

## *Christian pacifism*

Along with the problem of evil, the most difficult question in Christian philosophy is whether to be an absolute pacifist. Perhaps this is the reason why it is mostly ignored in Christian debate, or passed off with excuses. The question as a whole can be examined by looking at what Jesus specifically taught for all situations where violence could naturally occur, whether there were any conditions or limitations placed upon the principle of non-violence, and what that means for us today.

The fundamental message of Jesus was unconditional love. All other principles, parables, and commandments flesh out this fundamental message into every area of our lives. We are to care for the poorest in society as if we were caring for God, we are to forgive unconditionally, we are to love our neighbours as ourselves, we are to do to others as we would have them do to us, we are to love others as Jesus loved, and we are to love our brethren in a way that will set us apart in society. Everything else in Christian doctrine and theology could be called an 'add-on'. As James said, if you have faith without works, it is dead. As Paul said, if you have enough faith to remove mountains but not love, you are nothing. Radical love and radical forgiveness is the lifeblood through which all the sayings and parables of Jesus should be interpreted.

As I will attempt to convincingly argue, the New Testament (Jesus especially) was very clear on when violence is and is not acceptable for the follower of Jesus. However, the Old Testament is equally as clear on when it is acceptable for the righteous Jew. David said in Psalm 114:1, "*Blessed be the LORD my Rock, who trains my hands for war, and my fingers for battle.*" Qohelet said in Ecclesiastes 3:1,8, "*there is an appointed time for everything... A time for war, and a time for peace.*" Exodus called for the stoning of disobedient children, promiscuous women, and homosexuals. Additionally, it claimed that killing a trespasser was a blameless act; "*if the thief is found breaking in, and he is struck so that he dies, there shall be no guilty for his bloodshed.*" (Exodus 22:2). Not to mention the law of redemptive violence (Eye for an eye, and tooth for tooth),<sup>1</sup> and the various times that God commanded that throngs of people be killed in cold blood (including the women and children). Violence was an everyday reality for the people of Israel; and God saw that it was good.

---

<sup>1</sup> Exodus 21:24, Leviticus 24:20, Deuteronomy 19:21

Jesus appears on the scene, and immediately two objections are made to drawing any conclusions from what he has to say on the matter:

“Jesus said in Matthew 5:18 that nothing in the law will pass away until all is accomplished, and hence we must accept the Old Testament’s opinion on violence and war with equal weight!” – What is there to say? This is one issue (among quite a number) that the Old and New Testament fundamentally disagree. I’ll leave the problem of reconciliation to those who believe that the Bible as we have it today (compiled together centuries after the death of Jesus) is inerrant. This objection also ignores the fact that Jesus offered a radical re-interpretation (at times complete disagreement) of the Law of Moses, a re-interpretation that was so shocking and threatening to the religious authorities that they eventually had him killed.

“Jesus spoke in a time where humanity was under a different dispensation, he was speaking to Jews, not to us Christians in present time. What he says is not applicable.” – It says something that Christianity has progressed to a point where it not only ignores the message and words of its founder, but creates a theological system where his words are *supposed* to be ignored. I’ll make the assumption (and it’s a big one) that this is a valid argument worthy of a rebuttal, and say that the other books in the New Testament offer similar ideas, as does the early church fathers.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus can be accused of many things, but he can’t be accused of lacking bravery. In the Sermon on the Mount he not only challenged fundamental social conventions that had been taken for granted by his audience, he disagreed with the Torah; the Israelites holy book. The commandment which is most often associated with pacifism is found in Matthew 5:38-39 (parallel in Luke 6:29). “*You have heard that it was said, ‘an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on the right cheek, turn the other to him also.*” The passage is clear enough; instead of violently defending yourself against the attacker, offer him the other cheek.

A common objection is made here that states that Jesus was only talking about not returning a backhand slap (which was an extreme insult in that culture), he did not say anything about not defending yourself if you are attacked. On this surface this objection seems quite reasonable; however the hypothetical situation used by Jesus must be understood in context. Jesus stated the law of retributive justice, “*an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.*” Another passage in the Old Testament adds “*a life for a life.*” The principle is in essence saying that if someone robs from you, you are justified in robbing them in

---

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Justin Martyr said in his first apology, “we who formerly used to murder one another now refrain from even making war upon our enemies.” Clement said in *Fragments* that “Above all, Christians are not allowed to correct with violence.” Tertullian said in *On Idolatry*, “The Lord, in disarming Peter, disarmed every soldier.”

return. If someone were to cut off your hand, their hand will be cut off in punishment. If someone were to kill you, they will be killed as punishment. You can also see how this law applies to personal defence; if someone is hurting you, you are permitted to hurt them back. However, the next thing that Jesus says is *“But I say to you.”* The following words must be interpreted as a direct criticism and an alternative commandment to eye for an eye. Jesus proceeds with the very broad notion to not resist an evil person. People who give you a backhand slap might be rude, but I doubt you could call them evil. It is clear that Jesus had much more in mind than just backhand slaps, and he used that merely as an example of a greater principle. Non-resistance to evil is the centrepiece of this passage, and offers no conditions or limitations. This is not a passage about the proper etiquette of responding to slaps, but rather an alternative to violent justice which is non-violent resistance.

The second passage that is applicable to this topic is found in Matthew 5:43-44. *“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”* The parallel in Luke, 6:27 adds to *“do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you”*. Often after I hear a provocative statement by Jesus, I have this instant temptation to water down certain things in my mind. For an example, I might say: “He was speaking in a Galilean rural setting; his audience were very poor people, many of whom were illiterate. When he talks about enemies he is referring to a nasty neighbour who steals a lamb.” Again, when the passage is understood as a whole, all conditions and limitations placed upon his commandment are washed away. Jesus is condemning the idea that we should love those who love us, and hate those who hate us. To love our family, our friends, and our fellow countrymen, and to hate Muslim extremists, communists, homosexuals, greedy businessmen, polluters, climate change sceptics, slutty celebrities, murderers, pornography peddlers, heretics, drug-addicts, the lazy poor, the bleeding-heart liberal, the intolerant conservative, wife-bashers, rapists, elitists, liars, thieves, and dictators. The idea that we should care for those who care for us, and protect those who are needy, but also make war with blood-thirsty tyrants, bomb violent people of different nationality, hit those who hit others, steal from those who are thieves, spit on those who do not share our values, and castrate sexual predators. No, says Jesus, you are to love them just as much. You cannot love someone as you are stabbing them before they have the opportunity to stab you, you can’t love someone when you break their leg for punching your face, and you can’t love someone as your elected representative’s bomb their apartment because they are in the unfortunate situation of living near murderers. We all live near murderers; this notion that we are to love those who love us, and hate those who hate us, is the source of all division within this world. To overcome division, Jesus said to love your enemies.

A common objection to Christian pacifism is that “it’s all well and good to not resist evil when your life is the only one at stake, but what about when others are in danger? It is criminal to not defend them.” Leo Tolstoy in his book, *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, criticised this notion with the following paragraph:

*“If every man has a right to have recourse to force in face of a danger threatening another, the question of the use of force is reduced to a question of the definition of danger for another. If my private judgment is to decide the question of what is danger for another, there is no occasion for the use of force which could not be justified on the ground of danger threatening some other man. They killed and burnt witches, they killed aristocrats and girondists, they killed their enemies, because those who were in authority regarded them as dangerous for the people.” (p.30)*

He makes a fantastic point. Justifying violence with the reason that another’s life is in danger is a slippery slope. Isn’t mostly all violence justified in this way? George Bush (despite intelligence telling him otherwise) argued that Iraq posed a very serious threat to the safety of American citizens, and in response to their lives being in danger he will commit an act of continual violence which has led to the deaths of tens of thousands of Iraqi civilians. As Tolstoy noted, they used to burn witches because they considered them dangerous to public safety. Palestinians attack Israel because it was their bombs that killed their kin. Israel attacks Palestinians because they keep blowing themselves up in Jerusalem cafes. Justifying violence in this way, especially in groups, leads to a spiral of violence that is never going to end, as each group continues to return evil for evil.<sup>3</sup>

My favourite response to this objection, however, comes from Jesus. He had for a long while told his disciples that he will be killed for what he was doing. They didn’t understand what he was saying until he was apprehended violently by Temple police.<sup>4</sup> It’s clear that the disciples that were with Jesus would have known the implications of what was occurring. The Pharisees and other religious groups were long plotting the arrest and death of Jesus. The disciples probably would have known that the arrest of Jesus would lead to his death by either the High priest or Pilate. In essence, Jesus life was in imminent danger as he was apprehended. Matthew reports that a man that was with Jesus (said by others to be Peter) reacted to this by drawing his sword, and cutting the ear off of a servant of Caiaphas, the high priest. The response from Jesus to this follower who decided to defend his life with violence was this: *“Put your sword back into its place; for all those who take up the sword*

<sup>3</sup> An idea prohibited in 1 Peter 3:9, Romans 12:17, and 1 Thessalonians 5:15

<sup>4</sup> Recorded in Matthew 26:47-56

*shall perish by the sword.*" His point is that resisting violence with violence will inevitably lead to a death while engaging in violence. The argument that it's ok to respond to violence with violence because your life could end is flawed. In most situations it is likely that death will follow whatever the reaction, and the way that a follower perishes is of great importance to Jesus. There is a popular dialogue that is often quoted that has a man saying to another "You fool! As if it matters how a man falls down!", and the response that was given was "When the fall's all that's left, it matters a great deal." Jesus believed that if he gave permission to his followers to use swords for self-defence, then the movement as a whole will be beset with fighting, wars, and factional violence. For a life philosophy that is defined by radical love and radical forgiveness, any use of violence is simply not acceptable for Jesus.

This principle can be seen in the persecutions of early Christians. In Acts there are quite a few reports of Christians being stoned, sometimes to the point of death. For examples, see the stoning of Stephen in Acts 7:59-60 where he forgives the assailants up to the point of his death, and the stoning of Paul in Acts 14:19-22. The response is never violence, but rather forgiveness. During the great persecution of Christians under Nero, there are no reports of Christians violently resisting their oppressors. As mentioned earlier, the early Church fathers agreed with the pacifism of Jesus. At least for the early Christians there were no rationalisations made to make violence acceptable in certain situations.

Nevertheless, it is quite easy to think of situations where using violence to defend the life of another feels justified. For example, if a loved one was being attacked right in front of you. I doubt any pacifist, Christian or otherwise, could say with certainty exactly what they would do in that situation. The natural instinct is to use whatever means necessary to stop the suffering of the loved one, and the instinct just feels right. It is worth noting here that there are non-violent ways to defend someone and stop suffering, and as Jesus said in John 15:13 "Greater love has no man this, that one lay down his life for his friends." If there is no other alternative, and violence is performed to prevent suffering, then theoretically there is no excuse as violence is sin. However, The Christian religion is founded on love and self-sacrifice, and there is precedent in early Christianity for submitting yourself to personal condemnation from God in order to achieve a greater social good. It was Paul that said "*I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart. I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh.*"<sup>5</sup> As Christians we are called to love all men to the point that we would do anything for the benefit of others. If sinning with violence is used in order to save the lives of many people, there would be no excuse in the eyes of God, but there would at least be love. I realise this last paragraph

---

<sup>5</sup> Romans 9:2-3

opens the possibility of all senseless acts of violence being defended in the same way. It is designed to address a very miniscule amount of situations in which violence is seemingly necessary. As with my response to natural disasters in the post about the problem of evil, there are areas where no satisfactory answer can be summoned.

Pacifism is an integral part to the message of the Jesus.

By Timothy Neal