

# Civil disobedience as performative truth-telling: A Glaswegian story of Christians in Extinction Rebellion at COP26

*Laura Gilmour*

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*Rev Laura Gilmour is a palliative care chaplain based in Central Scotland, working within the Baptist tradition. In this paper she reflects on witnessing environmental protests at COP26, as a Legal Observer.*

## **Abstract**

Using Matthew 5:38–42 as a basis, this paper explores civil disobedience through non-violent direct action as performative truth-telling. With particular reference to environmental protest groups during COP26 in Glasgow, this paper suggests that civil disobedience is an example of a transforming initiative, similar to that which Jesus offers in this passage from the Sermon on the Mount. Civil disobedience viewed as such becomes a creative pathway to expose situational injustice and simultaneously offers the oppressor a way of reconciliation and opportunity to transform the situation of oppression. In the context of climate crisis, the transforming initiative of civil disobedience offers the State an opportunity for truthful recognition of the severity of the crisis and implores reconciliation through meaningful action and reform. Finally, the paper explores the ways in which Christians can partner with secular protest operations, highlighting that nonviolence, prophetic witness and prayerfulness are central elements for engaging in civil disobedience as truth-telling. The integration of faith values with protest moves the action beyond civil disobedience towards sacred peacemaking.

Non-violent direct action is a common mechanism used by social movements to invite change. Examples range from the disobedient midwives in Exodus

## *Civil disobedience as performative truth-telling*

1:5–22 to the civil rights movements of the 1950s and '60s.<sup>1</sup> More recently the environmental movement Extinction Rebellion has used non-violent direct action as a vehicle to highlight climate-related injustice, and to serve as a catalyst for systemic change in favour of environmentally just relationships between government, corporations, and people.<sup>2</sup> Utilising the hermeneutical strategy proposed by Glen Stassen and David Gushee, which reads the Sermon on the Mount as a series of 'transforming initiatives', this paper explores the role of civil disobedience as performative truth-telling.<sup>3</sup> The idea of transforming initiatives is evaluated in relation to the campaigns of Christians in Extinction Rebellion, and specifically protest actions at COP26, held in Glasgow in November 2021.

Non-violent direct action encompasses civil disobedience, which is the intentional disobeying of civil laws for moral, religious or political reasons, often inviting confrontation with authorities and leading to arrest, which is accepted without resistance.<sup>4</sup> Protesters engaged in non-violent direct action and civil disobedience believe that the violated laws support the injustice of the 'Domination System', a term David Augsburg uses to represent social, economic, and governmental systems which cause and uphold injustice and oppression.<sup>5</sup>

Extinction Rebellion is a secular movement, based on a self-organising model of leadership, which unites various supporter groups, including faith-based group Christian Climate Action (CCA), whose members have endured arrest, trial and imprisonment.<sup>6</sup> CCA state that they are 'inspired by Jesus Christ and guided by the Holy Spirit [to] carry out acts of public witness, nonviolent protest and civil disobedience to urge those in power to make

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<sup>1</sup> Elaine Storkey, *Women in a Patriarchal World: Twenty-five Empowering Stories from the Bible* (London: SPCK, 2020), 4–5.

<sup>2</sup> "About Us", Extinction Rebellion, <https://extinctionrebellion.uk/the-truth/about-us/>.

<sup>3</sup> David P. Gushee and Glen H. Stassen, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 98–105.

<sup>4</sup> Glen H. Stassen, *Just Peacemaking: Ten Practices for Abolishing War* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1998), 39.

<sup>5</sup> David Augsburg, *Dissident Discipleship: A Spirituality of Self-surrender, Love of God, and Love of Neighbor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 138.

<sup>6</sup> Christian Climate Action, "Christians in Court", *CCA Blog*, May 7, 2021, <https://christianclimateaction.org/2021/05/07/christians-in-court/>.

the changes needed.<sup>7</sup> For Christians involved in non-violent direct action, the Sermon on the Mount, as Jesus' most thorough commentary on discipleship, can inform practices when engaging in protests, particularly Matthew 5:38–42 as it addresses non-retaliation. In this essay it is assumed that resisting climate injustice is a worthy cause, but discussion of pacifism and just war theory are beyond scope here.

Commenting on the Sermon on the Mount in relation to discipleship, Ulrich Luz argues that Jesus' teaching is primarily concerned with the deeds of those who heard his words, and that these deeds are the distinguishing mark of discipleship, rather than the ethnic or racial heritage of the hearer. Jesus' words, according to Luz, are intended not only for those inside his circle of disciples but are meant to be heard and acted on by people outside that circle. It is in this way, through hearing and action, that people are called in to Jesus' discipleship.<sup>8</sup> The author of Matthew thought that Jesus' hearers understood that Jesus came to fulfil the Law and Prophets, and to set them apart as his disciples by requiring of them a higher ethic, or way of life. The Sermon then is not a collection of sayings or impossible ideals, but a relevant and empowering call to a way of life which exhibits the values of the kingdom of heaven in the here and now.<sup>9</sup> This is the hermeneutical approach which will be adopted throughout this paper.

Much historical discussion centres around interpretation of Matthew 5:39: 'But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.' The preceding verse 38, 'You have heard that it was said, "Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth"' refers to Exodus 24:25 and Leviticus 24:20, but Matthew 5:39 counsels against unlimited retaliation for an offence. In Matthew 5:39 Jesus calls his disciples to a higher ethic, indicated by his use of 'But I say to you'. Leo Tolstoy argues that this amounts to absolute non-resistance to evil even by the State, leading to a Christian anarchist position.<sup>10</sup> Clarence Jordan

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<sup>7</sup> "Who We Are", Christian Climate Action, <https://christianclimateaction.org/who-we-are/>.

<sup>8</sup> Ulrich Luz, *The Theology of the Gospel of Matthew* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 43.

<sup>9</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 61.

<sup>10</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* (San Bernardino, CA: Kshetra Books, 2016), 9–10. Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) was a Russian novelist and Christian anarcho-pacifist whose work in *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* influenced Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi. He believed in the absolute

interprets this to exclude violent retaliation and adopts a pacifist position.<sup>11</sup> Both interpretations, Walter Wink argues, amount to ‘impractical idealism’, as they are impossible to live out practically. In anarchism no acts are punishable, and the pacifist is powerless in the face of evil.<sup>12</sup> Instead he suggests that the Greek *antistenai* of verse 39 is better translated as ‘Do not retaliate against violence with violence.’<sup>13</sup> Glen Stassen and David Gushee agree: ‘Christians are not being taught an impossible ideal of not resisting evil, but are instead being taught to name and resist the sinful pattern of retaliation by violent, revengeful, or evil means.’<sup>14</sup>

Such an understanding moves interpretation of Matthew 5:39 from passivity in the face of evil, towards understanding the text as offering non-violent resistance to evil. Stassen and Gushee describe this as the ‘transforming initiative’ or ‘sacred peacemaking’;<sup>15</sup> Wink describes it as the ‘third way’. Regardless of the term, the transforming initiative points to active, non-violent resistance, suggesting an action (or initiative) which transforms a situation of oppression and injustice. In terms of Jesus’ own example, he was not passive in the face of evil, overcoming even the violence of crucifixion and death with words of forgiveness and the life-giving, saving act of resurrection.<sup>16</sup>

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separation of Church and State in favour of focussing on the Sermon on the Mount as the primary Christian ethic, and in absolute nonviolence, even at a state-against-state level, including warfare and the organisation of society based on principles of nonviolence.

<sup>11</sup> Clarence Jordan, *The Substance of Faith and Other Cotton Patch Sermons* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005), 74–75. Clarence Jordan (1912–1969) was an American farmer, pastor and founder of Koinonia Farm. A contemporary of Martin Luther King, he understood nonviolence to go beyond physical nonviolence and opposed other forms of violence, such as economic boycotts and sanctions.

<sup>12</sup> Walter Wink, *Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 9. Walter Wink (1913–2012) was an American theologian interested in political and institutional power structures which govern society, and in particular the role of non-violent resistance in opposing such powers.

<sup>13</sup> Wink, *Jesus and Nonviolence*, 11.

<sup>14</sup> Gushee and Stassen, *Kingdom Ethics*, 99. Stassen (1936–2014) and Gushee (b. 1962), both Professors in Christian Ethics from the US, use the Sermon on the Mount to consider contemporary ethical issues in *Kingdom Ethics*.

<sup>15</sup> David Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics: Core Convictions for Christians Today* (Canton, MI: Front Edge Publishing, 2022), 289.

<sup>16</sup> John Dear, *The Nonviolent Life* (Long Beach, CA: Pace e Bene Press, 2013), 57.

## *Civil disobedience as performative truth-telling*

The proposed triadic understanding of these verses can inform the actions of Christians engaged in non-violent direct action protesting climate injustice. Stassen and Gushee's hermeneutical approach to the Sermon on the Mount invites us to understand the sayings of Jesus in a triadic pattern, as opposed to the more traditional approach of a dualistic understanding, or antithetical approach. In a dualistic approach Jesus' sayings are understood to express traditional righteousness (e.g. 'You have heard it said' in Matthew 5:21) followed by Jesus' teaching in response which is usually expressed as 'But I say to you' (e.g. Matthew 5:22–26). A triadic hermeneutic instead highlights a structure which is expressed in the following pattern. Firstly there is an expression of traditional righteousness (e.g. 'You have heard it said'), followed by an example of sinful pattern (e.g. 'But I say to you'), before Jesus finishes with a statement offering a transforming initiative, that being an example of an alternative course of action, sometimes understood as the 'third way'.<sup>17</sup>

Although this essay is concerned with modern-day Glasgow, instances of non-violent resistance occurred during the time of Jesus' ministry. As such, Jesus' audience would have been familiar with the concept. Josephus reports incidents of non-violent resistance occurring during the governorship of Pontius Pilate, in which Jews conducted a mass demonstration in the city in protest at soldiers bearing medallions with images of Caesar, contravening religious laws prohibiting graven images in the city of Jerusalem.<sup>18</sup> More recently, transformative action was the working hermeneutic of both Martin Luther King and Gandhi who used non-violent direct action to disrupt the Domination System.<sup>19</sup> Further evidence for this hermeneutic can be seen when we examine Jesus' given examples. Jesus' use of 'you' (plural) in Matthew 5:39–42 may indicate that he is addressing oppressed people familiar with the scenarios outlined in this passage. The examples of turning the other cheek, giving your cloak, and walking a second mile, are the most studied, though 'giving to anyone who asks' could be understood as non-violent direct action against a system of economic oppression in favour of economic equality and justice.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Gushee and Stassen, *Kingdom Ethics*, 102.

<sup>18</sup> Paul L. Maier, "The Episode of the Golden Roman Shields at Jerusalem", *The Harvard Theological Review* 62, no. 1 (January 1969): 109.

<sup>19</sup> James McClendon, *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002), 60.

<sup>20</sup> Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Socio-political and Religious*



## **The slap (Matthew 5:39)**

Slapping a person on the right cheek in a first-century Judaic context was the act of a person wanting to exert their superiority over another. The perpetrator would use the left (unclean) hand to execute the slap, in an action of intentional humiliation.<sup>21</sup> In response, the victim could: violently retaliate inviting further punishment; passively accept the blow resulting in their suffering physical violence along with the inner violence of shame and humiliation; or the third option, which Jesus suggests, turning the other cheek.<sup>22</sup> In turning the other cheek, the victim seeks to redress the imbalance of power in the situation and refuses to accept the position of inferiority. The physical act of turning the other cheek, invites the perpetrator to treat the victim as one of equal status, by inviting a slap from the right hand to the victim's left cheek, and thus introducing an opportunity to redress the relational violence shown in the deliberate act of humiliation.

In this act of non-violent direct action the victim says [my commitment to nonviolence means that] I can't hit you back, but I am going to assert my equality with you.<sup>23</sup> The perpetrator can then mete further violence or accept the equal humanity of the victim. As such it becomes an act of performative truth-telling which exposes the injustice of the situation (the truth in this situation being, I will not accept your attempt to treat me as an unequal and to humiliate me).

In the context of climate protests, Extinction Rebellion protesters stand against the Domination System, which represents the powerful in a global climate context. An intentional tactic of Extinction Rebellion is to target governments and corporations in protest actions, avoiding blaming individuals whilst simultaneously acknowledging their personal complicity in corrupt systems.<sup>24</sup> Extinction Rebellion protesters assume their inferiority

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*Reading* (New York: Orbis Books, 2000), 142.

<sup>21</sup> The left hand was designated unclean as this was the hand used for 'unclean' tasks such as toileting. So the act of slapping of one's cheek becomes humiliating not only by being an act of violence but via the association with the uncleanliness of the left hand.

<sup>22</sup> Dear, *Nonviolent Life*, 76.

<sup>23</sup> Martin Newell, "Bible's mandate for NVDA, Pt2", *CCA*, video embedded on page [at 06:46–07:00], <https://christianclimateaction.org/get-involved/training/>.

<sup>24</sup> "Pillars of Power", *Rebel Academy training: XR DNA training*, Extinction Rebellion, <https://uk.rebellion.academy/course/index.php?categoryid=1>.



## *Civil disobedience as performative truth-telling*

here in relation to powerful governments and corporations, in this case understood as an inability to live environmentally sustainable lives within the Domination System which assumes a capitalist and consumptive approach to the environment. In recognition of the power that they do have, Extinction Rebellion protesters seek to amplify the voices of the oppressed in the global south, those most affected by climate change.

Christians' ability to live an environmentally sustainable lifestyle is directly dependent on the 'information integrity' of the Domination System.<sup>25</sup> Quite simply, that means the ability to know what is true about the conditions in which they live. The Domination System in this context does not exhibit the virtue of truthfulness regarding the severity of the climate crisis.<sup>26</sup> Thus, when Christians accept truthfulness as a primary Christian ethical virtue, they must demonstrate a commitment to 'seeking truth and doing justice,' which means seeking access to truthful information by which they can make ethical, moral and lifestyle choices which are congruent with the lives that they want to live as disciples of Jesus.<sup>27</sup> In short, how can Christians make righteous choices relating to God, Creation, and our global neighbours if the information by which those choices are made is not grounded in truth?

Like the slapped in Jesus' example, an 'untruth' is forced on the Christian disciple who wishes to live a life congruent with their values as a disciple of Jesus. In the case of the slapped it is the 'untruth' of inferiority in the relationship and the subsequent 'turning the other cheek' offers an invitation to introduce the truthfulness of equality back into the situation. In the case of the climate-conscious Christian seeking to make ethical choices in relation to the environment, it is through the Domination System's 'untruth' regarding the severity of the climate crisis, through greenwashing and other means which restrict the Christian's ability to make ethical choices which are congruent with the lifestyle that they wish to live.<sup>28</sup> Non-violent direct action invites the perpetrators to introduce truthfulness back into the situation.

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<sup>25</sup> Gushee, *Christian Ethics*, 103.

<sup>26</sup> "What is the IPCC Report and what does it say?" *The Guardian*, February 28, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/feb/28/what-is-the-ipcc-climate-change-report-and-what-will-it-say>.

<sup>27</sup> Gushee, *Christian Ethics*, 103.

<sup>28</sup> By way of a minor (and not too inflammatory!) example, we might use McDonald's introduction of paper straws as a way to appear more environmentally



## **Haves and have-nots (Matthew 5:40)**

The poor among Jesus' hearers likely only owned two garments, an outer coat and a shirt. Provisions of the Law indicate that it was common practice for the poor to pledge a coat against debts.<sup>29</sup> Suing another for their shirt then meant that they had no warm garment to sleep in. As a transforming initiative response to the injustice of being sued of your only possession, Jesus suggests giving your coat too, essentially leading to one being naked in court. Jesus teaches the way of non-violent direct action to expose the greed of the claimant and a corrupt court system upholding unjust laws. In this case witnessing the nakedness of an inferior could be seen as an insult on the claimant by the naked person.<sup>30</sup> The possibility of being naked in court then insulted the oppressor and the unjust systems of oppression whilst revealing the injustice of the situation.<sup>31</sup> In this act the oppressed regains dignity and control whilst offering the oppressor opportunity for reconciliation.<sup>32</sup> In the context of non-violent direct action, such reconciliation would be dropping the charges.<sup>33</sup>

Calling attention to the injustice of the Domination System is inherent to non-violent direct action within Extinction Rebellion, often through surprising and creative means. Whilst not referring specifically to the protest actions of Extinction Rebellion, Gushee describes the 'resist[ing] of violence without inflicting it' as 'sacred peacemaking'.<sup>34</sup> He elaborates that:

“Nonviolence” is not an adequate term, because it does not quite capture the creative, dynamic, surprising, transforming initiatives

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conscious, only for it to later transpire that the straws weren't recyclable: “Climate Change: Seven Ways to Spot Business Greenwashing”, BBC News, November 8, 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-59119693>.

<sup>29</sup> Deuteronomy 24:10–13, 17.

<sup>30</sup> Michael L. Satlow, “Jewish Construction of Nakedness in Late Antiquity”, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 116, no. 3 (Autumn 1997): 440.

<sup>31</sup> Wink, *Jesus and Nonviolence*, 19.

<sup>32</sup> Christian Climate Action, *Time to Act: A Resource Book by the Christians in Extinction Rebellion* (London: SPCK, 2020), 21.

<sup>33</sup> See also, Jessica Elgot, “Semi-naked climate protesters disrupt Brexit debate”, *The Guardian*, April 1, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/01/semi-naked-climate-protesters-disrupt-brexit-debate>.

<sup>34</sup> Gushee, *Christian Ethics*, 288–89.



## *Civil disobedience as performative truth-telling*

that Jesus commands here. And it does not quite capture Jesus' striking picture of the merciful, loving heavenly Father whose character is honoured by such creative peacemaking. Sacred violence here gives way to *sacred peacemaking*.<sup>35</sup>

The biblical example of giving one's coat underlines the 'creative, dynamic, surprising', nature of transforming initiatives in the context of civil disobedience.<sup>36</sup> It is a creative solution, surprising in nature because it would be totally unexpected. Protest actions at COP26 in Glasgow were resplendent with such creative, dynamic and surprising acts. Even before COP26 officially began, an interfaith group, which included members of CCA, embarked on a pilgrimage, "Camino to COP26", from Birmingham to Glasgow, a trip of 500 miles which took 55 days. As they approached Glasgow on the day before the COP opened, protestors walked through the streets of Glasgow, singing a haunting song of lament led by a lone female wearing the 'Coat of Hopes'.<sup>37</sup>

The Coat of Hopes was made from small patches of blanket on which people and communities had sewn pictures and words 'expressing their griefs, remembrances, prayers and their hopes for their local landscapes in the face of climate breakdown'.<sup>38</sup> Later, when COP26 had begun, delegates, decision makers and world leaders were invited to wear the 'Coat of Hopes' for a short while, now heavy with the weight of all the patches, and were asked to 'feel the weight, and the warmth of [the people's] hopes'.<sup>39</sup> The Coat of Hopes is declared not to be a protest coat, but rather a creative endeavour of those who have been involved in its making and a physical manifestation of their hope.

Other creative actions included the 'Serpent of Capitalism', a 30-foot sculptural artwork which was paraded around the streets of Glasgow during the opening protest marches. The Serpent forms part of a research project by Walker and Bromwich, which 'explores the dominant belief system of Capitalism and the ways in which art practice can play a role in

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<sup>35</sup> Gushee, 289.

<sup>36</sup> Gushee, 289.

<sup>37</sup> Coat of Hopes, "Story", video embedded on page, <https://www.coatofhopes.uk/story>.

<sup>38</sup> Coat of Hopes, "Home", video, 00:34–00:40, <https://www.coatofhopes.uk/v2-home>.

<sup>39</sup> Coat of Hopes, "Home", video, 00:40–00:56.

## *Civil disobedience as performative truth-telling*

questioning this system.<sup>40</sup> The invitation to truth-telling is also seen in a non-violent direct action by the group Scientist Rebellion who pasted academic papers to the Scottish Power building, exposing the company's green-washing practices.<sup>41</sup> Such actions highlight injustice by performatively and creatively revealing the truth, and in doing so invite the Domination System into truthful dialogue and reconciliation, through meaningful action and reform. Each action of performative truth-telling inherently contains an invitation to reconciliation.

Returning to the judicial setting, which is the example given by Jesus, civil disobedience necessitating arrest is utilised by Extinction Rebellion to clog up the judicial system with low-level disobedience offences. This tactic is employed to highlight the judicial system's complicity in upholding the unjust laws of the Domination System, and CCA members use court appearances as opportunity to share testimony regarding their obedience to God's higher moral law over civil laws.<sup>42</sup> Modern examples of non-violent direct action can never be directly equivalent to the biblical examples which Jesus employs, but in both situations we see creative examples of subversive protest which attempt to bring truth to situations of oppression. Protest actions at COP26 used subversive and creative actions which attempt to uncover the unspoken truth of a given situation. Both the biblical and the modern examples become ways to subversively highlight inherent situational injustice, and also invite the perpetrator in each situation to a new relationship of reconciliation through truthfulness and action.



### **Oppressive service (Matthew 5:41)**

Matthew's third example draws from the resented Roman occupation of Judea, where a soldier could command a Jew to carry their pack for one

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<sup>40</sup> A Walker (Artist), "Serpent of Capitalism", 2022, <https://www.research.ed.ac.uk/en/publications/serpent-of-capitalism>.

<sup>41</sup> Scientist Rebellion (@scientistRebel1), "SR activists are currently getting unglued and arrested at Scottish Power", Twitter, November 11, 2021, <https://twitter.com/ScientistRebel1/status/1458835951950745600>.

<sup>42</sup> Christian Climate Action, "CCA rebels share their court statements", YouTube video, July 27, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bpsTLx5AEig&t=1662s>.

mile.<sup>43</sup> In offering to carry the pack for a second mile the oppressed person confronts the soldier with a dilemma, because the soldier could be punished if found to be abusing this power.<sup>44</sup> The action invites the oppressor to consider the situation's injustice, and 'calls the adversary to a new level of consciousness of what he or she is doing.'<sup>45</sup> This realisation, and reminder, of the injustice of the situation invites the soldier to reconsider their actions and choose a more just course of action instead. The act of resistance invites the soldier to think again. Similarly, as with the other examples, the transforming initiative of offering to carry the pack for a second mile calls for a more equal and dignified relationship and invites an opportunity for reconciliation. There is a subversive invitation to a more just and equal relationship inherent in the act Jesus proposes.

One of the demands of Extinction Rebellion is the creation of a Citizens' Assembly consisting of diverse and equally represented people to create solutions for the climate emergency. The Assembly would allow the creation of a decentralized system of governance outside the Domination System, with the intention, or hope, that these discussions, ideas and recommendations are taken on board by those that have power to effect change.<sup>46</sup> Through the use of Citizens' Assemblies, those in an inferior relationship (i.e. those outside the Domination System) have a forum in which their voices and ideas can be heard. The hearing of diverse voices is the first step in the process of reconciliation; it is the invitation to the Domination System to engage in truthful conversation with those over whom it has power. If that invitation is accepted, then change can hopefully be effected. An example of this focus on reconciliation is evidenced in protesters gifting 800 trees to lawmakers, as an invitation to meaningful action to offset carbon emissions through tree-planting.<sup>47</sup> Through the use of Citizens' Assemblies and practical efforts such as in the example above, protest groups demonstrate their willingness to get involved in creating a

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<sup>43</sup> Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 141.

<sup>44</sup> Carter, 139.

<sup>45</sup> Glen Stassen, *Living the Sermon on the Mount: A Practical Hope for Grace and Deliverance* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 93.

<sup>46</sup> Clare Farrell, Alison Green and Sam Knights, eds., *This is Not a Drill: An Extinction Rebellion Handbook* (London: Penguin, 2019), 12.

<sup>47</sup> "Extinction Rebellion Activists Plant Trees Outside UK Parliament", *Euronews*, October 8, 2019, <https://www.euronews.com/2019/10/08/extinction-rebellion-activists-plant-trees-outside-uk-parliament>.

more just future. The biblical examples show the oppressed offering to serve, and the modern example shows those without power willing to share in the work of coming up with solutions to the problem at hand.



## **Conclusion**

Jesus' examples address people personally affected by injustice and counsel against violent retaliation. Arguably, the examples are analogous with Extinction Rebellion protests which are postured towards protection of the earth. Examination of the verses from Matthew 5 shows that whilst the oppressed are advised against violent retaliation, there exists also subversive, contextual commentary relating to the situational context of the offence. When the oppressed act on Jesus' nonviolent transforming initiative they not only react against the personal offence, but also against the injustice of the situation which brought the offence about. This is especially prominent in 'giving your coat' and 'going the second mile' which highlight inherent injustices in the judicial system and the utilization of forced labour respectively.

Examining Matthew 5:38–42 in the light of Stassen and Gushee's transformative initiatives we see that not only is non-violent direct action permissible, but Jesus suggests this as a way of responding to violence, injustice and oppression. James McClendon says that 'engagement with the world was by Matthew's lights not optional or accidental, but lay at the heart of obedient Christian witness.'<sup>48</sup> In the case of climate injustice, the oppression becomes the Domination System's oppression of the earth's resources, of an individual's freedom to live in righteous and godly ways towards creation, and of those worst affected by climate change. If non-violent direct action is permissible, then Jesus' disciples should consider the following to ensure that when engaging in such actions as performative truth-telling, the focus remains on God's higher moral law.

Firstly, Jesus' resolute insistence on nonviolence demonstrates the importance of remaining steadfast in this commitment when Christians engage in protest actions. John Dear suggests that this includes violence towards oneself, which would preclude acts that inflict physical or

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<sup>48</sup> James Wm McClendon, *Ethics: Systematic Theology, Vol. 1* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), 171.

## *Civil disobedience as performative truth-telling*

psychological violence on the self.<sup>49</sup> Retired vicar Tim Hewes, of Christian Climate Action, sewed his lips together in protest against media silence on the issue of climate injustice; a stark example of meting violence against oneself.<sup>50</sup> This issue of violence against self is complex, and cannot be explored in full here, but by Dear's understanding, such an act should be avoided. A commitment to nonviolence and to kingdom values of peace and truth becomes a way of life which should colour approaches to engaging in non-violent direct action and sacred peacemaking.<sup>51</sup>

Secondly, the motivation of Jesus' disciples in partnering with secular protest groups should be spiritual or convictional, meaning that faithfulness to God supersedes the prospect of success.<sup>52</sup> Fr Martin Newell, of Christian Climate Action, summarises this as follows: 'We don't only act because we think we can win. We act because it's the right thing to do. We act to bear witness to the truth, to witness our faith in God and to stand with those who are suffering.'<sup>53</sup>

Disciples operating in secular movements must adopt a posture of faithful prayerfulness. Jim Douglass suggests that in doing so, civil disobedience itself can become an act of prayer, an action which proclaims, 'Thy kingdom come, thy will be done'.<sup>54</sup> Prayerful integration of faith into protest actions ensures the primary allegiance to Jesus isn't confused with Extinction Rebellion's secular motivations. CCA's actions at COP26 included prayer vigils, the earlier mentioned pilgrimage of 'Camino to COP26', and a 'March of Jericho' around J.P. Morgan bank.<sup>55</sup> The 'March of Jericho' involved circling the bank seven times, accompanied with the banging of samba drums and the blowing of whistles, a creative protest expression with clear echoes of Joshua 6:1–27. In all these examples the

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<sup>49</sup> Dear, *Nonviolent Life*, 25.

<sup>50</sup> "Glue protester sews lips to shame Murdoch", *Church Times*, August 6, 2021, <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2021/6-august/news/uk/uk-news-in-brief>.

<sup>51</sup> Gushee, *Christian Ethics*, 98.

<sup>52</sup> Gushee, 98

<sup>53</sup> Martin Newell, "Standing with the Crucified", in *Time to Act*, 133.

<sup>54</sup> Jim Douglass, "Civil Disobedience as Prayer", in *Peace is the Way: Writings on Nonviolence from the Fellowship of Reconciliation* (New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 152.

<sup>55</sup> Extinction Rebellion Scotland (@ScotlandXr), "Walls of Jericho March STILL GOING!!", Twitter, November 11, 2021, <https://mobile.twitter.com/ScotlandXr/status/1458870511195365390>.

### *Civil disobedience as performative truth-telling*

biblical witness of the protesters' faith is brought into the arena of protest and exhibits to all around that their hope remains in God.

When acting as part of secular movements, disciples are uniquely placed to witness to the values of the kingdom of God. Speaking of her experience of the occupation of Lambeth Bridge at the October 2019 Rebellion, Ruth Valerio says, 'We sometimes forget that the earliest followers of the resurrected Jesus were themselves a subversive, minority group who refused to acknowledge anyone as Lord except Jesus Christ, and they suffered the consequences for doing so.'<sup>56</sup>

Through non-violent direct action disciples stand firstly in obedience to the ethic of Jesus as detailed in the Sermon on the Mount. Non-violent direct action as performative truth-telling confronts governments with the stark truth of climate injustice and the Domination System's complicity in it. Disobedience to civil law becomes obedience to God's higher moral law, and our disobedience becomes witness of God's kingdom values. It is in our very disobedience that we invite truth-telling and reconciliation of the Domination System with the values of God's kingdom.

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<sup>56</sup> Ruth Valerio, "We Were Not Prepared for Candles and Prayers", in *Time to Act*, 4.