

1-1-2002

Why the Christian Church Ought to be Pacifist

Lee C. Camp
lee.camp@lipscomb.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Camp, Lee C. (2002) "Why the Christian Church Ought to be Pacifist," *Leaven*: Vol. 10: Iss. 2, Article 8.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol10/iss2/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Leaven by an authorized editor of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu.

Why the Christian Church Ought to be Pacifist¹

LEE C. CAMP

A theology of Christian nonviolence should begin with the ultimate claim of Christian faith: the lordship of Jesus the Messiah. Orthodox Christianity claims that Jesus dwelt in our midst as *God incarnate*. Jesus embodied most fully the *will of God*; he was—he is—the *Word of God*. On the other hand, orthodox Christology claims that Jesus was not merely *God*, but *God incarnate*: Jesus embodied most fully the will of God. He was, *in his humanity*, the Word of God.

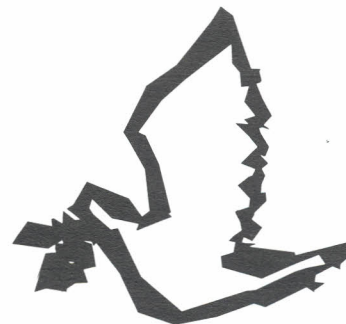
Nonetheless, this Word of God was not recognized among those with whom he dwelt; moreover, he was spurned and crucified. The one who was love was scorned, spat upon, murdered. Yet the Father vindicated the crucified one: he raised him from the dead, proclaiming the lordship of Christ *over all things*: as resurrected one Jesus is Lord of Lords, King of Kings, head over all principalities and powers.

Here precisely is the one point of distinction between disciples of Jesus and all other humanity; here precisely is the only *necessary* point of differentiation between “church” and “world.” The difference lies neither in a particular morality nor in a particular set of rules and regulations.² Instead the precise point of distinction between church and world lies in the claim that Jesus of Nazareth is the one who embodied the full reign of God, the full will of God, and that as crucified and resurrected one, he is proclaimed lord over all the cosmos.

Since, biblically, this is the one point of distinction between church and world, then this is the point from which we must embark upon all discussions of the appropriate way for Christians to be in the world. We claim to serve one who has ultimate power, ultimate authority. The Christian makes this bold, apparently foolish claim: that Jesus is indeed lord over all. The fundamental consideration for a “Christian politic” then is how we might bear witness to the lordship of Christ in the very real social circumstances in which we find ourselves. Many have suggested that taking Jesus’ teaching seriously means one must “withdraw” from the “real world.” But quite to the contrary, what we have throughout the teaching and life and ministry of Jesus is precisely a “political” ethic—i.e., taken in the classical sense of “politics,” Jesus is concerned with the manner in which communities, and individuals within those communities, conduct their affairs.

In other words, Jesus provides alternative answers to perennial political and social questions. How does one deal with offenses? By forgiving them. How does one deal with scarcity? By sharing one’s provisions. How does one deal with injustice? Not by returning evil for evil, but by speaking and bearing witness to the truth that the powers-that-be do not want publicly announced. How does one deal with one’s enemies? By loving them.

So quite consistently, Jesus went about proclaiming the appearing of the kingdom of God, the long-awaited triumph and rule of God in human history. Jesus’ model prayer makes explicit what the king-



dom of God is all about: “when you pray,” he said, “pray this way: . . . Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” The parallelism employed here provides Jesus’ succinct definition of “kingdom”: that God’s will be done on earth, even as it is in heaven.³

Not surprisingly then, the admonition to “repent” always accompanied Jesus’ proclamation of the coming near of the kingdom. *Metanoia* primarily connotes *change*: to participate in the kingdom, one must change. Jesus never rebuked his disciples for expecting a *kingdom on earth*, or a *kingdom even now*, in the midst of human history—he rebuked his disciples instead for mistaking the shape and manner in which that

**Jesus is concerned
with the manner in which
communities, and individuals
within those communities,
conduct their affairs.**

kingdom should be made manifest. To those who expected a violent militaristic overthrow of their oppressors, Jesus embodied the way of suffering servanthood. To those who desired the nationalistic triumph of a restored Israel, Jesus proclaimed that the Gentiles too were to be the people of God. To those who belittled the concerns of children, Jesus

reproved them and received the little ones. To those who thought they knew (quite wrongly) what it meant for “messiah” to come, Jesus told them quite simply to keep their mouths shut. To those who thought the fullness of religion was a holiness that lent itself to hypocritical legalism, Jesus pronounced harsh words of condemnation. To all these many different (wrong) expectations, Jesus announced a different way.

Concerning peacemaking, Jesus explicitly did not allow his disciples to take up the way of the sword. Jesus *was* ministering in the midst of very real situations of violence and oppression. Numerous “false messiahs” populated the first century, and one professed way of being messiah was to take up arms against the Roman Empire. When Jesus told his disciples to love their enemies, they would have undoubtedly brought to mind the Romans and the Roman sympathizers who implemented Roman rule over the Jews in their own homeland. Rather than taking up the sword, as the Zealots desired to do, Jesus commanded them to go the second mile, to turn the other cheek, and to pray for those that spitefully use you. Jesus took the *lex talionis* (“an eye for an eye”), which the Pharisees had evidently made into a rule of retribution,⁴ and undid it—you shall not return an eye for an eye. You shall not return like for like, but offer the other cheek, offer your coat along with your cloak, or go the second mile.

In light of such, Gandhi said, “The only people on earth who do not see Christ and his teachings as nonviolent are Christians.” Indeed Jesus himself made clear that the way of the cross—to suffer with and

**it should be noted that
“nonviolence” does not mean
passivity. “Pacifism” ought not
to mean “passivism.”**

because of and on behalf of others unjustly—was not only *his* way of bringing about the will of God, but was what he intended for his disciples as well. “You take up your cross and follow me,” was an invitation that none of the twelve initially accepted, since Jesus was crucified alone, between two *lestai*—two

terrorists who were likely seeking to overthrow the Roman empire through violence. Three revolutionaries, executed together—but two radically different programs for revolution.

In this regard, it should be noted that “nonviolence” does not mean *passivity*. “Pacifism” ought not to mean “passivism.” Christians must not be *passive* in the face of evil and injustice; instead, we seek peaceful, nonviolent resolutions to conflict, but do not cede the legitimacy of violence, even as a “last resort.”⁵ Jesus’ own example shows that his way is not some naïve “niceness.” Many persons point to Jesus cleansing the temple with a whip as if this case settles the question once and for all that Jesus could not have possibly been advocating nonviolence. Quite to the contrary, all this shows is that Jesus was not advocating *passivity*. He was willing to make a scene in order to question the offensive and complacent economic practices that everyone accepted as quite normal. His action in the temple was all very unmessianic—his actions

proclaimed in no uncertain terms that he would not accept the prevailing social and religious and cultural norms, but was bringing about a fundamentally different order. Burning a flag might be the closest cultural analog we have to the type of offense Jesus here engendered.

THE NEW TESTAMENT WITNESS TO CRUCIFORM PEACEMAKING

Not only did Jesus teach nonviolence with regard to peacemaking and dealing with offenses; the entire New Testament bears witness that the way of the cross is the way God has made peace and the way disciples are expected to bear witness to that peace. A few examples (all NRSV) must suffice.

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us . . . that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. (Eph 2:13–17)

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. (Phil 2:5–8)

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. . . . In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. (Col 1:15–20)

Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. (Heb 12:1–4)

Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh. For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. . . . When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. (1 Pet 2:18–24; cf. 1 Pet 3:13–18)

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. . . . Do not repay anyone evil for evil. . . . If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Rom 12:14–21; cf. 1 Thess 5:15; 1 Cor 6:1–8)

These texts might be summarized in this way: in the New Testament, the pattern for making peace is cross and resurrection, patiently bearing unjust suffering followed by the vindication of a faithful God. Moreover, this model of cross and resurrection becomes the template for Christian ethics. We are not given some sort of absolute moral norm or universal principle such as killing is wrong. Instead, we are given the story of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob revealed most fully in the person of Jesus Christ, who makes peace through a cross and is vindicated in his resurrection. This story, this pattern, becomes the norm for disciples of Jesus. His *disciples*, those who *learn* his way, seek always to be faithful to Christ's way of making peace, Christ's way of showing love, Christ's way of responding to injustice. Thus to those who suggest that "love your neighbor" means protecting them from evil through the use of warfare, the New Testament reminds us that "love" is to be defined narratively; that is, the shape and method of "loving" is always defined by the way of the cross.

"BUT NONVIOLENCE IS JUST NOT REALISTIC"

There are many so-called "realists" who believe in the limited redemptive possibilities of violence. They argue that "we live in a fallen world, and one must take the fallen nature of our world into account in one's ethic." Out of such a fabric did Reinhold Niebuhr argue in his classic essay, "Why the Christian Church is Not Pacifist." The realist believes that violence can be "redemptive," that is, redemptive to the point only of limiting violence and bloodshed and providing a modicum of "order." Violence is seen as the way to restrain chaos, a way to check the loss of innocent life, a last resort in a fallen and violent world. The kingdom of God has not yet come fully, and so we should not expect ourselves to take Jesus seriously when it comes to matters of nonviolence and injustice.

There are numerous difficulties with such a view. First, the "realist" ought not to be allowed to hold the assumption that he or she is being more "realistic" than the Christian gospel. For the Christian, what is *most real* is the rule of Jesus as lord over the cosmos. The proclamation "Jesus is Lord" is not merely wishful thinking; the Christian confession that "Jesus is Lord," is instead a statement about the very nature of reality,

**. . . in the New Testament,
the pattern for making peace
is cross and resurrection,
patiently bearing unjust
suffering followed by the
vindication of a faithful God.**

about what has come to pass by virtue of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Christian pacifism is rooted not in "idealism," but in the conviction that Jesus is ruling over the cosmos.

In other words, one contradicts oneself when one says, "Jesus is Lord" and then says that one should kill one's enemies. These two claims cannot stand side by side, for the lordship of Jesus calls us to another way to deal with enemies. To put it in

Paul's language, if the enemy is hungry, we feed him, not starve him; if the enemy is thirsty, we give them drink, not destroy their infrastructure that provides drinking water. Jesus is Lord, or he is not.

What is most *real*, then, is the present and still-coming kingdom of God. The "realist," on the other hand, would have the statesman, Christian or not, make use of consequentialist reasoning to make the best possible approximation of what pressure to apply to bring about a balance of geo-political forces to maintain "order." But the disciple of Jesus cannot simply proclaim such consequentialist discounting of the teaching

of Jesus as unfaithfulness: our task is not to maintain a balance of power among the nation-states that refuse to submit to the lordship of Christ. Our task, first and foremost, is to walk in faithfulness in the ways of Jesus. Our task, first and foremost, is to be the church, not maintain the empire.

The realist ultimately makes Jesus out to be a naïve, utopian idealist, unaware of the way in which the world “really works.” “You can only love those who love you,” the realist seems to say. But Jesus explicitly rejects such: if you only love those who love you, so what? Even the pagans do that (Matt 5:46–48). Everyone can respond with “love” when they are treated with “love.” Jesus’ point is precisely that we must love when we are *not* treated with love.

A “Christian realist,” it would appear, does not prioritize *Christian theology*, but an insufficient *anthropology*: a theory about the nature of self-seeking social and political systems. Missing is any awareness of the historical reality of the kingdom of God, as well as any doctrine of redemption. The theology of the kingdom is trumped with a pessimistic anthropology.

“BUT JESUS DIDN’T TELL THE CENTURION TO QUIT HIS JOB”

One might find innumerable “negative proof-texts” to argue against pacifism. For example, some object that the centurion in Acts 10 was not told to quit his job. But a few observations about this text could be equally applied to other such proof-texts. First, arguments from silence are simply not legitimate arguments.

Second, there is another, larger theological theme in Acts 10 that is the concern of Luke; namely, that the division between peoples (in this case, that division between Jews and Gentiles) had been abolished. This is a major theme throughout Acts, and it is for this reason that Luke relates the story of Cornelius, the centurion. But this observation itself has great bearing upon the subject matter at hand. In the New Testament, all of the divisions that are used to alienate and estrange peoples from one another are broken down in baptism (see Gal 3:27–29). But warfare since the sixteenth century has typically been fought upon nationalistic lines. For example, German Christians are told by their government to kill the French Christians who have been told by their government to kill the German Christians. Both sides believe their cause is “just” and thus kill fellow baptized believers in the name of “justice” or “civilization” or “liberty” or “freedom.” So Christians kill Christians (and Christians kill their enemies, whom they are to love) in the name of values that are of lesser importance than the kingdom of God.

LEE C. CAMP

DR. CAMP is Assistant Professor of Christian Ethics in the College of Bible and Ministry, and Senior Faculty Fellow in the Center for International Peace and Justice at Lipscomb University. He also serves as preaching minister for the Donelson Church of Christ in Nashville.

ENDNOTES

- 1 A lengthier version of this essay, which deals with numerous objections to Christian pacifism, is available at www.wineskins.org. Some paragraphs of the present essay were originally published as “The Case for Christian Nonviolence,” *New Wineskins* (January/February 2002), 25, 27.
- 2 Christians may have—indeed *should* have—a specific set of moral norms and ideals, but it is not moral norms and ideals that are, in themselves, our ultimate point of reference. There exists a long-standing debate in the guild of Christian ethicists about whether there is a “distinctive Christian ethic.” That is, is there something about Christian morality that distinguishes Christians from all others? This mis-locates, as indicated here, the more important question. The *distinctive* characteristic of Christians is not a particular moral stance, but a claim about the authority and person of Christ. Christians do have particular morals and ethical stances that are *specific* to their group (i.e., of or pertaining to the “species” of Christians), but others may also hold to these things. Christians, for example, hold to the importance of truth-telling; many non-Christians do as well. So truth-telling is *specific* to Christianity, but not *distinctive*. “Jesus is Lord” is both specific to Christianity and *distinctive* to Christianity.
- 3 Thus it is incorrect to suggest that Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount (or elsewhere) are “personal, not social.” Although this is a common false understanding of the Sermon on the Mount promulgated by Martin Luther, the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount are explicitly located within Jesus’ proclamation that the *kingdom* of heaven has

come near (see Matt 4:17, 23; 5:3, 10, 19; 6:10, 33; 7:21). The common distinction made in the Western world between “religion and politics,” between the “secular and the spiritual” relegates the teaching of Jesus to some sort of “spiritual” or “religious” realm, and then subsequently claims that his teaching is irrelevant for matters in the real world like politics and society. But Jesus precisely advocates a new order, that is both “spiritual” (in the sense that it must proceed from one’s heart, and not be mere external law-keeping) and “social” or “political” (in the sense that the ways of God revealed in Christ are lived out in relationships with other people, in communities of people).

- 4 According to many commentators, the *lex talionis* (“an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”) was initially intended to *limit* excessive retribution. In this case, Jesus deepens or radicalizes the limit upon retaliation (i.e., rather than “overturning” Moses’ teaching).
- 5 Jesus’ teaching that one shall not resist an evildoer should be noted here. The word here for “resist” (*antistēnai*) almost attains the sense of a technical term, used by Josephus 17 times—15 of those times Josephus means “violently resist.” (See N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996], 291.) Jesus intends that his disciples not use the way of the world in bringing about God’s good purposes, which seeks to impose its agenda using coercive force. Similarly, we should interpret “turning the other cheek.” In our culture, this phrase has become synonymous with simply being a doormat. But this is not what Jesus apparently intended. For example, Walter Wink argues (*Engaging the Powers* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992], chapter nine) that “turning the other cheek” was a creative way for oppressed peasant people to turn the tables upon the wealthier upper classes who would demean them by back-handing them on the cheek. “Turning the other cheek” would have been both a demonstration that their attempt to demean and belittle was ineffective and a demonstration that they would not return like for like.

