

Peace & War

- the challenge of 'just war' and 'nonviolence'

WORLD AND WAR

War and history

War is an activity that has defined world history.
Peace is a dream that has eluded human grasp.
Violence is an issue that must be debated.

It is beyond dispute that history flows on a river of human blood. Conflict and war have been a primary force in shaping the human story. Terror and technology have been woven together through time, from the simple spear to impale the body of another individual to the sophisticated smart weapons capable of eliminating millions. From personal bloody encounter face to face in combat to the detached anonymity of pressing a missile launch button.

The 20th century saw the most astonishing increase in both the impact and complexity of war:

- Millions of civilians and combatants dying in the global wars
- 1945 the first nuclear weapons used in conflict
- 1962 enough weaponry to destroy the whole human population
- 1970's development of 'tactical-theatre' nuclear weapons
- 1980's 'overkill thinking' - equivalent to 4 tons of TNT for every human
- 1990's 'Cold War' thawing leads to massive global military instability
- 2001 (Sept 11th) fundamental shift in conceptual thinking

At the beginning of the 21st century the experience and possibilities of war are wide open. Local conflict is widespread and global conflict remains ever possible. Crude machetes are still widely used alongside chemical, genetic, nuclear weapons becoming ever more refined. War and its possibilities have never been more complex.

Alfred Nobel (inventor of dynamite) believed that once a weapon, thought to be too terrible to use, was developed war would automatically cease. We have long since passed that point yet increasingly horrific armaments continue to be developed. What is going on?

War and reality

The statistics about war and violence are overwhelming. At the beginning of the 21st century global arms sales are out of control and destabilising many societies and countries. Just a few facts begin to illustrate the situation:¹

¹ Details from '*Shattered Lives*' Amnesty International and Oxfam 2003



- Every 60 seconds a person is killed by the use of guns;
- Every minute two people are injured by firearms;
- There are enough firearms for every 1:10 person on earth to have one;
- It is estimated there are some 300,000 child-soldiers worldwide;
- \$22bn are spent on arms by two-thirds world countries each year;
- The five permanent members of the UN Security Council (France, Russia, China, UK, USA) are responsible for 88% of the world's arms exports.

WAR, TERROR AND VIOLENCE

War and terrorism

Terrorism, as an expression of violence, has been used for millennia. However, during the 20th century it took on a greater form of organisation and sophistication as different groups used it. The magnitude and shock of September 11th 2001 and its aftermath, has concentrated the global imagination. It has both similarities and yet significant differences to conventional conflicts:

▪ War

- Nations / states in conflict;
- Identifiable troops fight;
- Clear battle lines;
- Territorial objectives;
- Battle for land and control;
- Language / image of power.²

▪ Terrorism

- Disparate groups in conflict;
- Shadowy individuals fight;
- No defined frontiers;
- Ideological objectives;
- Battle for minds and hearts;
- Language / image of value and dreams.³

The phrase, “War on Terrorism”, has become a banner headline of our times; the belief that only violence is capable of dealing with violence in a ‘political homeopathy’, treating like with like. This is a classic example of the persistent ‘myth of redemptive violence’, which believes that only violence is capable of restoring order out of chaos. How does this myth, that has so powerfully shaped our culture, and many others, fit with a Christian understanding of how to respond to violence?

² ‘Iron Sides’, Blitzkrieg! ‘Desert Storm’

³ ‘Al Dawa’ (Call to Faith); ‘Hezbollah’ (Party of God), PLO (Palestine Liberation Organisation), “National Salvation Front”, “Shinning Path” etc



Myth of 'redemptive violence'⁴

There is an ancient Mesopotamian myth from the Babylonian creation story the 'Enuma Elish'. Here, Tiamat, the god of chaos is murdered by her son Marduk. He then dismembers her body and creates the universe out of her cadaver. Here creation is an act of violence, order is established by means of disorder. Creation is a violent victory over an enemy older than creation. Evil and chaos are prior to, and have priority over, order and good. Forms of this myth have fundamentally influenced cultures from India to Ireland. It is no coincidence that the Roman (Latin *pax*) and Greek (*eirene*) words for 'peace' mean a 'truce'; implying that the fundamental nature of the universe is chaos, violence and evil. Any experience of peace must be short lived and inevitably to be once more engulfed by violence.

This myth is deeply embedded in Western culture. Whether in TV cartoons or major films you see the 'good guy' using violence to hold back the tide of chaos and evil which threatens to triumph. Violence is the means of redemption. Popularist nationalism and patriotism in most nations is presented as a thin veil over this myth. The population must be prepared to sacrifice everything to violently hold back the potential tide of chaos / evil that threatens the frontiers of 'civilisation'. Even biblical language and ideas are sometimes used to reinforce this thinking.

But nothing could be further from the central biblical understanding. There a good God creates a good creation. Chaos does not resist order. Good exists prior to evil. Neither evil or violence is part of creation; both enter as a result of sin and rebellion. Evil appears as a problem that requires a solution not the primeval state of things.

In Jesus the call is to love your enemies (Mt 5:44). Evil was to be overcome by good (Rm 12:21). In stilling the storm (Mk 4:35-41), which was a symbol of chaos, Jesus proclaims that the ultimate consequence of the proclamation and in breaking of God's kingdom will be the re-establishing and final consumption of God's *shalom*.

Culture of violence

It is quite obvious that the issue of war and conflict is not rooted in the availability and sophistication of weapons, but in the human heart. It is also clear that the horror of war is only one extreme manifestation of the central reality of the human tendency towards violence. It is embedded at every level of culture and expresses itself in numerous subtle and overt ways through the whole of human experience.

A discussion about the subject of peace and war is nothing more than a debate about violence and nonviolence, brutality and disturbing gentleness. Examining this raw condition with primal roots at the core of the darkest and most destructive side of human communication and inter-relationship.

What is violence? A word frequently used, about which all manner of assumptions are made, but rarely defined and reflected upon.⁵

⁴ Adapted from Walter Wink '*Engaging the Powers*' Fortress 1992; esp 13-31

‘Violence is emotional, verbal, or physical behaviour that dominates, diminishes, dehumanizes or destroys ourselves or others’

- Violence crosses boundaries without permission, disrupts authentic relationships and separates us from other beings.
- Violence is often motivated by fear, unrestrained anger, or greed to increase dominion or power over others. It can also be motivated by a desire for justice in the face of injustice: a longing to put things right, to overcome an imbalance of power, to end victimization or oppression. Often those who perpetrate violence do so with a conviction that they are overcoming a prior violence or injustice.
- Violence often provokes new violence. This spiral of retaliatory violence is often propelled by personal or social narratives that are enacted in situations of conflict.⁶

It is important to note that someone can violate another person by:

- A thought chosen
- A look given
- A word spoken
- A brutal action

The issue of violence is as much to do with inner attitudes, as it is to do with overt actions. As Jesus makes clear:

“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times,
‘You shall not murder’, and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment’.
But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister,
you will be liable to judgment ...”
(Mt 5:21-22)

The question for debate is, “Can violence ever be justified?” and what might a particular Christian response to this question be?

When faced with violence there are four possible human responses. Which do we choose?

- Accommodation
- Avoidance
- Attack
- Assertive Meekness (to be explained below)

⁵ Combining the Concise Oxford English Dictionary and the Chambers English Dictionary we get the following range of definitions:

- **Violate:** to do violence, to disregard, to act against, to fail to comply with, to ravish, to profane, to defile, to break in upon, to disturb
- **Violent:** the use of physical force, intensely forcible, impetuous, unrestrained in action, overmastering vehement, wrested
- **Violence:** being violent, unlawful exercise of physical force, excessive, unrestrained, unjustifiable force, outrage, profanity, injury, rape

⁶ This definition of violence with the three following observations comes from Ken Butigan *‘From Violence to Wholeness’* Pace e Bene Nonviolence Service 2002; 13



Hebrew understanding of war

For all that the Hebrew scriptures have a vision of peace (*shalom*), much of the text is taken up with accounts of war, violence, killing and even apparent commands by God to destroy people they conquered.⁷ These passages have had a strong influence on Christian thinking about war when they have been faced with threats of invasion and violence from other nations. The biblical texts about the ancient Israelite people seem to justify using violence on at least some occasions.

‘Beat you ploughshares into swords
and your pruning hooks into spears’
(Joel 3:10)

‘Blessed be the Lord, my rock,
who trains my hands for war,
and my fingers for battle’
(Ps 144:1)

‘God has given your enemy
into your hand this day’
(1Sam 26:8)

NONVIOLENCE, ASSERTIVE MEEKNESS AND PEACE

Understanding nonviolence

The most popular response to the question, “What is peace?” is the reply, “The absence of war” - this actually tells us nothing about the nature, character or qualities of peace; it is assumed we know what they are.

Added to this, many activists in the peace movement refer to ‘non-violence’ (or ‘nonviolence’)⁸ more often than they do to ‘peace’. Both these responses consciously or unconsciously assume:⁹

- That war and violence are the primary point of reference and that peace and nonviolence are secondary, simply acting in response to violence;
- That peace (the ‘not-war’ experience) is essentially a somewhat passive ideal we would like to achieve, but can only do so by courageous and creative activity that is not violent.

⁷ On the question of war, violence and the divine command for Israel to exterminate their enemies see in particular “God’s genocide” below

⁸ It may seem trivial but to many the removal of the hyphen to create a single word is seen as significant as a peace-concept within itself, whatever the intention it still only says what peace is *not* and still singularly fails to communicate anything creative or positive about the concept of peace.

⁹ I have made these observations from a position of deep respect for all authentic members of peace movements who continually show the most astonishing courage and creativity in working to bring an end to war, violence and injustice. It is just that I know from personal experience that for many the whole understanding of ‘peace’ is astonishingly un-thought through and that Christian *shalom* thinking has much to offer.

The language of 'nonviolence' has its primary origins in India. While found in many aspects of Hinduism, in Jainism the concept of *ahimsa* is central to their ethics:

- The word *han* means 'to kill'
- The word *hims* means 'to desire to do harm'
- The word *ahimsa* means 'to renounce the desire to kill or harm'

This word was highlighted within mainstream Hinduism by Gandhi (1869-1948) who was also deeply influenced by the teaching of Jesus particularly as interpreted by Tolstoy (1828-1910). The power of Gandhi's peace witness inspired many, including Martin Luther King Jr (1929-1968) and the American Civil Rights Movement in the 1960's. All these facts have combined to give the idea of 'nonviolence' such a prominent place in peace thinking and vocabulary.

From a Christian perspective we can see the language and idea of 'nonviolence' having two very limited spheres of value:

- Confronted with violence someone may not know how to respond and in their confusion feel that a violent response is the only option, in that situation the word and practice of – non-violence – would be the best response; better to do no violence than any violence;
- Because most people have no authentic conception of peace, and certainly no *shalom* vision, the word 'nonviolence' may be the only place some people can actually begin to think differently. If that is the case then the language of 'nonviolence' serves an initial purpose.

In both cases ¹⁰ it is a temporary (we hope) holding position.

Assertive Meekness

If the phrase 'nonviolence' begins with a negative, how can we express the idea of positive practical peaceful actions as an alternative to violence? What word or phrase will make this bold statement? We suggest three terms:

- '**Assertive meekness**' – the Greek word *praus*, translated 'meekness', implies 'strength under perfect control' – not unlike a powerful warhorse held in check by the warrior riding it. This perfectly combines humility and dignity, it challenges violence and stands its ground offering the path of *most* resistance to hostility;
- '**Disturbing gentleness**' - a person of peace is far more disturbing than an armed soldier, creative gentleness is the most disarming of all powers;
- '**Shalom activism**' – as we have seen earlier in this unit, this is very much more than simply a nonviolent response to violence, but rather a sense of mission that works actively to see our violent world embraced by the integrating wholeness of God's *shalom* in the power of the Spirit.

Each of these terms challenges the popular understanding of 'pacifist'. Although the 'pacifist' is formed from the word 'peace', the way it sounds gives the impression of the quite different word - 'passive' ('passivist – someone who is passive and inactive). In

¹⁰ I am grateful to a conversation with Simon Barrow of 'Ekklesia' when we reflected on these points together in July 2006



contrast we know that true peace as *shalom* is assertive, disturbing and active, nothing 'passive' here!

Jesus makes it very clear that his disciples do not acquiesce in some docile manner to evil and injustice, 'but in a very deliberate way seize the initiative and overthrow evil by the force of its own momentum.'¹¹ It is the very opposite of either passive acceptance or cowardice. Jesus illustrates this with three remarkable, and usually completely misunderstood, examples.¹² He speaks of 'turning the cheek', 'stripping naked' and 'going the second mile' (Mt 5:38-42; Lk 6:29-30). In each case it is the disciple that receives the humiliation, abuse or exploitation, but also provides the remarkable creative confrontation in response:

- **Turning the cheek**

"If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also"
(Mt 5:38)

In the orient the only hand that would ever be used to strike someone would be the right one; the left was the unclean toilet hand and never used in public. The natural way to hit someone on the *right* cheek would be to use the back of the right hand as an insult to an inferior. To turn your other cheek, your *left* cheek, to your attacker would force them to use the palm or fist of the right hand, which you would only do to someone who was your equal. To 'turn the other cheek' is therefore to non-violently assert your equality with your attacker, saying, "You cannot demean me, I am a human being like you, your status or superior strength or advantage does not change that fact!"

- **Stripping naked**

"From anyone who takes away even your coat
do not withhold even your shirt"
(Lk 6: 29)

The setting is the law court. Only the poorest peasant would be sued for their outer garment, their coat (cf Ex 22:25-27; Dt 24:10-13,17). Why does Jesus say, "Give them your undergarment as well"? This would leave them stark naked. In Judaism nakedness was a taboo, but the shame was always in the one who was looking on. By this act the poor disciple shows the creditor up for who and what they really are: their exploitation has led to the debtor to be left naked. The disciple has taken the initiative, greed has been unmasked, and the dignity of the poor has been affirmed.

- **Going the second mile**

"If anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile"
(Mt 5:41)

¹¹ Walter Wink '*Engaging the Powers*' Fortress Press 1992; 127

¹² The reflections on these three sayings of Jesus are a simplified adaptation from Wink 175-182



Roman soldiers could legally command a civilian to carry his pack for a single mile, but no further. This practice left conquered people feeling humiliated and deeply resentful. To insist on going on for a second mile shifted the balance of power. The soldier was under pressure; forbidden to allow a civilian to backpack for him more than a mile he could face very serious reprimand. This instruction of Jesus was to deliberately challenge the command and humiliation system of the oppressor. This was not about kindness but confrontation.

Here we see the true nature of assertive meekness. It requires courage. It recognizes the image of God in every other being. It is creative, improvisational, keeping the oppressor off balance. It is in its own way an acted prophecy. These illustrations are just examples of the myriad of possibilities that creative assertive meekness offers. This is the 'path of most resistance' constantly provocative and always free.

Peace as *shalom*

Shalom is not simply the opposite of war. Biblically, *shalom* stands as the central worldview, it is primary and declares a reality about existence in which thinking about war and violence has no place – they are an aberration and perversion. To set peace in contrast to war, and to set war and violence as the main point of reference, is unthinkable. As Claus Westermann says, 'When we think of peace as the opposite to war ... *shalom* cannot be understood within this dichotomy ... it was neither intended nor understood as the opposite of war.'¹³ On the occasions in scripture when it would appear that there is juxtaposition between *shalom* and war it is a minor and very secondary understanding and *shalom* dominates the thinking with war being an anomaly. *Shalom* stands in total contrast to the ideas of *eirene* and *pax*, which popular 'myth of redemptive violence' thinking perpetrates. In practice there will be many occasions when there will appear to be little difference between '*shalom* activism' and 'nonviolence', but in reality their root, motivation and goals will often be quite different.

CHRISTIANS AND PEACE

Hebrew vision of peace

A profound vision of peace and non-violence runs throughout the Hebrew scriptures, but along side it there are many passages seeming to accept the need for war and violence and on occasions they even demand it, which we will discuss below.¹⁴ In spite of this the call to peace is dominant and it provides the primary focus of Israel's destiny, it also lays the foundations for the Christian example and message. From the huge amount of material available the following are just a few examples and quotes:

- We are made in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1);
- God loves those we hate the most (Jonah);
- Beat your swords into ploughshares (Micah, Isaiah);
- The vision of *shalom* (cosmic wholeness in compassion, justice and integrity).¹⁵

¹³ In '**Peace (*Shalom*) in the Old Testament**' in PB Yoder & WM Swartley (Ed) '**The Meaning of Peace**' (2nd Ed) pub IMS Elkhart 2001; 39

¹⁴ On the question of war, violence and the divine command for Israel to exterminate their enemies see in particular Appendix 1 "God's genocide"

¹⁵ A more complete presentation of the Hebrew vision of peace and its meaning and implications is outlined at the beginning of this unit and in the Workshop unit: '**Re-Imagining Hope: living at the edge of time.**'



'Beat your swords into ploughshares
and your spears into pruning hooks'
(Mic 4:3)

'Woe to those ... who rely on horses,
who trust in chariots ... and in horsemen,
but do not look to the Holy One of Israel'
(Isa 31:3)

'I will abolish the bow, the sword
and war from the land;
and I will make you lie down in safety'
(Hos 2:19)

Jesus and gentleness

In Jesus the challenge of peace and non-violence and the issue of conflict and war come to crisis.

Jesus' teaching on love, gentleness and non-violence seems to come through clearly and consistently in the texts:

- **Mt 5:5,7,9** - 'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth ...the merciful, for they will receive mercy ... the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.'
- **Mt 5:39-41** - 'But I say to you. Do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to them the other also; and if anyone would sue you and take your coat, let them have your coat as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles' (cf Lk 6:27-31).
- **Mt 5:44** - 'But I say to you. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you'.
- **Mt 7:12** 'In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets'.
- **Mt 21:1-11** - Jesus' kingly and meek entry into Jerusalem on a donkey (cf Zec 9:9)
- **Mt 22:39** - 'Love your neighbour as yourself' (cf Rm 13:8-10; Gal 5:14; Ja 2:8).
- **Mt 26:52** - Then Jesus said to him (Peter), "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword".
- **Lk 9:56** The Son of man has not come to destroy the lives of human beings but to save them."
- **Lk 10:5-6** - 'Whatever house you enter, first say, "Peace to this house!" And if any one is there who shares in peace; your peace will rest on that person; if not it will return to you'.
- **Jn 8:7** - 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her'.
- **Jn 18:36** - Jesus answered, "My kingship is not of this world; if my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight that I might not be handed over to the Jews; but my kingdom is not from the world".

Arguments against Jesus teaching non-violence are focused on the following texts:

- **Mt 8:10** - Jesus commends the faith of the centurion with no other requirement.
- **Mk 7:10** - Jesus quotes Ex 21:12 which says, 'whoever speaks evil of their father and mother must surely die' and comments that the Pharisees made void the word of God by their traditions inferring he supported killing in certain circumstances.
- **Mt 10:34** - 'I have not come to bring peace but a sword'.
- **Mt 17:27** - Jesus commands people to pay taxes which inevitably involves supporting the armed forces.
- **Mt 21:41** - in the 'Parable of the Vineyard', the Master (God) destroys those miserable men.
- **Mt 25:46** - in the 'Parable of the Sheep and Goats', those on the left hand are cast into 'eternal punishment'.
- **Lk 22:36** - 'And the one who has no sword must sell their cloak and buy one'.
- **Lk 23:47** - the centurion at the cross confesses Jesus as the Son of God.
- **Jn 2:15** - 'Making a whip of cords he drove them all out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle'.
- **Jn 18:23** - Jesus does *not* 'turn the other cheek' (cf Mt 5:39) but said, "If I have spoken wrongly testify to the wrong. But I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?"

A plain reading of the text of the gospels appears to present a clear call to non-violence being at the heart of the kingdom of God. While those who disagree hold their views sincerely the references they use do not seem to be making the clear opposite point, are open to alternative understanding and appear to have been selected in an attempt to challenge the non-violence position for other reasons than the natural sense of the text. We shall now briefly examine the issues:

- We are told that Jesus' command to love enemies and not retaliate (Mt 5: 39-44) is restricted to personal ethics and not to the demands and realities of community and the state; they are illogical in the face of national conflict. If one agrees that the sign of God's kingdom in individuals is a commitment to non-violence in personal relationships, how can it be arbitrarily abandoned in time of crisis and war, where in reality each encounter is still one to one?
- The fact that soldiers are commended or respond to Jesus shows he accepts everyone (cf Mt 8:10; Lk 23:47). We are not told what the consequence of that encounter was. Did the prostitutes who followed Jesus continue selling sex, we don't hear Jesus commanding them to change but it is reasonable assume they did.
- The quote from Ex 21:12 (cf Mk 7:10) emphasises the seriousness of the rabbinical manipulation of the Torah, not Jesus' agreement with the use of violence. Notice how he deals with the adulteress when the Law equally demanded her execution.
- Individuals have the responsibility to pay taxes (Mt 17:27), but it is the authorities that have the responsibility as to how they are spent. This issue still faces peace people today.
- Parables that refer to the use of force and punishment (cf Mt 21:41; 25:46) are stories told with the particular technical purpose to forcefully illustrate ideas. The forceful ending emphasises the seriousness of the issue but is not the point of the parable.
- When Jesus says he 'did not come to bring peace but a sword' (Mt 10:34) or that those who had no sword should 'sell their cloak and buy one' (Lk 22:36) is emphasising that



God's kingdom brings conflict with the status quo. It is not a call to the zealot option. This is illustrated clearly in the story that follows in Luke where Peter in Gethsemane begins using one of the swords (22:49-51).

- Cleansing the temple (Jn 2:15) was an acted prophecy; the whip of cords was a symbol. We are not told he actually used it, if he did it was only to drive cattle and sheep; and there is no suggestion that he violated them.
- The fact that Jesus did not literally 'turn the other cheek' (Jn 18:23) only demonstrates his earlier saying (Mt 5:39). It is about challenging the oppressor with the reason and source of their violence (not passive non-retaliation), which is exactly what Jesus does.

Jesus is *the* peacemaker and in that *the* Son of God (Mt 5:9). We see his disturbing gentleness working in distinct ways:¹⁶

- **Shalom craftsman** - daily taking the raw hard materials of fear, hatred and bitterness and transforms them into a masterpiece of God ultimate *masterpeace*.
- **Ruthless compassion** - standing at the centre of conflict Jesus works with love and passion to creatively resolve it, even provoking hostility to reveal the roots.
- **Weapons of wisdom** - Jesus insight and perception were disarming, questions like rapier thrusts disarmed attackers; but looking for space for God's kingdom.
- **Prophetic action** - an activist giving an important place to proclamation, method and moment were crucial, the medium becoming the message.
- **Redemptive love** - Jesus death demonstrated peacemaking as redemptive, bearing the cost within itself that others might come to wholeness.

New Testament nonviolence

Beyond the Gospels the rest of the New Testament seems to give clear and consistent teaching on non-violence resonating and interpreting the teaching of Jesus. While it undergirds the whole body of writing some key passages are:

- **Rm 12:17,19-21** - 'Repay no one evil for evil ... Never avenge yourselves ... if your enemy is hungry, feed them ... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good' (cf Mt 5:39-41; Rm 13:8-10).
- **2 Cor 10:4** - '... for the weapons of our warfare are not worldly but have divine power to destroy strongholds'.
- **Eph 6:12** - 'For our struggle is not against enemies of flesh and blood...'
- **Phil 2:14-15** - 'Do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation in which you shine like stars in the world' (cf v 5-11).
- **1 Thes 5:15** - 'See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one and to all'.
- **1 Pet 2:21-23** - '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 entrusted himself to the one who judges justly'.

¹⁶ The ideas in this section are developed more fully in Noel Moules '**Jesus the Peacemaker**' in Dana Mills-Powell (Ed) '**Decide for Peace: Evangelicals against the Bomb**' Marshalls 1986; 74-85



- **1 Pt 3:9** - Do not return evil for evil or reviling for reviling; but on the contrary bless'.
- **Rev 5:5-6** - 'See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered ...then I saw ...a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered'.
- **Rev 17:14** - '... they will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord and Lords and King of Kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful'.

Arguments are made against the broader New Testament writings teaching nonviolence:

- **Lk 3:14** - John the Baptist doesn't require soldiers to resign (cf 1 Cor 7:20)
- **Acts 10:34-35** - Cornelius the centurion shows that the faith and righteousness of a soldier are acceptable to God.
- **Rm 13:1-7** - 'Let every person be subject to governing authorities ... whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed ... for it is God's servant for your good ...for the authority does not bear the sword in vain!'
- **Eph 6:10-20** - New Testament writers frequently use military imagery (cf eg 2 Tim 2:3-4; Rev 19:11.15).

It is interesting how few objections can be found:

- Those on the issue of soldiers responding to the kingdom of God have been dealt with above.
- The matter of 'military imagery' in context is always making spiritual points and never justifying even the limited use of violence. The New Testament frequently uses the imagery of war and conflict (see above) but it is in terms of a real 'spiritual' struggle being the true battleground. This is exactly what Jesus demonstrated. The imagery is analogy.
- The ideas in Romans 13:1-7 are the classic challenge to a nonviolent position, they are been dealt with in considerable detail in the 'Church and State' section below.

There appear to be strong reasons for believing that the New Testament writers held a strong commitment to nonviolence.

Early Christian peace thinking

Beyond the pages of the New Testament, during the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE, we begin to see how the early Christian community thinks and acts in terms of peace and nonviolence, or war and conflict. This is a subject about which there has been a long, and often heated, debate. The simple fact is that there is very little evidence of early Christians ever being in the armed forces of the day or using violence towards others.

Those holding a 'just war' position, and challenging the notion that nonviolence is at the core of Jesus' teaching on the kingdom of God, make the following points:

- There are some references that do suggest some Christians were members of the Roman armed forces.
- The fact that few Christians were soldiers was mainly due to the link between the demands of the army and pagan religious worship, not that Christians were opposed to warfare itself.



- Christians were a small and persecuted minority for much of the time and were not welcome as members of the key structures of the State, so it is not surprising few were found in the armed forces.

Those holding a peace position respond:

- There is recognition that we cannot make sweeping statements to the effect that there were no Christians in the armed forces before the 4th century CE. However, there seems little doubt that the majority of Christians during this period were committed to non-violence as the essence of the gospel.
- Paganism and persecution did encourage many of the early Christians to keep a low profile. However, there is overwhelming evidence that their instinctive love, compassion, non-violence in everyday life; and fearlessness, forgiveness and non-retaliation in the face of death, drew many outsiders into the faith.

Early Christian voices on the subject of non-violence:¹⁷

- **Tertullian:** “But how will they (soldiers who are Christians) make war ... without the sword, which the Lord has taken away? ... The Lord, in disarming Peter, thenceforth disarmed every soldier”.
- **Origen:** “We who by our prayers destroy all demons which stir up wars, violate oaths and disturb the peace, are of more help to the emperors than those who seem to be doing the fighting”.

Of great significance is the fact that throughout the first three centuries of the Christian church there was a constant challenge from the Jewish community:

“Jesus cannot be the Messiah because the Messiah does not die and because the Messiah will establish peace on earth. Jesus died and there certainly is not world wide peace”.

The early Christian voices made it clear that the vision of Isaiah 2:2-5 and Micah 4:1-5 has *already been fulfilled* in the church, the non-violent community:

- **Justyn Martyr:** “This prophecy too was verified ... we, who once killed one another, now do not only not wage war against our enemies ... but even meet death cheerfully confessing Christ”
- **Irenaeus:** “The law of liberty ... caused such a change in the state of things.. [nations] now unaccustomed to fighting ... when smitten offer the other cheek.”
- **Origen:** “No longer do we take the sword against any nation, nor do we learn war any more, since we have become sons of peace through Jesus”.

It is important to remember that the official position of the church has always been:

‘Ecclesia non novit sanguinem’
‘the Church does not shed blood’¹⁸

¹⁷ For more details on this section see G Lohfink ***‘Jesus and Community’*** Paulist Press 1984;168-176

¹⁸ It is an irony that throughout the Middle Ages during the Inquisition the church claimed to remain true to this dictum, but actually used the state to carry out its executions and thus technically upheld nonviolence.



The call is to engage in 'the Lamb's war' (Rev 17:14) and to understand themselves as 'sheep among wolves' (Mt 10:16).

However, as we shall see below, during the 4th and 5th centuries a complete change came to popular Christian thinking about peace and war. Only small numbers of Christians would continue to believe that non-violence was central to the gospel as the church reaches for the sword.

For example in 1263 a Jewish Rabbi, Moses ben Nachman (Nachmanidies) was given permission to hold a free and open debate with Christian theologians, in the presence of the Spanish king James 1 of Aragon, with the promise of complete immunity. Nachmanidies gave two central reasons why the Christian faith could not be the truth:

- It was illogical that almighty God would or could become a human being.
- It was prophesied that the Messiah would usher in an age of universal peace and yet the church never ceased to engage in warfare and extol military virtues.¹⁹

This is a most challenging indictment of the church's embracing of 'Just War' thinking and on occasion's wholehearted militarism; which in turn is such a complete contrast to the majority thinking of the church in the first five centuries CE.

CHURCH AND SWORD

'Just War' concept

Why, since the 5th century CE have the majority of Christians of all denominations have believed that war in at least some circumstances is just and right when Jesus clearly appears to teach non-violence and non-retaliation²⁰. This view has been honestly and sincerely held. Most Christians, like all right minded people, will say they are appalled by violence and that war must only be fought as a last resort.

However, one is led to ask however the reason why (to give just two of numerous possible examples):

- At the height of the 'Cold War', with the potential of a global thermonuclear holocaust, Christians supported their governments in being prepared to incinerate millions of other people (many also Christians) if necessary;
- During the massacres in Rwanda numbers of Christians were actively involved in the bloodshed.

What kind of thinking leads to these extremes? The starting point is to understand the nature and the birth of the 'Just War' idea that we will now explore.

¹⁹ This of course is exactly the same challenge that the Jews leveled at the Christians in the first three centuries and they were able to rebuff, how things have changed by the 13th century!

²⁰ There have of course been notable exceptions with the Anabaptists, Quakers and the Brethren.



'Just War' thinking has shaped traditional Christian doctrine for more than fifteen hundred years, especially as the links between church and state became closer. Thinkers like Augustine (5th century CE) and Aquinas (13th century CE) developed the idea out of concepts that had been discussed by pagan philosophers like Aristotle, and inter-wove them with ideas about war from the Hebrew scriptures. Then certain New Testament passages (eg Rom 13) were then read in the light of these findings. Just War thinking subsequently became the basis of international law.

'Just War' has as its aim:

'To limit war in the pursuit of justice, but only if certain conditions are met'

It recognises the fact that all war is a tragic evil, but that in certain circumstances a limited war carried out righteously and according to clear restrictions is a lesser evil than the one it is seeking to remove. For any war to be considered 'just' certain very strict requirements must be met:

▪ **Just Cause:**

- **A clear wrong** - there must be a genuine issue of injustice
- **A last resort** - only after all other means of resolve have been exhausted
- **A legitimate authority** - it can only be authorised by a government
- **A limited objective** - the goals must be clearly defined and just in their aim
- **A chance of success** - failure will add the evil endured in the 'Just War' to the triumph of the evil being resisted

▪ **Just Means:**

- **Minimum force to be used** - just enough force necessary to reach objectives;
- **Military only to be attacked** - civilians are not to be attacked or willfully killed.

▪ **Just Intention:**

- **The soldiers are to have a right attitude** - they fight with the spirit of a peacemaker;
- **The enemy is to be respected** - they are under no circumstances to be dehumanized.

▪ **Just Disobedience:**

- **Violation permits desertion** - should the basis of the Just War be violated, particularly on commands from his higher authority, a soldier has the responsibility to leave the battle.

▪ **'Just War' and Weapons of Mass Destruction**

Having established the accepted criteria for a 'Just War' we must ask whether or not they could be met within what we know or might be the expected results of an attack with Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs), which of course include nuclear weapons:

- **Just cause?** – WMD attacks on military targets alone could result in the death of many millions of people; what evil could make such a war a higher good?



- **Just means?** – WMD make discrimination between soldiers and civilians impossible;
- **Just intention?** - WMD, by their very presence, dehumanise the enemy;
- **Just disobedience?** – WMD attacks, with its speed and devastation, demands that moral judgments be made before their use or not at all.

This has led John Stott to say, “Every Christian, whatever they may think of the possibility of a ‘just’ use of conventional weapons, must be a nuclear pacifist”. This was quoted before the idea of WMD was developed, but it would seem quite logical to put it in the place of ‘nuclear’ and it would still be true.

▪ ‘Just War’ - is just war!

For many people conventional ‘just warfare’ appears persuasive. However, many others believe that in reality its demands are idealistic and go unmet; what results is nothing more than ‘just war’!

- Each army in any battle believes they have ‘right’ on their side; no army in any battle is free from self interest and exploitation;
- In the Second World War the allied bombing of German cities (like Dresden) alone killed in excess of 580,000 civilians, only one English bishop protested, and he was forbidden to preach! :

- In the First World War 90% of casualties were soldiers and 10% were civilians;
- In the Second World War 50% of casualties were soldiers and 50% were civilians;
- In wars since the 1990’s 10% of casualties were soldiers and 90% were civilians.

- To put a gun into any person’s hand changes them and the atmosphere of the battlefield brings certain madness to every soldiers mind. There is little chance for the spirit of the peacemaker;²¹
- No soldier could exercise ‘just disobedience’; they would be shot as a deserter and traitor

It is challenging to consider that rarely if ever has a church denomination as a body condemned their nation’s conflicts as unjust! Many Christians, and others, believe there never has been, nor ever could be, such a thing as a ‘just war’. Others disagree.

Justice and deterrent

There has been a widespread global view that large stockpiles of armaments, especially WMD (held by responsible governments!) are a vehicle for peace because of their deterrent value. History has shown that ‘Mutually Assured Deterrence’ (MAD) is a flawed doctrine and that states with more weapons than their neighbours do not bring peace but fear and manipulation.²²

²¹ See Joanna Bourke *‘An Intimate History of Killing’* Granta 1999 that reveals the extent to which many soldiers ‘enjoy’ the act of killing and massacre during war.

²² See Appendix 2 ‘Weapons as peace’ for a fuller critique.



Many Christians reject the idea of 'Just War' as mediaeval and outdated, no longer relevant in the modern world. Instead they argue that the church should be prepared to support armed conflict, even using WMD if necessary in the cause of both national and international justice. This approach is based primarily on an attempt to argue logically from certain ideas in the Hebrew scriptures and Paul's letter to the Romans.²³

It is worth asking if Christians who believe 'justice' is the sole criteria for sometimes engaging in conflict ought to regularly engage in 'guerrilla prayer groups' asking for guidance as to where attacks should take place next. To only engage in conflict as self-defence, under the guise of justice, is simply self-interest and a corruption of the concept.

Many Christians who hold a peace position argue that for a society to look to their weapons stockpile for national security are involving themselves in nothing less than idolatry, which is clearly condemned in scripture.

Christendom and conflict

As the church moves into the 4th and 5th centuries CE everything changes. On the 28th October 312 the empire in the west is controlled by the new ruler Constantine. He claimed Christian conversion and gave Christians equal rights with pagans. The first steps to linking the church with the State were made and the commitment of the majority of Christians to non-violence was changed forever.

As people began to identify Christianity with a political entity defined by geographical territory it began to be argued that the Christian boundaries had to be defended against pagan invaders, or extended by force to expand the kingdom of God. The consequences progressed logically from there. Some examples are:

- 380 Theodosius declares the state Christian, pagans and heretics are persecuted;
- 385 Priscillian, the Spanish bishop of Avila, is executed with six followers by the orders of the church for heresy;
- 396 Augustine orders dissenting Donatist Christians to be attacked by troops on the basis that the church has the right 'to compel them to come in' (Lk 14:23);
- 496 Clovis king of the Franks is converted to Christianity and attributes his military victories to God and sees them as expanding the territory of the church;
- 732 Charles Martel defeats the Muslim forces at Poitiers and is seen as saving Christian Europe from the infidel;
- 751 Pepin 'the Short' uses his troops to restore papal territories in Italy from the Lombards creating the 'Papal States';
- 768 Charlemagne came to power and used Christianity as an excuse for political expansion, in 800 was crowned 'Roman Emperor' by the pope.

The pattern is set for the unfolding thinking and action of the majority of Christians for the unfolding centuries. The tragedy of the situation is illustrated by an event in the 13th century in Spain.²⁴

²³ See Appendix 3 'Weapons as justice' for a fuller critique.

²⁴ See further details in Joan Comay '*The Diaspora Story*' Steimatzky 1981; 132-133

GOD'S GENOCIDE

As we have seen, the broad Hebrew text presents us with a paradox over the subject of peace and war. Some present a breathtaking vision of peace as *shalom*, while others present horrific acts of violence and seemingly God-ordered genocide where it clearly states that Yahweh the God of Israel commands the complete destruction of every living person in a given people group. Here are just three of many possible examples:

'... when the Lord your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy.' (Dt 7:2)

'But as for the towns of these people that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, you must not let anything that breathes remain alive' (Dt 20:16)

'The Lord said to Joshua, "See I have handed Jericho over to you..." Then they devoted to destruction by the edge of the sword all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep and donkeys' (Josh 6:2, 21)

The plain reading of these texts seems to demonstrate beyond question that the God of Israel (whom Christians believe to be the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ) both sanctioned and commanded genocide on a massive scale. This goes far beyond any discussion about whether or not a godly person is sometimes permitted to fight. It challenges the very heart of a biblical understanding of the actual character of God personally as well as the nature of scriptural revelation itself. This is possibly the greatest challenge to biblical interpretation.

We shall try to work our way through the challenge in a careful step-by-step approach.

▪ **Yes, we have a problem!**

- These texts are surely a major problem to every Christian? Not only those seeking to take a peace position that is not violence, but also those taking a 'just war' position.²⁵ How do we understand the true character of God?
- These texts are used by those criticising the Jewish and Christian faith in an attempt to reveal a potentially violent and savage God at the heart of both faiths.
- Historically both Jews and Christians embarrassed by these biblical passages have simply ignored them, as if they were not there. There is little rabbinical comment on them in the Talmud and in both Jewish and Christian worship they are either read without comment or excluded altogether.

▪ **Easy solutions to the problem:**

- Quite simply the ancient Hebrews *thought* that God was commanding them to carry out these acts of genocide but they were mistaken; however they recorded the stories to reflect this understanding.

²⁵ Sadly we have to acknowledge that since the 5th Century CE there have always been some Christians who have seen no problem in the actual or potential slaughter of non-Christians because of their actual or potential association with perceived evil or threat. How this position can be held in the light of the teaching and example of Jesus would seem to defy understanding, but they do attempt to make just such a connection to justify their views.



- These stories would have been finally edited during the period of the exile; some Jewish scholars suggest that the biblical writers *wrote as if God* had commanded genocide – the writers *wished this is how Israel had acted* because if Israel had wiped out the ‘Canaanites’ she would not have fallen prey to their temptations, sinned and ended up in Babylon!²⁶

These responses are interesting. Are they satisfactory? Do they make the biblical text simply subjective and untruthful?

▪ Liturgy and learning

- Remember that the first question to ask in all biblical interpretation is, “What kind of literature am I reading?” These ‘genocide’ texts are mainly found in Deuteronomy and Joshua (remember that Joshua is in the ‘Former Prophets’ - there are no ‘historical’ books in the Bible); they are about spirituality and morality, not history.
- A key to understanding the ‘genocide passages’ is to see them as stories being retold with a liturgical purpose (teaching, declaration, meditation, worship) to remind Israel of the central truth that ‘Yahweh is holy’ and that God and the covenant people must not be contaminated by the cultural and spiritual corruption of the ‘Canaanites’; it is the sin that is being emphasised, not slaughter.

▪ Radical holiness

- These texts are all about ‘holiness’ (Heb: *qadosh*). Keeping the spirituality of Israel free from contamination by Canaanite culture, which the prophets make clear remains a constant threat and in fact continually contaminates them.
- Holiness in Deuteronomic thought is all about life and death:

‘I call heaven and earth to witness against you today
that I have set before you today life and death ...’
(Dt 30:19, but see v15-20)

This would account for the strength of the language and the imagery used in these so-called ‘genocide’ texts.

- We see exactly the same principle in the New Testament:

‘Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly ...’
(Col 3:5)

It is quite clear that no form of suicide is intended here, but a call to take sin and its consequences deadly seriously in the way you live your life. This finds an identical parallel in the so-called ‘genocide’ passages.

- There is a parallel with these ‘genocide’ texts and the often-quoted, an ‘eye for eye, tooth for tooth’ (Lev 24:20). These words have always been understood and interpreted by the Jewish community as compensation, *never* as offering the possibility of revenge

²⁶ See M Greenberg article *Herem* in *Encyclopedia Judaica* vol 8 Keter Publishing 1972; 346



or retaliation. Talmudic scholars are clear that the 'genocide' commandments would never have been applied –they pointed towards living holy and uncontaminated lives.²⁷

- The principle of holiness works with the idea of contamination. Notice the stress on 'proximity' – the possible contaminating influence closest to the Israelites is to be treated most harshly, while that further away not so (see Dt 20:10-16).
- The name 'Canaanite' appears to be used in a general and non-specific way in the text ie: 'those locally who were not Israelite'; much as 'Gentile' was later used for all those who were not Jews. The word 'Israelite' may also have a broad sense of 'those covenanted to Yahweh' and include those who joined them after coming into the land (eg covenant at Shechem).
- Many Rabbis' argue that the name 'Canaanite' and others²⁸ used in a negative way, are not referring to the particular people of the time in a direct personal way, but rather to the destructive forms of sin and evil that their culture symbolised.
- The 'Canaanites' were certainly not all destroyed; total genocide did not in fact take place. The book of Joshua gives the impression that the Canaanites have been conquered (cf 11:16-23), but Judges (cf 1:1) opens with the 'Canaanites' still a very strong influence. So a strong theological theme rather than close historical detail is suggested.
- Archaeological evidence does not support the destruction of Canaanite towns by the Israelites²⁹ (with the possible exception of Hazor and Lachish). This also strengthens the argument that the genocide did not happen.

▪ **God questions:**

- The theme is that 'Yahweh is a warrior' runs throughout the Hebrew scriptures and into the New Testament; the biblical view of holy war is that Yahweh fights *for* Israel not *with* Israel.
- If we read them just within the context of the Hebrew scriptures we are left asking, "What kind of morality is displayed by a God like this?" and "How do these passages harmonise with others that speak of love and compassion?"
- Consider these texts and their commands from a 'Canaanite' perspective. Imagine you were a 'Canaanite', how would these commands make you feel and what conclusions would they lead you to make about Yahweh the God of Israel?
- When we read them within the context of the New Testament we are left asking, "Does God's character change in Jesus?"

▪ **Social and historical factors:**

- The stories need to be read in the light of their particular historical and social circumstances; ancient warfare was ruthless and merciless especially when the

²⁷ The Talmudic sources are Tosefta, Sanhedrin 14:1; Bavli, Sanhedrin 71a, quoted in J Milgrom '*Let your love for me vanquish your hatred for him*' in DL Smith-Christopher (Ed) '*Subverting Hatred: The challenge of nonviolence in Religious Traditions*' Orbis Books 2007; 155

²⁸ Which would include all those nations associated with them, such as the Amalakites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, Jebusites etc

²⁹ See eg 'A History of Ancient Israel & Judah' by J Maxwell Miller & JH Hayes pub SCM Press 1986 p71-79



combatants were driven by ideology in the way the Israelites were. Israel were children of their times, clearly some fighting clearly did take place.

- Israel was carving out a political entity defined by geographical territory; Jesus said it is the nature of the kingdoms of this world that they fight (cf Jn 18:36) - so military conflict was to be expected. The church is quite different in that it is not restricted by political, geographical and cultural limitations and does not fight.

▪ **Unfolding understanding:**

- It is clear that biblical revelation is an unfolding process, in terms of understanding, as it moves towards God's most complete revelation in the person of Jesus. God is working with people within their historical and cultural circumstances and all the limitations of understanding that this presents. While this is far from a satisfactory solution to the 'genocide' texts (and other difficult texts in the Hebrew scriptures), it is an important factor to address in this discussion.
- We recognise that the apparently smooth surface of the biblical text is a fabric that has been woven from many different strands and traditions, often coming from quite different perspectives and bringing different emphasises. The genius of the Hebrew writers and editors is the way they enhance truth by drawing on these disparate sources. The 'genocide passages' demand that we have the maturity and wisdom to recognise this especially in the light of the full breadth of biblical revelation.

▪ **Remaining challenges:**

- The reflections outlined above by no means resolve all the challenges made by the 'genocide' passages; we have to admit that they are still an interpretation conundrum that has not yet revealed all its secrets - the task ahead keeps us very humble.
- We still have to take a step of faith and echo the words of the commentator in Genesis, 'Shall not the judge of all the earth do right' (18:25)
- We are again reminded that just because something is biblical it does not necessarily mean that it is Christian!

PERSONAL PEACE CHOICES

Embracing assertive meekness

If someone is convinced that all violence of any kind is fundamentally opposed to the core of the gospel they must make a conscious act to embrace the path and responses of 'assertive meekness' and make it part of their daily lifestyle. The notion that it is only a peripheral issue only needing to be considered if we stand on the brink of war is mistaken. It proves that the majority of Christians have made little direct connection between handling violence in the microcosm of personal life and the macrocosm of the battlefield. They cannot be separated. We encounter violence in subtle or overt forms many times every day. It is only as this is recognised, and we become sensitive to it developing strategies of 'assertive meekness' and 'disturbing gentleness', that change begins. Embracing the path of the '*shalom* activist'.

It demands the personal decision to take on the implications of being a 'citizen of heaven' (Phil 3:20 and living by the vision of *shalom*. It should be seen as part of the implications of a Christian understanding and experience of baptism.



We make the vital commitment to:

- Embrace gentleness as a daily lifestyle;
- Take on the *shalom* vision of the integration of all things;
- Recognise everything is sacred; live within a sacred world with wisdom;
- Let love and gentleness affect every action and reaction;
- Challenging the daily in-roads of violence;
- Confronting deep personal hostile attitudes.

Two points to reflect upon:

- Christians often feel excluded from exploring non-violence because they confess to feelings of anger, rage and a desire for revenge and retaliation when confronted with injustice, evil and violence. They should remember that not to feel these emotions is evidence of our humanity and would in fact disqualify them from the peace path. Gandhi said, “Anyone who does not feel that they could kill another human being has no place in the peace movement”! It is feeling all the anger and then choosing the path of nonviolence that makes the peace person.
- Even if a Christian is convinced by the arguments for ‘just war’ they still have the obligation to obey the commands of Jesus with regard to nonviolence in all their personal relationships. If they faithfully experiment in this way then one might be surprised what the outcome and consequences might be?

Facing personal violence³⁰

We now come to the very practical question at the heart of the subject of peace and war; how would we handle a personal encounter with violence?

▪ The classic question

Almost every discussion about the way of non-violence leads some one to protest:

“ ... but what would you do if a violent person threatened to kill your family?”

What a challenging question to consider! Of course those who ask it rarely seem to want an answer. Instead, while they believe the way of non-violence, while attractive in theory, is mere idealism and completely flawed as a model to practice. Asking the question alone is enough to prove it!

The question is of course hypothetical (something important to remember). It demands a serious answer, and is an opportunity to explore some of the dynamics of peace at work.

▪ Subtle assumptions

Behind the question there are some subtle assumptions that cloud the issue and need to be identified before we can give a positive reply: -

³⁰ Much of the material in this section has been adapted from the ideas in John Howard Yoder *‘What Would You Do?’* Herald Press 1983



- **Mechanistic scenario.** The question implies that unless the attacker is killed the outcome is clearly determined [ie 'the ones I love will die']. Telling myself there are no other options makes it unlikely I shall find any. The belief that the scenario will unfold mechanistically becomes self-fulfilling
- **Success guaranteed.** The question implies that I will be able to successfully kill the attacker. This is far from certain (Bonhoffer failed to kill Hitler). The attacker may elude me, or prove stronger than me. Failure will probably result in even greater evil. Having seriously harmed the attacker, all other options will be closed, and I will probably die along with others
- **Complete knowledge.** The question implies that I know exactly what would happen if my response is lethal or not. My knowledge is incomplete and there are many options. Killing the attacker also removes all possibility of redeeming the situation for ever
- **Victim's wishes.** The question implies that the person being attacked wants me to kill their attacker in their defense. This may not be the case at all.
- **Personal weakness.** The question implies that however righteous I may wish to be, in these circumstances you can only reasonably expect me to respond lethally. Must every situation be conditioned by my frailty?
- **Attacker's circumstances.** The question implies that the attacker is motivated by mindless evil (which may in fact be the case). However, the attacker's violence may be the result of driven circumstances like fear, illness or hunger that I am unable to meet if I kill them.
- **Legal right.** The question implies that the law would support my action of killing in legitimate defense, thus allowing me to justify my action to myself without questioning it much further. But is a society where the individuals take the law into their own hands really going to have less crime?
- **Emotional twist.** The question implies that if I do not respond violently I am weak, passive, cowardly, probably inhuman, and in the case of men, 'not really a man'. The issue is an objective question about what is right or wrong.
- **Egotism.** The question implies that I must defend what is 'mine', with little or no consideration of the welfare of others. The welfare of everyone must be taken into account.
- **Serious answers**

However hypothetical the question it highlights some important facts:

- It is essential to have thought through and prepared your attitude before such a crisis so that your reaction can be a free, creative and considered; when it breaks it will be too late to be thinking what your reactions ought to be.
- It is essential to recognise that the answer is not simply 'yes' or 'no', assertive meekness presents us with many possible choices; however, if you are not looking for a non-violent option you probably won't find it.
- It is essential to recognise that the way of Jesus calls for us to draw on resources of astonishing creativity, divergent thinking and wisdom.

Facing a violent person attacking my family there are a number of possible options:



- **Massacre.** It is possible that the worst will happen and my family will be murdered; tragically dying for what seems no possible reason. This of course could still happen even if I attempt to kill the attacker.
- **Martyrdom.** It is possible that my family, and myself, are murdered, but that would happen within the greater purposes of God. It is the witness and testimony of martyrdom. The person who killed me would never be able to forget how I died; fearless and with real love for them shining in my eyes and in my heart.
- **Means of escape.** It is possible that a number of options will present themselves as the circumstances unfold:
 - **Disarm them emotionally** - with a word of authority, with a display of love, with words of kindness;
 - **Disarm them psychologically** - with a display of fearless defencelessness;
 - **Disarm them tactically** - with a ruse; using surprise, thought and imagination; assessing and manipulating circumstances;
 - **Disarm them physically** - with non-lethal, non-violating physical restraint; imposing myself within the line of attack, using physical barriers;
 - **Disarm them morally** - with a reasoned argument, by providing material needs like money or food.
- **Miracle.** The above 'means of escape' are open to anyone, whether or not they have a spiritual discipleship commitment. The Christian, however, can look for God to act within and beyond all the numerous possibilities suggested. For us there is also the dimension of miracle:
 - 'You can trust God not to let you be tested beyond your strength, and with any trial he will give you a way out of it and the strength to endure it' (1Cor 10:13).
 - This does not mean that God will always act in the way we expect or achieve the outcome we most desire. We can always be successful but not always in the way in which most people measure success.
 - 'Settle it therefore in your minds, do not meditate beforehand how to answer; for I will give you a mouth and wisdom which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand' (Lk 21:13-15).

This does mean that when we face violence we should be sensitive to the Spirit, expect to hear from God and operate in the gifts of faith, knowledge, wisdom etc.

▪ **Some conclusions**

Jesus gives us an excellent example of how to face this question, in the story of 'the woman taken in adultery' [Jn 8:1-11]; where the vulnerable woman faces violent death. In fact you see Jesus handling violent situations in unique, spontaneous, and quite unpredictable ways throughout his life. Illustrating most of the possibilities outlined above. In the end he died, and yet his death was both within the will of God and redemptive in its outcome.

We can summarise our reflections above by saying that we should learn to meet violence:

- **Creatively** - making quite unexpected responses;



- **Fearlessly** - power of violence is based on the attacked being afraid;
- **Authoritatively** - with boldness, taking charge;
- **Compassionately** - meeting practical needs;
- **Winsomely** - speaking with love and kindness;
- **Reasonably** - working with a gentle subtle logic;
- **Tactically** - using a ruse or surprise;
- **Physically** - non-violent restraint or obstruction;
- **Expectantly** - looking for a miracle.

Further reflections:

- We must try to anticipate conflict and violence and act prophetically
- We must make a modest proposal for peace, "Let the Christians of the world agree that they will not kill each other"
- We must be prepared to suffer physically as a witness (martyr) allowing how we suffer to have a profound effect on others

The path of non-violence is:

- **Responsible** - acting to prevent the worst;
- **Obedient** - responding to the hard sayings of Jesus;
- **Dependent** - walking in sensitive faith and trust;
- **Creative** - exploiting every just possibility;
- **Redemptive** - acting to bring good out of evil.

The path of non-violence demands:

- **Decision** - made well in advance that violence can never be an option or last resort under any circumstance; 'the last resort must always be forgiving love';
- **Action** - to experiment with love at every opportunity however hostile the circumstances; learning to pray for your enemies;
- **Forgiveness** - whenever we feel we have failed in the way of non-violence we can begin again with renewed commitment and wisdom.

The deep sigh

When many people are presented with the call to non-violence and assertive meekness, they often give a deep sigh; shrug their shoulders and say, "So you don't really have an answer do you?"

Popular commitment to violence prospers because people (including most Christians) want a clear neat resolve to any challenge violence is likely to present us with. People continue to meet violence with violence because, violence offers:

- **Simple solutions** - gun, knife, fist, boot;
- **Simple actions** - shoot, stab, punch, kick;
- **Simple results** - you hurt and you kill;



- **Simple feelings** - you express your anger and fear and are rewarded with a sense of satisfaction.

All this is very powerful and attractive, the call of Jesus challenges this and calls us to a path of faith:

- **There are no neat guarantees**; if you do this success is assured;
- **There is a need to be creative**; with each situation demanding a fresh response;
- **There are so few examples** of the alternative to violence; this is the price we pay for having ignored the call of Jesus.

However there are examples to inspire and challenge us.

Victories without violence

It is always argued that the way of peace is fine in theory but that it can rarely work out in practice. To disprove this here are just a few of the numerous examples of success in people's different personal circumstances. Each represents many other accounts that could be told. We also need to remember that the way of peace is a way so very rarely walked and so presents a challenge to explore and experiment.

- **Tom Skinner.** A New York gang leader told his 129 members he had become a Christian and was leaving. Everyone admitted to wanting to kill him but felt 'they were glued to their seats by something or someone'³¹.
- **Mr Morgan.** A missionary in a remote Chinese village overrun by Japanese troops. Fearless in the face of a firing squad and one soldier's bayonet charge he turned his enemies into friends³².
- **Gladys Aylward.** Quelled a serious prison riot in Yangcheng province in northern China by standing in the centre of it and ordering a crazed axe-man to hand over his weapon³³.
- **Terry Dobson.** Tells of a violent man on a Tokyo train who is brought to quietness and tears by a little old man who calmed him by gentle questioning and listening. This entire event happened before Terry could use his Aikido skills to physically subdue the man³⁴.
- **Dorothy Samuel.** One night in 1972, penniless on the streets of Philadelphia, a crazed junkie attacked her and friend with a knife demanding cash. With quiet talking they took him to their flat and gave him money - he left apologising for not having any change!³⁵
- **Sarah Carson.** A missionary in South America attacked by soldiers determined to kill all foreigners in the area. Welcoming them into her home, her testimony to the non-violent love of Jesus haunted their leader. He not only left them unharmed but visited their church to her more³⁶

³¹ See 'Black and Free' by Tom Skinner 1968

³² See Fellowship of Reconciliation Journal 1945

³³ See 'The Small Woman' by Alan Burgess 1957

³⁴ See 'Reader's Digest' December 1981

³⁵ See 'Safe Passage on the Streets' by Dorothy Carson 1975

³⁶ See 'Sojourners' journal April 1983



Questions & Reflections

1. What do you believe should be a Christian response to the international arms trade today, both in attitude and action?
2. What should be the consequences of Jesus' teaching on non-violence in your own life?
3. "There are no circumstances in which a Christian is ever justified in using violence." What is your response to a statement like this? Do you think it is a true reflection of Jesus' teaching and example? Why do you think this has not been the majority opinion of Christians down through church history? What do you think the impact would be if all Christians lived by this maxim? How might such a commitment have influenced world history?

Reading and Resources

- RH Bainton '*Christian Attitudes Towards War and Peace*' Abingdon 1960
OR Barclay '*Pacifism and War: When Christians Disagree*' IVP 1984
J Bourke '*An Intimate History of Killing*' Granta 1999
V Bowie '*Coping With Violence*' Karibuni Press 1989
R Clark '*Does the Bible Teach Pacifism?*' Marshalls 1983
J Forest '*Four Days in February*' Marshalls 1988
Douglas Johnson (Ed) '*Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft*' Oxford 1994
JM Hornus '*It is Not Lawful For Me to Fight*' Herald 1980
A Kirk (Ed) '*Handling Problems of Peace and War*' Marshalls 1988
J Lasserre '*War and the Gospel*' James Clarke 1962
MC Lind '*Yahweh is a Warrior*' Herald 1980
Dylan Mathews '*War Prevention Works: 50 stories of people resolving conflict*' Oxford Research Group 2002
D Mills-Powell (Ed) '*Decide for Peace*' Marshalls 1986
Gene Sharp '*The Politics of Nonviolent Action*' Porter Sergeant 1973
R Sider '*Christ and Violence*' Lion 1979
DL Smith-Christopher (Ed) '*Subverting Hatred: The Challenge of Nonviolence in Religious Traditions*' Orbis Books 2007
A Trocme '*Jesus and the Non-Violent Revolution*' Herald 1973
K Wengst '*Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ*' SCM 1986
JH Yoder '*Nevertheless: Varieties of Religious Pacifism*' Herald 1971
JH Yoder '*The Original Revolution: Essays in Christian Pacifism*' Herald 1971
JH Yoder '*The Politics of Jesus*' Eerdmans 1972
JH Yoder '*What Would You Do?*' Herald 1983
'*Shattered Lives*' Amnesty International and Oxfam 2003

