he motivated them to organize and support technical development work in northern Algeria. Shortly before his death, Yad Vashem awarded him and his wife, along with others in Le Chambon, the prestigious “Righteous Among the Nations” medal for the part they played in the rescue efforts.

Trocmé’s convictions and ideas grew out of his activities as a peacemaker. His writings were forged not in theoretical musings, but in the fiery events that had been his baptism into the world of nonviolent revolution.

Trocmé wrote much and often but only managed to publish two books. His first book, *The Politics of Repentance* (1953), proposed a strategy for peacemaking in situations of conflict. *Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution* (1961, French edition), is a systematic treatment of Christian nonviolence and the more influential of the two books.

When this book first appeared it broke the clutches of “Christian realism,” spearheaded by Reinhold Niebuhr, which was so dominant at the time. Trocmé offers a truly Christ-centered social ethic, one to be taken seriously not just by individuals but by the church. He understands from personal experience that Christ’s redemptive work extends far beyond the individual to encompass society and nations. His understanding of discipleship is revolutionary without succumbing to political ideology or sheer activism.<sup>4</sup>

There is nothing fancy about Trocmé’s approach. With prophetic intuition rather than weighty analysis, he renders interpretations that are both subtle and provocative. His core argument is simple: Jesus inaugurated the kingdom of God based on the Jubilee principles of the Old Testament. These principles call for a political, economic, and spiritual revolution in response

to human need. Jesus intended nothing less than an actual revolution, with debts forgiven, slaves set free, and land returned to the poor.

It was this threat to vested interests that awakened the hostility toward Jesus that led to the cross. Jesus understood the kingdom of God in terms of God's work in human history; every sphere of life was a domain for God's rulership. But he saw, too, that such rulership would always cost a struggle. The first Christians, who were charged with seditiously "turning the world upside down," understood their master well. They had caught this vision and begun to live it out.

Trocmé is careful to locate Jesus within the socio-cultural context of his day. He therefore expends a great deal of effort surveying various movements, social groups, and patterns of authority and influence that situate Jesus and help to delineate his unique mission. Jesus' way transcended the alternatives of his day, while at the same time it grew out of intense interaction with his contemporaries. Jesus was no spiritual mystic. He had to overcome the temptations of employing violence, of escaping into the desert, and of compromise.

Yet, as Trocmé shows, Jesus refused both the way of violence and of spiritual quietism. He called for practical changes but rejected violence as a means of achieving social change. Instead he articulated and exemplified a way of life that obviates the kind of social order that produces injustice and poverty, and the violence inherent in them. Jesus' nonviolence was not a philosophy or a tactic, but a matter of obedience to God.

Trocmé makes it clear that Jesus should be the center of the church's life and practice, not nonviolence or revolution or justice. Jesus' nonviolent revolution, and ours, is rooted in the cross. Jesus was ready to sacrifice his "cause," the liberation of his people, for the sake of a single human being in need of healing. Human need—be it physical, emotional, spiritual, or social—was Jesus' reason for being, and should be ours. Jesus' sacrifice makes possible a new social order where human lives are dignified with justice, uplifted in compassion, and nurtured by peace.

Trocmé takes the liberty of interpreting certain passages of Scripture in fresh ways. Though somewhat imaginative at times, he puts forth insights that in the broader narrative of Jesus' life make perfect sense. Historical and exegetical work have subsequently proven Trocmé, if not right, then at least on the right track. His work is constructive as well. By showing us how Christ continues to do his work here and now through his people, he broadens our understanding of Jesus' mission, and makes plain what Jesus expected of his followers.

By any standard, Trocmé's work deserves ongoing attention. This edition is new in several respects. First, the text has been edited to read more smoothly. Some material has been rearranged with new subtitles, certain sections deleted to eliminate repetition, and transitional phrases added that were not in the original English edition. New material has also been incorporated, particularly in chapters 14 and 15, which are from Trocmé's book, *The Politics of Repentance*. Finally, references have been added to show how trends in current thought affirm Trocmé's thesis.

Not much has changed since World War II, the Holocaust, and the Cold War. Ours is still an age of bloodshed. We live by the hellish logic of revenge, just war, might makes right, and deterrent force, while inequality, oppression, and exploitation flourish. *Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution* refutes such logic. Trocmé answers our continued propensity toward violence with, as he terms it, "the algebra of God's kingdom." If only more Christians were courageous enough to follow Trocmé's lead in obedience to Jesus' call, the story of Le Chambon sur Lignon would not be so exceptional.

*Charles E. Moore*

## Preface

**T**here is no easy peace. The earth's exploding population renders more difficult each day a peaceful solution to the problems of hunger, national security, and social justice. Simultaneously, the threat of nuclear destruction continues to hover over the future of humanity.

Meanwhile, the gap widens between the mentality of our contemporaries, shaped by a technological civilization whereby we control nature, and traditional religion, conceived during a rural epoch when human beings bowed under the weight of nature. Though technology threatens human existence more than it ever did in times past, Christian thought—frightened by the responsibilities it should assume—refuses to see in the gospel anything but a message of individual salvation. It might even be said that today's Christianity finds suspect any actions performed for the physical salvation of the human race. It spurns any practical efforts of authentic Christian obedience as presumptuous and pharisaical—and that in an age much in need of them. Such a reversal of the teachings of Jesus Christ must be rectified, lest the church disqualify itself as an instrument capable of pointing the way for a humanity bordering on collective suicide.

I am neither a professor of history nor of theology, and the following little more than scratches the surface of areas normally reserved for specialists. Let me say, however, that having flirted with the theologies and philosophies of despair, I have now rejected their poison. Existential thought may sate one with its lucid analyses, which define the problems, but it fails to offer

a courageous obedience capable of resolving them. Such an approach is nothing but a subtle excuse to evade one's responsibilities in the world and is thus characteristic of a period of moral and religious decadence. In fact, the tendency of Christians to intellectualize ethical issues is in direct proportion to the extent that they have become a part of the power establishment.

All of us, Christian and non-Christian alike, are responsible for the hunger, injustice, egoism, exploitation, and wars that devastate our time. Christians bear special responsibility: knowing that God can change both people and their situations, the disciple of Jesus can help bring into being God's future for humanity.

Christians profess that at a given place and time, God intervened in history, rendering all subsequent happenings on this planet as of divine importance. Because of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we know that every birth, every life, and every death matters to God.

If each person has thus been invested with such value, how great is the worth of the sum of human history! Whether one believes he is the Son of God or not, Jesus is the central event of history, because *de facto* his coming changed humankind. We must therefore understand who this Jesus was in order to fully grasp the value of humanity and of our task toward it.

Recent works have reopened the debate about who Jesus was.<sup>1</sup> Everyone agrees that when the authors of the New Testament attempted to present Jesus to the people of their generation, they made use of certain beliefs then current in the Mediterranean basin. Obviously, Jesus and his disciples spoke the language of their contemporaries. This should not alarm us. We need not, for example, dispute the value of what people of the first century said about the universe simply because our knowledge of the universe has since expanded. Behind the vocabulary of Jesus' day, we can still discover the enduring Christ.

The gospel merits being read not only with faith, but with intelligence. This does not mean we have to give way to the demythologizing zeal of some interpreters, whose efforts to weed out the gospel have only transformed it into a desert.

If the New Testament has to be demythologized at all, it should be done with the assistance of the Old Testament, not our modern myths.<sup>2</sup> The more one adheres to the strict monotheism of the God of Israel, the more visible the thought of Jesus Christ becomes. The God of Jesus Christ is the God of Israel. The Christian faith dissolves into pure mythology as soon as it no longer leans upon Judaism. True, the authors of the New Testament borrowed from sources other than the Old Testament in order to explain Jesus to their Jewish and Greek contemporaries. But let us not forget that their main frame of reference was always the Old Testament.

Conversely, the Old Testament stands in need of the New. Jesus lifts the crushing fact of the original Fall and broadens the dogma of a narrowly elected people. He humanizes the ritual laws of Moses. He accomplishes what the prophets of old could only announce. Thus one loses nothing by Christianizing Judaism, because Jesus Christ has already done so.

The Jesus of history actually transcends both the Old and the New Testament. He is the point of encounter between two theological edifices, the Jewish and the Christian. He has fulfilled the first and engendered the second. He alone explains that which came before and that which came after him. One does not put a lamp under a bowl, but uses it to lighten the darkness. The light dawns when we let Jesus himself interpret Judaism and Christianity for us.

Jesus' life and teaching are a bridge connecting two historical epochs – a bridge defined by the parables and aphorisms which he spoke. We should try to grasp their deeper meaning. Their depth is more striking than any rigorously consistent doctrine, for they spring from the presence in Jesus of the living God, who reveals himself as the loving Father of all people. God's presence manifests itself; it does not prove itself.

I have thus limited my ambitions to the modest goal of interrogating Jesus Christ by Jesus Christ. What have I discovered? In short, the portrait of a vigorous revolutionary capable of saving the world without using violence.

Although I have examined secondary literature, I wish to underline again my limited exegetical and historical competence. My many other activities

have simply prohibited me from doing much scholarly work.<sup>3</sup> The theses concerning the proclamation of a biblical Jubilee by Jesus are my own. If their somewhat unusual character can stimulate the curiosity of the specialists and provoke further inquiry into the social ethics and nonviolence of Jesus, I will have attained my goal.

*André Trocmé*

PART I

# Jesus and His Revolution

## CHAPTER ONE

# Jesus the Jew

In Jesus' time Galilee was a place in transition. Three languages—Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek—were used. Dualistic doctrines from the east on the devil, angels, and demons threatened belief in strict Jewish monotheism. Hellenistic civilization was invading the last strongholds of Judaism. Raised in this complex environment,<sup>1</sup> Jesus could have laid the foundations of his movement by simply borrowing from all the surrounding sources. But he didn't.

We need merely to read the synoptic Gospels<sup>2</sup> to discover that Jesus was, at the very least, a Jewish prophet, the last in a line that had begun with Amos and ended with John the Baptist. Matthew in particular had one obvious intention: to demonstrate that Jesus was truly the Messiah whom the prophets had announced. Hence his generous use of Old Testament quotations.

The Gospels in general had no trouble showing the Jewish character of Jesus' thought. And this is for good reason. Jesus, as a Jew, had only one library at his disposal, namely the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms. These scriptures inspired his teachings and parables. Jesus' contemporaries made no mistake on this score. Even the ones who refused to recognize him as the Messiah saw him as an authentic prophet.<sup>3</sup> The theology and moral teaching of Jesus was nothing less than Jewish theology and Jewish moral teaching without the ritual elements. "You diligently study the Scriptures...

These are the Scriptures that testify about me” (John 5:39). “I have not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets but to fulfill them,” he affirmed. “What did Moses command you?” he asked his questioners. When he gave the Golden Rule, “Do to others what you would have them do to you,” still considered the supreme lay expression of morality, he justified it with a peculiarly Jewish expression, “for this sums up the Law and the Prophets” (Matt. 7:12).

The Law of Moses, enlarged and commented upon by the prophets, was *the* law of the Jewish people. It mixed together religious, moral, social, and political prescriptions. When the prophets sounded their calls they addressed themselves to Israel—the people of God. They thought of Judah and Jerusalem as corporate personalities. They thus called the entire people of God to repentance. Justice had to be restored, religion purified, customs transformed, and the Torah put into practice at all levels. Similarly, Jesus addressed his reproaches and his appeals to the entire Jewish people. When he proclaimed *metanoia*, that is, a radical change of heart and mind, he was not addressing himself to pagan “nations,” per se, but to the Israelite community. Jesus traveled up and down Galilee preaching the good news of the kingdom, the reign of God: “The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15). When he commissioned the twelve apostles, he instructed them: “Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel” (Matt. 10:5–6).<sup>4</sup>

Keeping in mind that the Jewish faith was a national religion, it is worth noting that Jesus accepted and taught without hesitation several typically Jewish notions. For instance, Jesus’ universalism did not spring from Greek rationalism, or from Roman law, or from some Enlightenment conception of individual rights. It was also certainly not the offspring of a happy marriage between Judaism and Neoplatonism. It grew out of a Judaism that “exploded” under the pressure and dynamism of the messianism borne within it. Greek and Roman ideals were simply too well balanced, too symmetrical to inspire action. Jesus’ universalism, rooted as it was in Judaism’s understanding















## CHAPTER TWO

# Jesus Proclaims Jubilee

**A**t the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus the prophet gave an extremely important speech in the synagogue of his hometown, Nazareth. Matthew and Mark offer but a brief summary of this event, but Luke's account is quite detailed. Here it is in its entirety:

Jesus went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,  
because he has anointed me  
to preach good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners  
(and recovery of sight for the blind,)<sup>1</sup>  
to release the oppressed,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”





























## CHAPTER THREE

# Implications of Jubilee

**T**he speech at Nazareth alone would not be enough to prove that Jesus proclaimed a Jubilee. A more complete reading of the Gospels is needed to validate our thesis. As we have just seen, the Jubilee or sabbatical year prescribed four provisions: letting the land lie fallow, the remittance of debts, the liberation of slaves, and the redistribution of capital. This chapter will explore further references in the Gospels to these four provisions!<sup>1</sup>

### **The Fallow Year**

Jesus does not directly mention the provision of letting the land lie fallow. His silence on the subject is not surprising, since this sabbatical prescription was the only one already accepted by the people. It was therefore unnecessary to encourage the Jews to put it into practice. But they surely needed courage to let their land lie fallow every seventh year while counting on God to give them what they needed. In Leviticus 25:20–21 Yahweh foresaw their uneasiness and declared, “You may ask, ‘What will we eat in the seventh year if we do not plant or harvest our crops?’ I will send you such a blessing in the sixth year that the land will yield enough for three years.”

Jesus talked to his disciples in similar terms. His proclamation of the Jubilee may have troubled them because they had abandoned their land and their boats by the lake to follow him. “So do not worry, saying, ‘What

























## CHAPTER FOUR

# The “Politics” of Jesus

**M**any Christian ethicists assert that Jesus left us no political teaching. In one sense they are right. Any hope of finding in the Gospels some type of partisan politics or criticism of first-century political regimes, such as the kingdom of the Herod dynasty or the Roman Empire, is futile. Nor can a comprehensive teaching be found concerning the nature of church-state relations.

But an apolitical interpretation of the Gospels is wrong on at least two counts. First, it takes Jesus’ sayings out of context. For example, Jesus says, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s” (Matt. 22:15–22), or “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above” (John 19:11). From these passages exegetes mistakenly conclude that the disciple should submit humbly to the authorities and do his civil duty. Such assumptions totally stifle any attempt to apply Jesus’ teachings to the social level, not to mention how they also discourage any Gospel-inspired attempts to transform social institutions.

Second, an apolitical gospel causes churchgoers to obey the established order blindly, without giving much thought to how such obedience supports oppressive regimes, such as the tyrannical dictatorships in Latin America and Africa. In short, such a gospel amounts to good news only for the rich – quite a different message from that of the One who went about proclaiming good news for the poor.





























## CHAPTER FIVE

# Ethics of the Revolution

**T**he question now arises as to what extent the new Israel—the church—can practice the jubilean mandate. In this chapter we will make only a summary exploration, which will be developed later on.

How shall we bridge the gap between Jesus' revolution and today's Christianity? To understand the significance of the Jubilee—"a Sabbath of sabbatical years"—that Jesus envisioned, we must first dig deeper into the meaning of the Sabbath itself. For herein lies the bridge we are looking for. Creation, God's kingdom, the Sabbath, and the Jubilee are so thoroughly intertwined in Jesus' understanding that both Israel's destiny and the earth's redemption are described in the New Testament as a state of holy rest.

### **The Final Sabbath**

It is clear in the Old Testament that the Sabbath has eschatological significance (Exodus 20). It announces God's rest, the completion of his work in final perfection.

The Sabbath also has redemptive significance. In Deuteronomy 5 it is a reminder of the exodus from Egypt: "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt...Therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the



















PART II

# Jesus and His Contemporaries

## CHAPTER SIX

# Precursors to Peace

**J**esus proclaimed that the kingdom of God was at hand and that a great reversal was about to be unleashed. Mary understood right from the start: “He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful” (Luke 1:51–54).

But what kind of upheaval would this be? Would it demand a call to arms? Would it require the use of force? Did Jesus come to bring peace or a sword?

This next section will show how Jesus’ revolution would bypass political intrigue and posturing; it would follow an altogether different path. He would fulfill God’s plan of peace, of which the prophets had but a glimpse.

### **The Prophets**

We cannot understand Jesus’ way of peace apart from Israel’s prophetic tradition. Elijah, who prophesied in Israel under Ahab (around 870 b.c.), was certainly the most ardent defender of sacred violence. To rid the Israelites of













## CHAPTER SEVEN

# Crises in Palestine

**W**e now come to the social and political setting in which Jesus found himself. In Jesus' day Palestine was a hotbed of conflict. It was indeed one of the most violent and oppressive epochs in Jewish history, with the cauldron of agitation reaching its apex in the destruction of Jerusalem. Jesus' message of Jubilee would not likely be received as a benign word of hope. The climate was thick with unrest. Any proclamation risked inciting revolution.

### **Political Unrest**

Herod the Great's death in 4 b.c. caused a serious succession of crises. The king's will divided the kingdom among his three sons. Philip received the land beyond the Jordan. Archelaus inherited Judea, Idumea, and Samaria, with the title of king; and Herod, called Antipas, received Galilee and Perea.

When Jesus crossed the Sea of Galilee, he would go into Philip's territory. Philip reigned there peacefully until a.d. 34 without problems. In Judea, however, Archelaus's reign would last only ten years and would be filled with disturbances. For instance, after several attempts to appease the people, he executed three thousand Jews to suppress an insurrection. His brothers contested the validity of their father's will, which had made Archelaus king while they were only tetrarchs. Archelaus went to Rome as early as a.d. 4 to











## CHAPTER EIGHT

# Resistance Movements

**P**alestine's political situation, its impoverishment, and the re-awakening of messianic hopes were important factors in the numerous revolts that shook Israel during Jesus' youth. The Jewish people were engaged in a life-and-death struggle for the survival of their nation and religion. In one way or another and to varying degrees, they resisted assimilation into the Greco-Roman world.

### Tension

By Jesus' time the traditional religion of the Romans and the Greeks was already completely decadent. Educated people no longer considered their divinities to be symbols of one unique and unknowable God. Syncretism was overcoming the fanaticism of preceding centuries. Greek philosophy took upon itself the reconciliation of all the extremes. Philo of Alexandria, also known as the Jewish Plato, was attempting to harmonize Platonic philosophy and the Old Testament. And by writing his *Jewish Wars* and *Jewish Antiquities* in Greek, Josephus was bringing Judaism in line with the wisdom in fashion during the first century.

Emperor worship, through which Rome was to try to unify so many diverse religions and give a sense of duty to a crumbling world, was just beginning to form. Rome showed itself tolerant and granted to the peoples of the empire the right to practice their particular cult so long as they agreed to venerate













## CHAPTER NINE

# Seeds of Nonviolence

**T**he intent of this book is not to describe the gradual fall of Jewish messianism into the violence that caused the destruction of Jerusalem. Its aim is rather to show that another current was emerging in troubled Palestine, one that would prove fertile ground for Jesus' message.

Revolutionary outbursts and subversive tactics aside, the behavior of most Jews in Israel during the Herodian-Roman period was by and large nonpolitical. They were consumed with eking out an existence. However, in addition to the various insurrectionary movements there were occasional acts of resistance of the nonviolent kind – usually directed against massive insults to the religious feelings of the larger Jewish populace. The attitude of most of Jesus' Jewish contemporaries was not that of the freedom fighters. It is difficult to know whether Jesus was influenced by them or whether he inspired them, but we know that for fifteen years, from the beginning of Pilate's rule until the end of the proconsular regime in Judea (a.d. 26 to 41), the Jews in Palestine gave up combating violence with violence.

### **Nonviolent Resistance**

Immediately after his arrival in Judea, a few months before Jesus began his ministry, Pilate made the mistake of bringing several military ensigns bearing the emperor's effigy into Jerusalem. This was a serious offense to the religious customs of the Jews, who forbade any representation of the















## CHAPTER TEN

# Another Way

**A**s we have seen, Jesus came proclaiming the kingdom of God, inaugurated by a Jubilee. This Jubilee upset both human tradition and religious scruples. Consequently, Jesus' adversaries tried to kill him. They were determined to prevent a dangerous revolution that would usurp their influence and power. Jesus seemingly had only two alternatives: violent resistance or flight into the desert—the Zealot temptation of force or the Essene option of withdrawal. But Jesus chose to do neither. He overcame the temptations of revolt and escape, but did so at the cost of a great struggle.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Zealot Temptation**

The Zealots were preparing themselves to wage a war of liberation against Rome. They were extremists who occasionally used their daggers against the occupation forces and sometimes against countrymen whom they suspected of collaboration. After having assassinated those who favored collaboration with Rome one by one, they finally succeeded in sweeping the entire nation into a generalized war in a.d. 66.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus was not exempt from being tempted by the solution of force. It appears, for example, that there were Zealots among Jesus' disciples: Simon, called the Zealot, and probably Judas Iscariot.<sup>3</sup> We also know that from a high mountain he saw “all the kingdoms of the world,” and that the tempter





















PART III

# Jesus and Revolutionary Nonviolence

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

# The Radical Explosion

**W**e have seen how Jesus proclaimed a unique revolution. Unlike his contemporaries he refused to resist evil on its own terms. His kingdom was not of this world, yet it was for this world. This chapter will show how, although Jesus' thought developed from peculiarly Jewish premises, it expanded into a radically inclusive vision, which, in turn, would preclude violence.

Jesus remained faithful to Jewish forms of worship celebrated in the temple at Jerusalem. Although he emphasized that God delighted in mercy and not in sacrifices, he did not in principle exclude sacrifices. He did not abolish ritual, but rather enlarged its scope: "First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift" (Matt. 5:23–24).

His attitude toward circumcision was similar. He did not abolish it, but compared it with a physical healing, thus giving it a more human and less ritualistic meaning (John 7:22–24). Until the end Jesus, like every other orthodox Jew, regularly traveled to Jerusalem at the prescribed times to perform his religious duties in the temple. His criticism was not aimed at the temple, but rather at the priests and Levites, who were so consumed with their dogmatic preoccupations that they ignored those wounded by the side of the road. Contrary to the accusation made during his trial (Mark 14:58), Jesus did not desire the destruction of the temple, but its purification. The day of his messianic entry into Jerusalem, his burning zeal for the temple



















## CHAPTER TWELVE

# The Sword of the Spirit

**I**f boundaries between peoples needed erasing, then so, too, did practices and institutions that oppressed the human spirit. Sadly, those among Jesus' contemporaries who should have recognized him as the Messiah first were the Pharisees, but they did not.

Jesus shared much with the Pharisees. Indeed, as an orthodox Jew, Jesus wanted to bring the people back to an integral practice of God's law, as did the Pharisees. Like them, he was expecting the kingdom of God to come soon. Like them, he made no distinction between this coming and the restoration of Israel. Like them, he was a convinced believer in the Sabbath. He went to the temple as they did. And the Pharisee Hillel had already articulated the Golden Rule, which Jesus later reformulated.

Yet the Pharisees balked at Jesus' universal embrace. Why did they resist his revolution of social justice? Why did they refuse to heed his jubilean summons, if they really wanted to practice the Law of Moses with such great zeal?

To put it simply, the Pharisees did not repent upon hearing Jesus' call because they were offended by his requirements. They were avaricious and would not give up their exploitation of the poor. They were proud and would not abandon their prominent seats. They were authoritarian and would not allow a Galilean peasant to teach them. They were hypocrites who hid their intentions behind noble appearances.



















## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

# Nonviolent Love and the Person

**J**esus overturned the Jewish institutions of his day because the cast of human traditions had to be broken. The truth had to be set free so that Israel's election could become available to all nations. Jesus' conflict with the guardians of the Jewish institutions was so acute that, humanly seen, it would appear he was faced with only two options: war—with the Pharisees first, then with the Romans, which would have greatly pleased the Zealots—or withdrawal from the world, which would have greatly pleased religious purists such as the Essenes.

Jesus, however, chose a third path: the nonviolent entry as Messiah into Jerusalem, his capital city. More than a "triumphal entry," Jesus' nonviolent option was packed with redemptive significance. His sacrifice would be the supreme mark of divine compassion. But nonviolence was merely the framework. In this chapter, we will attempt to discover more precisely the content Jesus wanted to give his nonviolent action.

### **Redemptive Nonviolence**

Though Jesus had given up violence, he did so without abandoning the struggle for liberation. He would be crucified and yet rise victoriously. We will not go into all the reasons for Jesus' death. Jesus himself was extremely reserved on the subject, and the Gospels contain practically no "theology"



















## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

# The Greatest Commandment

**F**or the time being, until the Last Judgment, the throne of vengeance is unoccupied. In the place of the avenging God there is the Lamb of God, the *goel* who takes away the sin of the world. Yes, *of the world*.

None of us is capable of doing good, at least not without dirty hands. It is downright dangerous to try to justify ourselves, for doing so puts us in the place of God. A moralizing religion, a religion of works, even of nonviolence, only raises the screen of pride between us and God, and between us and others. What, then, remains to guide our conduct? What can compel us toward a new future? What is at the heart of Jesus' nonviolent revolution? *A loving respect for our neighbor, the person right before us.*

### **A New Command**

Jesus sums up in two sentences the entire Mosaic Law and the Prophets, that is, the duty of holiness and of prophetic mission in the world: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength; and love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:30–31). Although these two commands are found in the Old Testament, what is original in Jesus' teaching is that he brings them together. They become a singular command. Jesus is saying that we cannot love God if we do not love our brother; God





















## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

# The Politics of Witness

**B**efore we conclude our study, we must determine how Jesus himself related to the state, and how he wanted his followers to act toward the government.

As we have seen, in Jesus' time two authorities represented the state: the Jewish authority, theocratic in type, consisting of the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem; and the occupying authority, in the person of the Roman procurator. Jesus addressed himself to each of these on several occasions. He never associated himself with their activities, nor did his disciples. Nor did Peter, Paul, or John ever make the slightest allusion to any sort of collaboration. Their attitude toward the civil authorities was nonviolent in the best sense of the word. They acted prophetically, uttering warnings and pronouncing severe judgments against the state, yet never inciting armed revolt.

According to Jesus, the kingdom of God is in the world in terms of its function. The world is the soil, the church is the sower. The world is a dark house, God's people a candle. The world is a field where the weeds, which are the wicked, and the wheat, which is the church, grow side by side. The church is the mustard seed that becomes a great tree. The world is the flour, the church the leaven mixed in by God to make the dough rise. The world is the sea containing fish of all kinds, the church is the net cast into it by the angels. The world is the earth, the church its salt and light. Thus, between the world as God's creation and the church there is no discontinuity.<sup>1</sup>















## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

# God's History

**F**rom its inception, the way of nonviolence that Jesus' disciples inherited from their master has posed various problems, not the least of which is the problem of the church's relationship to the state. Despite considerable changes in the notions of church and state throughout the centuries, some Christians still try to find normative definitions of the church and the state in the Bible. This endeavor is useless, because it begins with a wrong assumption. It wrongly refers to "the church" and "the state" as if there were only one church and only one state in the world.

To be strictly objective, one should refer to churches (separated everywhere into national churches and into numerous denominations) and to states (trying to keep interior order, but divided into hostile governments that wage war with each other). If we adopt this terminology, it is obvious that the rules of submission to Caesar as they are deduced from, for example, Romans 13 are inadequate for our day. An altogether different frame of reference must be found if we are to make progress on this matter.

### **Kingdom Algebra**

Some suggest we should give up trying to find a social ethic in the Bible altogether. The problem, however, is in their approach. The Bible relates



















# Notes

Square brackets indicate notes added by the editor of this edition.

## Introduction

- <sup>1</sup> [For the best account of what happened in Le Chambon sur Lignon see Pierre Sauvage's documentary, *Weapons of the Spirit*. Additional information can be found in the following: Stuart A. Kallen, *The Faces of Resistance* (Minneapolis: Abdo Consulting Group, 1944); Susan Zucotti, *The Holocaust, the French and the Jews* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993); Eva Fogelman, *Conscience and Courage* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994); F. Rochat and André Modiglian, "The Ordinary Quality of Resistance" in *Journal of Social Issues* 51, no. 3 (1995), pp. 195–210. Philip Hallie's influential book, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*, though inspiring and informative, is neither historically nor biographically accurate. It tends to sensationalize and romanticize Trocmé's role in the rescue efforts. Nevertheless, it was the first book to put the story of Le Chambon on the map. *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed: The Story of Le Chambon and How Goodness Happened There* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979). Trocmé's personal memoir is now available to the public at Swarthmore College. It has yet to be translated into English.]
- <sup>2</sup> [Trocmé's and Theis's sermon of June 23, 1940, from the Magda and André Trocmé Papers, Swarthmore College Library, Peace Collection.]
- <sup>3</sup> [2,500 is Trocmé's own estimate. Some place the number as high as 5,000.]
- <sup>4</sup> [Unlike the social gospel movement at the turn of the twentieth century, or some liberation theologies that have emerged since, Trocmé resists abstracting a set of norms from the gospel that ends up merely reflecting one's own political mindset. He seriously engages the biblical text in the context of its time.]

















































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