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PACIFISM

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BY
TROY SELLEY
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INTRODUCTION

Our world today is wrought with violence. Look no further than the local news for reports of violent crimes, rape, and murder. The war to end all wars ended in 1918, and yet the world witnessed a second world-wide conflict only 21 years later. War continues to rage between nations to this day, in the name of power, in the name of terrorism, and even in the name of God.

Military spending in the United States for 2010 is budgeted to be a staggering 636.3 billion dollars\(^1\). In contrast, the United Nations Millennium Development Goals require only 195 billion dollars to fund their global poverty-reduction strategies by 2015.\(^2\) The resources spent on warfare throughout history is unfathomable. Equally so, the pain, sorrow, and suffering caused by warfare through history is unimaginable. History proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that no amount of power can perfectly deter evil and violence. In fact, John Howard Yoder states, “The Christian responsibility for defeating evil is to resist the temptation to meet it on its own terms. To crush the evil adversary is to be vanquished by him because it means accepting his standards.”\(^3\) How then, might a Christian live in such a way as to defeat the evil that is present in this world?

THE CHOICE OF PACIFISM

Pacifism comes from the Latin *pax facere*, which translated means “to make peace.”\(^4\)

Pacifism is an ethic founded on an interpretation of Christ's life and Christ's words that

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4 Glen H. Stassen and David P. Gushee, Kingdom Ethics – Following Jesus in Contemporary Context: (Downers Grove, IL, IVP Academic), 167.
set an example of love and peace. Furthermore, pacifism describes a way of life of
discipleship for Christians to follow based on an imitation of Christ's life and obedience
to Christ's teachings, again founded on his example of love and peace.

Pacifism is based primarily, though not exclusively, on Jesus' teaching in the Sermon
on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), and the parallel Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6). Robert
Barclay, a seventeenth-century Quaker, sums up well the pacifist belief:

> Whoever can reconcile this, “Resist not evil,” with “Resist evil by force”; again, “give also thy other cheek,” with “Spoil them, make a prey of them, pursue them with fire and sword”; or “Pray for those who persecute you,” with “Persecute them by fines, imprisonment, and death itself.” Whoever can find a means to reconcile these things, may be supposed, also to have found a way to reconcile God with the Devil, Christ with Anti-Christ, light with darkness, and good with evil.\(^5\)

**PACIFISM THROUGHOUT HISTORY**

Jesus Christ set the ultimate example of peace and love when he chose obedience to
the plans of his Heavenly Father over the temptations of Satan to grasp power by
rejecting God. Jesus chose not to resist evil in the present time, knowing that complete
justice would come through his Father's plans at time still to come.

From the time of Jesus Christ to the time when Constantine the Great granted official
status to the Christian religion in 313, the church was unanimously pacifist.\(^6\) Christians
across the Roman empire submitted to the government except in cases that violated their
relationship with God. For example, the early Christians refused to comply with practice
of Emperor worship, though this act of defiance could cost them their lives. In another
instance, the early church peacefully resisted the attempts of the Emperor Caligula to set

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\(^6\) Stassen and Gushee, Kingdom Ethics, 167.
up statues of himself in the temple in A.D. 40. The book of Acts records a community of believers devoted to one another and seeking to share the Good News.

The merging of the church and the state by Constantine led to the abandonment of pacifism for the next millennium. History records many grievous examples of the church prompting, sanctioning, and participating in state actions of war and violence against declared enemies of the empire and of Christendom. The crusades against Jews and Muslims stand out as a prime example of wars unjustly waged in the name of God. The number of human lives lost in these endeavors can never be fully known.

The Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century spurred the emergence of several radical pacifist movements. Three particular movements birthed what are known as the peace churches. In the sixteenth century, the Mennonites came out of the Anabaptist Radical Reformation to create the first peace church. In the seventeenth century the Society of Friends, also known as the Quakers, emerged out of Radical Puritanism to create the second peace church. And finally, in the eighteenth century, the Brethren emerged out of Radical Pietism to create the third peace church.

Today individual Christians from all denominations may choose to follow the pacifism ethic, due to a greater emphasis on the Gospels and a greater awareness of the destructiveness of war.

THE PRACTICE OF PACIFISM

As with many Christian ethics, the details of how one might live out this ethic are debated. Pacifism is generally divided into several different forms.

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8 Brown, Biblical Pacifism, 6.
9 Stassen and Gushee, Kingdom Ethics, 166.
The first form is nonresistant pacifism. Anabaptists of the sixteenth century lived a nonresistant form of pacifism. Anabaptists baptized believers upon confession of faith in Christ, rather than as a child at birth. Because this practice was contrary to the state-sanctioned religious practices, their religious movement was deemed illegal, and the state stripped away any political power and public influence the Anabaptists might have had. The situation was further aggravated by their pacifist refusal to in any way, shape, or form participate in military action. This included a refusal to be a part of the military, and a refusal to even pay special taxes collected for the purpose of military campaigns. Many Anabaptists withdrew from society as much as was possible, and they cared for one another following the model of the early church.

A second practice of pacifism is known as nonviolent resistance. This approach to making peace is founded on the Scripture found in Romans that says, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good,” (Romans 12:21). Whereas pacifism in the nonresistant sense meant strict antimilitarism, or an unconditional rejection of war, nonviolent resistance meant an active engagement in the process of seeking peace through nonviolent methods. One of the most famous pacifists using nonviolent resistance was Mohandas Gandhi. Though not a professing Christian, Gandhi was known to have loved the Jesus of the New Testament, calling him “our peace.” Martin Luther King Jr. is another well-known pacifist who employed nonviolent resistance. The first of King's six principles found in his book *Stride Toward Freedom* maintained that nonviolence is not passive, but the way of resistance for courageous people.

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A common element running through the ethic of pacifism is a radical nonconformity to the ways of the sinful world. John Howard Yoder writes:

When Jesus used the language of liberation and revolution, announcing a restoration of “kingdom” community and a new pattern of life, without predicting or authorizing particular violent techniques for achieving his good ends, he need not have seemed to his listeners to be a dreamer; he could very easily have been understood as updating the faith of Jehosaphat and Hezekiah, a faith whereby a believing people would be saved despite their weakness, on condition that they be still and wait to see the salvation of the Lord.13

This is an important theme in the pacifist ethic – that God will save his people in their weakness. This theme leads to the most common objection to pacifism today – that it is seen as passivism, that it is not a realistic solution to the aggressiveness of evil in this world. So let us now consider the Scriptural case for pacifism, as well as the objections against pacifism.

A BRIEF THEOLOGY OF PACIFISM

The Hebrew and Greek words for justice (including synonyms such as peace, mercy, grace, and reconciliation) are repeated 1,060 times throughout Scripture.14 Clearly this reflects the heart of God common refrain throughout scripture reflects the heart of God.

The most obvious argument for pacifism is that it takes the way of Jesus and the witness of the New Testament as authoritative for our witness.15 To follow the way of Jesus is discipleship in the most pure sense, to follow our Lord. However, this does not answer the question of whether the life is possible or practical.

It has been argued Jesus assumed an imminent establishment of the new Kingdom of

14 Brown, Biblical Pacifism, 68.
15 Stassen and Gushee, Kingdom Ethics, 166.
have to be followed for very long, because his return was very soon. Followers of Christ could withstand the persecution of living so radically different from the rest of society for this short period of time. But now, because the kingdom of God has not come as Jesus might have expected, his teachings cannot be taken as literal instructions for living.

Pacifism rejects this argument of Christ's supposed imminent expectations. The Gospels, including the Sermon on the Mount, provide practical lessons for living the new kind of life Jesus came to grant us through is death and resurrection. In a study of the Beatitudes, Thomas Trzyna concluded that the first three Beatitudes provide the characteristics that are required for a life of engagement, and the later Beatitudes focus attention on actions that be taken and the results that one can anticipate because of these actions. The Beatitudes can be specifically applied to the issue of resolving conflict without the use of violence. This radical life of peace and nonviolence is exactly what Jesus had in mind for us, just as he lived and taught.

If pacifism is based on the love and peace exemplified in the life of Jesus Christ in the New Testament, then one must also deal with the overwhelming amount war and violence present in the Old Testament. It appears that much of this is approved, if not commanded by God the Father. This ranges from the warfare carried out by Moses, Joshua, and the judges, to the presence of the death penalty in some cases of disobeying God's commands, to the predictions of Israel being crushed by Babylon and the eventual destruction of Israel's enemies. Yoder proposes several reasons for the war and violence in the Old Testament:

16 Thomas Trzyna, Blessed are the Pacifists – The Beatitudes and Just War Theory: (Waterloo, ON, Herald Press, 2006), 63.
1. War is the outworking of the unwillingness of Israel, and especially the kings of Israel, to trust God.\textsuperscript{17}

This is most visible throughout the book of Chronicles. For example, in Chronicles 16 God condemns King Asa of Judah for making an alliance with the king of Damascus, rather than trusting God to bring victory. The end result is God stating, “You have done a foolish thing, and from now on you will be at war,” (2 Chronicles 16:9)

2. The holy war of the Old Testament is a religious event, that ended when demanded a king like the neighboring nations.\textsuperscript{18}

In much the same way as animals and first fruits were sacrificed to God, so a city to be attacked was devoted to God. This can be seen in the explicit instructions given to the Israelites that everything was to be destroyed, and nothing was to be taken. In a holy war, there was no booty of plunder, and therefore no profit. God remained the one who provided for his people. When the Israelites stopped trusting in God as their true king and demanded a human authority, the period of the holy war thus ended.

3. Redefining the true sons of Abraham

the Israelites were the chosen people of God. But throughout history, and culminating with the Gospel message, God made it possible for Jews and Gentiles alike to become sons of Abraham. Therefore, Yoder says, “The willingness to trust God for the security and identity of one's peoplehood, which was the original concrete moral meaning of the sacrament of holy warfare, is now translated to become the willingness or readiness to renounce those definitions of one's own people and of the enemy which gave

\textsuperscript{17} Yoder, The Politics of Jesus, 80.
\textsuperscript{18} Yoder, The Original Revolution, 98.
to the original sacrament its meaning.”\(^{19}\) There can be no more enemy if Jesus Christ has died for everyone, and made it possible for all to become sons of Abraham, children of God.

THE WORLD'S RESPONSE TO PACIFISM

In a world bent towards war and violence, the witness of pacifism has caused the world to make concessions in recognizing and respecting an alternative way to life.

Since the sixteenth century when the peace churches emerged and railed against war and the relationship of church and state, the practice of conscientious objector and alternative service has been observed. Members of the peace churches who reject violence have been allowed to serve in non-combatant roles, or in homeland service in support of the war effort. However, some pacifists have rejected any and all efforts that might support a war effort, which has resulted in persecution of varying degrees.

The peace churches also have a long-established history of actively seeking peace through humanitarian efforts. Members of the peace churches are known to enter war zones to bring humanitarian aid to civilian victims. On a continuing basis, many of these churches actively practice missionary work relating to basic human needs – supplying medical aid, training for farmers, education for women and children, as well as building churches to share the Gospel message.

MY PACIFISM POSITION

I chose pacifism for this project out of deep personal interest. I pastor an Evangelical

\(^{19}\) Yoder, The Original Revolution, 104.
Mennonite Church (EMC), one of the traditional peace church traditions discussed above.

Our conference constitution reads:

We believe in the life of peace. We are called to walk in the steps of the Lamb of God, the Prince of Peace. Everything about his life, his teachings, and his redemptive death on the cross, summons us to a life of nonviolence.

As nonresistant Christians, we cannot support war, whether as officers, soldiers, combatants or noncombatants, or direct financial contributors.

Instead of taking up arms, we should do whatever we can to lessen human distress and suffering, even at the risk of our own lives. In all circumstances, we should be peacemakers and ministers of reconciliation.

And yet, I found myself without a real conviction towards pacifism. In fact, I found myself rejecting pacifism on account of stories I had been told, of the “pacifist” man who claimed he would be willing to make a cup of tea for the man who was raping his wife. I was certain that is not what Jesus would do, and if this was pacifism, I wanted nothing to do with it.

I myself come from a line of family members who have served our country in the first and second world wars, including my great grandfather who survived the trenches of Vimy Ridge. So in beginning this study, I would not have called myself a pacifist. Like most people in this world, I believed that war was a horrible thing, and yet I also believed it was a “necessary evil” to keep evil in check and to protect the innocent.

As I now proceed through this study and reflection, I find myself being harshly corrected, and at the same time drawn towards the way of pacifism. First of all, Christ's example is crystal-clear. He chose obedience to God's plan all the way to his death on a cross. Though he had the power to summon help, he chose the way of peace. Second, I am finding a place for my passion for justice, since peace and justice go hand in hand.
What frustrates me most of all about the way of peace is its slow progress. One author proposed that the way of peace takes generations to make a difference, which is exactly why humans like violence – its fast and to the point. The results, for better or worse, are instantaneous.

At this point, I best define myself as supporting war as a last resort, which is more in line with a position of just war. However, I do understand the slippery slope that comes with defining a just war, and how easily both sides of any war can claim a just war.

I have discovered the true courageous and faithful nature of pacifism in this study. While I still have personal questions concerning the practical application of pacifism in some extreme circumstances, I think that perhaps it is the extreme circumstances when our ethic is truly tested. Would I have the courage to put my faith in the way of Christ when faced with a life of death situation? Would I practice the way of peace and love, or resort to violence in hopes of self-preservation, or preservation of nation, rights, and freedoms? I think it comes down to answering the question – Who, or what, do I worship?
Bibliography


For more than three decades Canadian Southern Baptist Seminary and College has been entrusted with the training and theological education of pastors and other church workers in and through local churches throughout the world. The small group of churches that...