



Don Murphy:
Can a Christian Be a Pacifist?

SPIRITUALITY TODAY
 Spring 1986, Vol. 38, pp. 100-110.

Today's 'peace churches' attempt to follow the radically simple teaching; of early Christianity to wage peace through loving non-violence.

Don Murphy publishes a Japanese Christian newsletter which he distributes to various Hutterite communities in North America. He also publishes a newsletter for an itinerant Irish priest and has written several articles and pamphlets on pacifism and spirituality. A full-time computer software author. Don and his wife live in Renton, Washington.

PACIFISM means different things to different people. Its dictionary definition is "the opposition to war or violence as a means of settling disputes." To some it means demonstrations which try to stop nuclear submarines or trains carrying nuclear weapons. To others it means selling out to the Russians. Many tend to ignore the subject, perhaps fearful of what changes it would bring to their lives if they were to investigate it carefully. One thing is certain: it is an explosive issue, touching deep into the faith life of the disciple of Jesus Christ.

Can a Christian be a pacifist in this modern world? Can one completely reject the use of violence on both a personal level and on a national level? If someone wants to take what is ours, must we reject the use of force to stop him? Does our position on this issue, the use of force in order to have our own way, reflect our relationship with God? Does it indicate our faith in God and in his control of events in our lives? Let us explore this subject, attempting to examine it not only with our logical mind but also with our spiritual eye, trusting that God will guide us on this path and provide us with his light that we may see the truth.

If pacifism is of God, then like all things of God, it does not stand alone. In the great wisdom of God, it has to be deeply mixed with the other areas of the Christian walk such as love for others, rejection of the world, and trusting God in all matters concerning our lives.

THE TEACHINGS OF JESUS

Jesus appeared to teach pacifism when he told his disciples: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God . . . Do not resist the evil man but whoever slaps you on the right cheek turn to him the other also. And if anyone wants to sue you for your shirt, let him have your coat as well. Love your enemies. Give to everyone who asks you; when a man takes what is yours, do not demand it back" (Luke 6:30 and Matt. 5:9-44). These are hard sayings of Jesus and we might respond, as some of his listeners have done elsewhere, "Who can follow them?"

Jesus declared that the life of the Christian will be different from the life of the Old Testament Jew. One of the areas of change is in the Christian's relations with other people. Love is now to be the overriding concern. He said, "You have learned that our forefathers were told, 'Do not commit murder; anyone who commits murder must be brought to judgement.' But what I tell you is this: Anyone who nurses anger against his brother must be brought to judgment. If he abuses

his brother he must answer for it to the court; if he sneers at him he will have to answer for it in the fires of hell" (Matt. 5:21-24). Jesus does not even allow a Christian to be angry with someone! What then will he do with those who kill?

Jesus taught, "You have learned that they were told, 'Eye for eye, tooth for tooth.' But what I tell you is this: Do not set yourself against the man who wrongs you" (Matt. 5:38-39). What a strong statement! Only the Son of God could call for such faith in God's control of the situation. Is he telling us that the Christian life is to be lived in the Kingdom of God and not in this world?

The apostle Paul said on the subject of peace, "Let us pursue the things that make for peace and build up the common life" (Rom. 14:19). And "The Kingdom of God is justice, peace and joy, inspired by the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 14:17). The disciple James wrote,

The wisdom from above is in the first place pure; and then peace-loving, considerate, and open to reason; it is straightforward and sincere, rich in mercy and in the kindly deeds that are its fruit. True justice is the harvest reaped by peacemakers from seed sown in a spirit of peace. What causes conflicts and quarrels among you? Do they not spring from the aggressiveness of your bodily desires? You want something which you can not have, and so you are bent on murder; you are envious, and cannot attain your ambition, and so you quarrel and fight (James 3:17-4:2).

What could be more clear? How can it be made more understandable? The Bible is plainly telling us that peace and love (pacifism) comes from God while violence and greed (the antithesis of pacifism) spring from the evil in one's heart. Can we accept this? If we have greed in our heart, don't we want to push down and hide this truth?

God would have us be at peace with all men but not all men want to be at peace with us. When we get into a situation that requires us to respond either with violence or with non-violence, does God just sit back and watch our reactions to see if we do right or is God actively involved in what is occurring? This is perhaps the heart of the matter for many people. Are we on our own or is God watching over us as a father watches over his children? To what degree does God control the affairs of human persons? If we are on our own then we need to be in control of our lives but if God is in charge we would allow God to control our actions.

The Bible has much to say about God's hand on the affairs of the world. Paul's speech in Athens makes it plain:

Since the God who made the world and everything in it is himself Lord of heaven and earth, he does not make his home in shrines made by human hands. Nor is he dependent on anything that human hands can do for him, since he can never be in need of anything; on the contrary, it is he who gives everything -- including life and breath -- to everyone. From one single stock he not only created the whole human race so that they could occupy the entire earth, but he decreed how long each nation should flourish and what the boundaries of its territory should be. And he did this so that all nations might seek the Lord and, by feeling their way towards him, succeed in finding him. Yet in fact he is not far from any of us, since it is in him that we live, and move, and exist (Acts 17:24-28).

Psalms 121 tells us that the Lord is always watching over us, day and night, to guard us. Jesus tells us that not even the sparrows are forgotten by God. "More than that, even the hairs of your head have all been counted" (Luke 12:6-7). There is much in the Bible to show us that God works all things for our good, that we need have no fear.

EARLY CHURCH PRACTICE

When we are seeking the true meaning of the teachings of the Bible, it can be helpful to us to go back to our roots, the early church which was founded by Christ through the power of the Spirit of God. The manner in which the early church lived out the teachings of Christ may help us to understand how we are to live the Christian way as the early church was taught by the apostles who were taught by Jesus.

The early church took the teachings of Jesus and the apostles very seriously. Guided by the Holy Spirit, they were strong pacifists. They did not identify with any earthly nation but rather claimed citizenship in heaven, considering themselves as strangers and aliens on the earth (Heb. 11:13-16 and I Peter 2:11). They believed that the governments were given by God and therefore to be obeyed when it did not conflict with obeying God (Acts 4:19; Rom. 13:1-6 and I Peter 2:13-14). However, Christians could not be judges or soldiers as this would place them in positions where they might be responsible for taking someone's life.

Most serious scholars of church history today agree that for the first three centuries of the Christian church, Christians rejected not only emperor-worship and idolatry but also participation in the military. Obedience to the gospel, the early church held, was consistent only with a position of nonresistance and not serving in the military. This does not mean, of course, that all early Christians were consistently following the teachings of Christ and the apostles. The New Testament gives us much evidence that not all were true to the gospel but many were lured by Satan off the narrow path.

Yale church historian Roland Bainton writes, "From the end of the New Testament period to the decade 170-180 there is no evidence whatever of Christians in the army. All of the East and West repudiated participation in warfare for Christians." Guy F. Hershberger adds, "it is quite clear that prior to about AD 174 it is impossible to speak of Christian soldiers." None of the Christian leaders in the pre-Constantinian era (ca. 313) approved of a military career for disciples of Jesus Christ.

Many early writers spoke of this pacifism. Tertullian wrote, "The divine banner and the human banner do not go together, nor the standard of Christ and the standard of the devil. Only without the sword can the Christian wage war: for the Lord has abolished the sword."⁽¹⁾ About 240, Origen wrote, "You cannot demand military service of Christians any more than you can of priests. We do not go forth as soldiers."⁽²⁾

Justin Martyr wrote about the year 160, "We ourselves were well conversant with war, murder, and everything evil, but all of us throughout the whole wide earth have traded in our weapons of war. We have exchanged our swords for ploughshares, our spears for farm tools. Now we cultivate the fear of God, justice, kindness to men, faith, and the expectation of the future given to us by the Father himself through the Crucified One."⁽³⁾ Twenty years later, Athenagoras asked, "How can we possibly kill anyone, we who call those women murderers who take drugs to induce an abortion, we who say they will have to give an account before God one day! We are

convinced that with God nothing goes unexamined, and that the body, after serving the irrational urges and lusts of the soul, will have its share in punishment. We have, therefore, every reason to detest even the slightest sin." (4) Hippolytus (ca. 218) states that soldiers who become Christians are not allowed to kill and must refuse to obey orders to kill. He also says that judges who want to become followers of the Christ must resign or be rejected by the church. (5)

MODERN PRACTICE

This pacifism did not survive the Constantinian change. By the year 314, the church was excommunicating military deserters without any consideration of the motives for desertion. Leo Tolstoy, author of *War and Peace*, said, "A pacifist can not own property. For ownership requires the use or threat of force to protect it." When the early church gave up community living and began living as individuals with each one owning their own possessions then the church also gave up pacifism. The two seem to go together.

Dr. Eberhard Arnold, founder of the Society of Brothers, began to question the wisdom of the Christian churches when he observed the results of World War I. He saw the German Christian soldiers killing and being killed by the enemy soldiers who also claimed to be Christian. How could German Christian ministers and priests bless the German army and send it off to war while the enemy Christian ministers and priests were blessing their armies and sending them off to war also? How could a Christian soldier maim and kill other Christian soldiers? How can one part of the Body of Christ do evil to another part? This seemed very contrary to the teaching of the Bible to Dr. Arnold. This line of reasoning led him to become a pacifist.

The churches today, as of Dr. Arnold's time, have problems dealing with the issue of pacifism. There are the historic peace churches such as the Mennonites, the Quakers and the Church of the Brethren that preach pacifism. Then there are those churches that accept the so-called 'just war position. Many of these have developed elaborate guidelines as to what constitutes a just war. But there are also those ministers of the gospel of Jesus that preach nationalism, loyalty to the state and hatred of governments that oppose ours. In his book, *Preachers Present Arms*, Ray H. Abrams documents at length the story of the involvement of the clergy in the world wars as well as the Vietnam war. One minister told his people, "We are fighting not only for our country and for the democracy of the world but for the kingdom of God We can not draw the line between Christianity and the military. The two go together. Every church should be a recruiting station."

Governments are created by God as servants whose duty it is to take vengeance on evildoers, to punish the evil and to protect and shelter its citizens. God has given the sword into their hands. He has granted the government honor and dignity that it might rightly be obeyed in that which is not against God. But because governments are outside the perfection of Christ, they sometimes feel a need to go to war with their neighbors. To do this they need an army that will carry out their bidding. Governments recognize that most young people can not be aroused to kill unless they first hate those that they kill. Therefore, before a government leads its people into war, great propaganda efforts must be made to bring people to the point where they can believe it is right to kill other human beings. Often, in the guise of religion, they declare that the enemy is evil and under the control of the devil. At the same time they may state that God is with them. These propaganda efforts to bring forth hatred should alert the Christian immediately that something is wrong. Hatred should be obviously identified as the work of Satan and not of Jesus Christ.

Supporting the military activities of a government seems to be in opposition to the call of the

New Testament to reject the world. John tells us to love not the world nor the things of the world. Jesus said that his disciples are in the world but not of the world. Rejection of the worldly system means rejection of selfishness which is what nationalism boils down to. When a country says "This is mine" and fights to get it or keep it, then those who support it are following a spirit other than the Spirit of Christ.

The faith required to be a pacifist must provide the Christian with the assurance that God is in charge of all that happens to the Christian. Just as Jesus said that we should look to the Father for our daily needs, we can be confident that he loves us and is leading us into God's kingdom. If we can not trust God then we need to trust in our own power. But we, who call ourselves followers of Christ, have placed our complete trust in God.

Considerable human logic is used by the opponents of pacifism. Their arguments sound reasonable until we remember that Christians are in the 'upside down' kingdom where things are done differently than in the world. The opponents of pacifism may recognize Jesus as the Christ but in their arguments against pacifism they are noticeably lacking in any attempt to support their position with the teachings of Jesus or the apostles. This seems very inconsistent for such an important subject.

The late Francis A. Schaeffer, author of *A Christian Manifesto*, stated,

I am not a pacifist because pacifism in this fallen world in which we live means that we desert the people who need our greatest help. Consider the following illustration: I am walking down the street. I see a great big, burly man who is beating a helpless little girl to death. I come up and I plead with him to stop. If he won't stop, what does love mean? Love means I stop him in any way I can including, quite frankly, hitting him. To me this is necessary Christian love in a fallen world. What about the little girl? If I desert the little girl to the bully, I have deserted the true meaning of Christian love and responsibility to my neighbor. Now extend this illustration to violence at a national level. We have in World War II the clearest possible illustration with Hitler's terrorism. There was no possible way to stop the awful terror that was occurring in Hitler's Germany except by the use of force. As far as I'm concerned, this is the necessary outworking of Christian love. The world is an abnormal world. Because of the fall it is not the way God meant it to be.[\(6\)](#)

Schaeffer presents the classical arguments against pacifism with his 'what would you do if . . . situation. He seems to feel that it is necessary to combat violence with violence ('an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth'). He ignores the fact that responding with violence may make the situation worse instead of better. If he resorts to force, what guarantee does he have that he will prevail? In fact the might lose and then the situation would be worse. On the other hand if he uses non-violent means to save the girl, his chances of succeeding are as good and perhaps better than if he resorts to violent means.

In his excellent book, *What Would You Do?*[\(7\)](#) John Howard Yoder, a leading Mennonite theologian, presents an excellent analysis of this type of argument against pacifism. He points out that, in addition to the various options that one has in such a situation as Schaeffer describes, there are always many unknown elements that may affect the outcome of our response. Choosing the violent response may often have surprisingly undesirable results as the history of international conflicts reveal (such as the U.S. governments disastrous decision to use military

force in the Mid-East several years ago).

Schaeffer's argument also ignores the reality of the power of God in the situation. Nor does he justify his response by showing that he follows the explicit teachings of Jesus. Where does the hand of God fit in his reasoning? Isn't God in charge of what happens to his children? Yet Schaeffer seems to say that, since we live in a 'fallen world,' we must use the world's method of survival. Shouldn't we be living in the kingdom of God, accepting whatever God sends us as for our good? This may seem simplistic to many but isn't that exactly what faith is all about? Only the simple, child-like faith that trusts completely in God's loving providence can produce the assurance that whatever God allows to happen is for our good.

Some people tend to confuse pacifism with passiveness. In a certain sense perhaps they are similar. To be passive means to receive or be subject to an action without responding or initiating an action in return. But passiveness also implies that one is not participating, that one is inert. In this sense nothing could be farther from the truth. A pacifist relies upon the power of his heavenly Father who is all-powerful. Therefore, he has greater influence on the events that effect his life than the non-believer because he can call upon his God who hears his cry and can move the mightiest of mountains. Certainly the prayers of a Christian for his nation have more effect upon the country than any political or military activity he might participate in. For the Bible tells us that "all government comes from God, the civil authorities are appointed by God" (Rom. 13:1). God is the one who controls their rise and fall and the extent of their territory (Acts 17:26). Schaeffer is sadly mistaken when he asserts that the only possible way to have stopped the awful terror caused by Hitler's Germany was by the use of force.

A Dutch book written in 1660 by T.J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians*, describes all the known martyrdoms from the first century to 1660. It also attempts to describe the faith of the Christians that allowed them to submit humbly to death, even the most horrible of deaths. It is a long record of those who died that they might live, who chose the lowest path so that God would raise them up to the highest. They testified to their faith in God with their blood. They accepted the evil of violence from others without returning the evil. Can we say that they were wrong and that they should have resisted with force? Or do we honor them for their faith?

PEACE-MAKING

When Jesus was questioned by Pilate, he said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, then my disciples would be fighting that I might not be delivered up to the Jews; but as it is, my kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36). Jesus is truly king and members of his kingdom do not fight as members of the devil's kingdom do, killing and maiming their fellow man, but they fight a spiritual battle against spiritual forces that are far more powerful than human enemies.

Pacifism can not be separated from other areas of the life of a disciple. How can one be a pacifist, for example, if he has great wealth that needs to be protected? How can one be a pacifist if he has no love for the needy, if he is not willing to share with those in need? Pacifism itself is not the real issue. It is our relationship with God and our fellow human beings that is important. As we know, Jesus will judge us not on what doctrines we believe but on what actions we take to express our love for our heavenly Father and how we help God's children who are in need.

Pacifism, then, is really the sum of the fruits of the Spirit defined by the Apostle Paul as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23). All of these ingredients are required to be a pacifist. But, above all, faith is required. And faith is a gift from God (I Cor. 12:9).

The evidence indicates that Jesus and his apostles opposed the use of violence as a means of settling disputes. The early Christians followed this path of 'defenseless Christianity' and many suffered martyrdom at the hands of violent men. It is something for us to consider. Perhaps a Christian should be a pacifist

As Paul indicates that there are different levels of faith (Rom. 14:1), so there are also different levels of pacifism (as pacifism is directly tied to faith). Some Christians would be pacifists except for 'just wars' while others are pacifists (such as members of the historic peace churches) to the extent that they would actively attempt to prevent wars (including civil protests against the arms race) and would register as conscientious objectors in the event that they were drafted into the military. The faith of a few Christians (such as the Hutterian Brethren) is such that, as pacifists, they could not take part in either military activities or political activities. (Since the government has the power of the sword, it has blood on its hands even in peace-time.)

Each follower of Jesus must examine his own conscience to determine his position on this important subject. The Bible tells us that "we all must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one will receive what is due to him for his conduct in the body, whether good or bad" (II Cor. 5:10). "God is love and anyone who lives in love lives in God, and God lives in him. Love will come to its perfection in us when we can face the day of judgment without fear; because even in this world we have become as he is" (I John 4:16-17).

NOTES

1. *On the Chaplet*, 11-12.
2. *Against Celsus*, VIII.7.3.
3. *Dialogue with Trypho*, 110.3.
4. *A Plea Regarding Christians*, 32-35.
5. *The Apostolic Tradition*, 16.
6. Speech given in Washington, D.C. in 1982.
7. Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1983.

| [INDEX](#) |
