

One New Book for the Preacher

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EXCLUSION AND EMBRACE: A THEOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF IDENTITY, OTHERNESS, AND RECONCILIATION by Miroslav Volf. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996. 336 pages.

Miroslav Volf, presently teaching theology at Yale Divinity School and director of the Yale Center for Faith and Culture, has written extensively on a variety of subjects. Many of his articles are readily available over the internet or in print from periodicals such as *Christianity Today* and *The Christian Century*. Although he is one of the most provocative and lucid theologians at work today, in my own circles not many preachers have made any consistent efforts to delve into his thought.

Volf grew up in Croatia, where his father was a Pentecostal pastor. All of his writing and speaking is grounded in the harsh realities of the war in his native land, and has an existential depth and urgency that is somewhat rare for academicians. Volf has taught in more evangelical seminaries such as Fuller, and yet is now at Yale and has been sought by various other major theological institutions of the Western World as a faculty member or guest lecturer. According to one source, he was courted by Harvard to be dean of the divinity school there, but was not offered the position because of his belief that theology is ultimately within the context of the Church and for the Church. He has a strong tie to the Reformed tradition, in part through one of his mentors, Jurgen Moltmann, and is also intentionally ecumenical. (*Free of Charge*, published by Zondervan in 2005, was designated the book for Lenten study in the Anglican community by the Archbishop of Canterbury.) Moreover, Volf is committed to interfaith dialogue while remaining a confessing and practicing Christian.

The essence of the struggle within *Exclusion and Embrace* is revealed in the book's preface. Volf had been giving a lecture on the themes in the title, and at the end was asked by Moltmann, "But can you embrace a *cetnik*?" Volf ruminates:

It was the winter of 1993. For months now the notorious Serbian fighters called "cetnik" had been sowing desolation in my native country, herding people into concentration camps, raping women, burning down churches, and destroying cities. I had just argued that we ought to embrace our enemies as God has embraced us in Christ. Can I embrace a *cetnik*—the ultimate other, so to speak, the evil other? What would justify the embrace? Where would I draw the strength for it? What would it do to my identity as a human being and as a Croat? It took me a while to answer, though I immediately knew what I wanted to say. "No, I cannot—but as a follower of Christ I think I should be able to." (9)

The tension between the message of the cross and the world of violence presented itself to me as a conflict between the desire to follow the Crucified and the disinclination either simply to watch others be crucified or let

myself be nailed to the cross. (10)

Exclusion and Embrace thus addresses profound issues for the Christian in personal relationships, for the Church beset by our schismatic and judgmental illnesses, for the nation, and for the world. Do we exclude our enemies, even to the point of killing them, or do we embrace them as the gospel teaches?

Throughout the book, Volf displays an immense range of theological, philosophical, and literary conversation partners (Augustine, Aquinas, Barth, Bonhoeffer, Mary Daly, Dostoyevsky, Faulkner, Girard, Moltmann, the Niebuhrs, Nietzsche, Rosemary Ruether, Sobrino, and various postmodernists). His writing, while exceptionally erudite, is clear and is accessible for both laity and clergy. At the conclusion of the book there are three full pages of references to biblical texts—the author has a passionate devotion to and strong knowledge of Scripture.

A brief review cannot do justice to the complexity and depth of Volf's subject, or to the beauty and often piercing and awe-full insights of his arguments and observations. However, let two brief quotations serve as invitation to the full feast!

...exclusion can entail cutting off the bonds that connect, taking oneself out of the pattern of interdependence and placing oneself in a position of sovereign independence. The other then emerges either as an enemy that must be pushed away from the self and driven out of its space or as a nonentity—a superfluous being—that can be disregarded and abandoned. Second, exclusion can entail erasure or separation, not recognizing the other as someone who in his or her otherness belongs to the pattern of interdependence. The other then emerges as an inferior being who must either be assimilated by being made like the self or be subjugated to the self. Exclusion takes place when the violence of expulsion, assimilation, or subjugation and the indifference of abandonment replace the dynamics of taking in and keeping out as well as the mutuality of giving and receiving. (67)

On the other hand, the gospel is God's embrace (see, for example, the story of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15). But embrace in this Christocentric and therefore cruciform sense is far from being easy, or retreating into sentimentality, or engaging in polite perfunctory hugging.

The four structural elements in the movement of embrace are opening the arms, waiting, closing the arms, and then opening them again. For embrace to happen, all four must be there and they must follow one another on an unbroken timeline; stopping with the first two (opening the arms and waiting) would abort the embrace, and stopping with the third (closing the arms) would pervert it from an act of love to an act of oppression and, paradoxically, exclusion. (141)

I open my arms, make a movement of the self toward the other, the enemy, and do not know whether my action will be appreciated, supported, and reciprocated. I can become a savior or a victim—possibly both. Embrace

is grace, and “grace is gamble, always” (Smedes 1984 [*Forgive and Forget*], 137). (147)

Toward the end of the book, Volf discusses power, violence, nonviolence, and even comments on the book of Revelation, a text frequently used in holy war or just war theologies.

At the very heart of “the One who sits on the throne” is the cross. The world to come is ruled by the one who on the cross took violence upon himself in order to conquer the enmity and embrace the enemy. The Lamb’s rule is legitimized not by the “sword” but by its “wounds”; the goal of its rule is not to subject but to make people “reign forever and ever” (22:5). With the Lamb at the center of the throne, the distance between the “throne” and the “subjects” has collapsed in the embrace of the triune God. (301)

This book would be appropriate for a Lenten study, church book club, or a sermon series (see the chapter titles such as “The Cross, the Self, and the Other” and “Deception and Truth”).

Those who seek to be disturbed in a healthy way should “embrace” this book, and also seek out Volf’s more recent work *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2005), which further explores the issues raised in this review. One can also find an excellent video interview and presentation by Volf at <http://www.trinitywallstreet.org/multimedia/?video>, from the 2006 Trinity Institute, which had “Reconciliation” as its theme. Those who do not wish to be disturbed in a healthy way should avoid Volf at all costs...and most likely will continue excluding, dividing, warring, and even killing in God’s name.