

# Who Is My Neighbor?

## An Honest-to-God Assessment of Some Common Christian Answers

1 The following is a modest exercise, its scope more limited by far than the title suggests.

2 We will not, for example, attempt to explore the presenting question in all its dimensions. For that one wants a book, and a long one at that. Nor will we attempt a proper survey of current Christian responses to the one thread of the question that we do pursue. Here too books are called for, and also more scholarship than this writer can claim.

3 More limiting still: as the discussion unfolds we will find ourselves thinking not so much about every neighbor as about two species of neighbor, first the Christian with whom one stands in bitter disagreement, and second, the neighbor who disavows God.

4 Christians, at least in America, commonly scorn the first kind of neighbor. The second kind they undervalue. That is, they think less of such neighbors than the Word of God either requires or invites them to think. But they do this in different ways that feed their scorn for each other. We will raise the possibility that a more honest and faithful regard for the non-believer will dampen this scorn. Such is the nut of the argument.

5 These pages reflect more fully on God's Law than on God's Gospel, though the latter will not go untouched. This more than anything speaks to the modesty of the exercise. God's proper work does not receive its due. There is more to think, in other

words, and more to write.

6 May this serve nonetheless as a useful beginning to a fuller conversation. That the conversation is badly needed, not only here but throughout the Church, is beyond all doubt.

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7 The question that constitutes our title is not original to this work. Of course not. It was asked by the lawyer of Luke 10 who sought to expose Jesus as a fraud and instead brought the parable of the Good Samaritan crashing down on his head.

8 Then again, the question as we pose it here is not altogether the same as the lawyer's. The words are identical, to be sure, but we give them a different thrust. "Who is my neighbor?" For the lawyer this is a question about quantity. He wants to know how many neighbors he happens to have. For us the concern is quality. We wonder here about the nature of the neighbors we do have.

9 In posing the question this way, we stand in a tradition as old as the Jerusalem community of Acts 6. There we encounter the first intramural Christian spat, or at least the first one on record. Did anyone caught in that argument suggest that Widow A was my neighbor and Widow B was not? There being a flock of apostles on hand, one doubts this. Instead they wondered whether it mattered that Widow A spoke Aramaic while Widow B spoke Greek. The implied answer, emerging from the episode: "Of course it doesn't matter." Other questions would follow. For example, "Do I expect one thing of Inquirer A because he's circumcised and another of Inquirer B because he's not?" That question took longer to resolve, though it led, thanks to the Holy Spirit, to the same response: "Of course not."

10 Still, the present point is not whether and how such

questions got resolved, but rather that no one entangled in the endless asking of them made the lawyer's mistake. Or if they did, someone else promptly set them straight. Else it could not have been a Christian argument.

11 The lawyer's mistake was to base his asking on a faulty premise, though one that appears on the surface to be reasonable, indeed more than reasonable. Try "essential to sanity." This is why countless human beings continue to embrace that premise and the question it drives. To put it succinctly, "It cannot be possible that all people are my neighbors, not if 'neighbor' is tied to rules of proximity and still less if it entails a divine obligation to love somebody as I love myself. After all, my capacity to love is finite, as is the space around me, and God is surely reasonable, yes? Who, then, is my neighbor—and who is not?"

12 As if such asking could possibly advance the lawyer's objective. He aims, says Luke, "to justify himself." But how? Suppose we start with his premise. Suppose further that, using it, we noodle our way to the following conclusion: "This lawyer has but one neighbor, his spouse." That still leaves him with the burden of loving his wife as he loves himself. But as wives everywhere will testify, in even so limited an endeavor "no man is righteous, no not one." "Amen," saith the LORD.

13 Enter the Gospel. Against the lawyer's reasoning stands the unreasonable wisdom of God in Christ (1 Cor. 2:6-7) who "died for all" (2 Cor. 5:14) and so is neighbor to all. Christians will often read Jesus' story about the Samaritan as a morality tale and so miss how this wisdom lurks at its heart. Even so they imbibe it elsewhere. They do so because they encounter the Gospel elsewhere. What is the Gospel if not the announcement of Christ as neighbor-neighbor, that is, as Jesus redefines the term in his story, i.e. as the one who comes to the stranger's

aid at peril and expense to oneself? Thus, "Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord" who for your sake has "emptied himself" and is already busy with the next step of humbling himself, "even unto death" (Phil. 2). Go, dear shepherds. See your new neighbor.

14 This Gospel entangles Christians inexorably in the nutty conviction that as Christ is "for all," so are they—somehow, in some way. Christians across the confessional spectrum understand that to deny this or even to quibble with it constitutes a betrayal of the name one bears. This is evident in the works of mercy that all churches promote. This includes even so reclusive a Christian group as the Amish.

15 Also of the Gospel's essence: Christ died for all "while we were still sinners" (Ro. 5:8), and in that dying is neighbor as much to Thief on the Left as to Thief on the Right; as much to Caiaphas and Pilate as to his mother and the beloved disciple. In other words, his neighborly conduct is not predicated on the other's faith in him but rather precedes it, and does so with ensuing faith as nothing more than a possible outcome. Where that faith does ensue, the people it grips commonly make a habit of obeying Jesus' post-parable instruction: "Go and do likewise." Thus the old Salvation Army which, while serving Scripture with the stew, ladled out the stew also to those who made faces at the Scripture. At least one hopes it did. It could not otherwise have been neighborly, not in a Christian sense.

16 For again—more fully this time: Christ does with the definition of neighbor as he does with so much else. He turns it on its head. Its primary meaning, post-Easter, is not "the proximate other" but "the one who shows mercy" (see par. 11 above), said mercy flowing without stint to the undeserving who more often than not are also the uncomprehending. "Who was neighbor," Jesus asks, "to the one who fell among the thieves?"

That becomes the basis of the question that persons controlled by the love of Christ (2 Cor. 5 14) are driven to raise first and foremost, as the one and only question that finally matters: "To whom am I neighbor," or more precisely, "To whom is God extending mercy through me?" If then they ask "Who is my neighbor?" it can only be in further inquiry, as a shorthand way of wondering "What can I say of this person that I am neighbor to? What mercy does she require of me? How shall God serve her through me?"

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17 One might suppose that this new construing of "Who is my neighbor?" would put an end to all thought of using the question, as the lawyer did, in the futile quest for self-justification. It does not. As Luther twice says of the baptized in his *Large Catechism*: "We have the old Adam hanging around our necks." Old Adam and his progeny—old Jerome, let's say—will quit trying to justify themselves only when they're dead. If anything the new form of the question gives them more room to romp in.

18 One of the loci of Luther's observation is his commentary on the Sixth Petition where the issue is temptation, the very thing that our reshaped question affords. The lawyer, recall, aimed with the original question to eliminate neighbors. We aim with the newer one to examine neighbors—or more precisely, to examine the persons we are neighbor to. Miserably, examination is to old Adam's lusts as agar is to bacteria. Examination invites comparison. Old Jerome thinks about you, then reverts in a flash to his favorite subject, himself. "God," he prays, "I thank you that I am not like...", or alternatively, "God, why him and not me?"

19 Where is the Christian or that body of Christians in whom this dynamic is not operative? It drove the dispute of Acts 6,

cited above (par. 8). One bets it had a hand in the separation of Paul and Barnabas. It certainly stoked the miseries of the churches at Corinth and Galatia. Why else is Paul so bent on prodding his readers there to quit regarding each other "according to the flesh" (2 Cor. 5:14) and instead to "think Christ"? (The latter phrase, Robert W. Bertram's, gets Paul exactly right).

20 1,950 years have passed since Paul put reed to parchment. In none of them has this piece of his counsel been anything less than fresh, urgent, and demanding of Christian attention. It remains so today. Why? Because old Adam romps on, old Eve cavorting with him in an endless game of comparative justification. Like schoolyard games it comes with a taunt: "I'm righter than you are!" No wonder Paul keeps adjuring his readers to grow up. As with all such games this one often turns mean. It has sometimes gotten vicious and deadly. One thinks quickly of the century or two that followed the Reformation.

21 These days old Adam's game continues as a feature of every Christian gathering. Every formal congregation exhibits it. As harried bishop's assistants will testify, in some it develops into a team sport that calls for referees. Jurisdictional conventions and assemblies are a preferred venue for the game. Few things whet old Adam's appetite more than the prospect of a vote. ("Now we'll see who's right and who's not.") Be it said that even so polite and passing a meeting as the present one is infected with the itch to play, and play we do. Is there anyone here who has not taken his or her own measure against the persons that he or she is listening to or conversing with? If so, rank her with the saints.

22 Consider further the broad picture of American Christianity. Down its middle runs a canyon that follows contours less of confessional allegiance than of cultural location and political

sympathy. On each side sit phalanxes of Lutherans, Baptists, Methodists, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Congregationalists and Catholics. One side boasts a corps that calls itself non-denominational even though it seems to exhibit a cohesiveness of confession that Lutherans, say, might envy. In keeping with current convention, let's color one side red and the other blue.

23 Notice then how Red and Blue despise each other. One sees it in the distance they keep from each other. One hears it in the labels they affix to each other, though not so much in the labels themselves as in the tones they employ when spitting them out: "Liberal." "Christian right."

24 Or among Lutherans: "ELCA." "LCMS." Utter either among a group of pastors on the opposite of the divide, and watch how the eyes roll. They do so in testimony to the one conviction that Lutheran pastors in America would seem these days to hold in common, namely that contact and conversation with counterparts on the other side of the divide is a waste of time, a futile sojourn among heretics or fools.

25 Is this a caricature of the situation that pertains among Lutherans? Yes. Still, caricature serves truth by exposing character. See *Gulliver's Travels*, or any of the better political cartoonists. Exposés are *ipso facto* calls for repentance.

26 Let Lutherans repent, they of all people. To despise the other is to laud the self. It invites one to feel righter-than-thou and to bask in the feeling. Shall one do so while brandishing formulae that mark such feelings as disobedient folly? *Sola gratia*. *Sola fide*. Yet "Good for us," old Adam crows. "We know what these terms really mean. The others just think they do."

27 Such feelings are unneighborly in the strict sense of Jesus'

recasting of the term. They interfere, that is, with the call to be a conduit of God's mercy to the other. Allowed to fester, they go a step past unneighborly to become "unneighboring." This happens when one supposes that there is or might be an other on whom mercy and attention, coming from me, is wasted and pointless. In other words, I cannot be neighbor to him, with the consequence that he is not neighbor to me. This of course is the lawyer's error, RCV (Revised Christian Version).

28 Have we been witnessing in recent decades a new unneighboring within American Christianity? It would not be the first time such a thing happened in our land. It has occurred often enough, certainly, in the history of the Church. Such times call for fresh attention to the warnings of the Neighbor against driving him to the point at which he unneighbors us. "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord...'" and again, "I do not know you. Depart from me, you [unneighboring] evil doer."

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29 Here's a thought: what if the Good Samaritan should give old Adam his comeuppance by using a passel of present day Samaritans to have mercy on his Americans Christians and show them the meaning of "neighbor" all over again? Or to put that another way: what if he should turn us from our disdain for each other by upending first our disdain for the merely other?

30 The "merely other"? That would be someone we are not obliged to recognize, however grudgingly, as a fellow Christian. The Muslim. The Jew. The New Age devotee. The hard-edged critic of all things religious. The beer-bellied boob who thinks Sunday was invented for football. So much the better if, for present purposes, we concentrate on the latter two. They have the additional strike against them that they don't believe in God (they say) and have no wish to. If the cocktail conversation



turns to “spirituality” they head for the opposite side of the room. They hold all clerics—rabbi, shaman, imam, pastor—in equal disregard. They do not pray.

31 Such people are among us in significant numbers. The website Adherents.com, counting persons who claim not to believe in God, pegs the number in the U.S. at between three and nine percent of the population. The lower figure yields about 8,800,000 people, or 1.5 million more than the combined memberships of the ELCA and the LCMS. In Australia the figure is 25% and in most of Western Europe at least 40%. One may as well assume atheism of the Swede. The non-believing slice of her homeland’s population is no lower than 46% and perhaps as high as 85%. These figures, by the way, are for 2005.

32 Reactions to such numbers among Christian groups in America will range from horror to nonchalance. To which of these extremes one leans is a key indicator of which side of the Red/Blue divide one happens to stand on.

33 The lean on the Red side is toward horror. Near the edge of the divide it will be a sympathetic horror, an impulse to weep for the hell-bound or at least a sense that one ought to. The farther one moves from the edge the more sympathy yields to hostility, the non-believer being reckoned either as tooth or claw of the prowling lion (1 Pet. 5) or else as the potential instigator of yet another outburst of divine wrath, 9/11- or Katrina-style. (See Jerry Falwell, infamously.) However horrified, whether in sympathy, hostility, or a mixture of the two, the Christian’s responsibility toward “the godless” is to convert them, or failing that, to restrain them, and by all means to keep their hands off the levers of power. To protect oneself, and more, one’s children from their pernicious influence one spends and labors mightily to build parallel institutions and indeed, a parallel culture that both imitates

and rebukes theirs.

34 Blue Christians are appalled by this. It seems impolite at best, despicable at worst. Here too, which of these reactions one evinces, and in what proportion, will indicate one's position relative to the edge of the Red/Blue divide. Matters of eternal destiny are not ones over which the blue crowd chooses to lose sleep. To do so will seem arrogant and unfaithful, such things resting in the hands of the God who provides for all God's children, wishes all to be saved, and has somehow arranged in the mystery of Christ to effect this. (Notice how bluish lectionaries will excise the nasty bits from Revelation 22.) Of pressing concern to the Blue Christian is not the wrath of God but the wrath of man and woman-child too, to be fully inclusive. Anger itself is the Enemy. It destroys peace. It postpones the peaceable kingdom. If angry Muslims are the prowler's tooth and claw, then so are angry Christians, all the more so when said Christians double as shills for the greedy bankers whose policies breed despair and anger in the city's poorer parts. In blessed contrast to these are—guess who?— the non-believers who keep stepping forward as allies in the quest for the fair and just conditions that lead to peace. Patently, there are many of these. To them the Christian's particular responsibility is not to convert but to welcome, not to restrain but to encourage. So long as they serve the cause of peace their dismissal of God is beside the point, as are their choices (let's say) of who to sleep with.

35 No wonder Red and Blue spit at each other.

36 Be it said that both Red and Blue do the non-believer a disservice. Thus neither is neighborly. If they refuse to hear this from lesser neighbors they will hear it one day from the Great Neighbor who is also the Good Neighbor, good with a goodness that can horrify and appall. See Isaiah and Peter in

the forthcoming texts for Epiphany 5.

37 The disservice that Red and Blue alike render to the non-believer is strictly that: a dis-service. Or perhaps a diss-service. Both fail to recognize and acknowledge that the non-believer is a servant of God. One might say that in their minds—in practice too— they drum the non-believer out of God's service. They do this for different reasons. For Red the thought of non-believer as God's servant is oxymoronic, for Blue impertinent. Or at the extremes, blasphemous for Red, intolerant for Blue, and in either case offensive.

38 In so stripping non-believers of their dignity, Red and Blue alike think of them as the lawyer thought of Samaritans. They do to them as the bandits did to the traveler on the Jericho road.

39 They do this, Red and Blue, from the same error. Odd as it may sound, both make too much of faith; faith in God, that is, as a condition for enrollment in the service of God.

40 Red's hand is tipped by her use of the term "godless" (par. 32). She means, of course, to describe those who carry on without thought or regard for God and thinks, perhaps, of pimps, crack dealers, and the ACLU. Does she also notice how the term pushes her toward assumptions that clash with the First Article of the Creed? "I believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth" who, as Jesus reminds us, makes the sun to shine and the rain to fall on the just and the unjust alike. That being so, how, strictly speaking, can one be without God? To posit that possibility is to toy with Mani's big mistake. American Christians have a long history of doing precisely this, especially in their thinking about matters of sin and morality. Making too little of sin, they make too much of moral conduct. That makes it much too easy to sort the citizenry: the righteous from the unrighteous, the virtuous from the wicked, the

believing from the unbelieving (see Jackson Lears, "Sanctimonies" in *The New Republic*, 6/30/03). From there the step is short to positing that God can only be the God of the former. The others are the children of darkness.

41 Blue overestimates faith from a different tack. He is, be it said, a postmodern pluralist, and rejoices in that. His virtue is civility, his credo that "I am as I say I am, and not as someone else purports me to be." Therefore, "If you believe there is no God, then—for you—there *is* no God, nor can you be a servant of God, nor may I or anyone else posit otherwise. That would be intrusive of your space, a violation of your fundamental right of self-definition. That would be wrong."

42 He who sits in the heavens doubtless laughs. Who but an American fool would think it that easy to dethrone him? Of course some ancient Israelites thought this too (Ps. 14:1). Luther was right. Old Adam hangs on every neck.

43 To be sure, Blue is correct in his assumption that words are creative ("I am as I say am.") Words form, define, and qualify. They establish reality. Children, hurling insults at each other on a playground, are well aware of this. They understand that the outcome of their contest will shape conditions that pertain once they return to the classroom. It will determine, perhaps, the composition and hence the reality of the sleepover that takes place next Saturday night. Thus the question between them as the insults fly: "Whose word will do the shaping?" Or more simply, "Whose word rules?"

44 Children also understand that there are words against which they are helpless. The word "student," for example. A child, refusing to rise in the morning, may assert 50 times, "I am not a student" (or as he'll put it, "I'm not going to school."). It does him no good. All the assertion in the world will not alter

the fact—for him the hard, cold reality—that a student he is. Someone greater than he has said so, and will say so again. If not a parent, then a truant officer. Once at school, believing himself still to be “not-student,” he may behave that way and refuse to do his work. But is he then, in truth, not a student? Of course not. As teachers and vice-principals will take pains to remind him, the most he can hope to be in this rebellion, this perverse quest of his for self-definition, is “bad student.”

45 Today’s question: in their thinking about the non-believer, can Red and Blue bring themselves to remember Whose Word rules? Can they do so thereafter in their thinking about each other?

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46 It would help mightily if Red and Blue were to heed an insight that both, for deep reasons of history, confession, and old-Adamic stubbornness, continue to ignore. The insight comes from Luther and his co-confessors of the 16th century. Simply put, God’s words are two, the Law and the Gospel.

47 The words are akin to each other in that both create. Both form and define reality, and then they qualify it, that is, they assign to it a quality. “Good.” Or else “Not good.”

48 The words are polar opposites of each other in the way they create. The one does so by fiat, the other by faith.

49 For the moment, put the Law on hold and consider the Gospel. It is an astounding word. To quote two of the people who were astounded first, “It exalts those of low degree” (Mary, Luke 1:52). It also chooses “things that are not to bring to nothing things that are” (Paul, 1 Cor. 1:28). Things that are? That would include the self-defining fools who abound on the face of the earth. Things that are not? That would be the self-defining

fool who is in truth what she asserts herself to be, namely, Co-Creatrix, I doing my reality, you yours. (Is she that? No, she is not, as her parents tried to teach her when she was toddling. No parents quite succeed in driving home this lesson.) The usual word for such a creature is "sinner." But notice what happens when God comes to this self-same deluded sinner and slips her the Gospel. Surprise! He *invites* her faith, the very believing she's been putting so much stock in, heretofore erroneously. God says to her, in effect, "On Christ's account I not only have a new word for you—'just,' let say—but I also think so well of you that I won't impose that word on you and make something of it without your assent. Let's turn this into a co-creating process, I speaking the word, you believing the word, and only then will it be so. Is this too good to believe? Here's my Spirit to nudge you."

50 Come to think of it, "astounding" does not do the Gospel justice. What is it if not God bringing down the Mighty One—himself—from the lofty throne and exalting the no-account fool, exactly as Mary recognized? He makes the penitent's "Amen" co-effective with the absolution that precedes it. As it is written, "The just shall live by faith." This is God's self-humbling, and God's gift to us of unmerited grace.

51 The Law, God's prior word, does not work this way. That's why Mary and Paul were astonished by the Gospel. Those who tumble to it today are often overwhelmed by the same astonishment, finding this new Word of God to be utterly unlike the other Word of God that they're used to hearing. d gotten used to. And so it is, precisely in its invitation to faith.

52 The Law is pure decree. "Let there be light. And there was light." "Because you have done this, to dust you shall return." And so we do. Note, by the way, how the one decree strikes us as

wonderful and the other as terrible. Our reactions to the Law are always mixed.

53 Both Law and Gospel are God's word to all people. But only the Law imposes itself on all people, as indeed it must do. Apart from Christ and the faith-inducing prod of Christ's Spirit, how can God think well enough of his willful human creatures to let it be otherwise?

54 As they think about the non-believer, Red and Blue keep confusing the operations of Law and Gospel. Because the Gospel (being Gospel) is effective only when I believe it, they assume the same is true of Law. Indeed, the Law seems in some instances to invite our assent, as in, for example, "Thou shalt not steal." But here the appearance of assent is superficial. The thief might flout that word. He is nonetheless bound by it and knows it to be true, inescapably. Watch his reaction when someone steals from him. He does not say, "Good" or even "That's OK." Red may froth about the wicked turning 10 Commandments into 10 Suggestions. But this they don't do. They don't do it because they can't do it.

55 God's Law is the Word that, from womb to tomb, creates, defines, shapes, and qualifies every human being. It does so without our assent. No one asks to be born; our withholding of permission does not prevent wrinkles. The Law also does these things for better and for worse. In Biblical language, it blesses and curses. First among its blessings is that dignity spoken of earlier. It invests every human being with responsibility. It gives every one work to do and a role to play. It enlists one and all as agents in God's work of providing for God's creation and caring for God's creatures. It does this, again, without first inquiring whether we wish to play along. Nor, for that matter, does it ask whether we deem ourselves worthy of a position in the King's service. We

are, as it were, drafted. The choice is not whether one is or is not God's servant, but only whether the service one renders is good, wretched, or merely mediocre. But in the dignity itself—human being as God's agent, God's servant—there the Law is inexorable.

56 Paul points to this when he speaks of "captivity" under the Law (see e.g. Gal. 3:23). He does so invariably with dismay. Yet there is a blessed aspect to the very captivity he rues. It keeps the world going whether the captives believe in God or not. Consider Sweden. Assume for a moment that the percentage of agnostic or atheistic Swedes, reported earlier (par. 30), is the higher of the two that were given. Does that mean that 85% of Swedes fail to serve God's creation, or, if serving, do so more poorly than the equal percentage of Americans who claim a faith in God? Are Swedes worse parents or nastier siblings? Are they poorer employees? More rampant thieves? Is justice more badly served in Swedish courts? Do Swedes blight the world more bitterly than Americans do? The evidence suggests the contrary.

57 Thinking on this, a Christian who believes in God and cares about God's world will honor the Swedes. Better still, he will thank God for Swedes, and for the quality of service that God's Law keeps driving them to render. He will pray, perhaps, that the Law would work that well in other lands, beginning with his own. While he's at it, he will also mourn the fact that all Swedes die, noting as he does so that their fate is his as well. All Swedes kick against the Law, not least in their disavowal of God. But then he kicks too—always has, always will—and with him as with all Swedes, God's word rules. God, that is, gets the last word. The question is, which of God's words will the last one be? Here and only here does faith enter as an issue.

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58 The same word that rules non-believing Swedes rules non-believing Americans. American Christians, Red and Blue, would do well to remember this. It would, as some say, be right neighborly of them.

59 Remembering this, perhaps those American Christians might begin to notice how God keeps showing mercy to them through the agency of the non-believers they live with. It may not be the mercy that forgives sin. It is certainly the mercy that fixes roads, and invents medicines, and arrests criminals, and runs the local Little League, affording one's boys the small but exquisite pleasure of putting bat squarely to ball.

60 In short, the non-believer is neighbor to us. Neighbor not in the lawyer's sense but in Jesus' sense, as the one through whom God's mercy reaches us. The mercy of the Gospel? No. But certainly the mercy of the Law. Such mercy is no small thing, as the residents of Baghdad will testify these days.

61 Speaking of Baghdad, notice how the same servant, at once driven by God's Law and in high rebellion against it, can be both blessing and curse, neighbor and felon, agent of mercy and worker of woe, and not in sequence but simultaneously; and notice further how this phenomenon will churn and multiply our reactions to the Law itself. Case in point: is it good that the Law has worked and Saddam Hussein is dead? Sure. But many are the Iraqis who long today for the order he imposed, however cruelly he imposed it. Wistful too are many Americans: soldiers' families to be sure, but also some, perhaps, who directed his downfall.

62 One underscores this on the chance that Red and Blue might take the dare and look with fresh eyes at the non-believing neighbor. One guesses that Red will have the harder time of it. She will look out her window, say, and see a knot of workers

clustered at a manhole. It opens to the sewer that drains her street. The men—one woman too—appear dirty and coarse. A car drives by, pretty young thing behind the wheel, and the men crane their necks. The leers of two are vile. She guesses their language is filthy. She doubts they go to church. Doubtless she doubts well. The challenge: can she nonetheless respect these people? Or to pull that word apart, can she re-spect them? Deem them worthy of a second look, that is? And will she let that second look be shaped by the word of God, not yet the Gospel but first the Law, the word that presents these creatures to her not merely as city workers but as servants of God? A word that furthermore will lay a burden on her, namely that she should thank God for them and for the neighborly ministrations they render, the ones that will cause her toilet to flush properly this afternoon?

63 Assume now that Blue lives two houses down from Red, and, looking out his window, sees what Red sees. Will Blue also do as Red is challenged to do? And in his re-specting of the persons in that work crew, will he make what for him is the harder move? To honor them is fairly easy. He grew up, after all, listening again and again to his father's Woody Guthrie albums. That aspect of the Law which lifts these people up makes sense to him. Not so the Law's dimension that demands much more of these people than they are putting out: that they should not swear or curse or imagine fornication, or lollygag on the job as some are patently doing. "Such things," says the Law, "are beneath you. They destroy the dignity that God adorns you with. They turn you into tawdry, unpleasant servants, and God is not amused." The question for Blue is whether he will respect these people as highly as the Law insists that he do by acquiescing in the Law's judgment on them. Or will he continue to spout those postmodern shibboleths about their inalienable right to self-definition? That would demean them and be unmerciful of him. It would make

of him a pitiful neighbor.

64 Imagine instead that Blue, getting honest about the Law, would think for once to start slipping his non-believing neighbors the Gospel, the word of Christ that so unthinkably invites them, through the fact and exercise of faith, into the co-creating role they have yearned for all along? How kind of him would that be? What post- postmodern fun to woo them into, that they should all be just and righteous simply because God said so, and all of them agreed. *Propter Christum*, of course. Always and only because of Jesus.

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65 Returning finally to give an earlier passing thought a second quick pass. What if, along America's great Christian divide, the word got out that Red and Blue alike were reassessing their approaches to the non-believing neighbor with an ear to the Word of God, both Law and Gospel? Might Red and Blue begin at last to re-spect each other? To quit leaning in their opposite directions, that is, and to look at each other with ears sharpened for fresh and surprising things that the other might now be saying? What if, in the process, Blue were to learn that Red was treating the non-believer with a new civility? Or what if Red noticed that Blue was regarding the non-believer's sin more somberly and was starting once again to preach Christ crucified and the promise of faith in him as God's fantastic gift for every human being?

66 Suppose this happened. Not for a moment should we think that the divisions of Red and Blue would cease, neither the major fissure nor the lesser cracks that divide the Christian groups on either side. We could think that maybe, just maybe, the spitting would stop and some talking begin. That would be a good thing, merciful and neighborly.

67 Suppose still further that Red and Blue, thinking through the Law as it applies to the non-believer, caught themselves thinking through that same Law as it applies to them? Suppose each were to tumble again to the great dignity that the Law of itself— nothing said, not yet, of the Gospel—assigns to the denizens of the canyon's other side? Suppose they noticed in the meantime how they've been failing the Law by disrespecting the neighbor, not only the non-believer but also that Christian of the other color? Might old Adam be checked in the games he keeps playing as the eyes turn away from the neighbor and back to him?

68 Suppose finally that American Christian, one and all, were to honor the name they bear by looking to Christ for the righteousness that the Law has stripped them of.? It's a fanciful thought, but think it anyway. Now notice how the Good Samaritan, rushing to our aid, is clapping his hands with joy.

69 Can there be a Christian of any color at all who wants anything less than that?

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[W4\\_Burce\\_My\\_Neighbor \(PDF\)](#)