A politics of peace and justice? Walter Wink's engagement with Matthew 5:38-42 as a glad tiding of salvation in an age of crisis.

Fifteenth Oxford Institute for Methodist Studies
Keble College, Oxford

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Abstract:
As we gather to explore the meaning of "glad tidings of salvation" in an "age of crisis," the (radical) teachings of Jesus in Matthew 5:38-42 offer insights for our collective pursuit of justice, peace, and the integrity of creation. This paper, offered in the New Testament group, engages with the work of Methodist New Testament scholar Walter Wink, who significantly influenced Southern African Methodism's efforts to dismantle apartheid and colonialism from the 1980s onward. Wink's exegetical treatment of Matthew 5:38-42 presents Jesus's teachings as a "third way" beyond violence and apathy, offering a framework for a "politics of peace and justice." This approach, however, is not without critique from New Testament scholars. Wink's interpretation of Jesus's call to "turn the other cheek", "go the extra mile", and give more than is demanded, underscores the potential of nonviolent resistance. It highlights that the oppressed have agency, and that it can be powerful in the deconstructing of the powers and violences of contemporary life. This paper explores the ethical and practical implications of embracing a "politics of peace and justice" as Walter Wink proposed. It does so within the Methodist tradition, attempting to provide a critical theological foundation for contemporary engagements with systemic violence and injustice, by drawing on a careful and critical reading of the Bible. By revisiting Matthew 5:38-42, we aim to illuminate the ways in which Methodist New Testament scholars can contribute towards our understandings of justice and reconciliation, heralding "glad tidings" in these challenging times.

Introduction

The Fifteenth Oxford Institute, themed "The World is My Parish: Glad Tidings of Salvation in an Age of Crisis,"[1] meets at a critical juncture in history. Today's global community is beleaguered by a host of interconnected crises, including economic inequality, systemic racism, environmental breakdown, climate destabilization, political corruption, misogyny, discrimination against various persons, and various forms of social violence. These crises not only challenge our collective well-being but also test the moral and ethical frameworks that guide our responses to such issues. Wesleyan and Methodist communities, with their rich theological heritage, are positioned to offer both theological insights and moral guidance.

The New Testament Working Group at this Institute invited papers that engage scriptural themes of God's salvation in the face of crisis from a Wesleyan-Methodist perspective.[2] This, as we shall see, is no easy task! Since, as New Testament scholars we can be quite sceptical of the ways in which contemporary ideological and theological convictions can miss-shape the content and intent of ancient texts. Does this mean that the Bible (or at least passages in the Bible), have nothing to contribute towards issues of contemporary moral concern? This paper aims to explore the complexity of reading the Bible in relation to contemporary ethical concerns by engaging the work of Walter Wink a Methodist New Testament scholar, with a particular emphasis upon his work with Southern African Methodists during the anti-apartheid struggle.[3] It aims to offer both pragmatic theological insights into nonviolence, as well as raising some questions about how New Testament scholars can engage on theological ethics.

Prolegomena

In an age marked by both overt and covert forms of violence, Christians seek moral direction from their reading and interpretation of the Christian scriptures to navigate complex social issues such as war and violence. The search for guidance is particularly relevant for Methodists, who, taking their lead John Wesley and other 18th century Anglican (and later Methodist) Christians tend to apply an approach to both doctrine and ethics,[4] which has become (somewhat contentiously) described as the 'Wesleyan Quadrilateral'—a framework that integrates Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience.[5]

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[1] 'The Fifteenth Oxford Institute', *The Oxford Institute* (blog), 2024, https://oxford-institute.org/2018-fourteenth-institute-old/.
[2] 'Working Groups — With Specific Calls for Papers', *The Oxford Institute* (blog), 2024, https://oxford-institute.org/2018-fourteenth-institute-old/groups/.
[3] Walter Wink, *Jesus' Third Way: The Relevance of Nonviolence in South Africa Today* (Cape Town: Methodist Publishing House, 1987).
[4] Stanley Hauerwas and D. Stephen Long, 'Methodist Theological Ethics', in *Working with Words: On Learning to Speak Christian* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 255–69.
[5] Ted A. Campbell, 'The "Wesleyan Quadrilateral": The Story of a Modern Methodist Myth', *Methodist History* 29, no. 2 (1991): 87–95; Daniel J Pratt Morris-Chapman, 'Is the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral" an Accurate Portrayal of Wesley's Theological Method?', *Theology and Ministry* 1, no. 5 (2018): 1–17; Albert Cook Outler, *Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville, TN: Tidings, 1975).

With regards to this framework, and the contemporary reality of war and violence, lies a crucial question: *When reading the Bible, what should we believe and do in response to both personal and systemic violence?*

Now, I need to manage expectations at this point. I am afraid that it would be impossible to answer this question definitively. In part, what I hope to show is that while we can gain some theological and moral orientation from a careful and critical reading of the Bible, we also need to apply critical theological scholarship to this task. In other words, we need to learn something about how Methodist and Wesleyan New Testament scholars might engage the Bible responsibly in relation to contemporary issues of moral and ethical concern.

Walter Wink provides us with some important insights into how Christians can respond to violence in a manner consistent with the teachings of Jesus. Moreover, as I will argue, he also helps us (Methodist New Testament scholars), to consider how we engage the complex task of responsible New Testament Scholarship in relation to issues of contemporary moral or ethical concern. Of course, he also illustrates that when we do this work well, we will open ourselves up to critique.

I will largely refer to Wink's engagement with the sociopolitical context of apartheid South Africa, particularly through his book "Jesus' Third Way,"[6] as an example of how a Methodist New Testament Scholar approached the Bible to develop what he advocated as a responsible approach Christian nonviolent resistance.

In this book, Walter Wink offers a novel and informative exegesis of Matthew 5:38-42.[7] His aim is to present, what he labels as the "radical teachings of Jesus," inviting us to transcend conventional paradigms of responding to injustice with either violence or capitulation. He argues that Jesus advocates a "third way" of "nonviolent militant action"[8] in his call to "turn the other cheek" (v.39), "go the extra mile" (v.41), and 'outgive' the legal demand (v.40), underscores the transformative potential of nonviolent resistance. Such an approach empowers the oppressed and contributes to a sustainable peace built on a foundation of justice, rather than a violent response that often perpetuates injustice.

Those of us at the Oxford Institute are extremely privileged. We are among the few Methodist and Wesleyan New Testament scholars who are privileged to spend this time working and discerning together. We bear some responsibility, through our scholarship and faith, to contribute towards shaping the witness and work of Methodists and Wesleyans throughout the world. A 'glo-cal'[9] Methodist witness should play a pivotal role in the pursuit of justice

[6] Wink, *Jesus' Third Way: The Relevance of Nonviolence in South Africa Today*; Walter 1935-2012 Wink, 'Neither Passivity nor Violence: Jesus' Third Way', *Seminar Papers / Society of Biblical Literature* 124, no. 27 (1988): 210; Walter Wink, 'Jesus' Third Way', *Catholic New Times* 29, no. 4 (6 March 2005): 12–13.
[7] Wink, *Jesus' Third Way: The Relevance of Nonviolence in South Africa Today*, 12–36.
[8] Ibid., viii.
[9] A perspective that is conscious of global entanglements, yet in tension with the need for contextual nuances in Christian belief and witness.

and reconciliation in contexts of war and violence. By revisiting Wink's interpretation of Matthew 5:38-42, this paper aims to illuminate some of the ethical and practical implications of embracing a "politics of peace and justice" as important aspects of our work and witness, heralding "glad tidings" in a time of crisis.[10]

I will argue that, for Methodist New Testament scholars to play a responsible role in shaping the ways in which the Bible is used in theological ethics, we will have to remind our siblings that the Bible is not a single, or entirely coherent, text. Rather, we will need to acknowledge the complexity of using the diverse collections of texts of the Bible that reflect different historical settings, cultural foundations, theological commitments, intentions, and are delivered to differing circumstances. Such an understanding, I will argue, does not weaken our use of the Bible in contemporary ethics, rather it approaches the Bible and the Christian faith in a manner that is honest and authentic – which is surely the only way to seek to discover God's will and intention, and enact it in our communities and individual lives? The ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the war in the Ukraine (and the role of faith in that conflict), and various African conflicts (particularly those that are protracted along religious fault lines), give stark examples of how Biblical interpretations can influence attitudes toward violence and peace. As the South African Methodist Bible scholar, Itumeleng Mosala reminds us, the Bible is a sight of struggle! Lest we forget, as Mosala points out, it was "trained" readers of the Bible (pastors and professors) who developed Apartheid theology (and earlier colonial theologies). They read the Bible to enact separation and exceptionalism, and they provided the moral and religious "software" that allowed the "hardware" of political and military power to work so ruthlessly in South Africa (and now also in the Ukraine, and Palestine).[11]

I contend that Wesleyan and Methodist approaches to the Bible and ethics (often associated with the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, a term coined by Albert Outler, to his own regret, to characterise John Wesley's theological approach),[12] provides a framework for Methodists to navigate complex moral issues by holding Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience in an unequal, but creative tension. By that I mean, for Methodists, as for many Protestant Christians, Scripture holds greater authority than other sources of theological sense-making. However, it cannot be separated from these other sources for both empirical and hermeneutic reasons. Empirically, the Bible was written by individuals and communities in historical contexts. Hermeneutically, it is read by individuals and communities in historical contexts.

Furthermore, Stanley Hauerwas emphasizes that for contemporary Methodists, there is no fundamental separation between belief (and the reading of sacred texts that inform our

[10] 'The Fifteenth Oxford Institute'.
[11] Itumeleng Jerry Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 1–2; Robert R. Vosloo, 'The Bible and the Justification of Apartheid in Reformed Circles in the 1940's in South Africa : Some Historical, Hermeneutical and Theological Remarks', *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 1, no. 2 (January 2015): 195–215, https://doi.org/10.17570/stj.2015.v1n2.a09; Mitri Raheb, 'Palestinians, Israel and the Bible - The Software the Fuels the Occupation', in *MEDIAting Theology*, ed. Jione Havea (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2021), 161–74..
[12] Outler, *Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit*; Campbell, 'The "Wesleyan Quadrilateral"'.

doctrines) and action (what is often called ethics).[13] As we have already stated the Bible is commonly used, and sometimes misused, by Christians in seeking to understand and resolve ethical issues in everyday life. It thus makes sense that there is both promise and peril in the 'use' of the Bible in Christian ethics. Regardless, most Christians and theologians would agree that the Bible is an important source for the development of beliefs (doctrines) and practice (ethics).

So, how might we approach the Bible in Christian Ethics? Richard Hays, another prominent Methodist New Testament scholar, suggested that there are at least four necessary tasks that we should undertake.[14] First, we should engage in a careful reading of the texts of the Bible (the *descriptive task*).[15] Before trying to harmonize the texts that make up the canon of scripture, let's acknowledge their individual contributions, differing messages, cultural and religious characteristics, genres, and intentions. This allows us to describe the different and unique ways in which moral issues are thought of, engaged, and solved in scripture. Second, we may ask whether there are any coherences, or overarching theological characteristics that bind the scriptures to one another (the *synthetic task*).[16] Careful consideration of intra-canonical tensions can be identified by considering some of the moral concerns and themes that appear to surface throughout the scriptures (for example, justice, mercy, peace etc.). This is an inductive approach (watching for the emergence of themes that arise from the texts), rather than a deductive approach (such as the imposition of moral commitments or images on the texts). Third, is the task of 'building a bridge' between our context and the texts of the Bible (the *hermeneutical task*).[17] This task requires both honesty and imagination – honesty in acknowledging that the Bible was not written for us or our contexts, and imagination to see what we can learn from how God deals with people and situations, and how people dealt with moral and ethical concerns (in both constructive and problematic ways). The fourth task asks how we will embody what we learn from the scriptures in our individual and social lives (the *pragmatic task*).[18] The value of our responsible engagement with scripture is shown in how they are embodied in our engagement with contemporary ethical questions and concerns.

This integrated approach raises critical questions about how Methodists should respond to contemporary ethical issues, such as violence and war. The challenge is to engage the Bible responsibly while taking seriously that as Christians (as Methodists), we read the texts of the Bible not only as historical or literary artifacts, but as theological texts that we approach with a particular orientation and expectation. Walter Wink's work with Southern African Methodists during the apartheid era offers valuable lessons for addressing violence and war from a Biblical perspective, while modelling a responsible way to use the Bible in contexts of ethical complexity.

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[13] Hauerwas and Long, 'Methodist Theological Ethics', 255.
[14] Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation, A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*, First Edition (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1996), 17–21.
[15] Ibid., 17–18.
[16] Ibid., 18–19.
[17] Ibid., 19–20.
[18] Ibid., 20–21.

I want to add one additional layer of importance to my argument. This paper honours the work of the late Dr. Alease Brown, an African American United Methodist who explored the intersections of faith and violence while working in South Africa. Sadly, she passed away in March 2020. Brown's dissertation, "The Violence of Jesus and the Justice of God,"[19] underscores the complexities of believing in the Prince of Peace amidst systemic and personal violence, while also taking the Bible and its complex presentations of resistance to violence seriously. She had begun to wrestle with the complex, and important, task of reading the Bible with scholarly integrity that is held in tension with a deep commitment to Christian faith that is grounded in peace and justice.

So, this paper aims to provide an approach to understanding and responding to violence, operating within the Wesleyan-Methodist tradition, and considering how we might use the Bible in engaging issues of contemporary ethical concern.

On Walter Wink and his approach to non-violence and the New Testament

Walter Wink (1935–2012) was an important figure within New Testament studies, theology, and peace activism.[20] He was celebrated for his ground-breaking insights into the social, political, and ethical dimensions of biblical texts. Yet, because of his prominence, he also faced some critique. Wink's scholarly approach, was deeply rooted in historical-critical analysis, yet transcended traditional boundaries by incorporating perspectives from the social sciences, literary criticism, and liberation theology.

Central to Wink's scholarly corpus is his pioneering examination of power dynamics within the New Testament, particularly evident in the synoptic Gospels. Across his trilogy, "The Powers That Be,"[21] "Naming the Powers,"[22] and "Engaging the Powers,"[23] Wink delves into the multifaceted nature of power, contending that the "principalities and powers" depicted by Paul and the Gospels represent tangible manifestations of domination, oppression, and systemic injustice in historical settings, and that these can also be identified in many contemporary instances of violence and conflict. His interdisciplinary approach, drawing from political theory and social psychology, offers important insights into social control,

[19] Alease A. Brown, 'The Violence of Jesus and the Justice of God: The Life, Death, Resurrection, and Parousia of Jesus as Exemplary of Non-Lethal Violent Resistance, and the Implications for Acts of Protest by the Subaltern' (Thesis, Stellenbosch : Stellenbosch University, 2019), https://scholar.sun.ac.za:443/handle/10019.1/106095.
[20] 'A Tribute to Walter Wink (1935-2012): New Testament Theologian of Nonviolence and Power', *Pilgrim Pathways: Notes for a Diaspora People* (blog), 25 May 2012, https://pilgrimpathways.wordpress.com/2012/05/25/a-tribute-to-walter-wink-1935-2012-new-testament-theologian-of-nonviolence-and-power/.
[21] Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (Potter/Ten Speed/Harmony/Rodale, 2010).
[22] Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984).
[23] Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992).

resistance, and liberation, challenging readers to discern power structures and envision alternative modes of engagement, rooted in Jesus's ethics.

Wink's grounding in the Wesleyan and Methodist theological tradition profoundly influenced his approach to biblical interpretation and social activism. As a committed Methodist and ordained minister within the United Methodist Church, Wink drew inspiration from Wesleyan tenets of holiness, social justice, and personal transformation. His engagement with Methodist theology, notably the concepts of prevenient grace and social holiness, informed his understanding of Christian communities and their roles in addressing systemic evil, while embodying transformative love. Moreover, his work resonated with Methodism's historic commitment to social reform, abolitionism, and peacebuilding, aligning with the denomination's advocacy for justice and reconciliation across diverse contexts.[24]

Beyond his scholarly endeavours, Walter Wink emerged as a fervent advocate for nonviolent resistance and peace-making, viewing Christian action for peace as both a moral imperative and a practical necessity in a world marred by violence and oppression. His concept of "active nonviolence", "militant nonviolence" as articulated in "Jesus' Third Way,"[25] presents a compelling framework for engaging with conflicts and power struggles, by drawing upon Jesus's transformative ethic as a model for societal change. Through his emphasis on active engagement, creative resistance, and spiritual discernment, Wink inspired individuals and communities to confront injustice, foster reconciliation, and advance God's kingdom of shalom.

I was one of the individuals influenced by his work. Walter Wink came to South Africa just during the second state of emergency in South Africa (1985-1986) where he worked with Methodist laity and clergy to train us in "militant nonviolence". It was transformative, and very effective. In 1988 (after the second state of emergency in South Africa), the Methodist Church of Southern Africa committed itself to bearing the name of the Prince of Peace in our worship and witness, and in doing so to order our private and public lives in peace. Simply stated, a peace church, "is one which declares, as a basic tennet [sic] of its teaching, its objection to war, participation in war, financial support for war and training for war."[26] And, as you may know, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA), was recognised as one of the major communities that shaped the deconstruction of Apartheid, contributing towards the establishment of the democratic South Africa. Regarding the role and importance of the

[24] John Dart, 'Wink Challenged "Powers" and Taught Nonviolence', Canadian Mennonite Magazine | Christian Century, 19 June 2012, https://canadianmennonite.org/articles/wink-challenged-%E2%80%98powers%E2%80%99-and-taught-nonviolence; Dion A. Forster, 'Revival, Revolution and Reform in Global Methodism: An Understanding of Christian Perfection as African Christian Humanism in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa', *Black Theology an International Journal* 16, no. 1 (3 December 2018): 1–18, https://doi.org/10.1080/14769948.2018.1554328.
[25] Wink, *Jesus' Third Way: The Relevance of Nonviolence in South Africa Today*.
[26] George Irvine, 'Should the Methodist Church Become a Peace Church?' (St. John's Methodist Church, Port Elizabeth, 12 April 1988), 2, https://www.smms.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Pastoral-letter-Should-the-Methodist-Church-become-a-peace-church.pdf.

church in general, and the MCSA in particular, in the struggle against apartheid, Nelson Mandela (who is a prominent Southern African Methodist)[27] noted:

> The sense of social responsibility that the religious community has always upheld found expression in your immense contribution to the efforts to rid our country of the scourge of racism and apartheid. When pronouncements and actions against the powers-that-be meant persecution and even death, you dared to stand up to the tyrants… The Methodist Church was the only Church to be declared an illegal organisation under apartheid… The Church, like all other institutions of civil society, must help all South Africans to rise to the challenge of freedom. As South Africa moves from resistance to reconstruction and from confrontation to reconciliation, the energy that was once dedicated to breaking apartheid must be harnessed to the task of building the nation.[28]

The militant nonviolence of the MCSA not only contributed towards the deconstruction of the violence of Apartheid, it also laid a foundation for a peaceable future built on the principles of reconstruction and reconciliation. My Bishop at the time was the Rev Peter Storey,[29] was one of the architects of the Peace Church movement in South Africa, a committed anti-Apartheid activist who was bold in his witness for peace,[30] the founder of the "End [Military] Conscription" campaign.[31] He offered the following advice for ministry, saying that there are four primary tasks that we should be engaged in, to work for justice and peace as Christian ministers in apartheid South Africa:

> The first was to be a truth-teller, to proclaim the truth without fear and expose the lies of apartheid; the second was to bind up the broken, siding with the victims of injustice wherever [you] found them; the third was to try and 'live the alternative', seeking to be a visible contradiction of the apartheid state's cruel segregation practices and offering a picture of God's alternative; the fourth was to work in non-violent, Christ-like ways to bring a new dispensation of justice, equity and peace.[32]

As noted, Walter Wink was one of the persons who helped to shape the MCSA's work and witness as a Peace Church in the midst of violence and oppression.

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[27] For a detailed discussion of Mandela's relationship to the MCSA throughout his lifetime please see Dion A Forster, 'Mandela and the Methodists: Faith, Fallacy and Fact', *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 40, no. Church History Society of Southern Africa 40th Anniversary supplement (August 2014): 87–115.
[28] Nelson Mandela, 'Address by President Nelson Mandela to the Annual Conference of the Methodist Church', Speech, 18 September 1994, http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=3685.
[29] Dion A Forster, 'Engaging "Die Gif in Vergifnis" [the Poison in Forgiveness]? Considering Peter Storey's Four Ecclesiological Tasks for the Coming Generations', in *Faith, Race and Inequality among Young Adults in South Africa*, ed. Nadine F Bowers Du Toit, Beyers Naudé Centre Series on Public Theology (Stellenbosch: African Sun Media, 2022), 41–61.
[30] Peter Storey, *I Beg to Differ: Ministry Amid the Teargas* (Tafelberg, 2018).
[31] Weekly Mail, '"We Will Not Serve"', *The Mail & Guardian*, 21 September 1989, https://mg.co.za/article/1989-09-22-00-we-will-not-serve/.
[32] Storey, *I Beg to Differ*, 131.

The Legacy of Wink and Southern African Methodism

Walter Wink spent "40 days in South Africa in March and April, 1986", where he "led four workshops on Jesus' teaching on nonviolence."[33] This was a crucial time in South Africa. There was a great debate among religious and political leaders about the most effective means to end the violence of the apartheid state. Some were advocating for a violent revolution, and the Christian support of the 'armed struggle' for liberation.

There was already a Methodist tradition of non-violence. Albert Luthuli, a notable South African Methodist pacifist, staunchly advocated for nonviolent resistance as a means of combating apartheid and colonial oppression.[34] His ideas were shared by Robert Sobukwe, a Methodist Lay Preacher and the founder of the Pan Africanist Congress, who asserted that apartheid represented "legalized barbarism", and that Christians had a the moral imperative to confront this injustice through peaceful protest and civil disobedience.[35]

Peter Storey, however, epitomized nonviolent resistance through his courageous stance against racial segregation and discrimination in South Africa from the mid 1960s onwards.[36] Grounded in Christian principles, Storey mobilized Methodist congregations to actively oppose apartheid policies and champion efforts for social justice and human rights. He said in a sermon in 1985:

> In war violence is glamourised, people are dehumanised, truth becomes propaganda, morality is destroyed and reconciliation is impossible … war is always the ultimate despair … To those who believe that military might can repress the aspirations of a subject people, I say: "in the long-term your hope is vain and your war unwinnable." To those who believe only war will bring the change they want, I say: "the instrument you are using will bring more suffering on this land than it has ever known and you will inherit ashes."[37]

Although not a Methodist himself, Desmond Tutu's commitment to justice and reconciliation aligns closely with the principles of nonviolent activism embraced by many within the Methodist tradition. Tutu's leadership in the anti-apartheid movement and his role in the

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[33] Wink, *Jesus' Third Way: The Relevance of Nonviolence in South Africa Today*, 3.
[34] Stephen Zunes, 'The Role of Non-Violent Action in the Downfall of Apartheid', *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 37, no. 1 (1999): 137–69; Vinay Lal, 'Mandela, Luthuli, and Nonviolence in the South African Freedom Struggle', *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies* 38, no. 1 (2014), https://escholarship.org/content/qt5r64v5qg/qt5r64v5qg.pdf; Ezekiel Mphahlele, 'Albert Luthuli: The End of Nonviolence', *Africa Today* 14 (2023): 1–3.
[35] Elias L. Ntloedibe, *Here Is a Tree: Political Biography of Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe* (Century-Turn Publishers, 1995); Benjamin Pogrund, *How Can Man Die Better?: The Life of Robert Sobukwe* (J. Ball Publishers, 1997).
[36] Forster, 'Engaging "Die Gif in Vergifnis" [the Poison in Forgiveness]? Considering Peter Storey's Four Ecclesiological Tasks for the Coming Generations'; Peter Storey, 'Banning the Flag from Our Churches: Learning from the Church-State Struggle in South Africa', in *Between Capital and Cathedral: Essays on Church and State Relationships*, ed. Dion A Forster and Wessel Bentley (Pretoria: UNISA Research Institute for Theology and Religion, 2012), 1–20; Storey, *I Beg to Differ*.
[37] Storey, *I Beg to Differ*, sec. 4655 of 7927.

Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) exemplify the enduring legacy of nonviolent activism among the Ecumenical Churches in Southern Africa.[38] Together they advocated for approaches to dealing with violence "that could withstand the harsh scrutiny of history."[39]

This cultivated a tradition of nonviolent activism, what Wink later called "militant nonviolence" within Southern African Methodism,[40] inspiring generations to confront oppression and injustice with courage and compassion. Their unwavering commitment to nonviolent resistance serves as an example for us today as we pursue a more just and humane world that is built on peace rather than violence and war.

The theological and ethical significance of active nonviolence is rooted in the principles of love, compassion, and solidarity. Active nonviolence challenges the prevailing logic of violence and domination, offering a proactive alternative, which is grounded in Christian faith that love and peace win in the end. Such an approach empowers individuals and communities to confront injustice with creativity and resilience, disrupting cycles of violence and oppression. By reclaiming agency and dignity in the face of adversity, active nonviolence fosters reconciliation that is built on justice, it lays the foundation for healing, and works towards lasting social transformation. Moreover, active nonviolence challenges conventional notions of power and resistance, advocating for strength through vulnerability and solidarity. It offers a vision of community based on equality, mutual respect, and shared humanity, inspiring hope and resilience in the pursuit of justice and peace.

In essence, the theological and ethical significance of active nonviolence lies in its capacity to envision alternative futures grounded in love, justice, and human flourishing. As a beacon of hope in the struggle against oppression and injustice, it calls upon individuals and communities to embody the radical love of Christ and work towards a world where violence is replaced by reconciliation, oppression is replaced by liberation, and fear is replaced by hope.

For Walter Wink, this radical alternative to violent resistance can be found in the ministry and life of Jesus.

An examination of Wink's Interpretation of Matthew 5:38-42

Walter Wink's "third way" argues that Jesus offers an alternative to the binaries of a violent response to violence, or passive acceptance of violence. He based his understanding of the "third way" on his interpretation of Matthew 5:38-42.

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[38] John Allen, *Rabble-Rouser For Peace: The Authorised Biography of Desmond Tutu* (New York, NY: Random House, 2012); Ken Butigan, 'Desmond Tutu's Lifelong Campaign of Nonviolence', *Campaign Nonviolence* (blog), 28 December 2021, https://wagingnonviolence.org/cnv/2021/12/desmond-tutu-lifelong-campaign-nonviolence/; Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York, NY: Random House, 2012); Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu, *Made For Goodness: And Why This Makes All the Difference* (Random House, 2010).
[39] Butigan, 'Desmond Tutu's Lifelong Campaign of Nonviolence'.
[40] Wink, *Jesus' Third Way: The Relevance of Nonviolence in South Africa Today*, viii.

Wink contends that this passage offers a distinctive lens through which to understand Jesus's teachings on peace that is coupled to justice as a "third way" of active resistance against violence. Wink undertakes his task by grounding his analysis in a socio-historical and social-political engagement with the biblical text. Central to Wink's perspective is the assertion that contemporary readers of the New Testament have been led astray by the mistranslation of ἀντιστῆναι in Matt 5:39 by the first English translators of the Bible.

> When the court translators working in the hire of King James chose to translate *antisēnai* as "Resist not evil," they were doing something more than rendering Greek into English. They were translating nonviolent resistance into docility.[41]

He goes on to argue, like Richard Burridge does in his book "Imitating Jesus," that the words of Jesus are best understood in relation to the person and work of Jesus.[42] He contends that Jesus's "entire ministry is utterly at odds" with the "preposterous idea" that "oppressed hearers [should] not resist evil."[43] Hence, Jesus's directives to "turn the other cheek" etc., do not signify passive compliance but strategic acts of nonviolent protest challenging structures of domination and coercion that the Matthean hearers would have faced in their daily lives under Roman rule. He writes, "most Christians desire nonviolence… but they are not talking about the nonviolent struggle for justice. They mean simply the absence of conflict."[44]

Wink contends that what Jesus illustrates in this passage is something different. It is not only the absence of conflict, it is a nonviolent action to resist injustice and work towards true peace. The translators of what becomes known as the King James version of the Bible are themselves captured by the idea that resistance against unjust power should be avoided, and certainly not attributed to Jesus. And so they 'soften' their translation to fit that ideological conviction of the powerful King. Of course there are many other examples of this, among the more prominent are the 'Slave Bible' in which whole passages are removed (such as Gal 3:28, which was removed, while Eph 6:5 was kept).

Wink thus proposes to offer a more accurate translation of *antisēnai.* He explains that this compound word is comprised of the words *anti* meaning "against", and *histēmi*, "a verb which in its noun form (*stasis*) means violent rebellion, armed revolt, sharp dissention." Thus he argues that a proper translation of Jesus's teaching,

> … would then be "Do not strike back evil (or, one who has done evil) in kind. Do not give blow for blow. Do not retaliate against violence with violence." Jesus was no less

[41] Ibid., 13.
[42] Richard A Burridge, *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2007), 3.
[43] Wink, *Jesus' Third Way: The Relevance of Nonviolence in South Africa Today*, 13.
[44] Ibid., 6.

> committed to opposing evil than the anti-Roman resistance fighters. The only difference was over the means to be use: *how* one should fight evil.[45]

Wink suggests that there are generally three options to addressing violence or evil – passivity, violent opposition, or a "third way of militant nonviolence articulated by Jesus [in Matt 5:38-42]."[46]

From a socio-historical standpoint, Wink contextualizes Jesus's teachings within the first-century Palestinian landscape which was characterized by Roman occupation, militarization, and hierarchical power structures. Here, Jesus's actions—such as offering one's cloak along with one's tunic (v.40) or voluntarily exceeding a Roman soldier's mandated distance (v.41)—emerge as subversive forms of nonviolent resistance, unsettling the mechanisms of oppression, while explicating and unveiling inherent societal violence. By choosing humiliation over retaliation, Jesus exemplifies a radical alternative to cycles of retribution, advocating for transformative, nonviolent engagement.

Moreover, Wink's social-political reading of Matthew 5:38-42 aims to underscore the ethical and political dimensions of Jesus's teachings. In doing so, he asserts their relevance for contemporary struggles against systemic violence and injustice. Drawing from liberation theology, critical theory, and nonviolent activism, Wink extrapolates political insights from Jesus's nonviolent ethic, framing it as a potent force capable of challenging domination structures and fostering reconciliation.[47] By reframing nonviolent resistance as "active nonviolence," or "militant nonviolence," Wink prompts contemporary readers to reimagine the functioning (and possible functioning) of contemporary power dynamics, and so to consider our ethical responsibilities through Jesus's call to embody God's kingdom values. As you can no doubt see, this is a kind of political theology that questions the authority, longevity, and wisdom of 'contemporary' powers, and seeks to relativise them in relation to God's eternal authority and power.

While Walter Wink's work is much broader than the "Third Way," (see for example his well know "powers" trilogy),[48] his engagement with this passage offers both helpful content for Christians who are reading the Bible in search of answers for how to respond to violence and war. Moreover, it invites New Testament Scholars to approach the Bible, and their task as scholars, with a particular orientation.

In essence, Walter Wink's interpretation of Matthew 5:38-42 offers a nuanced understanding of Jesus' peace teachings as a transformative, active resistance against violence. By synthesizing socio-historical analysis with socio-political engagement, Wink illuminates the

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[45] Ibid., 13.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Dart, 'Wink Challenged "Powers" and Taught Nonviolence'; Wink, 'Neither Passivity nor Violence'; 'A Tribute to Walter Wink (1935-2012)'.
[48] Wink, *Jesus' Third Way: The Relevance of Nonviolence in South Africa Today*; Wink, *Naming the Powers*; Wink, *Engaging the Powers*; Wink, *The Powers That Be*.

potential of nonviolent resistance in addressing systemic injustice and cultivating a more just and peaceful society. Moreover, by choosing one particular pericope, and focussing specifically on the teaching and example of Jesus, he is able to contribute something that is theologically and morally meaningful to the discussion on nonviolence and resisting violence, without being immediately stuck in the complexities of the various ways in which the Bible presents violence and characterises responses to violence. Naturally, such a choice must also be interrogated, lest we fall into the trap of 'proof texting'.

Identifying the "Third Way" Proposed by Wink as a Paradigm for Peaceable Resistance

At the core of Walter Wink's scholarship (as a New Testament scholar) lies the assertion that Jesus proposes a paradigm of peaceable resistance to violence—as we have outlined above. Before the publication of "Jesus' Third Way: The relevance of nonviolence in South Africa today," in 1987, which as we saw emerged from a 40 day teaching visit to South African in 1986, he had already published first of his 'powers' trilogy, "Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament" (1984). This already indicates the direction that his thoughts were taking. Much like Mosala, Wink was conscious that the Bible not only *tells* of struggle, it also *is* a site of power struggles (both among the texts of the Bible, within the texts that are in the Bible, and of course among translators, preachers, readers, and hearers of the Bible). Wink is worried that a misrecognition of the radical nature of Jesus may lead some Christians to become "cowardly and complicit in the face of injustice" (passivity),[49] or they might dismiss Christianity (and the teachings of Jesus) as naïve and irrelevant "turning to Marxism" and (other forms of violent revolution) instead.[50] At the core of Wink's project is a deep conviction that the person and ways of Jesus offer a radical opportunity for peace that is coupled with justice, and does so because Jesus's example will "not let evil dictate the terms of your opposition."[51]

In Matthew 5:38-42, Jesus delivers teachings known as the "antitheses," challenging conventional norms associated with justice and retaliation. Wink interprets these teachings as advocating for nonviolent resistance, wherein individuals and even communities respond to violence with creative, transformative actions disrupting oppression cycles and fostering reconciliation. For instance, Jesus's directives to "turn the other cheek," "go the extra mile," and give so generously that you embarrass the abuser, explicate and subvert the social dynamics of domination and coercion. In his later work, "The Powers That Be,"[52] Wink explores "domination systems," hierarchical power structures characterized by violence in much greater detail and nuance. These systems are geo-political, they are national, but they are also racist, sexist, classist and xenophobic. Jesus's nonviolent resistance, Wink posits, exposes these injustices and offers a radical, love-based alternative that is not only more powerful, but also more sustainable to bring about true and lasting peace.

[49] Wink, *Jesus' Third Way: The Relevance of Nonviolence in South Africa Today*, 12.
[50] Ibid., 10.
[51] Ibid., 15.
[52] Wink, *The Powers That Be*.

Furthermore, Wink's notion of "active nonviolence", or "militant nonviolence", underscores the proactive and strategic nature of Jesus's peaceable resistance. In "Jesus' Nonviolent Way,"[53] Wink contends that Jesus's actions—temple cleansing and confrontations with authorities—epitomize courageous, confrontational injustice stances. By reframing nonviolence as "spiritual warfare," Wink urges readers to reclaim Jesus's transformative message and engage in active peace efforts addressing the roots of violence, and not only its expression or symptoms. At the heart of Wink's conviction is that the "new reality that Jesus proclaimed was nonviolent", and that this was clear from Jesus's "entire life and teaching, and above all, the way he faced his death." Jesus saw "nonviolence as a direct corollary of the nature of God and of a new reality emerging in the world from God."[54]

In summary, Walter Wink's assertion of Jesus's peaceable resistance paradigm—termed the "third way"—derives from biblical texts, socio-political analysis, and ethical reflection. Through his work, Wink prompts us re-evaluate power and violence traditions, inviting us to embrace of Jesus's radical vison of peace and justice.

His work was not without critique. So, let's turn to some of that next. What we are aiming toward (eventually) is to show A) that the Bible does offer some resources for Methodist and Wesleyan Christians to reflect carefully and critical on violence and war (and of course other contemporary issues of ethical concern), and B) that Wesleyan and Methodist New Testament scholars can retain the integrity of our disciplinary rigour, in studying ancient texts in relation to their languages, contexts, and intentions, while still drawing both theological and moral guidance from them in relation to contemporary concerns.

Walter Wink's Nonviolent Resistance: Critiques and Redeeming Features

Walter Wink's interpretation of Jesus' teachings on nonviolence has shaped many Christian understandings of nonviolent resistance over the years, not least of all (as I have suggested earlier, a generation of Southern African Methodists). However, his "third way" has also faced some important criticism from scholars who question the historical and exegetical foundations of Wink's arguments. This section examines a few key critiques of Wink's position, evaluates the concerns about his use and interpretation of the New Testament, and identifies redeeming features of his approach, particularly in relation to how Wesleyan and Methodist New Testament scholars might approach their study of the Bible in relation to issues of contemporary ethical concern.[55]

Some Critiques of Wink's Position on Nonviolence

[53] Walter Wink, 'Beyond Just War and Pacifism: Jesus' Nonviolent Way', *Review & Expositor* 89, no. 2 (May 1992): 197–214, https://doi.org/10.1177/003463739208900204.
[54] Ibid., 197.
[55] I will not return to this here, but in a later draft of this paper, I might like to do more with Richard Hays's work, which I discussed earlier

The first set of concerns relate to Wink's treatment of the historical context surrounding the Matthean community and the life and work of Jesus. Kevin Carnahan is one of the prominent critics of Wink's reading of the Sermon on the Mount. He argues that Wink's exegesis would not pass muster in a historical-critical Bible class, suggesting that it prioritizes ethical outcomes over sound historical analysis.[56] He states, "Wink's reading of the Sermon on the Mount is the kind of exegesis that would get failed in a historical-critical Bible class. It has succeeded because it is good ethics, so no one wants to point out too loudly that it's bad exegesis."[57] Carnahan contends that Wink's interpretations rely heavily on imaginative scenarios unsupported by the broader textual and historical context. For instance, Wink's interpretation of "turn the other cheek" as a strategy to demand equality from an oppressor lacks substantial historical evidence to support such a nuanced cultural understanding of the gesture.

Wink's interpretation assumes a level of historical detail that many New Testament scholars find too speculative to hold with certainty. As mentioned above, he interprets "turn the other cheek" in a way that suggests a highly specific cultural practice of backhanded slaps to denote inferiority. Wink argues that offering the other cheek forces the aggressor to use an open hand, thus acknowledging the other as an equal. However, Carnahan notes, "The cultural contexts posited are not explicitly in view in the text, and don't show up anywhere else in the Gospels".[58] This lack of direct evidence in the primary texts raises questions about the reliability of Wink's historical reconstructions. Yet, Carnahan is sympathetic to Wink's work in general, noting that, his work "has succeeded because it is good ethics."[59]

Joseph Scrivner also critiques Wink's approach, particularly questioning the plausibility of his historical reconstructions. Scrivner acknowledges Wink's intention to challenge the use of Jesus's words to justify passivity in the face of injustice but finds Wink's scenarios unconvincing. He notes, "The abusive slaveowner, spouse, overseer, or whoever will rarely be affected by the nonviolent response of the one under their power".[60] Scrivner argues that Wink's examples, such as the shaming of a Roman soldier by carrying his pack an extra mile, are overly optimistic and not reflective of actual power dynamics in oppressive contexts.

Wink's interpretation of the cultural context involves an assumption that specific actions would necessarily lead to certain reactions from the oppressors. For example, Wink suggests that carrying a Roman soldier's pack an extra mile would embarrass the soldier and highlight the absurdity of the law. However, as Scrivner points out, this assumes a level of empathy and moral reasoning on the part of the oppressor that may not have been present. Scrivner elaborates, "If a peasant offered to walk the extra mile, why wouldn't the Roman soldier just

[56] Carnahan, 'Jesus Did Not Teach Nonviolent Resistance in the Sermon on the Mount', *Political Theology Network*, 14 October 2021, https://politicaltheology.com/jesus-did-not-teach-nonviolent-resistance-in-the-sermon-on-the-mount/.
[57] Ibid., 2.
[58] Ibid., 2–3.
[59] Ibid., 2.
[60] Joseph Scrivner, 'Walter Wink's Blind Spot: Passivity as Resistance', Political Theology Network, 4 November 2021, 1, https://politicaltheology.com/on-walter-winks-jesus-and-nonviolence-a-third-way/.

say: 'he volunteered' and avoid any punishment?"[61] This highlights the speculative nature of Wink's scenarios and the potential disconnect between his interpretations and the lived realities of oppressed individuals. Carnahan and Scrivner both highlight issues with Wink's exegesis. Carnahan criticizes Wink for reading contemporary ethical concerns back into the text, asserting that Wink's interpretations often require accepting highly speculative cultural contexts. Yet surely neither Carnahan nor Scrivner offer alternative readings of these texts.

Wink's approach to the Greek term *antistēnai* in Matthew 5:39 is another point of contention. Wink translates this term as "resist violently," suggesting that Jesus was advocating for nonviolent resistance rather than complete non-resistance. However, as Carnahan notes, "Wink shows no cases in which it is used to distinguish such from non-violent resistance [within this pericope, or the rest of the Gospels]".[62] This interpretation relies heavily on Wink's assertion rather than on solid linguistic evidence.

Sandra Sullivan-Dunbar offers a pedagogical perspective, noting that while Wink's interpretations are engaging and accessible, they often depart in significant instances from traditional scholarly consensus. As a result, she has taken to using Wink's work to help students understand the complexities of Biblical interpretation, while acknowledging its limitations. Sullivan-Dunbar explains, "Wink's interpretation proves very helpful for this [pedagogy] —it may be even more accessible for undergraduates because his exegesis is not as careful as we might like."[63] This suggests that while Wink's interpretations can be pedagogically useful, they should be critically evaluated from a disciplinary (New Testament) perspective.

Wink's approach often involves reinterpreting well-established understandings of Biblical texts. For instance, traditional interpretations of Matthew 5:38-42 have emphasized Jesus' call to refrain from all forms of retaliation against violence or oppression, and so encourage the oppressed to endure suffering with patience and humility. In contrast, Wink reinterprets teachings (such as his reading of Matthew 5) as calls to active, nonviolent resistance. This radical departure from traditional readings can be problematic, as it requires readers to accept Wink's redefinitions of key terms, challenging the long-held positions of particular reading communities. Sullivan-Dunbar highlights this by stating, "Many students like Wink's Nonviolently Resistant Jesus and prefer this Jesus to the Jesus they learned about via religious education or the broader culture, but some usually object."[64] Of course, Wink's approach aims to create conversation, to raise questions, and to challenge some interpretations of texts that he perceives as being wrong or inadequate to form Christian belief and practice in the face of violence and injustice.

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[61] Ibid., 2.
[62] Carnahan, 'Jesus Did Not Teach Nonviolent Resistance in the Sermon on the Mount', 4.
[63] Sarah Sullivan-Dunbar, 'On Teaching Walter Wink in an Introduction to Christian Ethics Course', Political Theology Network, 21 October 2021, 1, https://politicaltheology.com/on-teaching-walter-wink-in-an-introduction-to-christian-ethics-course/.
[64] Ibid., 3.

We can ask what the alternative is, should we give ourselves over to a kind of theology that looks to cleanse the temple of the non-violence? Or are there points in-between?

Are there redeeming features to Wink's Approach

In the same series of articles in *Political Theology*, from which the critiques above come, Scott Paeth writes that Walter Wink's interpretation of Matthew 5:38-42 offers a thought-provoking and innovative perspective that, despite its critiques, presents a plausible and defensible argument. He contends that Wink's approach is not merely an attempt to provide a historical-critical analysis of this passage in the Sermon on the Mount, but rather an attempt at reappropriation of Biblical texts to address contemporary ethical concerns.[65] Such a constructive Biblical theology aims to draw from Scripture what is essential for Christians to respond to current issues with moral integrity and relevance. Paeth defends Wink's approach by arguing that it is an excellent example of how Biblical texts can be reinterpreted to meet contemporary ethical challenges. He states, "Wink's approach throughout the Powers trilogy is fundamentally a reappropriation of the Biblical texts in light of contemporary concerns. Far from being a 'really bad' reading of scripture, it is an excellent example of constructive Biblical theology."[66] This perspective recognizes that while Wink's historical and textual reconstructions may be speculative, they serve a defensible purpose, namely that of engaging believers in active nonviolent resistance against oppression.

Paeth also addresses Wink's interpretation of the Greek term *antistēnai* as not to "resist violently", saying that it must be understood within the context of violent resistance to Roman occupation. Paeth contends that Wink's primary concern is the text's moral implications in the present context rather than strict historical fidelity. He writes, "Wink's primary concern is what the text is saying in the present context, not with fidelity to its historical setting."[67] This approach allows for a reimagining of Jesus' teachings as advocating for active, creative nonviolent engagement. Herein lies the rub! Was Wink being a 'bad' New Testament Scholar by undertaking his task in the manner that he did?

I would argue that he is holding a tension that all of us who hold faith, and study the New Testament, hold in our scholarly work. Sometimes we explicate our convictions and try to account for them. Sometimes, we may be unaware of them, or not explicitly show them, and they are identified and addressed by others. But they are always there, always present in our readings of texts. This is, as Hans Georg Gadamer put it a form of "legitimate prejudice" (*legitime Vorurteile*), an explicable, engageable, critique-able, and defensible hermeneutic perspective on reality.[68]

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[65] Scott R. Paeth, 'Walter Wink, the Powers, and the Sermon on the Mount', Political Theology Network, 28 October 2021, 1, https://politicaltheology.com/walter-wink-the-powers-and-the-sermon-on-the-mount/.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Ibid., 3.
[68] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Hermeneutik I. Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge Einer Philosophischen Hermeneutik* (Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 275, 281. For a fuller discussion of this concept, in relation to Wesley and Gadamer, please see the excellent article by Arrie Zwiep, A. W. Zwiep, 'The Wesleyan Quadrilateral

What is clear is that Wink's primary contribution is his strong advocacy for nonviolent resistance as a viable and morally compelling response to oppression that comes from the teaching and example of Jesus and is recorded in the Sermon on the Mount. His interpretation of Jesus' teachings in Matthew 5:38-42 emphasizes active, creative responses to injustice that maintain the dignity of the oppressed. Wink's assertion, "Is there no escape from the myth of redemptive violence? Yes, there is, but it is difficult." He challenges Christians to seek alternatives to violence and to recognize their own capacity for moral and ethical agency.[69]

Wink's interpretation looks to present Jesus, and the Jews of Jesus's time who faced Roman oppression, with the choice of defiance rather than submission. This reframes the narrative of Christian nonviolence. Wink's approach highlights the potential for oppressed individuals to assert their humanity and challenge the dehumanizing practices of their oppressors. While Wink's historical reconstructions may be debated, the ethical message remains powerful and relevant.

Carnahan concedes that Wink's work remains relevant for its ethical implications, particularly in contexts where traditional interpretations of scripture have been used to justify passivity or submission to oppression.[70] Scrivner also acknowledges this aspect, noting that Wink's goal is to prevent the misuse of Jesus's teachings to endorse tolerance of abuse. He states that Wink "wants to remove the option of reading Jesus's words as endorsing toleration of abuse."[71] This ethical stance is crucial in reinterpreting Biblical texts in ways that empower the oppressed rather than perpetuate their subjugation.[72]

Wink's interpretation encourages readers to see Jesus as an advocate for justice and human dignity. This perspective can be particularly empowering for marginalized communities seeking to resist oppression nonviolently. By framing nonviolent resistance as a proactive and powerful response, Wink's approach offers a hopeful and constructive vision for social change.

Wink's approach and the issues at hand

Wink's scenarios, while critiqued for their historical accuracy, provide a framework for thinking about how nonviolent resistance can be applied in relation to some contemporary contexts. His interpretations encourage readers to consider how the principles underlying Jesus' teachings might be relevant today, even if the specific historical contexts differ. Moreover, we may even help our readers (students, members of our Churches etc.) to

Reconsidered: Wesley Meets Gadamer.', in *Evangelical Theology in Transition* (VU Univeristy Press, 2012), 223–46, https://research.vu.nl/en/publications/the-wesleyan-quadrilateral-reconsidered-wesley-meets-gadamer.
[69] Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 30.
[70] Carnahan, 'Jesus Did Not Teach Nonviolent Resistance in the Sermon on the Mount', 2.
[71] Scrivner, 'Walter Wink's Blind Spot', 2.
[72] Dion A. Forster, 'The "Stolen Bible" and the "Stolen Land"? Some Tentative Reflections on the Decolonising of Biblical Studies', in *Facilitating God's Preferred Future: Faith Formation, Missional Transformation and Theological Education*, ed. Marius J. Nel and Pieter van der Walt (Biblecor: Wellington, 2023), 241–62.

appreciate the complexities of the historical generation of Biblical texts, and their engagement within the dominant approaches that operate within our guild. One could ask, what counts as scholarship in New Testament studies? To whom does the Bible belong? What makes certain interpretations qualitatively 'truer' or 'better' than others?[73]

Wink's interpretations have been influential in various social justice movements, including the anti-Apartheid movements in South Africa. His emphasis on creative, nonviolent resistance strategies not only saved lives, but it also helped us to creatively and powerfully destabilise the supposed 'powers' of politics and military violence. This practical relevance underscores the enduring value of Wink's work. While his work faces important critiques concerning its historical and exegetical foundations, it also offers a compelling ethical vision that challenges Christians to seek nonviolent solutions to oppression.

Wesleyan and Methodist New Testament Scholarship and Issues of Contemporary Moral and Ethical Importance

Let's see if we can pull some of the 'loose' strings together. The Wesleyan tradition, deeply rooted in the theological thinking of John Wesley, provides a distinctive framework for engaging with scripture.[74] As Sarah Lancaster notes, "John Wesley undertook the task of communicating complex and important theological ideas to common people."[75] He did this through preaching sermons, writing letters, and sharing tracts. In all of these, as a clergyman of his time, he sought to draw upon the Scriptures to understand and respond to issues that were contemporary to him and his followers. In the preface to *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*, he writes, "I write chiefly for plain, unlettered men, who understand only their mother-tongue, and yet reverence and love the Word of God, and have a desire to save their souls."[76] This framework of reading the Bible with "reverence and love", with a "desire to save… souls", remains important to Methodist and Wesleyan scholars of the New Testament.

Of course, it is also embodied in what Albert Outler called the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, which integrates Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience.[77] For New Testament scholars in the Wesleyan and Methodist traditions it remains important to approach our work with scholarly rigour, critical integrity, but also in a manner that contributes towards the shaping of doctrine, ethics, and practical Christian living.

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[73] Ibid.
[74] Bishop Scott J. Jones, *John Wesley's Conception and Use of Scripture* (Kingswood Books, 1995), https://books.google.co.za/books?hl=en&lr=&id=yZb-CwAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PT8&dq=wesleyan+quadrilateral+scripture&ots=YnHNYIdzsT&sig=cG9jS8Uac1TMoY7uDXiRyRgoI5Y.
[75] Sarah Heaner Lancaster, 'Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament', in *The Routledge Companion to John Wesley*, ed. Clive Murray Norris and Joseph W. Cunningham, 1st edition, vol. 15 (Oxford: Routledge, 2023), 104.
[76] Wesley 2000: Preface, §3.
[77] Campbell, 'The "Wesleyan Quadrilateral"'; Morris-Chapman, 'Is the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral" an Accurate Portrayal of Wesley's Theological Method?'; Outler, *Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit*.

The Wesleyan Quadrilateral, has since come to stand for a balanced approach to theological reflection, integrating Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. This method ensures that scriptural interpretation is not isolated from the broader context of Christian thought and life. For this reason, many contextual and liberation theologians have found great affinity with Wesleyan and Methodist traditions. Yet, as William Abraham notes, "Scripture stands apart from the other three. Scripture has a primacy and priority not possessed by tradition, reason, and experience."[78] However, this primacy does not diminish the significance of the other elements but rather positions them in relationship to our understanding of Scripture. Methodists read the Bible for several reasons, among which are a seeking after forms of truth and righteousness that go beyond historical and literary accuracy (as important as those are in relativising our ideas, claims, and actions).

A critical concern in biblical interpretation is maintaining historical and contextual integrity. Critics of Walter Wink's exegesis, such as Kevin Carnahan, argue that his interpretations sometimes lack historical rigor. Despite this, Wink's ethical insights remain significant, illustrating the tension between historical-critical scholarship and theological interpretation.

Wink's approach involves reinterpreting well-established understandings of biblical texts, which can be both enlightening and problematic. Some traditional interpretations of Matthew 5:38-42 have emphasized Jesus's call to refrain from retaliation and endure suffering with patience and humility. Wink, however, reinterprets these teachings as calls to active, nonviolent resistance. Such an approach requires that both scholars and 'ordinary readers' ask some critical questions about what constitutes value (in our case, scholarly value) in the interpretation and reading of ancient texts that have sacred importance for the reading community. The answer is not simple, but neither are the problems associated with uncritical acceptance of certain historical, cultural, or social implications of predominantly white, male, educated, Western scholars.[79]

So, despite important critiques, Wink's work offers us some valuable insights, particularly in its ethical implications and practical application in contemporary contexts. His primary contribution is his advocacy for nonviolent resistance as a morally compelling response to oppression. His interpretation of Jesus' teachings in Matthew 5:38-42 emphasizes active, creative responses to injustice that maintain the dignity of the oppressed. What this teaches us, is that we can read the Bible to gain various forms of intent and insight. Of course, direct instruction on moral issues would be most helpful. However, as Richard Burridge has argued, we can also learn important ethical and theological lessons by imitating Jesus, not only by following the sayings that are attributed to him.[80] So, while Matthew 5:38-42 might not be directly applicable to, for example, Palestine, the Ukraine, or other personal instances of violence – the narrative does introduce us to the importance of activating a Christian moral

[78] William J. Abraham, 'On How to Dismantle the Wesleyan Quadrilateral: A Study in the Thought of Albert C Knudson', *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 20 (1985): 35.
[79] Forster, 'The "Stolen Bible" and the "Stolen Land"? Some Tentative Reflections on the Decolonising of Biblical Studies', 241, 259.
[80] Burridge, *Imitating Jesus*.

imagination for alternatives to disarming the violent and dealing with structural and personal violence. In that sense, such readings hold analogous promise, rather than absolute historical or literary clarity. As a scholar from the majority world, I would also contend that Wink's work is particularly relevant in contexts where traditional interpretations of scripture have justified abusive power relations and encouraged passivity or submission to oppression. Scrivner acknowledges this aspect, noting that Wink's goal is to prevent the misuse of Jesus' teachings to endorse tolerance of abuse.

Thus, Wink's interpretations encourage readers to consider the relevance of Jesus' teachings today, even if the historical contexts differ, and even if we don't have full or conclusive evidence about the cultural, social, or semantic ranges of images, values and words. Sullivan-Dunbar points out that Wink's approach helps students appreciate the historical complexities of engaging biblical texts and their application to contemporary ethical issues, yet retaining the promise that we can learn from them (and one another)[81] through rigorous and creative engagement.

Walter Wink's approach shows some coherences with the Wesleyan Quadrilateral by integrating Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience in his interpretations. Wink reads the scriptures with theological and moral intent, striving to derive ethical guidance from Jesus's teachings. This approach, while highlighting challenges in his hermeneutics, also offers important theological and moral orientations.

Gijsbert van der Brink's argues that there is always a measure of explicit or implicit theological intent in scriptural interpretation.[82] Christians (and particularly theologians) approach Scripture not merely as historical artifacts or pieces of literature but as texts that shape doctrine and ethics. This perspective aligns with Wink's approach, which integrates theological and moral considerations into his interpretation of Matthew 5:38-42. Wink's work illustrates how New Testament scholars could explicate their theological convictions, much more clearly, in order to open up their interpretations of the scriptures to consideration and critique, while at the same time critically and carefully attempting to derive impetus for moral action and ethical thought.

The Bible, unlike many other historical literary texts, is approached by theologians and New Testament scholars as both an artefact of faith and a source that shapes faith. This dual nature necessitates a critical and honest form of engagement that respects the text's historical and

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[81] Stephen E Fowl and L. Gregory Jones, *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1998); Charlene Van der Walt, 'Danger! Ingozi! Gevaar! Why Reading Alone Can Be Bad for You', *Scriptura: Journal for Contextual Hermeneutics in Southern Africa* 115, no. 1 (2016): 1–12; Dion A Forster, 'Towards an (Im)Possible Politics of Forgiveness? Considering the Complexities of Religion, Race and Politics in South Africa', in *Reconciliation, Forgiveness and Violence in Africa: Biblical, Pastoral and Ethical Perspectives*, ed. Marius J. Nel, Dion A Forster, and Christo H. Thesnaar (Stellenbosch: SUN Press, 2020), 51–69, https://doi.org/10.18820/9781928480532/04.

[82] 'The Book of God and Humans: The Doctrine of Scripture', in *Christian Dogmatics: An Introduction*, by Gijsbert Van Den Brink and C. Van Der Kooi (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2022), 553–71.

literary aspects while also acknowledging its theological significance. Naturally, as New Testament scholars, we are somewhat cautious of the ways in which persons read theological convictions 'back into' the texts of the Bible. Yet, we also need to acknowledge, as van der Brink states, that the Bible is not merely a record of ancient religious thought but is itself a document that continues to "speak" to persons of faith today, shaping their beliefs, practices, and ethical outlooks.[83]

Such a perspective differentiates theological engagement with the Bible from that of historians or literary theorists. Historians might focus solely on the socio-political contexts of the texts, while literary theorists might analyse narrative structures and rhetorical strategies. Theologians, however, must balance these scholarly approaches with a commitment to understanding how the text informs and transforms contemporary faith and practice.

The integration of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral in scriptural interpretation ensures that theological and moral orientations are not lost amidst historical and literary analysis. In this light, the task of the Methodist and Wesleyan Christian New Testament scholar might be to engage the Bible with both scholarly rigor and theological intent, seeking to derive insights that are both academically defensible and spiritually transformative. This integrated approach not only honours the complexity of the biblical texts but also ensures that their interpretation remains relevant to contemporary moral and ethical issues.

Walter Wink and Alease Brown: Towards a Faithful Hermeneutic for Contemporary Issues

Alease Brown's dissertation, "The Violence of Jesus and the Justice of God,"[84] offers a contemporary exploration of Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and Parousia as exemplary of non-lethal violent resistance, with significant implications for acts of protest by marginalized groups. Her work is particularly relevant, and it resonates with aspects of Walter Wink's approach to non-violence. Both scholars invite us to take the Bible seriously, read it critically, and approach it with explicit (and explicated) theological intent that is shaped by Christian faith. Brown's work emphasizes the importance of reading the Bible not just as a historical text but as a source of theological and moral insight for contemporary ethical action.

Both Brown and Wink work within what can be described as a hermeneutic circle, where faith shapes interpretation and interpretation, in turn, deepens faith. This approach has some coherences with the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, which integrates Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. As New Testament scholars and Wesleyan theologians, they engage the Bible not merely as an ancient document but as a living text that speaks to contemporary issues of justice, peace, and dignity.

[83] Ibid., 553.
[84] Brown, 'The Violence of Jesus and the Justice of God'.

Brown's dissertation calls for an interpretation of Jesus' teachings that recognizes the existential violence faced by marginalized communities, particularly Black people. She argues that the good news of the Gospel must address violence in an existential way, "which privileges Jesus's concern for the dignity and self-actualization of despised persons."[85]

Brown and Wink's approaches demonstrate that it is possible to maintain scholarly integrity while also engaging Scripture with theological intent. This perspective urges scholars to consider the lived experiences of marginalized communities in their interpretations of biblical texts, ensuring that their theological reflections are relevant and transformative.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the integration of Walter Wink's approach to nonviolence, demonstrating a framework for engaging the Bible in addressing contemporary moral and ethical issues. It invites us to take the Bible seriously, read it critically, and approach it with theological intent shaped by faith. Yet, this is not without necessary critique, since we have seen how the Bible has been used (and abused) to support a myriad of problematic and harmful beliefs and practices.

In this regard, I have attempted to argue that the Wesleyan Quadrilateral—comprising Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience—provides a balanced approach to theological reflection, ensuring the Bible is differentiated from other theological sources (in authority, but also in context, style, and intent), yet it is connected to the broader context of Christian thought and life. Wink's interpretation of Matthew 5:38-42 offers a complex, yet illustrative, example of an attempt to read the Bible in order to think faithfully about complex issues such as violence, injustice, and oppression. This was also undertaken in to honour similar work done by the late Dr Alease Brown, who seemed to be taking a comparable path in her work.

Finally, Wink's engagement with Methodists in South Africa in the late 1980s serves as a practical application of his non-violent resistance framework. His training programs for South African activists provided strategies to confront oppression without resorting to violence, demonstrating the effectiveness of loving resistance in deconstructing apartheid. This approach avoided the obliteration of the 'enemy' or 'other,' presenting a more sustainable and responsible future for South Africa and highlighting how the Bible can shape efforts to address the injustices of colonialism and apartheid.

As theologians and New Testament scholars, the task is to engage the Bible with both scholarly rigor and theological intent, seeking to derive insights that are both academically defensible and theologically transformative. In doing so, we might be able to offer "glad tidings", or at least in "an age of crisis", but drawing on the rigour of our disciplinary training, while linking it to the hope of our faith.

[85] Ibid., iv.

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