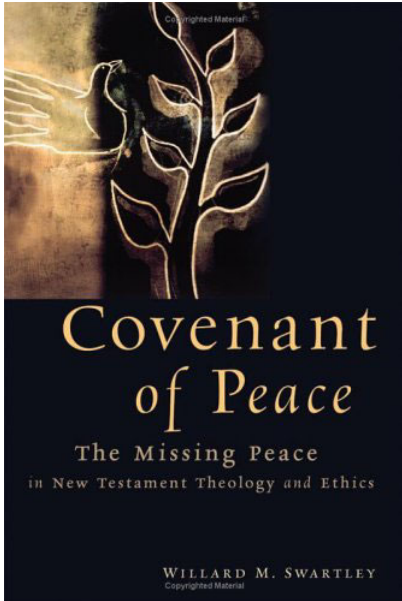


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Swartley, Willard M.

Covenant of Peace: The Missing Peace in New Testament Theology and Ethics

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006. Pp. xviii + 542. Paper. \$34.00. ISBN 0802829376.

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When I first read the statistics in the introduction to Swartley's work, I was shocked. The term *peace* occurs one hundred times in the New Testament, while the term *reconciliation* is found only seven or eight times. Those numbers, plus the intriguing subtitle of this book—*The Missing Peace in New Testament Theology and Ethics*—told me Swartley was on to something.

Swartley is Professor Emeritus of New Testament at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana; thus one should not be surprised at an emphasis on peace in his work. His contention is that the study of peace in the New Testament is “a topic often marginalized in texts on NT Theology and Ethics” (1). Even when the term is used, Swartley thinks it is “used in vain.” He suspects something selfish may be meant by it. For example, he wonders if the just-war tradition might be used to gain “peace” by superior power and violence “when necessary” and that “when necessary” qualification could be nothing more than “protection of national expansionist interests” (1). Before outlining too large of an assignment for himself, though, Swartley limits his task in an effort “to show that the major writings in the NT canon speak to the topic of peace and peacemaking” and “to show *how* we are to seek peace, the *motivations* that guide such actions, and what ‘habits of the heart’ or *practices* lead to peacemaking” (3).

Because Swartley believes the theme of “peace” has been largely marginalized in New Testament theology and ethics, he has sought to bring together in one volume an understanding of peace in the New Testament to fill a perceived void. He gives some statistics to try to document this perceived neglect. The word “peace” is not only found one hundred times in the New Testament, but also it is in every book except 1 John. Swartley’s surveys of New Testament theologies and New Testament ethical studies revealed minimal notice, if any at all, in most scholarly works. A detailed summary of this documentation is given in appendix 1 of the book. The survey was not merely a simplistic check of topical indexes of these works for the word “peace.” The works were also studied for their content. Swartley realized that an idea is often going to be expressed by more than a single term. Therefore, he searched for other terms, such as *reconciliation*, *nonviolence*, and *nonresistance* (6). He ultimately concluded that “this serious *peace* deficiency” was not limited to New Testament studies in theology and ethics, but it was also found in many of the best contributions to works on mission in the New Testament (7).

The bulk of Swartley’s work reviews biblical theology related to peace, with the emphasis being placed on the New Testament. For example, in the chapter on “Jesus and Peace: The Gospel of the Reign of God,” he recognizes that, although there are many “brands and flavors” of historical Jesus studies around today, one recurring emphasis is the “Jesus is the initiator of a peace movement” (13). He can cite such polar opposites as Borg, Crossan, and Wright to make his case. Chapter 2 contains a helpful word study on “peace,” before the work progresses from the Gospels through the Epistles. It concludes with a few topical chapters, primarily on ethics and moral formation.

Throughout the work one is often taken down a delightful side path. For example, the reader is given a distillation of Swartley’s teaching on certain matters related to war and peace from a quarter of a century of teaching and reflection. He summarizes this in seven strands of what he sees as biblical-theological emphasis (51–52).

Swartley develops biblical theological themes very well. In the chapter on Matthew, Jesus is presented as the King, the long-awaited Messiah, and the Son of David. However, he is not like the David of old who “destroys enemies to gain peace.” Matthew also subverts “the political domination strand of hope connected with the Davidic Messiah” and converts “it to a fundamentally different, indeed peaceable messianic, portrait” (79). Matthew emphasizes Jesus as the shepherd, showing continuity with David in that regard, albeit a young David, but this presents Christ as a more peaceable king in line with many Old Testament expectations (80–81). Finally, the motif of a father caring for children is brought in to round out the picture. All of these themes are build around the motif of a covenant of peace (see the chart on 84).

Swartley's work is copiously documented and an exhaustive effort to make a major contribution in an area where there has been a paucity of previous work done. This work would make an excellent textbook for a graduate seminar. This reviewer has already used *Covenant of Peace* in a doctoral seminar in biblical ethics. It was a challenging work for my students. They would have liked more clarity in two chief areas. First, can as many passages be applied to the issue of war and peace in society as Swartley seems to do, rather than to inner peace of mind and heart? Second, as one of my student put it, "While a Christian, as a Christian, should not strike back, the question of a citizen of a civil kingdom having the right or duty to defend the innocent by the use of all means if necessary, including force (and there are many levels of force, from an insistent tug to the use of a lethal weapon), should be explored in its own right."

These issues were explored by Swartley as space allowed, along with much biblical exegesis. One can quibble with him here and there at points, but we are indebted to him for a significant work that has brought a major theme, too long neglected, to the forefront of New Testament studies in theology and ethics.

Swartley's work is greatly enhanced by a bibliography, an author index, a subject index, and an index of Scripture and other ancient writings.