

The Creation of True Peace:

Pacifism and the redemptive work of the cross

*"Broken bottles under children's feet.
Bodies strew across a dead end street.
But I won't heed the battle call.
It puts my back up against the wall."
~U2*

As I read the articles on Christians and politics, even though the main underlying concept at first seemed to be justice, it soon became obvious that even more important to the authors is the idea of peace. I feel that this is accurate because justice is only a part of what needs to happen for true peace to exist. The concept of peace is vast and incomprehensible, to me, in its completeness. I cannot image what peace looks like, or what needs to take place for peace to be fully realized. The truth of peace is that it is not simply about not having war, but it is instead the perfect wholeness created when the justice of God is fulfilled. We call the time when we are not actively extending ourselves in war with an enemy nation "peace time," we call a sleeping baby "peaceful," when we come to terms with a decision that we have made we say we are "at peace," we effortlessly raise our first two fingers to our friends and call it a "peace sign," and we have made

peace a catch-phrase. We have created a convoluted idea of what peace means because it is impossible for us to envision what peace is in its fullest sense. For this reason, I will only be discussing one area of peace that I feel is not presented as a valid position in American culture. That topic is pacifism.

For me, pacifism is so much more than just a conscientious objection to war and a commitment to non-violence. I sincerely believe that it is contrary to the gospels and to the actions of the early followers to Jesus to engage in violence and war. The Gospel writers record that Jesus called his followers to a way of life in which violence and division are overcome by sacrificial love. We must not return evil for evil, Jesus taught, but must return good for evil; we must not hate those who wrong us but must love our enemies and give freely to those who hate us. I believe that following Jesus requires that we follow his examples and teachings. We must show love and seek reconciliation and justice for everyone without resorting in violence.

The early Christian community understood this requirement. Christians refused to join the military, even though the Roman army killed them. Those who converted to Christianity while in military service were instructed to

refrain from killing, to pray for forgiveness for past acts of violence, and to seek release from their military obligations. Early church fathers Tertullian and Origen each wrote in support of Christian refusal to join the military.

The change in the Christian attitude toward war occurred at the time of the emperor Constantine, whose conversion to Christianity helped bring the Christian community to the center of Western society. From the time of Constantine to the present, pacifism has been a minority view in the Christian church. The just-war tradition, rooted in the ethical theories of Plato and Cicero and formulated within the Christian tradition by Augustine, Aquinas and the Protestant Reformers, defends military force as a last resort against momentous injustice. According to this view, when the innocent are threatened by an unjust aggressor and all other options have failed, Jesus' demand for sacrificial love may require us to use lethal force. I believe though, that lethal force for any reason is inconsistent with the teachings of Jesus Christ.

Why is the pacifist vision of nonviolent reconciliation not universally embraced by the Church? One reason may be that people believe that pacifism equals surrender. I have heard the argument so many times that

giving in to evil and letting it continue is not what Jesus would do. This argument equates *pacifism* with *passivism*. Pacifists do not just give in, but rather support nonviolent resistance and refusal to cooperate with occupying forces no matter the cost. This tendency to equate pacifism and passivism show how little people know about the success of nonviolent tactics. The most obvious being the Indian struggle for self-rule led by Ghandi and the struggle for racial equality led by Martin Luther King Jr. It is impossible to say whether or not this will work in every situation and that the lives lost will be less than in war, but these questions are also up in the air when we consider violence. It cannot be said, though, that pacifists simply capitulate.

Another argument that I have heard is that pacifists live in a dream world that rests on the goodness of people. They argue that history has shown us that people cannot be trusted to simply work things out and resolve their differences peacefully. I agree that if we approach pacifism with this mentality, we are living in a very dangerous fantasy. Luckily, pacifism does not require that we trust human nature, but can realistically account for the sinful nature of humans. We can agree with just war theorist in that evil will inevitably arise. What we

disagree about is what to do once evil does arise. I believe that the one thing more powerful than doctrine of sin is the doctrine of grace. Though human nature is perverted by sin, it is also illuminated by God's presence and guidance, which shows itself in many ways to all people, not just Christians. Evil demands a response that lessens it rather than adds to it. A pacifist stance based on grace requires that we believe in other remedies to sin besides war.

Also, if we are going to be realistic about human nature, we must view it fully. If we presume that an army trained and equipped for national defense can use violence to quell evil, we must also assume that it can quickly become an army of conquest and a tool of repression in the hands of an unprincipled ruler. On the other hand, a nonviolent peacekeeping force composing of many nations is of little use other than its intended purpose.

A final argument that I have heard, and possibly the hardest to answer, is that that pacifism is too patient. Critics say that resisting violence with nonviolence might work, but it will take too long, and people will not be able to endure the afflictions. This in turn leaves no choice for immediate deliverance but to use force in return. This argument is impossible to hear without

feeling the deep pain of those who make it. I am not sure whether this argument can be answered. Those of us who regard it at a comfortable distance may not know the possibilities that remain to those whose lives have been stunted by violence. Are there wrongs so grave that only violent means can set them right? I do not believe there are, but I do believe that history has shown that this is a significant question. I sincerely believe that Nazism would have been destroyed by sustained nonviolent resistance had Christians and others not averted their gaze from its evil for so long. But whether Nazism could have been destroyed by nonviolent means in 1939 is a far more difficult question. People also use this argument in regard to the war in Iraq. Saddam Hussein was a hateful dictator who oppressed and killed his own family and people. Situations of extreme oppression do not invalidate the pacifist vision of nonviolent change. Active but non-lethal resistance is both theologically and practically defensible even in seemingly hopeless circumstances, yet many in such situations turn to violence as their last hope in the struggle for justice.

I have heard so many times that the world is better without Saddam Hussein, that world is better off without

Osama Bin Laden, and the world is much better off without Hitler. Sometimes I want to agree, but whenever I do I remember something that former Olivet student David Belcher once told me. He said that to believe that the world is truly better off without any one of these people is to say that the blood of Christ cannot run so far as to clean them. The redemptive work of the cross is dead if the grace of a slain savior isn't enough to redeem the vilest of sinners. I honestly believe that we are a hindrance to the blood of Christ if we end a life that could have been saved. Every life is valuable and I am unwilling to accept any other position.