

AN OPEN LETTER TO WALTER WINK ON  
THE STYLE & SUBSTANCE OF HIS BIBLE TEACHING

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If your name is not WW, why should you be interested in reading this letter? Because better than anybody else now hoofing it around as a peripatetic Bible teacher, WW combines the three factors needed for great Bible teaching: (1) communications skills that are state-of-the-art psychologically & sociologically; (2) the pastoral touch (he was a pastor before becoming a scholar of technical competence), &, as anticipated in (2), (3) technical biblical competence. I'd like to clone him 1,000 times! But how can you get in on, & understand, a letter that is a reflection on something you weren't in on, viz, four days I spent with WW, experiencing his teaching & having conversations with him? I'll make it easy for you, get you in by indicating, instance by instance, what I'm making critical-appreciative observations on. And where this old biblical scholar gets technical, he'll not assume y'all know what he's saying: I'll explain, as I'd not have to in a private letter to WW.

Dear Walter:

Just before being with you, I was a day with a 93½-year-old mentor of mine, Amos Wilder, whose friendship I cherish for many reasons, not the least of which is that most of my mentors have already been either buried or cremated. I'm of the biblical-scholar generation who mentored you, & now you are mentor to the oncoming generation. I can't describe the peace & joy in my heart, & the gratitude to God I feel, for the privilege of being in this historical flow of *homines unius libri*, men (unfortunately it used to be almost exclusively males) whose most passionate scholarly attention has been Scripture. As I was meditating on this when with you, I thought of a photograph\* I took 41 years ago: four hands on a treetrunk--a greatgrandparent's, a grandparent's, a father's (mine), & a son's (Loree's & my Bill). As now I write this, I'm looking at that picture & feeling good about the flow of both flesh & spirit through the generations. If at some points in this letter my scale seems to you to tip excessively on the side of criticism rather than appreciation, please consider (1) that the contextual feel is highly appreciative & (2) the proof of my high regard for you is that I count you worthy of a multi-page Thinksheet!....No particular order to the following impressions. This is grab shots, not a movie or essay. \*On p.2, over.

1. I understand why in your writing & teaching you use "the principalities & powers" (Paul: Ro.8.38; Col.1.16; 2.10,15; deuteropauline: Eph.1.21; 3.10; 6.12; Tit.3.1). The phrase has a twice double power, as I see it: (1) depending on the context, it can be quite concrete or usefully vague (roughly corresponding to the distinction between a fear & an anxiety); & (2) it's spacious enough to include timely/timeless, historical/trans-historical (the latter appropriate to the cosmic Christianity of Col. & Eph.). But I'm bothered by (1) Your tendency to use the phrase for alternative-political-consciousness-raising hermeneutics of suspicion, ie, as a tool of your particular politics. Quickly I check myself to commend you for not obtruding your politics in the Bible studies; your politics were there more by implication than by exposition. More anon. (2) Your making little if any use of parallel phrases in the 1st ½ of the NT, esp. Jesus' "the Evil (One)," eg in the Lord's Prayer). (On NT metonyms for the evil one, see S. Vernon McCasland, "The Black One," pp.77-80, EARLY CHRISTIAN ORIGINS, ed. by Allen Wickgren, Festschrift for H.R.Willoughby, who gave me my copy, Quandrangle/61. SVM doesn't refer to Bonhoeffer's central metaphor here, but it's apropos: "the dark powers" self-set over against "the bright powers." As you know, our earliest extant complete Bible is Cod.Sin., which confronts one entering the British Museum. Its last book is not Revelation but Barnabas, our earliest documentary evidence for the early Christian metonym for evil with "esthetic fullness, viz "the Black One"--cf. J.R.R.Tolkien's "the Dark Lord" in Hobbitland. Se Barn.4.9,181f,20.1. It's awkward to use this since we Americans got consciousness-raised by translating from the Latin "Negro" to the English "Black," but it's against sense & scholarship to let modern taboos transmogrify history. Here's SVM's explanation of "ho melas," the Black One, in Barn. & later early Christian literature: (1) Darkness is "terrifying" in that threats within it are less perceivable than in daytime, "lawless persons prefer(ing) to operate at night" (besides, "animism peopled the darkness with evil spirits"); (2) So in

biblical thinking Satan & his hosts were "naturally assigned night"; (3) It was then "logical for darkness, which was so often associated with Satan, to become his metonym"; (4) Finally, "it was almost inevitable that some imaginative person would designate Satan as the Black One. That distinction appears to belong to the author of the Greek Barnabas, who said quite simply 'ho melas.'....For many years, my personal practice has been to combine, as did Bonhoeffer, the fact that evil is personally, systematically, structurally powerful & the photeric metaphor, thus "the dark powers." Besides being in itself a rich, bracketing expression, it bypasses the thoughtless modern brush-aside "I don't believe in a personal devil"--the block we come to if we say "Satan" or "the devil" (meaning "the Devil"). Further, it avoids the politicizing spin your "the principalities & powers" gives to your own exegesis & your hearers' thinking. Not that "the dark powers" aren't political: how could they be powers at all were they not political? But most of your hearers have been, one way or more, liberationized, so it would be difficult for them to think transpolitically of "the principalities & powers." Again, in avoiding the Scylla of modern impersonalism of evil (the other side of the same vis-a-vis the good), careful you don't play into the hands of the Charybdis of the current intellectualistic-elitist sniffing at whatever is in the name of some academically constructed theory (lit., "vision") of what should be, what George Will aptly calls "the intellectuals' self-dramatizing notion that they should comprise an 'adversary culture.'" What I find deliciously ironic is the fact that so much of what academics parade as their identification with the oppressed is motored by the elitist (& thus oppressive!) energy of adversary-culture thinking. You yourself, although a humble Christian man, are far from free of this taint. (Don't respond that I too bear this taint: I already know it. We are in the fellowship of sinners known as academics. You are not as free as you claim in the beginning of your THE BIBLE IN HUMAN TRANSFORMATION, which I thought a brash instance of what the French like to call "intellectuals betraying their own kind.")

2. Whether or not imperialism was the curse of the 19th c., nationalism has been & is the curse of the 20th c. The latter got a theoretical boost from a Princeton historian who, upon becoming president of the USA, got a wide stage on which to enact the drama of his libertarian notions, which came to be called "the Wilsonian principles." Since at the time the American empire was scarcely yet in the bud stage, WW could afford the luxury of derogating empire itself, which came down to sniffing at the old empires, esp. the British, the French, & the German. At Versailles, all right-minded folks agreed the German empire should be broken up, preferably divvied up. World War II had, on the other old empires, a not dissimilar effect from that that World War I had had on the German empire. So in this century we've experienced two diminutions of the idea & reality of empire, nationalism ("the self-determination of peoples," etc.) gaining as, & to the degree that, imperialism lost....Now, in this historical rehearsal I've not told you anything you didn't already know. My reason is to raise a question: Why do you not evenhandedly attack both manifestations of "the principalities & powers," viz, imperialism & nationalism? I could give up my suspicion that you are using Scripture to promote a particular politics if I were to hear/read you saying a few kinds words for empire & a few sharp words for the political philosophy that preaches every people should be "free," meaning politically autonomous. A truly biblical politics would not be so simple-minded, so slogan-captive, so "liberal" (in the secularistic sense)--as I tried to suggest in #2217, "On Being a Subject People" (special ref. to Jer.29). Current

special-interest theologies, the various liberationisms, marry this idea of autonomy (the heart of Enlightenment dreams) to another simple-minded ideology, viz, class analysis--& we wind up with the risible anomaly of folks Scripture-proof-texting to sup-



port an atheistic perversion & ideological imprisoning of the Enlightenment! Wondrous as is the base-communities movement, its literature shows its leaders warping Scripture to a particular ecopolitical analysis & praxis, an idolatry Rein. Niebuhr began crying out against when Hitler persuaded him to give up the ideology to which RN had been holding Scripture captive, viz, pacifism. (Hear G.Fackre presenting Niebuhrian Christian realism here: "The biblical eye sees more deeply than secular realisms, for the latter do not indict themselves for the same pretensions they see in others."--41, THE PROMISE OF RN, J.B.Lippincott/70.) As I'm trying to apply a biblical-critical consciousness to your liberal-critical consciousness, please bear with me for a few questions:

(1) Should the British raj have given up India? It would have been tough to stay, what with simple-minded Ghandi preaching that Hindus & Muslims could cohere in one "India" after the British left (he having become, without knowing it, the pawn of Hindu nationalism). Ghandi won, & soon there were a million corpses as the raj split into India & split-Pakistan, with all the anguish arising therefrom. To trope Cromwell: I beseech thee, by the bowels of Christ, to think that Ghandi may have had a Big Bad Idea. Not saying he did. I wouldn't know. Seems to me probable. Anyway, it's thinkable by me, for I have no prejudice AGAINST empire FOR nationalism.

(2) Should the French have given up Lebanon? When Lebanon was about to explode in 1958, our Marines landed the very day I was to land in Damascus: Washington had decided to shore up that part of the French empire, & at the time I was stupid enough to think that a bad idea. In 1958, every aspect of Lebanese life in all its multifariousness was prospering except "the self-determination of peoples." Today, nothing is prospering except an empty "freedom": everybody's free (autonomy), nobody's free (anarchy). The only peace what we call the Near & Middle East has ever known (except for brief interlude in a few spots) has been under empire, including the Davidic empire (for which the royal theologians transmogrified the message of the prophetic theologians). Three cheers for empire? Or at least two?

(3) Should the State of Israel turn over any more territory to anybody? Israel has functional-potential military dominance of the Mediterranean's eastern littoral, & that fact--call it the Israeli imperium--provides a kind of peace to the region: Egypt & Jordan aren't about to try another attack, & Syria's airforce is pathetic face-to-face with Israel's, & Lebanon is a basket case, & the noncontiguous Arab states have their own fish to fry. The so-called Palestinians can rhetorically disturb the peace with rocks but are no military threat; & any land-for-tension-reduction deal must deny arms to the new Palestinian state, else it'll be the staging ground for a world-Palestinian military engagement with Israel. Are you so given to nationalism, "the self-determination of peoples," that you support the proposal of an armed Palestinian state? If not, then in some nuancing according to your own lights you favor the continuation of the present Israeli imperium. In short, in this instance you're for empire. If not here, where, please, are you for empire as the lesser evil?

(4) I'll quit with S.Africa, on which you've written (acc. to me) more effectively than well. Two issues here: (a) The strategy of black liberation (sudden? gradual?), & (b) The optimizing of justice. A few comments on each:

(a) A radical biblical critique will not merely take on some going notion of "liberation" or of "justice." Our biblical faith both converges with & diverges from any current secular notions (instance the U.S. Constitution, in Jorge Lara-Braud, PACIFIC THEOL. REVIEW, Spring/88). We've not come very far toward specific policy-action (eg, investment, which I favor, or divestment, which you favor) when we use banner expressions such as "from sin, death, & the devil" & "from the principalities & powers" & "from inequality." Liberated from/to what? A capitalist society moves toward justice every time it removes an obstacle to freedom of opportunity--as, eg, IBM was doing by forcing Pretoria to permit it to train blacks for executive positions (an effort led by a UCC layman I was close to throughout the process): 14 years ago IBM threatened to withdraw from SA if permission were not given. Permission was given, & other US corps followed. When US corps, under US church & government pressures, withdrew from SA, two tragedies ensued: ((1)) Black upward mobility into the middle class (a movement favored by white managers, whose eye is on profit & not on pigmentation) ceased; ((2)) The Japanese, ever eager to seize US foreign markets, pounced & absorbed IBM, Kodak,

& other companies, further tipping the trade balance against us. Reminds me of the old phrase "the evil that good men do." Stupid Americans (& American Christians!) acting doubly antiAmericanly: frustrating the upward mobility of a minority (black, at that), & increasing the US trade disadvantage & thus foreign debt, currently the most dangerous, destabilizing factor in the world economy, fragile for many reasons. (When I mentioned this double tragedy & stupidity in a recent speech in Vermont, a woman indignantly cried out "Why do we have to wait until after the fact to get the other side of the argument? Why doesn't our UCC national office provide us with both sides, trusting us to make our own decisions?" Why, indeed? In view of our foreknowledge that the Japanese would seize our S.African markets (& therefore our sanctions would not damage the S.African economy but would, in all probability, irritate the government into getting its Dutch up & so moving rightward--which has happened), our one achievement with sanctions was a little guilt-relief & a dollop of self-righteousness--the first, sick; the second, impious. (Sanctions, what a dumb idea in the game of "the principalities & powers"! We couldn't even knock off Noriega! Yet as I write this, Tutu is running around the US shouting what amounts to "Sanctions haven't worked! Let's try more of the same!" Too, that Peace Nobel, spouting nonviolence, is perpetually breathing out slaughter against the Pretoria government & threatening violence--along with all the other "peace" organizations, compromising their pacifism--if Pretoria doesn't fold! Tutu & his ilk, being against gradualism & therefore, whatever they say, proviolent, stick to their simple-minded ideological equation of (1) "liberation" with the collapse of the government, & of (2) "justice" with equality.)

(b) Instead of being brainwashed by slogans that equate "justice" with some proximate goal, proximate relative to "the righteousness of God," which our Lord tells us to "seek" (Mt.6.33, *dikaioisune/justitia*; along with his *basileia/regnum*), a true critical consciousness will swing into place a battery of questions, with a view to the scenario with the highest potential for (or, an expression from Niebuhrian realism, "approximation of") fairness. In plain English. I mean, like, 20 questions: I'm loth to mention any for fear you'll think I'm only pretending to open discussion on this. But I'll throw in a few not often in play on "the S.African issue": ((1)) Are only the living to be considered, or also the dead? If also the dead, how be fair to black dead, who when living looked forward to being revered ancestors, & the white dead, who when living intended to advantage their offspring with good memories of them & with thisworldly possessions? What is your personal opinion on inheritance rights? Marx was for confication at death, the next generation all starting their race at the same place, viz, as equal members of "the dictatorship of the proletariat" financially as well as in rights. Accordingly, in my Marxist period, I asked my father to leave me nothing in his will. He, with a wry grin: "I'll check back with you on that when you're out of your teens." He did, &--behold!--I'd changed my mind. In growing up, I'd had both inner-life & outer-life advantages, the second floating the first in the world: my inheritance from him enabled that arrangement to continue, with more freedom to live & serve through my inner life because not trammelled to the necessities of the outer life as I'd've been without the inheritance. (Cf. Socrates' independence, his investment broker sending him regular checks.) Come the revolution, I'd've lost this freedom: should the 20% S.Africans whites lose it, as they certainly would in a flip to a black government? ((2)) In the 1950s & 1960s I was for (as I saw it then, & still see it in retrospect) necessary violence in the US to replace racially unequal laws with racially neutral laws vis-a-vis our 12% blacks (& lost my job for saying so in the N.Y.TIMES). Why, then, am I against violence, & for gradualism, now in S.Africa? One reason is that gradualism is working (despite efforts of Tutu & his cohorts to obscure the fact): how could any Christian be for violence when gradualism is working? Another reason is that whereas in the US equality before the law & in the franchise could be, & was, absorbed into our system (we having only 12% blacks), in S.Africa today the 80% blacks could not be absorbed into the system if given equal franchise (they already having equality before the law: codical equality, though jurisprudential equality is imperfect). What prevents imaginative proposals (such as weighted voiting) from even being entertained? What maintaining the standoff, the gridlock, the extremism on both sides? It's black outrage at the thought of being anything other than absolutely equal to whites, & the churches are feeding that unrealistic outrage. (WHO says the

black/white equation, now 5:1, will by the year 2020 be 17:1. The prospects are dim, given the inertia of custom & the power of taboo, that, even if a black government succeeds the white, the hand trying to stop the widening of the black-baby-faucet flow will be as strong at the hand of the present momentum: with the exception of those managing to make it into the middle class, S.African blacks are doomed to increasing poverty & misery (the land being unable to sustain the 17:1 even if the economy could). In that light, is it your view that whites, whose birth-rate is ecologically & economically sound, should sink (equality!) into that morass of poverty & misery? The US is increasingly what Otto Kerner said, "two societies, one white & one black": S.Africa even moreso, utopian preaching & egalitarian theorizing to the contrary notwithstanding. The Bible calls us to worship God with all our minds: are we doing that when we let God's so-called bias for "the poor" sentimentalize both common sense & critical thinking out of us? And is feeding the outrage of "the poor" (black S.Africans, so-called Palestinians, et al) automatically a faithful "identification with the poor" in the vein of the biblical prophets, including Jesus? (Antiapartheid theology can be just as intellectually shabby as was apartheid theology, & what I've seen of it is. Ditto for liberationist biblical scholarship.)

3. Our 19th-c. missionaries got accused of exporting & imposing their-our culture-&-government on "the natives." They were less guilty than secularists accuse them of being; but secularists & fellow-traveling clergy are guilty of trying to preach the American model of "democracy" abroad, & of trying to get the Federal government to use its foreign clout (sanctions et al) in that interest. The model, as you know, cannot be derived from Scripture alone; its Enlightenment component is mighty, as is the early American liberationist (from Britain) experience. The model was designed & (in the Declaration & the Constitution) drafted by a few rich white Englishmen, who considered themselves "created (as) equal" as white Englishmen on t'other side of the Atlantic, held their rights to be "unalienable" by Geo.III (who, in their opinion, was acting like God--but only God gave them their rights, which are inherent because creational), who didn't mind being governed by the mother country but not without "the consent of the governed," viz, themselves, who sought to enforce as legal what they considered moral, & who expansively, grandly, philosophically--in short, utopically, & in the spirit of the Kantian categorical imperative--willed their vision & action upon "mankind" to the extent they were in any way responsible for human beings. Here we have a world-class instance of the particular parading as the universal, the local claiming the moral high ground against the larger (viz, Britain), a situational ethic contexting itself in history & cosmos. A civil-religious nationalism, Sid Mead's "nation with the soul of a church." Their long vision was to be good news to humanity, their shorter goal was "to guarantee the blessings of liberty to ourselves & our posterity" (not, note, everybody's posterity: "the pursuit of happiness" in freedom of person & of property from governmental meddling was quite specific: me & mine, including mine offspring). This "democracy" model works best in a homogeneous society such as its originating context, viz, AngloSaxon; it's extendable if the AS core control is not lost (in US, Britain, S.Africa--the last, AS in governmental style though at present the Afrikaans are in the saddle, which irritates the AS component of the population, esp. the Anglican church--including Tutu!--contra the Dutch churches, so anti-apartheid sentiment is stronger among the AS)...During these two centuries of our Republic, the franchise has been progressively extended to the point where almost everybody (resident aliens excepted) can vote. In S.Africa, where the franchise is being gradually extended, the % of the population that can vote is about that in the US in 1825. Currently our secular missionaries & fellow-traveling clergy are hot for imposing instant universal suffrage on the much younger government of S.Africa. Ironical. A second missionary movement, this time with many religious leaders serving as hand-maidens to the civil religion. "The principalities & powers" in a sneaky ploy!....I continue to be amazed at how little biblical-critical thinking is done, in national church offices, on public issues domestic & foreign (& even on issues of personal morality). Like ants, suddenly they're all moving in the same direction--kneejerk, lock-step. Franz Kafka could have deadpan-scorned it masterfully; Soren Kierkegaard did. I know of no point where you counter the current "mainline" herd, but perhaps you do on some point or points.



(Walter, I've only gotten a good start but I'm determined not to go beyond 6pp., so forgive the chopiness of this last p.)

4. In one conversation, I said that while Jesus was prophet & sage stranded together (& younger interpreters of him accent the prophet, older ones the sage), you seem to me to overbalance on the side of the prophet (perhaps because in recent years you've been so "principalities-&-powers"-minded). #2231 will be on this ("JESUS as PROPHET & SAGE"), so I'll not touch upon it further here.

5. You partake of the grimness of change-oriented religion, which is of two types (you being of the second): (1) PERSONAL-change religion such as the televangelists preach. Inside the Beltway these days one can hear derisive laughter over the revival of the musical "Elmer Gantry"--the popularity of this old theater piece signaling a backlash against grim, sobersided, face-screwed-up-with-phony-pain (yes, & hypocritical) fundamentalist personal-change religion. (2) SOCIAL-change religion, also, tends to grimness, carrying on its shoulders "the oppressed," "the poor," "the wretched of the earth." To both forms of change-religion I put the question: what is the evidence that you are making a difference? In mindset, aren't you the flipside of each other? The two are the old individual & social gospels updated, but is either an improved version? I speak not as a cynic--for I preach both gospels in Jesus' name--but as a sage, a sage at least in stepping a philosophical pace away from both actions so that in a momentarily disengaged state of mind I may ask some possibly course-correcting questions. Like, how much longer will our American social-change religion articulate itself with marxian class-analysis? In a recent lecture (IMPRIMIS, Apr/88), Fr. philosopher & eminent newspaper-editor Jean-Francois Revel said, "It is very difficult now to find a Marxist in France when you need one for a public debate. Usually we have to import one from the United States." America is a dumpingground for flawed & failed European philosophies (Freudianism, Marxism, others). I don't really mind having the Europeans laughing at us. I do mind seeing the Christian gospel equally yoked together with Marxism in various special-interest theologies of "liberation" (itself a Marxist-praxis word, different from either "freedom" or "liberty"). Your writing & teaching is tinged with this yoking. Sometimes you seem to be of the more-radical-than-thou spirit (as when you said to me that "Father/Son" in the trinitarian formula "must go," must be dropped in the interest of feminism, even at the price of isolation from the rest of the Christian movement in the world).

6. I was offended by your saying that Jewish prayer, including the Lord's Prayer, commands God--& you even had us shout the LP, which is (you said) of the same imperative tone as Ps.44 ("Wake up, Lord!"). Two qualifications: (1) Jesus (a) combines prophet & sage, the latter being a cooler mood than Ps.44, & (b) has a developed Abba("Father")-theology, whereas Ps.44 is addressed to "my king & my God"; & (2) The dimensions of the imperative are from top down ("command"), from bottom up ("demand," "plea"), & alongside ("request"). In emphasizing the first to the virtual exclusion of the second & the third, you distort Scripture, giving it the excessive dynamism of your genes, hormones, & stance-in-church-&-world. Further, to say that prayer "commands" God is blasphemy, top down with God down, beneath us (& not in the Tillichian sense of "Ground of Being"! ). You are very Methodist-American-activist, which ain't bad but ain't all that biblical either.

7. Our Christian eschatology is of a satisfied (kingdom come) dissatisfaction (kingdom not fullcome). The Lord of the future (& the past) has come to us in our present & will come to us in our future. I like what you do with the "groaning" (3 times in Ro.8.22-26) of creation for the new creation. I asked the group to feel the physical constriction of groaning by saying the root -sten- three times (parallel with the Greek-&-Latin root -gem-, which the Vulgate uses in this passage). Our Greek root means constricted, narrow, as in "sten-ographer," literally, "narrow-writer." In Aristeas (118), of a narrow mountain-pass. A Ro. emperor avoids a too "narrow" interpretation of a decree of his (Caracalla, 11 July 212). Also: to be short of something, to be in a tight place, to experience difficulty. You are right to rail against oversatisfied Christians! And to help Christians feel, incl. moral indignation! (June & you work wonderfully together in helping folks sense, possess, own their bods.)  
....More anon!

Grace & peace,

*Willis*