



Why the Christian Church Ought to be Pacifist

Lee C. Camp / September 2001¹

A theology of Christian non-violence 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*.² 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.³

Though he dwelt in the midst of those whom he created, as the Gospel of John puts it, he was nonetheless not recognized, and moreover spurned and crucified. The one who was love was scorned, spat upon, murdered. And yet the Father vindicated the crucified one; he did not leave him to be accursed, but 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, whether they accept or acknowledge his Lordship or not.

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; the ultimate difference lies not in meeting together on Sundays, or in any other set of church practices in and of themselves.⁴ Instead, the precise point of distinction between church and world lies here: 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, sometimes even apparently foolish claim: that Jesus is indeed, in fact, Lord over all, even those who

¹ 1st draft, year 2000, for possible project at Lipscomb with colleagues Neal Allison, Don Cole, Richard Goode, and Guy Vanderpool. 2nd draft, Sept 2001, following terrorist attack in NYC, for use of students in thinking through pacifism.

² Any theology which has denied the divinity of this 'Son of God' has been found wanting, has been labeled a variant of the ancient Ebionite heresy.

³ And thus any theology which has denied the full humanity of this 'Son of God' has also been found wanting, has been labeled a variant of Docetism.

⁴ Christians may have—indeed, we should have—a specific set of moral norms and ideals, but it is not moral norms and ideals which 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.' I.e., is there something that is particularly distinctive 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 which 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.

themselves claim to possess power and authority and often refuse to acknowledge the Lordship of Christ.

The fundamental consideration for a “Christian politic,” then, is how we might bear witness to the Lordship of Christ in the very real and very concrete social circumstances in which we find ourselves. Many have suggested that taking Jesus’ teachings seriously means one must “withdraw” from the “real world.”⁵ 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. How does one deal with those on the edge of society, those who have fallen through the cracks and have no social standing or security? By touching them (touching lepers), reaching into their lives (talking with Samaritan women), and sharing the love of God (blessing children).

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’ teaching regarding the shape of prayer makes explicit what the Kingdom 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 the nature of God’s Kingdom: that the Father’s will is done on earth, even as it is in heaven. The Way which Jesus both embodied and taught his disciples was not a Way which awaited the *eschaton*, the end of the age, or the ‘end of the world’—instead, it was itself the coming Kingdom of God, to which Jesus’ hearers were invited to participate at that very moment.

Not surprisingly then, Jesus’ proclamation of the coming near of the kingdom of heaven is also always accompanied by the admonition to ‘repent.’ *Metanoia* primarily connotes *change*: in order to participate in the Kingdom, one must change; and Jesus forthrightly provides throughout his teaching, the concrete nature of that change. Jesus never rebuked his disciples for expecting a *Kingdom*—he rebuked his disciples instead for mistaking the shape and manner in which that Kingdom should be made manifest. To those who apparently 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 part of the people of God. To those who thought they had no time to concern themselves with the petty affairs of children, Jesus reproved them, and received the little ones. To those who thought they knew (quite wrongly) what it meant for ‘Messiah’ to be present in their midst, 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 reserved very harsh words of condemnation. To all these many different (wrong) expectations, Jesus announced a different way.

With regard to peacemaking, Jesus explicitly did not allow his disciples to take up the way of the sword. It is often forgotten that Jesus was ministering in the midst of very real, concrete, historical situations of

⁵ This is true, e.g., of Max Weber, Ernst Troeltsch, and H. Richard Niebuhr (at least this is true of Niebuhr’s very popular *Christ and Culture*).

violence and oppression. There were numerous “false Messiahs” in the first century, and one professed way of being Messiah was to seek to take up arms against the Roman empire. When Jesus told his disciples to “love your enemies,” they would have undoubtedly brought to mind (perhaps among others) 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,”⁶ and to “pray for those that spitefully use you.” Jesus takes the *lex talionis* (“an eye for an eye”) which the Pharisees had evidently made into a rule of retribution⁷ and undoes 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.

Gandhi said, “The only people on earth who do not see Christ and his teachings as non-violent are Christians.” Indeed, Jesus himself made clear that the way of the cross—to suffer with and 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,” 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 “non-violence” does not mean *passivity*. There is a difference between *passivism* and *pacifism*. The former is simply passive in the face of evil and injustice; the latter seeks a peaceful, non-violent resolution to conflict, and does not cede the legitimacy of violence, even as a “last resort.” Jesus’ teaching “you shall not resist an evildoer” should be noted here. The word here for *resist* (*antistenai*) almost attains the sense of a technical term, used by Josephus 17 times—fifteen of those times Josephus means “violently resist.”⁸ 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 through the use of coercive force.

But Jesus’ own example shows that his way is not some naïve “niceness,” as if Jesus were merely advocating that we all be polite, Old South gentlemen. Many often 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 non-violence. Quite to the contrary, all this example shows is that Jesus was not advocating passivity. He was willing to whip animals, turn over tables, and run people out of the temple—willing to question the prevailing economic practices that everyone accepted as quite normal, but Jesus saw as offensive to the ways of God. His action in the temple was all very unMessianic, according to the expectations of the day—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

⁶ To “turn the other cheek” has become, in our culture, synonymous with simply being a door-mat. But this is not what Jesus apparently intended. Walter Wink argues, for example, 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 simultaneously a demonstration that their attempt to demean and belittle was ineffective, and a demonstration that they would not return like-for-like.

⁷ 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).

⁸ See N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), p. 291.

order. Burning a flag might be the closest cultural analog we have to the type of offense Jesus here engendered.⁹

The New Testament Witness to Cruciform Peacemaking

Not only did Jesus teach non-violence 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. Just a few examples must suffice here. (All quotations taken from the New Revised Standard Version.)

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. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, 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; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. (Eph 2:13-18)

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. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For 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)

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and 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

⁹ I do not mean to suggest by this that anyone should run out and burn a flag to make a point. There could, of course, be certain times at which such a symbolic gesture could be appropriate, but it would take the wisdom of Solomon to know when such a time arises.

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. "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." 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)

Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil. For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit . . . (1 Pet 3:13-18)

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. 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. (Romans 12:14-21)

When any of you has a grievance against another, do you dare to take it to court before the unrighteous, instead of taking it before the saints? Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? Do you not know that we are to judge angels—to say nothing of ordinary matters? If you have ordinary cases, then, do you appoint as judges those who have no standing in the church? I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to decide between one believer and another, but a believer goes to court against a believer—and before unbelievers at that? In fact, to have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded? But you yourselves wrong and defraud—and believers at that. (1 Cor 6:1-8)

We might summarize in this way: in the New Testament, the pattern for making peace, for reconciliation, is cross and resurrection. 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 in the concrete circumstances in which they find themselves to always be faithful to Christ’s way of making peace, Christ’s way of showing love, Christ’s way of responding to injustice.

“But Non-violence is just not realistic”

There are many (often called “realists”) who believe in the limited redemptive possibilities of violence; that is, “we live in a fallen world, and one must take the fallen nature of our world into account in one’s ethic,” so the argument goes. And so 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 non-violence and injustice.

There are numerous difficulties with such a view: first, the ‘realist’ ought not 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, about what has come to pass by virtue of the vindication of the crucified Son of Man in his resurrection from the dead. In the resurrection, the Way of Suffering Servanthood is vindicated; the Father vindicates the claims of the Son, vanquishing the enemies of the Faithful one. And thus the Christian lives in the knowledge of the reality 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. We show how seriously we take Jesus’ Lordship by the way we deal with our enemies.

This is a point of utmost importance for Christian non-violence. Christians do not *trust* in *non-violence*; we *trust* in the *Lord* who taught us to be non-violent. Christian pacifists do not assume that non-violence will simply bring about the end of warfare; instead, Christian pacifists believe that the rule and reign of God has appeared in human history, and even though it has not yet fully triumphed, it is present. And so we Christians are to live according to that reality. From a biblical perspective, an order of peace was of utmost importance in the full reign of God on earth. And so the prophet Isaiah declared that with the coming of the Messiah:

The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall graze,

their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea (Isa 11:6-9).

What is most *real*, then, is the present and still-coming Kingdom of God, in which those who walk in the way of Lord Jesus will be vindicated by the God who is always faithful to his promises. The Christian is not naïve about the reality of the still unredeemed world—it is violent, and hateful, and vengeful. But the new social order which Christ announced is an order of non-violence, love, and forgiveness. By being non-violent even in the face of violence, Christians bear witness to the claim that Jesus is Lord, that the Kingdom of Heaven has now come in the midst of human history.

The 'realist' would have the statesman, Christian or not, make use of consequentialist reasoning to make the best possible approximation of what pressure must be applied to bring about a balance of geo-political forces to maintain 'order.' But the disciple of Jesus cannot but simply proclaim such consequentialist discounting of the teaching of Jesus as unfaithfulness: our task is not first and foremost 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 to the ways of Jesus. Our task, first and foremost, is to be the church, not maintain the empire. Our task, first and foremost, is to be faithful, not be effective.¹⁰

The realist ultimately makes Jesus out to be a naïve, utopian idealist, unaware of the way in which the world "really works." But Jesus explicitly addresses such: "For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?" (Mt 5:46ff.). In other words, 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, but with contempt and abuse.

A 'Christian realist,' it would appear then, does not prioritize that which is *Christian*, but an insufficient *anthropology*: a theory about the fallen nature of social and political systems. Missing is any awareness

¹⁰ Though we should question whether violence is "effective." Most often, the use of violence can be judged to merely contribute to an ongoing and deepening spiral of violence and hatred. Violence cannot give birth to love, and only love can give birth to true peace. MLK, Jr.: "The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. Through violence you murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate... Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that."

With regard to the effectiveness of non-violence, Walter Wink (p. 247ff.) recounts 44 (or more) different non-violent campaigns that realized varying degrees of success from the 1970's to 1991. These ranged from U.S. citizen's rejection of the Vietnam War (and successfully bringing public awareness to the slaughter that was occurring that eventually led to loss of U.S. support for the war) to the overthrow of the Marcos dictatorship in the Philippines to the protection of Russian Pres. Boris Yeltsin from a coup attempt in which coup leaders had at their disposal four million soldiers, hundreds of thousands of tanks, aircraft, and weapons.

of the historical reality of the Kingdom of God, as well as any doctrine of redemption. It favors a pessimistic anthropology over a theology of the Kingdom of God.

One other distinction should be made in this vein. There is a real difference between the *fact* of our sinfulness, and *legitimizing* the fact of our sinfulness. Most of us will likely be willing to confess that there remain areas in our lives that may have not yet been fully submitted to the Lordship of Christ; that is, most all of us continue to struggle with sin. But it is quite another matter to confess our sinfulness, and then *justify* a systematic disobedience to the commands of Christ.¹¹

This raises the question of the personal meaning of the Gospel. Is the Good News of Jesus merely that God forgives us our sinfulness, and allows us to “continue in sin that grace may abound”? Clearly Paul’s understanding of the Gospel was that the grace of God not only grants us pardon for our sins, but also empowers us through God’s Spirit to be transformed into the image of Christ (see, e.g., 2 Cor. 3:18; Rom. 6, 8). Or to use one of the favorite Pauline metaphors, the church is now the body of Christ—the church is to exist as the ongoing incarnation of the Word of God. As He was in the world, so is the church to be (see 1 Cor 12:27; Eph. 1:22, 23; 4:12, 13; 5:29, 30; Col. 1:18, 24).

“Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount are PERSONAL, not SOCIAL teachings”

This is a common false understanding of the Sermon on the Mount. 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 Mt. 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 is precisely advocating 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).

“You Can’t Expect the President to Do That”

“We must put ourselves in the shoes of the President” (or the King, or the emperor, or the Tzar) some suggest: you can’t expect him to be non-violent and run the country (or Kingdom, or Empire, or Republic). This way of putting the matter turns Christian ethics wrong side up. The question for disciples of Jesus is never to be “what can we ask everyone, reasonably, to do?” Instead, the question is always “what are we disciples of Jesus supposed to do.”

Because many Christians believe the myth that Christians (the “good guys”) are supposed to run the world, they believe that we are not to take Jesus’ teachings seriously in the realm of social and political questions, because they cannot believe that non-violence could “work” in the political realm. But this assumption fails to see how Jesus undoes the standard, widely accepted paradigm of authority: “So Jesus called them and said to them, ‘You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their

¹¹ It is of interest, of course, that the area where this most often (only?) happens is with regard to violence: because of the acceptance in most Christian traditions of warfare (at some level), we have developed systematic justifications for war (the “Just War Tradition”). But one does not find the same sort of systematic justifications for other types of behavior. In other words, there is no “Just Extra-marital Sex tradition,” or “Just Lying Tradition,” or “Just Greed Tradition.”

rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.⁴³ But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant,⁴⁴ and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.⁴⁵ For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:42ff.). That is, Jesus rejects top-down hierarchical power, and replaces it with a fundamentally different paradigm—that of Suffering Servanthood. This is not merely some “spiritual principle,” but a new kind of social and political ordering. It is not one that Jesus assumes the unredeemed world will accept (“the Gentiles,” those who are not the people of God, lord their authority...). But Jesus expects differently of his disciples (“it is not so among you”). There was never any assumption in Jesus’ teachings that his disciples would “run the world,” and then bring “biblical values” (such as being nice, polite, honest, and getting others to “accept Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior”) to social structures that remain fundamentally unchanged at their roots. Jesus wanted to change social and political and religious structures from their roots (which is the meaning of “radical”—“from the root”)—and that change was to occur by individuals accepting his Lordship, and not restricting it merely to a “personal” realm.

This is likewise a very important observation for Christian pacifism: many of the conversations that do take “pacifism” seriously talk as if they want the government to be pacifist. But the government is not Christian, has not accepted the rule and reign of the Kingdom of God, and thus does not have the theological convictions needed to be non-violent. Governments trust in the power of the sword rather than the power of God. The god of civil religion (“In God We Trust. United We Stand.”) is the god of violence and domination and power, not the God revealed in the Crucified Messiah Jesus. Therefore *conversion* is necessary before one can hear Jesus’ call to non-violence. What we should do is call individuals in government to be disciples—this will either result in them being radically faithful in their position of responsibility, or them choosing to no longer hold such an office. But the Christian cannot accept that merely holding an office within an unredeemed social structure such as our government thereby legitimates the disciple opting out of the ethic of Jesus.¹²

To put the matter differently: that many people’s moral identity is more *American* than *Christian* is evidenced by the assumptions undergirding the question: “what are we going to do?” The question “what are we going to do about the terrorists?” always assumes that the primary actor is the United States, or the U.S. government, or the president. But from a biblical perspective, the “we” of such questions should always be the *church*; and this obviously changes the possible answers to the question. “What are we *disciples* going to do?” forces us to focus upon Jesus’ way of making a difference in the world, Jesus’ way of being “salt” and “light” in a rotting and dark world.

“What About Romans 13?”

In other words, we must not assume that the *government* is the primary vehicle through which God brings about God’s purposes in the world. The biblical witness, on the contrary, assumes it is, instead, the people of God who are the most important characters in God’s purposes being accomplished in human history. God can and does in his sovereignty, of course, use even emperors and kings and governments for his purposes. The Assyrians are used by God to punish Israel, the Babylonians become God’s instrument of wrath upon Judah, and Cyrus is employed as God’s servant sending the exiled Jews

¹² That one’s position of “responsibility” necessitates one not taking Jesus’ teachings as a concrete ethic is the classic position articulated by Martin Luther, and is called an “ethic of vocation.” That is, one discerns one’s ethic not from Jesus, or Jesus’ teachings, but from one’s job. This is also the position taken by Foy E. Wallace, who is accounted by many CoC historians to be the one figure most responsible for pushing CoC’s away from Christian pacifism.

back to their homeland. In each of these cases, the prophets declare that though empires like Babylon and Assyria think themselves sovereign, it is God alone who is sovereign, making use of these empires for his plans. So the prophets simultaneously pronounce judgment upon the arrogance and violence of both Assyria and Babylon. Just because God has used them in his overarching providence does not mean that they are pleasing to God. And more importantly, just because Babylon is used by God to punish his people, God does not subsequently call Israelites to become Babylonians. Instead, they are called to do what God always called them to do—to be the people of God, to “seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile” (Jeremiah 29:7), to be a channel of blessing to all the nations of the earth by bearing witness to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They are not called to withdraw themselves from the good of Babylon, but to seek its good—not by adopting the ethic of the Babylonians, but by faithful obedient witness to their God.

In other words, throughout the biblical narrative God calls his people to embody an alternative vision of community life: the people of God live a community ethic that stands at odds with the unbelieving peoples that surround them. Through being a “peculiar people,” the people of God can both bear witness to the will of God, as well as bring about transformative change for the cities in which they dwell. Only by being what God has called his people to be can his people really bring about good for the cities in which they dwell. The task of God’s people is not to “run things”—that is God’s job, for he alone is sovereign. The task of the church is to be the church.

This way of putting the matter helps us make sense of a text like Romans 13, often utilized as a proof-text for the Christian use of the sword.

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God’s servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, busy with this very thing. Pay to all what is due them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due (Rom. 13:1-7).

The “powers” and “authorities” of the world, as the apostle Paul depicts them, are created and ordered by God—but they are fallen, and in a state of rebellion against the purposes of God revealed in Jesus. The early church could never have taken Paul’s words in Romans 13 as an admonition to seek to get hold of the mantle of power so they could have a leavening influence upon the Roman empire from the top-down. Paul did not admonish them to bring “biblical values” to the Roman Senate; he called them instead to be the people of God in the midst of Rome. That is, Paul had just admonished the Roman believers to take seriously the way of Christ as their way of life:

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be

haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. 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).

“Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord,” is meant by Paul not as a systematic statement about a God who, in the end, has the biggest stick and will use it to put people in their place. The primary point is God’s sovereignty—God will, in his time and in his way, make sure that righteousness is vindicated, and evil defeated. The task of believers, in the meanwhile, is to be Christ, returning good for evil, giving food and drink to their enemies. Neither should we misconstrue Paul’s point by suggesting that he is here giving a very carefully calculated strategy for defeating one’s enemies by “killing them with kindness.” “Heaping coals upon one’s head” connotes *repentance*, mourning over one’s sins and transgressions. Ashes were put upon the head in a time of repentance and grief. Paul therefore counsels the way of Christ: if we are to bring people to God, it must be done through the way of Christ, returning good for evil. The repentance of our enemies results neither from returning like-for-like, nor from a spiteful use of “kindness.” Repentance results from witnessing a faithful obedience to the way of Christ, so that evil is overcome with good.

But, Paul goes on to say, even the authorities and powers who do not return good for evil, even the empires who do not feed their enemies but starve them, even the nation-states who do not give drink to the thirsty but use war to destroy the infrastructure that provides water—even these authorities are used by God for his purposes. God is, after all, sovereign, and the rebellious ways of humankind can even be used in his grace for good. “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose,” Paul had just told his Roman readers (8:28).

However, we often assume that the primary task of the Christian community is to have a hand in the positions of power and control. Common-sensical questions appear to undercut any position that might question the Christian imperative to control the agenda of our government: “Who else would you want in positions of power but a Christian?” “Don’t you want morally upright individuals in positions of social responsibility?” “If Christians are not involved in government, just imagine how bad it would be!”

These questions, however, miss the point. The issue is not whether, all things being equal, we might prefer a person of integrity to hold a governmental office rather than a deceitful power-monger. Nor is the point here to necessarily exclude the possibility that some Christians might receive a calling to serve in some government capacities.¹³ The question instead returns us to that discussed above: for whom are we doing moral reasoning? The empire, or the church? The emperor, or disciples?

¹³ This is a related, but different conversation, which would have to take account of at least two variables: one, in western democracies, one is not simply *offered* a position of power and authority. One must instead, *seek* it out. Two, any position within government could *not* be construed as a sphere within which the authority of Jesus does not extend—i.e., should a disciple be elected as Sheriff, or member of the Board of Education, or Senator, this position could not be understood as having its own ethic apart from the way of Jesus. The elected disciple must continue to follow the way and teaching of the Lord regardless of the calling or office.

“But Jesus Didn’t Tell the Centurion to Quit his Job”

One might find innumerable “negative proof-texts” to argue against pacifism, perhaps the most famous of which is that the Centurion in Acts 10 was not told to quit his job. A few observations about this text could be equally applied to other such proof-texts:

- (1) arguments from silence are not legitimate arguments. That is, that there is no mention of Peter telling the Centurion to quit his job does not mean that we can conclude that Peter did not tell him that. All we can conclude is that this text tells us nothing in this regard, either way.
- (2) In fact, there is another, larger theological theme in this passage, which is the concern of Luke, the writer of Acts—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. 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. So Paul says in Galatians, “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:27-29). But warfare since the 16th century has typically been fought upon nationalistic lines: that is, 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.

“What Would You Do if...”

“So what would you do if someone threatened your family, or your wife? So you’re saying you’d just stand there and let them do whatever they want?”

Several observations:

- (1) Of course not. The question instead, is, how can we intervene in such a way that bears witness to the Lordship of Christ? The question generally assumes that violence is the only way to respond to such a crisis. It also assumes that if you engage the assailant with violence, you will have greater chance of victory and be able to overcome him, and assumes that a non-violent response would have little to no chance of victory. These can all be questioned.
- (2) The appeal has its force because of the emotional strings attached. Whether this is a legitimate way to carry out ethical discourse is questionable.
- (3) Jesus’ point—much to our disliking—was that he expects us to do for enemies what we would normally do for family. See Mt. 5:46f.

- (4) This way of making an ethical argument is also suspect because it begins with a tragic dilemma, and then seeks to generalize to a universal ethical theory. That is, through use of an emotionally charged example, you try to force the pacifist to concede that there may be some situations in which you would grant the use of violence—and then you conclude that there is therefore a principle that allows the practice of warfare in self-defense.¹⁴ A more biblical way to proceed is to begin with a theological understanding of what kind of people we are supposed to be, and then seek to be faithful to that in difficult dilemmas or circumstances. If we begin with our identity as a certain kind of people (namely, to be a “cruciform” people), and then ask questions about dilemmas, we might come up with some possible creative responses that would never occur to us otherwise. For example, I know of a family whose home—while all the family was present—was invaded by armed robbers. The mother, incensed that people would dare violate her home and family in such a way, told me that there came from deep within her a voice which she did not know she had, and that from the depths of her being she began to rebuke the men in the name of Jesus, demanding that they immediately leave her home. The men were so frightened that they threw up their arms, shot their guns into the wall, and ran from the house. Once one begins to investigate such matters, one finds all sorts of similar stories (including accounts of effective, faithful, non-violent response to the Nazis).

Walter Wink relates the following account:

William Jennings Bryan once visited Tolstoy and pressed him with the perennial problem of what to do if a criminal is about to kill a child. Tolstoy responded that, having lived seventy-five years, he had never, except in discussions, “encountered that fantastic brigand, who, before my eyes desired to kill or violate a child, but that perpetually I did and do see not one but millions of brigands using violence toward children and women and men and old people and all the laboureres in the name of the recognized right of violence over one’s fellows. When I said this my kind interlocutor, with his naturally quick perception, not giving me time to finish, laughed, and recognized that my argument was satisfactory.”

There is considerable irony in the presumed compassion of the interlocutor who is so concerned about the potential rape of a single grandmother, when the same questioner accepts war, where the rape of grandmothers, wives, daughters, and children is so routine that many soldiers have regarded it as one of the prerequisites of warfare.¹⁵

Doesn’t “love your neighbor” mean protecting them from evil?

We must seek to define “love.” In the New Testament, “love” is defined narratively. That is, the shape and method of “loving” is always defined by the way of Christ, the way of the cross. In various contexts and ways, it is the willingness to suffer unjustly that ultimately defines New Testament agape.

¹⁴ Even if one grants the right of personal self-defense, warfare remains a very different matter. Warfare is typically fought upon nationalistic lines, in which one kills not because one has been personally threatened by a clear assailant on the other side, but because one has been convinced by one’s government that one should kill the other. Further, warfare leads to the death of innocents (which military parlance refers to as “collateral damage.”)

¹⁵ Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 233.

Churches of Christ and Pacifism

Because Churches of Christ began as a restoration movement, many of the early leaders questioned the long-held “Just War Tradition,” and subsequently rejected it. The Just War tradition arose beginning in the fourth century A.D. All extant writings on the question of Christians and violence, prior to the fourth century, reject the practice of Christians shedding blood in warfare. Following the rise of the emperor Constantine (who believed that the god of the Christians had helped him win control of the Roman empire), theologians began to legitimate Christian participation in warfare. Thereafter, the Just War Tradition developed.

When our early Restoration Movement leaders began to “restore the NT church,” they rejected the practice of warfare for Christians. Alexander Campbell discussed the matter more extensively than did Barton Stone, but both agreed that warfare was not a legitimate Christian practice. In Campbell’s oft-cited “Address on War,”¹⁶ he begins by raising the question of whether “one Christian nation has a right to wage war against another Christian nation.” His immediate response indicates the degree to which his eschatology and rejection of church-state alliances operates in his espousal of pacifism: “a proper literal Christian nation is not found in any country under the whole heavens.” Instead there is “indeed *one* Christian nation, composed of all the Christian communities and individuals in the whole church.” Christians are born from above, through faith; nations pertain to blood or naturalization. Consequently, there can, by definition, be no such thing as a “Christian nation.”¹⁷

Thus the question must be recast: “Can Christ’s kingdom or church in one nation wage war against his own kingdom or church in another nation?” Obviously, continues Campbell, the answer is no. But instead, people will not raise this recast question, and will propose the hypothetical situation of England declaring war against the United States, or vice-versa, and then ask whether Christians have the “‘*right* . . . [to] volunteer, or enlist, or, if drafted, to fight against England?’ Ought our motto to be, ‘Our country, right or wrong?’” In order to answer this query, Campbell manifestly refuses to engage the natural rights political theorists, believing that they are “led by imagination more than by reason, authority, or experience” Instead, he chooses the method that has “divine warrant,” turning to the scriptures in order to define *rights*. Thus, what does the Bible say on the matter?¹⁸

First taking up the historical narrative of Israel, Campbell asserts that the Jewish wars were appropriate expressions of the will of God, since Israel was God’s “sheriffs, executing . . . the mandate of heaven.” They were *right* in waging these wars, because God had simply commanded it. But under the reign of Jesus this is not now binding authority. “The very basis of the Christian religion is that Jesus Christ is now the Lord and King of both earth and heaven.”¹⁹

The whole issue thus comes back to Campbell’s constitutional and legal concepts of the Kingdom of God: Jesus is now monarch of the Universe, and as Lord of All, he has neither sanctioned nor permitted nor commanded his people to participate in warfare. God the Father established a divine mandate for the Israelite wars, and thus the Israelites rightly took up arms against their neighbors. “Let them, then, that

¹⁶ Campbell, “An Address on War,” *MH* 3d ser., 5 (July 1848): 361-386.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 365.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 368. This point is significant. AC’s optimism regarding reason always relies upon the *Bible* as the proper source of facts to be employed by the power of reason. See *Christian System*, 2-3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 370.

now plead a *jus divinum*—a special divine warrant or right for carrying on war by the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ, produce a warrant from the present Monarch of the universe.”²⁰ What the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, “as the then moral governor of the world,” did in his governance does not matter to Christians today, for these things God the Father did “before he gave up the scepter and the crown to his Son Jesus Christ.” Campbell explicitly states the importance of this kingdom conception with regard to warfare: that this divine governance has been granted unto the Son, that this new Monarch now reigns over all things “is a point of much more importance than we can now develop, and one which has been, so far as known to me, wholly slurred over in this great investigation.”²¹

At this point in the argument, Campbell utilizes again his favored notions of constitutional monarchy: It has been “positively declared” that all “legislative, judiciary, and executive power” have been granted to the Son. Such declarations “ought to revolutionize our whole views of civil government as respects its ultimate authority, and change some of our forms of legal justice.” The kingship of Jesus, and the implications flowing therefrom, is “*the gist of the whole controversy* between the friends and enemies of war, on the part of the subjects of Christ’s kingdom.”²²

Thus the question is simplified:

Has the Author and Founder of the Christian religion enacted war, or has he made it lawful and right for the subjects of his government to go to war against one another? Or has he made it right for them to go to war against any nation, or for any national object, at the bidding of the present existent political authorities of any nation in Christendom?²³

Barton Stone was a fellow laborer with Campbell in the restoration movement (though they disagreed with one another on many issues). Like Campbell, Stone has a consistent emphasis upon the evils of war, and a complete rejection of Christian participation in these evils. Unlike Campbell, Stone does not provide any systematic presentation of his rejection of participation in warfare, but his rejection is consistent, unembarrassed, and aware of the manner in which this position is rejected by a majority of Christendom. But like Campbell, Stone’s understanding of the Kingdom of God provided the ground from which his pacifism naturally flows: Stone was concerned with the rule of God over the creation, and lived in expectation of the full manifestation of the kingdom of God; his living “between the times” of the work of Jesus and the final manifestation of Jesus’ rule at his second coming dictated the terms and shape of Stone’s social ethic—thus, the Stoneite Christians denounced any participation in human government, believing that any and all human governments usurped the authority of the Creator. Christians were to embody a life at variance with the values of the fallen world, living a life of humble existence, rejecting the wealth and power of the world for a life of suffering servanthood, always willing to serve, always open to the moving and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

David Lipscomb,²⁴ and his teacher Tolbert Fanning, had similar views with regard to government and Christian participation in warfare. The Kingdom of God, for Lipscomb, was not merely about restoring

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 370. Emphasis added.

²³ Ibid., 371.

²⁴ Lipscomb’s viewpoint is most fully developed in his book *On Civil Government*.

the church to a particular set of first century worship practices: the Kingdom of God was about the renewal, the recreation of the entire created realm, back to the Creator's original intention for his creation. Where human rebellion had brought about sin, death, murder, warfare, disease and lust, the Messiah declared the arrival of the Kingdom of God: in which all these things would pass away. Disciples of Jesus, then, are called into service and obedience in that Kingdom; we are to bear witness to, and embody, the reign of the Kingdom of God on earth, even though the full reign of God has yet to spread its borders throughout the earth, has yet to spread its borders through the hearts of all men and women. In the meanwhile, then, the Kingdoms of this earth, which stand in ongoing rebellion to the Kingdom of God, might still serve a useful function in God's over-riding providence: the Kingdoms of this earth, in spite of refusing to submit to the will of God, nevertheless restrain evil, and punish evildoers. In admittedly a shocking way, he draws a parallel to hell: hell is ordained of God to restrain evil and punish evil; so are human governments.

But ought not Christians seek to Christianize such governments, such Kingdoms of this world? Lipscomb thought this a strange question: this is the same as asking whether a child of God ought to seek to participate in the administration of hell. In spite of the frankness of this, let us hear Lipscomb out; *his* question is this: how can one participate in an order which is concerned with the propagation of its own agenda, an agenda clearly not submitted to the will of God, and yet still proclaim allegiance to the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords? How can the child of God love his or her enemies, and yet kill them when the state calls him to do so?²⁵

If we think Lipscomb was removed from the "real world," we ought to think again. Lipscomb and other restoration movement leaders were horrified by the slaughter of 600,000 Americans during the Civil War. In fact, Lipscomb witnessed the Battle of Nashville, Dec., 1864, in which 1500 Confederates and 3000 Union Soldiers died in a two day period, the battle lines of which passed just a few blocks north and a day later, just to the south, of where we sit now. How, Lipscomb wanted to know, could Southern Christians slaughter their Northern Christian brothers? How could Northern disciples make widows out of their Southern sisters in Christ?

Mike Casey²⁶ has documented the demise of pacifism in Churches of Christ—he argues convincingly that Churches of Christ forsook their pacifism at the same time they became a part of the cultural and social mainstream in the United States. Precisely at the time Churches of Christ became one of the fastest growing religious groups in the United States, then did Churches of Christ forsake any widespread commitment to pacifism. The more American we became, the less we were willing to speak of the non-violence advocated by Jesus.

²⁵ I would not argue this as Lipscomb does, and I would likely see more room for the involvement of Christians in government. But Lipscomb nonetheless provides a fundamentally important theological point regarding the nature of Jesus' Lordship.

²⁶ Professor at Pepperdine. He has written numerous articles documenting this historical shift. See, e.g., "From Pacifism to Patriotism: The Emergence of Civil Religion in the Churches of Christ During World War I." *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 66 (July 1992): 376-90; "Warriors Against War: The Pacifists of the Churches of Christ in World War II." *Restoration Quarterly* 35 (1993): 159-174; and "A Family Quarrel Within the Churches of Christ: The Pacifist Tradition of the Non-Sunday School/One-Cup Churches of Christ." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Christian Scholars' Conference, Abilene Christian University, Abilene, Texas, July 1997.