

# A Theology of Nonviolence

“You just need to look at what the gospel asks, and what war does. The gospel asks that we feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome the homeless, visit the prisoner, and perform works of mercy. War does all the opposite. It makes my neighbor hungry, thirsty, homeless, a prisoner, and sick. The gospel asks us to take up our cross. War asks us to lay the cross of suffering on others.” —Dorothy Day

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Theological Conference  
Norcross, GA 2009  
Sponsored by Restoration Fellowship

*Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are from the NRSV (New Revised Standard Version)*



## Introduction

Is it right for Christians to volunteer in the United States' military?<sup>1</sup> Should followers of Jesus join the police force? Can one who has been redeemed find employment as a security guard? Should disciples keep a loaded gun in the house in case an intruder enters? Is there ever a time when violence is justified? These questions and many like them, for Christians, center on whether or not we interpret the New Testament teachings to prohibit violence or permit it. This work seeks to provide a clear biblical theology for this critical subject.<sup>2</sup> From the title it is clear that my perspective falls on the side of those who see Jesus and the Apostles as teaching something new—the idea of nonviolent enemy love.

Now, I realize that the moment I suggest that violence is wrong for Christians, a whole slew of questions and “what ifs” come to mind. Let me start by saying that these types of questions have good answers and we have collected a number of answers to difficult questions on our website.<sup>3</sup> However, it would not be prudent to handle all of the “objections” prior to laying out the case for nonviolence biblically, logically, and historically. Therefore, it is my intention to present both the clear biblical teaching on this subject and the theological framework into which this teaching fits.

Though adherents to nonviolence are still unquestionably in the minority, as of late more and more leaders from non-Anabaptist<sup>4</sup> traditions are beginning to speak up. As

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<sup>1</sup> This question would apply equally to any nation on earth. I am writing as an American primarily to Americans. If you are not an American, feel free to substitute your nation for the U.S. while reading.

<sup>2</sup> Due to space constraints we will not be able to work through the remarkable glimpses of nonviolent theology found in the Old Testament (like when God prohibited David from building the Temple because he was a man of war, Elisha's instruction to feed and release the Syrian army, the time Jehoshaphat put the praise band in front of the military, or the other times God fought for his people using unconventional means.)

<sup>3</sup> [www.loveyourenemies.wordpress.com](http://www.loveyourenemies.wordpress.com)

<sup>4</sup> Anabaptists refers broadly to those groups during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, during the reformation years, who alleged that Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin were not going far enough to restore the church to its roots. As a result, the Anabaptists formed their own fellowships and both postulated and pursued the radical idea that one should obey Jesus' teachings literally (especially those in the Sermon on the Mount). Consequently, the Anabaptists more almost entirely comprised of pacifists. Modern descendants of these groups include the Mennonites, Hutterites, Amish, and those who live in the *Bruderhof*.

I have researched this subject, in an effort to gain answers to the tough questions that face Christian pacifism, I have been surprised to find how central kingdom of God theology is to this topic.<sup>5</sup> It's as if one cannot talk about nonviolence without talking about the kingdom. But, what is it about the kingdom of God that inspires peace-making rather than war-making? In order to see how Jesus understood and applied the kingdom of God theology to his life and ministry, we need to first look at how the kingdom was understood in the Hebrew Bible.

## The Kingdom of God in the Hebrew Bible

Though the biblical concept of the kingdom of God has its roots in the creation theology of Genesis and the subsequent land promise given to Abraham, it really takes shape with God's promise to David that one of his descendants would rule on the throne forever. In fact, it would be impossible to understand Jesus' life and ministry without first becoming familiar with the Davidic Covenant, which formed the basis of the kingdom idea:

### 1 Chronicles 17.11-14

<sup>11</sup> When your days are fulfilled to go to be with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, one of your own sons, and I will establish his kingdom. <sup>12</sup> He shall build a house for me, and I will establish his throne forever. <sup>13</sup> I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me. I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from him who was before you, <sup>14</sup> but I will confirm him in my house and in my kingdom forever, and his throne shall be established forever.

David's royal descendant will rule on David's throne, in Jerusalem, forever. He will be God's son and rule over God's kingdom forever. From Solomon to Zedekiah, the story of the kings of Judah was a rollercoaster ride, mostly downhill, until the Davidic throne was at last subjugated to the scepter of Babylonia. Throughout this time, God sent prophets to call the people to repentance, warn them of coming judgment, and confirm that God's grand vision for the future was not forgotten. One of the most vivid pictures of the future was given by both Isaiah and Micah:

### Isaiah 2.2-4

<sup>2</sup> Now it will come about that In the last days The

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<sup>5</sup> Books that major on the kingdom while addressing the subject of nonviolence include: Leo Tolstoy: *The Kingdom of God is within You*; John Howard Yoder: *The Politics of Jesus*, Gregory Boyd: *The Myth of the Christian Nation*; David Bercot: *The Kingdom that Turned the World Upside Down*; Lee Camp: *Mere Discipleship*; Shane Claiborne and Chris Haw: *Jesus for President*.

mountain of the house of the LORD Will be established as the chief of the mountains, And will be raised above the hills; And all the nations will stream to it. <sup>3</sup> And many peoples will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, To the house of the God of Jacob; That He may teach us concerning His ways And that we may walk in His paths." For the law will go forth from Zion And the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. <sup>4</sup> And He will judge between the nations, And will render decisions for many peoples; And they will hammer their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not lift up sword against nation, And never again will they learn war.

The prophets spoke of an age to come which would be characterized by peace, justice, and healing. God would raise up from the felled stump of Jesse, <sup>6</sup> a shoot who would be empowered by the Spirit to judge righteously with wisdom and strength. He would vindicate the poor, punish the wicked, and bring about an age of restoration. The blind would see, the lame would run like the deer, the oppressed would be set free, the oppressors would be judged, and the land would finally be redeemed. Even though the prophets consistently called the people of God to repentance, they continued in their hardhearted disobedience to oppress the widows, the orphans, and the vulnerable. They worshipped other gods and committed adultery with them under every leafy tree. Finally, time ran out, and God used Babylonia, and her head of fine gold—Nebuchadnezzar—to punish his people. The Babylonian army destroyed Jerusalem, the Temple, and carried off the people into exile.

During the seventy year Babylonian exile, it would have been easy to lose hope in God's grand covenant to David, except for exilic prophets like Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel who explained to the people that they had been judged for their sin, but that God would again act to bring about their restoration.

One of these prophets, Daniel, interpreted the dream of Nebuchadnezzar, and in so doing revealed that God still had plans to establish a kingdom. The statue in the dream represented various human kingdoms, which were destroyed by a rock cut out without hands. When the stone hit the feet of the statue, the whole image broke into a million pieces. Then the rock became a mountain that filled the whole earth.

**Daniel 2.44**

<sup>44</sup> And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed,

<sup>6</sup> Jesse was King David's father.

nor shall this kingdom be left to another people. It shall crush all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever;

Furthermore, at a later time, Daniel saw a vision of four beasts coming out of the watery chaos. Each of these represented a kingdom: a lion, a bear, and a leopard. Then the last in this sequence of animalistic kingdoms was a beast so terrifying that no earthly analog was available. From this last, terrifying beast, arose a little horn who waged war with the saints and overcame them. However, God himself, the Ancient of Days, passed judgment upon the last kingdom in fiery act of divine justice. Then, at last, a son of man came up to the Ancient of Days.

**Daniel 7.13-14**

<sup>13</sup> As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being [son of man] coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. <sup>14</sup> To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.

Finally, a divinely sanctioned humane kingdom would arrive on the earth to bring lasting change. This eternal kingdom was to be given to the "people of the saints of the Highest One" who will enjoy it forever.

After the exile, the people returned to the land under Zerubbabel and Joshua to rebuild the Temple. Then Ezra arrived and taught the people how to live the Torah. Lastly, Nehemiah was commissioned as governor to rebuild the wall and establish Jerusalem again as a city-state (though they remained subjects of the Persian kingdom). Through the next four hundred years, various empires fought for control of Palestine including the Macedonian Empire, the Ptolemies, the Seleucids, and finally the Romans. By the time of the New Testament Rome had already been in power over Judea for sixty years. The people of God chafed under each empire and some even gave up hope that the Messiah would ever come.

Then, to a poor Jewish virgin, from the ignoble town of Nazareth, came the angel Gabriel, who brought hope back to life with these words:

**Luke 1.31-33**

<sup>31</sup> And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. <sup>33</sup> He will reign over the house of

Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Fascinating! Jesus, the virgin-born son of Mary would be the one to fulfill the promise God had made to David a millennium earlier. God had not forgotten about his covenant, and he was planning to act in a big way through this Jesus of Nazareth. As Mary's son grew, he not only heard stories<sup>7</sup> of Roman brutality but he also witnessed firsthand the humiliating practice of Roman soldiers who forced peasants to carry their gear for a mile. Once he was about thirty he began his ministry by going to John for baptism.

John was an ascetic, apocalyptic preacher who conceived of the world in two categories: the people of God and everybody else. John preached with red-hot passion and used poignant agricultural imagery to get people's attention as he prophesied of the one to come—the Messiah.

#### **Luke 3.16-17**

<sup>16</sup> John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>17</sup> His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

As the farmer separates out the grain from the chaff so the Messiah would judge between the people of God and the wicked. In this way John cried out in the wilderness, urging the people of God to get right with God because the Messiah was soon to appear. From John's perspective, when the Messiah came, God would act in an irreversible way to bring about his kingdom on earth as opposed to the kingdom of Rome or Parthia or whatever the current incarnation of Satan's rule happened to be.

Of course, Jesus agreed with John's apocalyptic message, or else he would not have gone to John for baptism and publicly associated himself with John's ministry. In fact, to emphasize the continuity of message between John and Jesus, Matthew used the identical summary phrase, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3.2; 4.17). Jesus did not change John's message about the coming kingdom and the need to repent nor did he depart from the apocalyptic worldview

<sup>7</sup> One such story involved the slaughter and enslavement of thousands of people living in Sepphoris (just two miles from Nazareth) around the time Jesus was born.

of John. However, he did enact the kingdom in fresh ways—as would only be fit if he were, in fact, the Messiah. But, before looking at how Jesus as Messiah embodied the kingdom in his ministry, a word or two must be said about Satan, God's archenemy and the one with whom Jesus found himself in the wilderness, just after his baptism.

Satan, that old serpent who had duped the first Adam, now with (at least) four more millennia of practice, approached the second Adam. All three temptations were ways of getting Jesus to doubt or prove that he really was the Son of God (i.e. the one destined to rule the world).<sup>8</sup> At one point the Devil took Jesus up to a very high mountain and showed Jesus all of the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. He said, "I will give you all this domain and its glory; for it has been handed over to me, and I give it to whomever I wish. Therefore if you worship before me, it shall all be yours." (Luke 4.6-7). Note the echoes of Daniel's vision that a son of man would receive "dominion, glory, and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations and men of every language might serve him." (Daniel 7.14). Jesus did not challenge Satan's claim that he was the present ruler of the kingdoms of the world. (It is clear from the rest of the New Testament<sup>9</sup> that Satan is the puppet master pulling the strings of the kingdoms of this age). Rather, Jesus resisted him by saying, "You shall worship the Lord your God and serve him only." With this response, Jesus overcame the temptation to grasp for the scepter of power, and become the ruler of the world apart from God's plan. Since he was confident in the promises of God he limited his ascension to a position of power to God's timing. Even though, the first century Mediterranean world would have been much better off with Jesus in charge instead of Satan, Jesus still said no to the temptation to take dominion before the kingdom arrived. He did not function by the ends-justifies-the-means thought process; instead his focus was on staying faithful to his God even in the face of the temptation to take Judea back for God.

#### **Jesus' Ministry: Fresh Signs of the Kingdom**

After three rounds with the Tempter in the desert, Jesus emerged victorious and began his Galilean ministry "in the power of the spirit" (Luke 4.14). In Nazareth, where he grew up, he preached an inaugural address of sorts. He was handed the book of Isaiah and read the following text (from chapter sixty-one):

<sup>8</sup> 1 Chronicles 17.13; Psalm 2.7; Matthew 26.63; Luke 4.41; John 1.49; 11.27; 20.31

<sup>9</sup> The devil is "the ruler of this world" (John 12.31) and "the god of this age" (2 Corinthians 4.4). "The whole world lies in the power of the evil one" (1 John 5.19). He deceives the whole world (Revelation 12.9).

**Luke 4.18-19**

<sup>18</sup> "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, <sup>19</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Then from the lips of Jesus came these astounding words, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." For Jesus, this text was the foundation of his ministry. In the context immediately preceding this quotation from Isaiah, the city of Jerusalem had been restored to glory. She had become wealthy and peaceful and the exiles had returned. The chapter concluded with an end to violence, the coming of Yahweh to give light to the city, and the permanent inheriting of the land by the righteous. The very next verse (Isaiah 61.1) was where Jesus began his reading. He saw himself as the herald of the coming restoration: the one who brought the good news (gospel), proclaimed the coming Jubilee, set free those who suffered oppression, and healed the blind. Furthermore, the context which followed the text Jesus quoted from in Isaiah sixty-one concerns itself with the reversal of fortunes to accompany the vindication of God's people in the end. So, Jesus saw his own ministry as that of the herald, who not only proclaimed but prophetically enacted the coming of God's kingdom.

Two more texts need to be addressed before we approach Jesus' teaching ministry, and begin to think explicitly about nonviolence. The first is Jesus' response to the disciples of John who asked him, in somewhat coded terminology, "Are you the expected one or do we look for someone else?" At that very moment Jesus was engaged in extensive healing and demonic exorcisms, and so he replied, in an equally cryptic manner:

**Luke 7.22-23**

<sup>22</sup> And he answered them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. <sup>23</sup> And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

This obscure response gains clarity once we realize that Jesus conflated two texts from Isaiah: one from chapter thirty-five and the other from sixty-one. Since we have already considered the latter briefly, we will now turn our attention to the thirty-fifth chapter:

**Isaiah 35:4-6**

<sup>4</sup> Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with

vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you." <sup>5</sup> Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; <sup>6</sup> then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert;

This chapter, as was sixty-one, is unquestionably a prophecy of the coming kingdom. When God's reign is established on earth the deserts will blossom, the lame will walk, the wicked will be judged, and even the mute will shout for joy. Jesus' answer to the emissaries of John was an emphatic, "Yes! I am the one." Still, what should grab our attention here is the fact that Jesus' miracles are signs of the kingdom which testified to who he was—the Expected One (i.e. the Messiah). Even so, his signs were not limited to healing people; he also performed exorcisms, which testified to the kingdom as well.

After his first recorded sermon, about which we have already commented, Jesus went to Capernaum on the northern Galilean seacoast. In the middle of his Sabbath teaching, a man erupted in a demonic shriek, saying the following:

**Luke 4.34**

<sup>34</sup> "Let us alone! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God."

Apparently, the demons interpreted Jesus' ministry in an eschatological light. They knew who he was and thought that he was coming in judgment. However, Jesus, rather than carrying on a dialog with the demon, rebuked it, told it to be quiet, and cast it out. Later that night, a mass of sick and demonized people assembled in a line outside of Simon Peter's house to be healed by Jesus.

**Luke 4.41**

<sup>41</sup> Demons also came out of many, shouting, "You are the Son of God!" But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew that he was the Messiah.

It is important to keep in mind that up to this point the term "Messiah" would have been inseparable from the "messianic age" (i.e. the kingdom of God). No one anticipated the Messiah to come prior to the messianic age much less that he would die for the sins of the people. Rather the traditional expectation as articulated by John the baptizer was that when Messiah came, he would enact God's final judgment and usher in the eternal age of peace, justice, and political security for Israel. So, the demons interpreted Jesus exorcism ministry as a kingdom event.

In another incident, later in his ministry, a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute was brought to Jesus for healing. The crowds in amazement mused, “This man cannot be the Son of David, can he?” However, the Pharisees, unable to deny the miraculous, crafted an accusation which acknowledged the exorcism but denied that this meant that Jesus was the king of God’s coming kingdom. They said, “This man casts out demons only by Beelzebul the ruler of demons.” Jesus defended himself against this absurd criticism with plain logic:

**Matthew 12.26, 28-29**

<sup>26</sup> If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself; how then will his kingdom stand?...<sup>28</sup> But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you.<sup>29</sup> Or how can one enter a strong man’s house and plunder his property, without first tying up the strong man? Then indeed the house can be plundered.

Jesus associated his victory over demons in terms of the kingdom of God. Jesus had tied up the strong man (Satan) and was plundering his house (kingdom) by setting free these oppressed people who had been held captive. Thus, it is abundantly evident that Jesus interpreted his healing and exorcism activities in light of the coming kingdom.

Jesus’ ministry was thoroughly soaked with kingdom language and imagery. The gospel he was commissioned to proclaim from village to village was called “the gospel *about the kingdom of God*” (Matthew 4.23; 9.35; Luke 4.43). When he told parables often they would start with the phrase, “the kingdom of heaven<sup>10</sup> is like...” (Matthew 13.24, 31, 33, 44, 45, 47, 52; 20.1, etc.). He chose twelve disciples and promised that in the regeneration, when the Son of Man came to sit on his glorious throne, then they too would sit on twelve thrones judging<sup>11</sup> the twelve tribes of Israel. Furthermore, Jesus reached out to the lowly, downtrodden, and outcasts of society in outrageously counter-cultural acts of restoration. He would touch the leper, eat dinner with the prostitutes and tax collectors, and share the gospel with a Samaritan woman beside Jacob’s well. Though he did not spiritualize or dismiss the prophetic vision of the kingdom described by Isaiah, Daniel, Amos, Micah, and the others, he did pour new wine into new wineskins by embodying the kingdom in fresh and exciting ways. It was as if the kingdom was bubbling over from the future and bursting on the scene in the ministry of Jesus. Of

<sup>10</sup> kingdom of heaven = kingdom of God (compare Matthew 19.23 to 24).

<sup>11</sup> Think judge in the sense of the book of Judges rather than in the sense of American court judges.

course, from the Messiah—the agent of the coming restoration, the one anointed to rule God’s kingdom—we would expect nothing less. One of these kingdom innovations that broke in through the ministry of Jesus was the Sermon on the Mount. Due to the misconceptions about this sermon and the subject of nonviolence, we will take a good deal of time analyzing certain portions of this teaching before returning to our narrative about Jesus.

**The Sermon on the Mount**

In this sermon, Jesus laid out the kingdom ethic, the new way of being the people of God while waiting for and actively anticipating the coming kingdom. The Sermon on the Mount is so radical that it is often dismissed, domesticated, or else completely ignored. In my own dispensationalist heritage the Sermon on the Mount was dismissed as the ethic Jesus gave to the Jews, the lost sheep of the house of Israel, not for Christians who were to obey the writings of Paul. In the Lutheran tradition the Sermon on the Mount was viewed as an impossible ideal designed to demonstrate our pathetic capacity for moral living and our sinfulness so that we may realize that salvation has nothing to do with works, but is, alas, solely a matter of God’s grace. In other traditions the Sermon on the Mount has been domesticated and reinterpreted so that exceptions and exemptions are found each time one of Christ’s commands crossed the grain of accepted norms. Some even say that there is nothing new in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus was merely calling Israel back to keeping the Law. Rather than responding to each of these theories in turn, we will take a more Anabaptist approach to the text—in other words, we will entertain the radical notion that Jesus actually meant for his followers to live the way he described in this teaching.

First of all, it may be beneficial to note that the overall structure of the Gospel of Matthew breaks Jesus’ teachings into five blocks, as if to say that with Jesus came a new Torah (more on this later). Furthermore, in Matthew, Jesus’ own life took a very Moses-shaped path. Jesus narrowly escaped an imperially sanctioned infanticide as a young child. After sojourning in Egypt for a time, he exited.<sup>12</sup> Jesus spent a time in the wilderness<sup>13</sup> and then he went up like a new Moses on a new Mount to deliver the new Torah. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus repeatedly said, “You have heard that it was said...but I say to you...” The shocking fact is that

<sup>12</sup> In fact, Matthew specifically cites this as a fulfillment of the text from Hosea where it is said, “Out of Egypt, I have called my son.” In its original context, Hosea spoke of the exodus from Egypt under Moses.

<sup>13</sup> Jesus spent forty days whereas Moses spent forty years in the desert.

Jesus quoted directly from the Law and then said, “But I say to you, do this instead.” The way Jesus described in this sermon transcended the old by requiring far more of the people. In fact, Jesus’ teaching was so radical, so counter-cultural, that even to this day most of us do not even dare take it seriously.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus explicitly mentioned the kingdom nine times (not counting allusions), which tells us that he could not separate doctrine from ethics or belief in the kingdom from the lifestyle of its citizens.

The beatitudes wonderfully illustrate how the future makes sense of the present. For example, one aspect of the kingdom is that when it comes there will be a series of reversals: the last will be first, the poor will become rich, the afflicted will be comforted, and the powerless will be given positions of authority, and so on. Jesus puts it this way: Those who are poor in spirit now will receive the kingdom then. Those who mourn now will be comforted then. Those who are meek now will inherit the earth then. Those who desire righteousness/justice now will be filled then...and so on. On this basis, Jesus pronounced blessings on those who fit into these categories.

What may not be immediately obvious is how radical these categories are: Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for justice, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and the persecuted. But, once we invert the list, suddenly the full force of Jesus’ blessings is felt: Cursed are the rich in spirit, those who are not mourning, those who assert their “rights” using force, those who do not care about justice, the unmerciful, the wicked in heart, the “warmakers,” and the persecutors.

Obviously some of these cursed behaviors were endorsed or at least permitted by the Law of Moses, but Jesus is doing something new. To further illustrate the newness of Jesus’ instructions, it would be helpful to see how Jesus used a series of formulas to quote the Law and then modify it.

*The Law prohibited murder and brought murderers to court.*

Jesus said that anger should have the same punishment, that a derogatory remark puts one in danger of the highest court, and that calling someone fool makes one guilty enough to go into the fiery hell.

*The Law prohibited adultery (on pain of stoning).*

Jesus said that looking with lust is equivalent to committing adultery in the heart. In fact it would be better to be maimed than to lust.

*The Law permitted divorce if any “indecency” was found in one’s wife.*

Jesus prohibited divorce altogether (except for fornication) and also prohibited remarriage to the one who had been divorced

*The Law permitted vows made to Yahweh so long as they were fulfilled.*

Jesus prohibited all oaths and instead argued for integrity of speech.

*The Law required civil punishment to be equitable: an eye for an eye.*

Jesus said not to resist an evil person but rather to turn the cheek, give the coat, and walk the second mile.

*The Law required the love of the neighbor but permitted the hatred of the enemy.*

Jesus said to love the enemy; pray for the persecutor so that they would be the children of God who provides rain for the righteous and wicked.

So, it is clear that Jesus *elevated* the moral standard beyond what the Torah required. Ironically, it has been our tendency as Christians to *lower* the standard of morality to be less than the Law of Moses. We have comforted ourselves in a blanket of justification-by-faith and used it to protect ourselves from the words of Jesus, as if the accomplishments of his death abrogate the instructions he gave during his life. To the contrary, Jesus’ death, resurrection, and subsequent outpouring of the Holy Spirit have modeled, vindicated, and made possible obedience to the Sermon-on-the-Mount lifestyle. Time would prohibit us from examining the entirety of this sermon in detail, but suffice it to say Jesus was doing something *new*. He was not just telling some wayward Jews to get back to Torah.

Since the aim of this work is to provide a theology of nonviolence, we will limit our attention to only the portions of the Sermon on the Mount which relate to this topic. There are two beatitudes and two commands that we need to examine before we can look at how Jesus practiced what he preached. The first is:

**Matthew 5.5**

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.



The meek are those who “endure injury with patience and without resentment.”<sup>14</sup> Because they shun the use of coercive tactics to assert themselves, they are the last ones who would ever possess the earth. The meek are the ones who are oppressed by the warlords and their accomplices. But, according to Jesus, the meek are exactly the ones God intends to put in charge of his creation.

The next beatitude was addressed to the peacemakers:

#### Matthew 5.9

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

The word peacemakers could be translated literally the “peace-doers.” It may be hard for us to think differently than our typical ends-justify-the-means mentality about this, but the peacemakers are *not* those who use violence as a means to bring about peace. In other words Jesus is commending those who “do peace,” not those who “do war” for the sake of peace. The peacemakers, not the “warmakers,” will be called the sons of God. Much more could be said about peace, especially in the context of the New Testament as a whole,<sup>15</sup> but for now we need to focus on the famous resist-not-evil passage.

#### Matthew 5.38-42

<sup>38</sup> "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' <sup>39</sup> But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; <sup>40</sup> and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; <sup>41</sup> and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. <sup>42</sup> Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

This instruction has to do with justice. The book of Leviticus had commanded, “If a man injures his neighbor, just as he has done, so it shall be done to him, fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth...” (Lev 24.19-20). The Israelite had the *right* to demand retributive justice in accordance with the injury he suffered. Jesus, however, argued for a new course of action; a strategy that involved giving up one’s personal rights.

<sup>14</sup> meek. (2009). In *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*. Retrieved April 3, 2009, from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/meek>

<sup>15</sup> John 14.27; Romans 12.17-19; 14.19; 1 Corinthians 7.15; 2 Corinthians 13.11; Galatians 5.22; Ephesians 4.1-3; 1 Thessalonians 5.12-13; 2 Thessalonians 3.16; Titus 3.1-2; Hebrews 12.14; James 3.17-18; 1 Peter 3.10-15;

Two typical ways to read this are (1) to understand the text as call to passive non-resistance or (2) to pull interpretive tricks to make exceptions for self-defense, military participation, and civil service. The Amish have taken the former as their rule of life to such a degree that a man would allow his wife to be attacked without attempting to defend her. To the battered wife the passive non-resistance advocate merely advises her to “turn the cheek,” even if it means becoming a punching bag.

The second strategy is generally held to by most Christians. The reasoning works like this: In my own dealings with my wife, my children, my coworkers, and my neighbors I should turn the cheek, give up my right to sue, and walk the second mile. However, if an intruder breaks into my house I’ll blow his head off with the hand gun I keep under my pillow. Furthermore, if someone is employed by the military, the police, or a security agency, he may disregard the commands of Jesus, because he is not acting out of personal concern but out of his or her representational role for the state, society, or employer. So, the person reasons, in my personal life I will not resist an evil person, but while on the job (in the real world) I will do what is required of me, especially if my life is endangered. The basis of these interpretative tricks was pioneered by the fourth century theologian, Augustine, who conceived of a dualism between the internal and the external. Lee Camp explains:

Whereas the early church did not, for example, spend a great deal of time asking whether “Jesus really meant” what Matthew records in the Sermon on the Mount, later Christianity began to “spiritualize,” to interiorize, Christian discipleship—discipleship becomes more a matter of one’s “heart” than all of one’s life...Christ’s teachings are meant to inform our attitudes, but not our actions, it is claimed. We, for example, “love our enemies” in our hearts, while our role as emperor or hangman or soldier requires that we kill our enemies. With regard to Matthew 5:39—...Augustine, for example, commented that “what is here required is not a bodily action, but an inward disposition.”<sup>16</sup>

Yet, there is a third option, which stays faithful to the text, yet does not make us doormats or hypocrites. One name for this third way is confrontational non-resistance.<sup>17</sup> The idea is quite simple: the follower of

<sup>16</sup> Lee Camp, *Mere Discipleship*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006) p. 36.

<sup>17</sup> As used by Tom Lock, founder of nonresistance.org, in his fine sermon, *Christianity, Violence, & War*, which can be downloaded at [loveyouenemies.wordpress.com](http://loveyouenemies.wordpress.com) under the “Audios and Videos” section.

Jesus is called to confront the oppressor nonviolently and in so doing show him how brutal he really is. Civil law cannot change the heart; it merely acts to restrict the behavior of people so that they will not harm others. So, in the old way, if an unjust offense occurred one could bring the offender to court and demand retribution. Jesus is showing a better way, a way that can actually challenge the offender in his act of oppression. Jesus' way invokes a provocative alternative to the tired old fight or flight dichotomy. He calls us to deconstruct our oppressor's underlying assumptions through creative acts of self-sacrificial and confrontational nonresistance. This response challenges the underlying assumptions which enable their brutality and opens the door to repentance and even reconciliation.

Before we look at the three examples Jesus gave, we need to address the command, "Do not resist evil." What does Jesus mean by this simple phrase? Is he saying that one should never oppose evil? But, didn't Jesus himself resist evil people? He certainly did. Remember the time that he railed against the scribes and Pharisees with seven thunderous woes (Matthew 23.1-36)? Or what about the time he fashioned a whip and drove out the animals, causing a raucous in the temple as a prophetic enactment of judgment upon a system of greed? The key to understanding this phrase lies in knowing a bit about the word translated "resist." The word literally means to stand against, which was frequently used as a military term.<sup>18</sup> When two armies met in battle they would "stand against" each other. Jesus was not saying do nothing to oppose evil. That would be hypocritical because his entire life resisted evil (Jesus even stood against Satan's temptations). No, Jesus was saying that the new way should not combat evil with evil. Rather than, "an eye for an eye," Jesus was saying that if someone poked out an eye, the victim should not "stand against" them by poking out their eye, rather seek a creative alternative to bring resolution. Don't fight fire with fire; fight it with water. As we will soon see, all three of the examples that Jesus gave were actually ways of confronting evil without being reduced to vengeful behavior.

In order to better understand Jesus' response we need to work through each of the three examples in light of the cultural context of the time. Our guide for this exercise is Walter Wink, Professor of Biblical Interpretation at Auburn Theological Seminary, whose work on this

<sup>18</sup> "The word here for *resist* (*antistenai*) almost attains the sense of a technical term, used by Josephus 17 times—fifteen of those times Josephus means "violently resist." Lee Camp, "Why the Christian Church Ought to be Pacifist," September 2001, published in *New Wineskins*, p. 3.

subject has been quoted by both liberal (Marcus Borg) and conservative (Lee Camp) theologians alike.

*Turn the Cheek – whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also*

At the time Jesus spoke these words, in Jewish Palestine, there was a vast economic divide between the "haves" and the "have-nots." Perhaps as few as three percent were wealthy, which meant that in all likelihood those people listening to him were the poor who struggled to eek out an existence in the shadow of the Roman empire and the wealthy Jewish aristocrats who partnered with Caesar. In such a society, and throughout the Mediterranean world, people were highly stratified.

Ancient Mediterranean societies tended to be very hierarchical. It was a world where everyone knew their place in relation to countless superiors and inferiors. Those who neglected or forgot this stratification of rank would be readily reminded by those around...Social convention dictated gestures of deference and respect from inferior to superior at every point along this hierarchy. In the presence of someone of high rank, low bows or prostrations were expected.<sup>19</sup>

Keeping all of this in mind, consider for a moment, what kind of strike is being used as an example. Probably, most of us envision a right hook, like would be common in a brawl between equals. However, this is impossible because that sort of blow would land on the left cheek. Then, maybe we should imagine a left hook, but this is impossible because the left hand was reserved for unseemly tasks. Furthermore, "to even gesture with the left hand brought shame on the one gesturing."<sup>20</sup> So, what was in mind here was a slap with the back side of the right hand. Such a hit would not be used to inflict harm but instead shame. This is the sort of thing a superior would use to humiliate an inferior in order to put him in his place. So what does it mean to "turn the cheek" after such a slap?

By turning the other cheek, the person struck puts the striker in an untenable spot. He cannot repeat the backhand, because the other's nose is now in the way. The left cheek makes a fine target, but only persons who are equals fight with fists, and the last thing the master wants is for the slave to assert equality (see the Mishnah, Baba Kamma 8:6). This is, of course, no way to avoid trouble; the master might

<sup>19</sup> Jason David BeDuhn, *Truth in Translation*, (Lanham, MD: University Press of America 2003), p. 41.

<sup>20</sup> Walter Wink, "Can Love Save the World?" Published in *Yes Magazine*, winter 2002 (<http://www.yesmagazine.org/article.asp?ID=485>).

have the slave flogged to within an inch of her life. But the point has been irrevocably made: the “inferior” is saying, in no uncertain terms, “I won’t take such treatment anymore. I am your equal. I am a child of God.” By turning the other cheek, the oppressed person is saying that she refuses to submit to further humiliation. This is not submission, as the churches have insisted. It is defiance.<sup>21</sup>

Suddenly the offender finds himself in an awkward position. He has only two options: (1) Stop abusing the person or (2) hit him as an equal. Either way the “inferior” person has nonviolently confronted the abuser without resorting to using the same violent tactic, which was not really an option anyhow. I imagine the most common response of a Jewish peasant humiliated in this way by a Jewish or Roman aristocrat was to endure the slap, glare at the offender, seethe internally, and curse under his breath. Due to social constraints the slapped one would have no recourse to acquire justice. He could not take the offender to court or respond in kind; rather he would have to endure the humiliation. In light of this, Jesus gave his audience a provocative new way to confront evil without becoming the very thing they hate. Perhaps another example will help to make the point.

*Giving the Coat -- If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt let him have your coat also*

In our culture, clothing is mass produced, relatively cheap, and diverse. We have multiple items of clothing for different parts of our body. If someone sued me for one of my twenty shirts I could easily give it to him along with one of my three or four coats. In their culture things were quite different—especially among the poor. The average person wore only one or two full length garments at a time. The tunic was worn next to the skin and the coat was used as an outer garment which doubled as a blanket for sleeping. So, if someone had no land, no crops, and no other way to pay his debt he could be sued for the clothes on his back. We are talking about someone who has suffered misfortune after misfortune, he has nothing left and he has succumbed to the economic squeeze of Romanization (i.e. becoming “civilized”). The landowning Jew or Roman suing the peasant was being absolutely ruthless; he has bought into the might-makes-right system of predatory wealth-building. He is ready to take this man’s second to last article of clothing, stopping just short of stripping him completely naked.

Furthermore, Jesus’ culture was heavily based on honor and shame. One did not seek wealth, success, and

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<sup>21</sup> Walter Wink, “Can Love Save the World?” Published in Yes Magazine, winter 2002 (<http://www.yesmagazine.org/article.asp?ID=485>).

education the way we do in twenty-first century America. Rather, the single commodity worthy of pursuit was honor. To be shamed was the highest insult and to be honored was the highest compliment. Just imagine the shame one would experience as he stood before the court and was ordered to give his tunic in payment. But, what was Jesus’ command? “If anyone wants to sue you and take your cloak, let him have your coat also.” Jesus is advising the oppressed to strip naked before the court.

Nakedness was taboo in Judaism, and shame fell less on the naked party than on the person viewing or causing the nakedness (Gen 9:20-27). By stripping, the debtor has brought the creditor under the same prohibition that led to the curse of Canaan. And much as Isaiah had “walked naked and barefoot for three years” as a prophetic sign (Isa. 20:1-6), so the debtor parades his nakedness in prophetic protest against a system that has deliberately rendered him destitute. Imagine him leaving the court, naked: his friends and neighbors, aghast, inquire what happened. He explains. They join his growing procession, which now resembles a victory parade. The entire system by which debtors are oppressed has been publicly unmasked. The creditor is revealed to be not a legitimate moneylender but a party to the reduction of an entire social class to landlessness, destitution, and abasement. This unmasking is not simply punitive, therefore; it offers the creditor a chance to see, perhaps for the first time in his life, what his practices cause, and to repent.<sup>22</sup>

To say exactly, what would happen in that court room would be impossible, but suffice it to say that Jesus gave the financially abused man a new way to confront financial injustice without resorting to violence or similar predatory practices. He is now able to symbolically demonstrate that the system was stripping him of everything. Though they wear fine robes of dignity in fact they are brutal savages deserving of burlesque not honor.

*Going the Second Mile – Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two*

One of the most hated sights in all of Galilee was no doubt that of a Roman soldier. This was partly because their presence meant that the people were not free, but under Caesar’s thumb—a thumb which increasingly was pressing down on the people, squeezing them for taxes through the local client king Herod Antipas. A second reason why the Roman troops were despised was because of the practice called *angareia*. A marching

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<sup>22</sup> Walter Wink, “Beyond Just War and Pacifism: Jesus’ Nonviolent Way,” ([http://www.cres.org/star/\\_wink.htm](http://www.cres.org/star/_wink.htm)).

infantryman customarily pressed peasants into service by ordering them to carry his heavy pack for him.<sup>23</sup> Due to abuses Rome had established a law that limited the maximum distance one would be required to go to one mile.

Just imagine what it would have been like to be forced to carry a conquering Gentile's seventy pound military pack. The person only had two options: (1) resist the soldier which would immediately escalate the situation and possibly get arrested or beaten or (2) submit to the injustice and bear the burden for the required mile. At the one mile stone the peasant would drop the soldiers stuff and storm off in a rush to get home furious for being made a donkey to bear Rome's wares.

But, what does Jesus say? "Go with him two." Excuse me? Go a second mile with the Gentile savage? What would happen if someone actually did this? The Jew passes the mile marker and the Roman soldier says, "Halt, you've gone far enough. Return to me my pack." But, the peasant responds, "No, I'd like to go a second mile." Since it was against Roman law to force someone to carry their belongings for *more* than a mile, the soldier could get into serious trouble if anyone found out. It is hard to know what punishment would result, but options ranged from his superior rebuking him to being given barley instead of wheat rations to arrest or even flogging. Perhaps, even because of the uncertainty of the punishment, the soldier would have all the more reason to obey the law.

From a situation of servile impressment, the oppressed have once more seized the initiative. They have taken back the power of choice. The soldier is thrown off balance by being deprived of the predictability of his victim's response. He has never dealt with such a problem before. Now he has been forced into making a decision for which nothing in his previous experience has prepared him. If he has enjoyed feeling superior to the vanquished, he will not enjoy it today. Imagine the situation of a Roman infantryman pleading with a Jew to give back his pack! The humor of this scene may have escaped us, but it could scarcely have been lost on Jesus' hearers, who must have been regaled at the prospect of thus discomfiting their oppressors. Jesus does not encourage Jews to walk a second mile in order to build up merit in heaven, or to exercise a supererogatory piety, or to kill the soldier with kindness. He is helping an oppressed

<sup>23</sup> For an example of a Roman soldier forcing a native to bear a burden, think back to when Simon of Cyrene was pressed into service (the verbal form of *angareia*) to carry Jesus' cross (Matthew 27:32).

people find a way to protest and neutralize an onerous practice despised throughout the empire. He is not giving a non-political message of spiritual world-transcendence. He is formulating a worldly spirituality in which the people at the bottom of society or under the thumb of imperial power learn to recover their humanity.

One could easily misuse Jesus' advice vindictively; that is why it must not be separated from the command to love enemies integrally connected with it in both Matthew and Luke.<sup>24</sup>

The ancient Mediterranean world was rife with injustices, especially for peasants. The question was not, whether or not an injustice occurred, but rather, when it occurred what to do about it. The Sadducean response was, "If you can't beat 'em join 'em." The Essenes pulled out of society and willingly exiled themselves in desert communities. The so-called fourth philosophy said, "This is God's country, and we will not stand to see it dominated by these heathen one moment longer. We need an armed revolution!" But, what does Jesus say? How should a follower of *this* Jewish rabbi behave in the face of injustice? Firstly, don't become what you hate—don't enter into combat with evil on its own terms. Rather, find creative ways to confront it self-sacrificially. Incredibly, by doing so, one rediscovers his own dignity whereas the oppressor is thrown off guard and challenged to rethink his participation in the system.

I realize that this reading of Jesus command, "Resist not evil" is probably new to many, but we should also admit that for followers of Jesus there are really only two options: (1) accept the Wink interpretation of confrontational nonresistance or (2) accept the traditional Anabaptist interpretation of utter passiveness in the face of evil. Let the reader decide. Either way, violence is excluded. Now we shall turn to the most poignant text on this subject and the first mention in the Sermon on the Mount of the word love:

#### Matthew 5.43-48

<sup>43</sup> "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'<sup>44</sup> But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,<sup>45</sup> so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.<sup>46</sup> For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?<sup>47</sup> And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more

<sup>24</sup> Walter Wink, "Beyond Just War and Pacifism: Jesus' Nonviolent Way," ([http://www.cres.org/star/\\_wink.htm](http://www.cres.org/star/_wink.htm)).

are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?<sup>48</sup> Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Of course, the Law never explicitly taught that one should hate his enemies. One of the primary aims of the Law was to facilitate a lasting, equitable and peaceful community that reflected God's beauty. Thus, the command to love one's neighbor (Leviticus 19.18) was a major step forward. The people were to love each other—like a family. The original context said:

**Leviticus 19.16-18 [NASB]**

"You shall not go about as a slanderer among your people...you shall not hate your fellow countryman in your heart...nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself, I am the LORD"

This command prohibited internal strife and urged the people to live in solidarity with their brothers and sisters—the descendants of Abraham. Even so, it did not prohibit nationalism or the hatred of others outside of Israel. Between the time of Moses, when this command was given, and the time Jesus addressed his disciples, Israel had been oppressed by Assyria, Babylonia, Persia, Greece, the Ptolemies, the Seleucids, and the Romans. And so, the saying was known, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." Or in other words, "love your fellow Jew and hate the oppressive, uncircumcised, lawless, brutal Gentiles." To this mentality Jesus responded by teaching the new way of loving one's enemy, not just one's countryman.

Jesus told his followers to pray for those who persecuted them. In the similar passage from Luke, Jesus went on to add, "Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you" (Luke 6.27-28). Why should one follow this upside-down course of action with regard to the enemy? Jesus explained that the reason was so that the children would be like their Father. In other words, the disciple practices enemy love not because it is effective but because that is what God does. The Father does not withhold sunshine from the wicked and he sends them rain as well. The people of God should love brothers and even foreign oppressive powers because they are to be like their Father in heaven. Besides, if one merely loved those who loved him, how would that be different than the pagans? Everybody loves those who love them! No, the followers of the way of Jesus are to love even those who persecute them, and in so doing their love is perfected.<sup>25</sup> It is not an imperfect love—a love merely

for the lovable—but a perfect love, which transcends nationalism, ethnocentrism, sexism, and every other barrier.

What is universally acknowledged by Christian and non-Christian alike, even to this day, is that Jesus was no hypocrite. He was a man who practiced what he preached. And so, when we read these staggering words in the Sermon on the Mount, we are not left without an example of what the way of Jesus looks like in full color. Jesus said, "Blessed are the meek," and when he was given opportunity to seize the royal robes of world-rulership from the fist of Satan, Jesus refused and instead entrusted himself to God's way. Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers," and throughout his ministry, not least in his exorcisms, he made peace between people and through his death he made peace between humanity and God. Jesus said, "do not resist an evil person, turn the cheek, give your undergarment, and walk the second mile" and when his beard was ripped out, his garments torn off, and the cross placed upon his back, he uttered no threats, he harbored no bitterness, and yet through it all he looked them in the eye and confronted their savagery by providing for them a ready mirror which reflected back to them their own brutality. He could have called legions of angels but he did not choose that path. Jesus who said, "love your enemy," washed Judas' feet, spoke truth to Pilate, and in a moment that must have astounded those standing by, he prayed for those who were crucifying him, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." So, throughout his ministry, even during his trials, torture, and death, Jesus lived out the way that he taught in the Sermon on the Mount, effectively putting to rest once and for all the idea that this way of being the people of God was impossible.

**The Cross as an Example for us to Emulate**

Almost as fast as one can say, "Jesus showed us that another way is possible," I can already hear the rebuttal, "But, that was Jesus. I'm not Jesus. He was the Son of God. I'm just a sinner saved by grace." In order to see if this way of reasoning is legitimate we need to look at how other New Testament authors spoke about the cross. The first chart below shows how Jesus' death on the cross has opened up a new way for us to live. The second chart demonstrates that Jesus' suffering and death is as an example for us to follow.

<sup>25</sup> The command to be perfect as God is not an injunction to moral perfection as Wesley and others have understood. The word perfect in Greek has the

connotation of completeness. Incomplete or imperfect love only loves those who reciprocate, but complete or perfect love even includes one's enemies.

<b>Chart 1: Cross Effects New Way</b>
Romans 8.3-4: When God's Son was given as an offering for sin; he condemned sin in the flesh <i>so that</i> we would walk according to the Spirit not according to the flesh
Hebrews 2.14-15: Through death he rendered the devil powerless and freed us who were slaves under the old principalities and powers
Hebrews 9.13: The death of Christ was vastly superior to the sacrifices offered under the old covenant; his blood cleanses even our consciences from dead works and enables us to serve the living God
2 Corinthians 5.14-20: If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things have passed away and new things have come: God has now given us the very same service of reconciling that God performed through Christ. Thus, we are ambassadors for the Messiah, who continue his ministry of reconciliation
Revelation 1.5-6; 5.9-10: We have been released from our sins by his blood and made into a new priesthood who serve God now and who will reign upon the earth in the future

<b>Chart 2: Suffering and Death as Example</b>
Philippians 2.5-8: Jesus' obedience to the point of humiliation and death is our <i>example</i> for how we should humbly relate to one another. Paul starts with the words, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus..."
Romans 6.2-11: All who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been buried with him, so that as Christ was raised into the newness of life we too would live out a whole new way of life. In other words, we were crucified with Jesus, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin, but freed people whose members are instruments of righteousness.
Romans 8.17: We are to join him in suffering so that we may also join him in glory.
Ephesians 5.2: We are to walk in love just like Christ who loved us by giving himself up for us as an offering and a sacrifice to God

Of course, the Greek Scriptures have a lot to say about how Jesus' death was *for* our sins as well. But, Jesus' crucifixion was not only something that dealt with sin, it also opened up a new way for us to *be* the people of God and therefore the Bible speaks of his suffering and death as our example. Perhaps no text makes this point more

clearly than the famous words of Peter when he said that we should follow Jesus "in his steps."

**1 Peter 2.21-24**

<sup>21</sup> For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. <sup>22</sup> "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." <sup>23</sup> When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. <sup>24</sup> He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.

The phrase "in his steps" refers specifically to the *suffering* that Christ underwent. Though many think Jesus suffered *only* because he was the lamb of God who accomplished redemption through the cross, this text makes it clear that his suffering was an *example* for us to follow—in his steps. Where did his steps lead? How did he walk? He did not sin or speak deceitfully. He did not return evil for evil or even utter threats, but entrusted himself to God the righteous judge. He did all of this *so that* we would die to sin and live in the same right way. Furthermore, this section of Peter's letter was specifically addressed to slaves who were being abused unjustly! Even under such deplorable and humiliating conditions, violence was not considered an option. Rather, Peter said, "to this you have been called," to suffer like Christ. But, again, just like Jesus, Peter knew what he was talking about; for after he and John were arrested and flogged by Sanhedrin they went their way "rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for his name" (Acts 5.40). Indeed, Jesus himself had directed two of the beatitudes to those who suffer persecution saying, "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven" (Matthew 5.12). Even so, Christians are not to go out of their way for the sake of suffering, and our suffering does not earn salvation because Jesus has already accomplished that. Lee Camp's words are helpful in clarifying and distinguishing our role from Christ's.

One thing should be made clear, if it is not already: we are not called to be the Messiah, but to follow the Messiah. There is, unquestionably, a unique role given to the Son of God who is the Savior and Redeemer...In his death, Jesus as the Anointed, as Son of God, accomplished certain things in behalf of humankind that we were (and are) unable to accomplish ourselves.

But the Christendom model increasingly made Jesus' way of effecting reconciliation irrelevant to the way of Jesus' disciples. The cross of Jesus increasingly became a symbol of legal atonement that could be

conveniently separated from our own lives. The cross is looked upon as something Jesus does for us—he dies so we don't have to... The New Testament, however, makes very clear that the cross is not something reserved for Jesus alone.<sup>26</sup>

Sadly, taking up the cross has sometimes been trivialized to mean, suffer through the flu without being a grouch. However, the suffering we are called to is not merely that which is common to all who live in this fallen world. No, we are called to follow *in his steps*. We are given a new life, made priests, so that we would minister the kingdom gospel to a world in desperate need—just like Jesus did. Thus, while we preach the gospel Jesus proclaimed we also embody the kingdom the way he did. John Howard Yoder, put it this way:

The believer's cross is no longer any and every kind of suffering, sickness, or tension, the bearing of which is demanded. The believer's cross must be, like his Lord's, the price of his social nonconformity. It is not, like sickness or catastrophe, an inexplicable, unpredictable suffering; it is the end of a path freely chosen after counting the cost. It is not...[as some contend]...an inward wrestling of the sensitive soul with self and sin; it is the social reality of representing in an unwilling world the Order to come.<sup>27</sup>

### Apostles Confirm Jesus' Teaching on Nonviolence

The apostles understood Jesus' teaching and life (especially how he endured torture and execution) as their standard for what it meant to be a follower of the way. We will return to the idea of embodying the kingdom in a while, but for now we must look at other New Testament writers who mention the notion of nonviolent enemy love. We will consider two examples before moving on to discuss two more theological bombshells that Jesus unleashed: resurrection and Holy Spirit.

Though Paul is often accused of diverting from the way of Jesus, in fact, his words to the nascent Christian community at the imperial capital were remarkably reminiscent of Jesus' own teaching in the Sermon on the Mount:

#### Romans 12.14, 17-21

<sup>14</sup> Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them... <sup>17</sup> Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. <sup>18</sup> If

it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. <sup>19</sup> Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." <sup>20</sup> No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." <sup>21</sup> Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Twice in this section we encounter the word "never": *never* pay back evil for evil and *never* take your own revenge. I suppose we could ask ourselves, what part of *never* is hard to understand? The disciple has a different calling than everyone else, he or she is called to overcome evil with good, to feed the enemy, to trust God with such childlike faith that space is made for God to exercise his divine prerogative of vengeance. The Apostle Peter echoed this same sentiment when he said:

#### 1 Peter 3.8-16

<sup>8</sup> Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind. <sup>9</sup> Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called-- that you might inherit a blessing. <sup>10</sup> For "Those who desire life and desire to see good days, let them keep their tongues from evil and their lips from speaking deceit; <sup>11</sup> let them turn away from evil and do good; let them seek peace and pursue it. <sup>12</sup> For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil." <sup>13</sup> Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? <sup>14</sup> But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, <sup>15</sup> but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; <sup>16</sup> yet do it with gentleness and reverence...

The follower of Christ is to be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted and humble in spirit. Surely the beatitudes are lurking somewhere behind this list of Christian virtues. Furthermore, he instructs us not to return evil for evil but give a blessing instead. The disciple *must* turn away from evil and be good to people. He *must* seek peace and pursue it. That is not to say that genuine Christians are doormats who are prohibited from defending themselves. We should always be ready to make a defense, yet with gentleness (not violence) and respect. The Christian receives suffering but does not afflict others with suffering in return. This is not an argument for passiveness but an admonition towards activism—to bless those who are doing evil to us, to

<sup>26</sup> Lee Camp, *Mere Discipleship*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), pg 74.

<sup>27</sup> John Howard Yoder, *Politics of Jesus*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994) pg 96. (emphasis added)

make a defense, to seek peace and pursue it. Perhaps by now many “what if” statements are coming to mind,<sup>28</sup> but, for now, our theology is incomplete. We have come to understand the instruction of Jesus and the apostles, and the example of Jesus on the cross (which we saw is normative for Christians), but until we come to grips with the resurrection of Jesus and the subsequent outpouring of the Holy Spirit we will be left with a knowledge of correct behavior without the empowerment.

### **The Resurrection of Jesus Explodes on the Scene**

Without exaggeration, the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth was the most significant event in human history. What this event did to the theology of the fledgling Jesus community was like a comet hitting the earth. The initial impact shocked everyone and called for fresh faith in the crucified one, and the residual shockwaves continuously reshaped everything they believed about Jesus, themselves, and the eschaton. A kingdom event had erupted on the scene. Something that was prophesied to happen in the end to everyone had happened early to one man. No one had seen it coming.<sup>29</sup>

The resurrection of Jesus the Nazarene meant that he had been vindicated by God. Even though he had been publicly disgraced, which brought intense shame on himself, his family, and his followers, now through a fresh act of God, this Jesus had been set free from the power of death and honored with God’s unique seal of approval. Furthermore, since the resurrection was often connected with the age to come in their Scriptures,<sup>30</sup> it had a distinct kingdom flavor to it when Jesus, who claimed to be the Messiah, rose from the dead. Resurrection was not, as I used think, merely a necessity following his death for our sins (which was what really mattered). No, the resurrection was God’s vindicating seal upon his Son as the one anointed to rule the coming kingdom—the Messiah.<sup>31</sup>

Furthermore, the resurrection of Jesus made a mockery of the ruling powers. This is because the cross already had a theological meaning at the time. It symbolized Caesar’s right to rule the world through the raw brutality of violence. “If you buck the system, this is what

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<sup>28</sup> For answers to common objections, log on to our website ([www.LoveYourEnemies.wordpress.com](http://www.LoveYourEnemies.wordpress.com)) and click “difficult questions.”

<sup>29</sup> Even though Jesus had told them in advance the Scripture specifically states that they did not understand. The idea that one man would be resurrected in advance of the rest of God’s people was foreign to their worldview.

<sup>30</sup> Is 25.6-8; Dan 12.2; Ez 37.1-14

<sup>31</sup> Romans 1.3; Acts 17.31

happens to you,” is the message people got as they walked by crucified insurrectionists and brigands. The meaning was clear enough: “Don’t mess with Caesar.” In fact, crucifixion, in contrast to modern execution tactics, was intended to be public, humiliating, excruciating, and long lasting. The Roman cross was a perennial reminder that Rome was in charge and that resistance was futile. So, because the cross already had deep imperial overtones, and because Jesus’ accusation was for claiming to be “the King of the Jews” (a title that only Rome could give to someone), Jesus’ death was doubly political. For example, Jesus’ opponents, while pushing for a state execution cowed Pilate with the declaration, “If you release this man, you are no friend of Caesar; everyone who makes himself out to be a king opposes Caesar” (John 19.12). There was no question in anyone’s mind, Jesus was being crucified as a political criminal—someone who had the audacity to claim kingship without the approval of Caesar. So, what did it mean when Jesus was resurrected? What sort of message did it send to the principalities and powers incarnate in the Roman Empire?

The resurrection meant that the power of Caesar—Satan’s puppet *du jour*—had been broken. Naturally, the foundations of imperial power rested in its ability to torture and kill its enemies. That very power was unleashed on Jesus in full measure. He drank the cup to the dregs and it killed him. But, then a resurrection happened, and suddenly something new dawned. Rome did not have the final word; God did (and still does). Jesus is not a false Messiah, he is the real thing. Caesar was the parody; Jesus was marked out as the rightful ruler of the world. Caesar is not Lord, Jesus is. One can almost hear the exuberance every time the apostles tell the story about how the wicked humans crucified Jesus, *but God* raised him from the dead (Acts 2.23-24; 3.14-15; 4.10; 5.30; 10.39-40; 13.29-30).

A dead man lives! A dead man lives! He was put to death by wicked conspiring humans cooperating with the Roman system of “justice” *but God* raised him from the dead. The resurrection of Jesus was big news. It was something that changed everything. It was worth traipsing about the Mediterranean world proclaiming from city to city. God had acted decisively, in the middle of history, to make it clear to all that this Jesus of Nazareth was the true Lord of the world, the genuine Son of God, whose kingship is superior to even Caesar. Thus, the resurrection ultimately brought up the question of allegiance. If Jesus was the true Lord of the world and not Caesar, then of course anyone who has faith in this gospel would revoke his or her allegiance from the imperial imposter and pledge it to the real Son of God who had been vindicated by God and authorized to rule all kingdoms.



We are sojourners who reside as aliens in the kingdoms of this world until finally God's kingdom is established on the last day. When that happens all nations will be subdued, like in Nebuchadnezzar's vision, and God's Messiah will set the world aright. Until then, we are sojourners like our spiritual ancestors who have come before us.<sup>32</sup> We are the resurrection people who believe God has already acted in history in anticipation of his coming age of justice and peace. Thus, our role is not the same as the pagans among whom we reside. But, before we can describe in particular how this all works out we need to focus our attention on the third kingdom event that gushed onto the historical scene: the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

### **The Spirit of the Kingdom Poured out Early**

Just before he ascended our Lord commanded his disciples to stay in Jerusalem because they were soon to be baptized in the Holy Spirit as John the Baptizer had prophesied. Isn't it strange that their immediate response to this was, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1.6). Amazingly, most commentators totally miss the connection between spirit and kingdom. The disciples were not stubbornly holding on to some nationalistic dream that Jesus had dispelled, rather they were holding fast to the promise Jesus had given them at the last supper. He told them that they would sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Luke 22.29-30).

Furthermore, Jesus had just spent the last forty days after his resurrection speaking to them about the kingdom of God (Acts 1.3). So, the disciples did not ask an off-the-wall question here. But, still, why would Jesus' promise about the coming immersion in Spirit cause them to ask about the kingdom? This question finds a ready answer the moment we observe that the prophecies about the outpouring of the Spirit in the Hebrew Bible predominately occur in the context of the coming kingdom.<sup>33</sup>

#### **Isaiah 32.14-18**

<sup>14</sup> For the palace will be forsaken, the populous city deserted; the hill and the watchtower will become dens forever, the joy of wild asses, a pasture for flocks;<sup>15</sup> until a spirit from on high is poured out on us, and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field, and the fruitful field is deemed a forest.<sup>16</sup> Then justice will dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness abide in the fruitful field.<sup>17</sup> The effect of righteousness will

<sup>32</sup> Leviticus 25.23; Psalm 39.12; Hebrews 11.13; 1 Peter 2.11

<sup>33</sup> Isaiah 44:1-5; Ezekiel 11:17-20; Ezekiel 36:24-28, 33-35; 37:12-14; 39.25-29; Joel 2.28-3.2

be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever.<sup>18</sup> My people will abide in a peaceful habitation, in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places.

This text and others like it clearly link the outpouring of the spirit to the coming judgment and restoration (i.e. the kingdom). Furthermore, John the Baptist's prophecy linked the baptism of the spirit to the final judgment to be executed by the Messiah when he comes (Luke 3.16-17). From John's perspective, there was no timing distinction between the pouring out (immersion) of the Holy Spirit and the eschatological fiery judgment. So, when Jesus quoted John and told the disciples that they would be baptized in the spirit in only a few days, their minds linked his statement to the spirit prophecies in their Bible and John's prophecy in particular. Since these spirit passages are in the context of God's final act to bring about lasting justice and peace to Israel, their question made perfect sense. "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" Note that Jesus' reply did not contain a rebuke, but rather a clarification of timing:

#### **Acts 1.7-8**

<sup>7</sup> He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.<sup>8</sup> But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Jesus explained that there was to be an *interim* between the arrival of the kingdom, about which only the Father knows the timing, and the advent of the Holy Spirit, which is needed now so they can fulfill their role as witnesses throughout the world. So, the spirit arrived early (i.e. in advance of the kingdom).<sup>34</sup> Further confirmation for this can be found by Peter's first recorded public sermon at the Feast of Weeks. As a result of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the apostles all began to miraculously speak foreign languages. Some who heard this criticized the apostles as being full of new wine. Peter's spirit-inspired response took them back to the prophecy from Joel. Here are Peter's words:

#### **Acts 2.16-17**

<sup>16</sup> No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:<sup>17</sup> 'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh...

<sup>34</sup> Of course, God was active through the Spirit prior to Pentecost, but it was never available to as many as call on the name of the Lord, only to certain individuals whom God empowered for a given task (cf. Exodus 31.3).

In the tongues Peter saw the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy. Something from the age to come had broken into the present evil age. A kingdom event had burst forth onto the scene right before their eyes. Peter's flow of thought went like this: the speaking in tongues indicated that Jesus had poured out the spirit. Although he was crucified, God raised him from the dead and ascended him into heaven. Therefore Jesus is both Lord and Messiah. The advent of the spirit, and in this case, the *glossolalia* in particular, strengthened their witness to the kingdom message by enabling the apostles to make the case that Jesus was the ascended Messiah.

So, there are really three eschatological events that have already taken place: (1) The Messiah has come, (2) a resurrection has occurred, and (3) the Holy Spirit has been poured out. Would we expect that the people of God would be the same after the Messiah had come? Of course not! Every Jew knew that when the Messiah came, the messianic age would dawn, God would win the decisive victory over the forces of evil, and lasting justice and peace would be established forever in the world. Jesus did not change this basic outline; but he did add a twist to the messianic stereotype when he ended up condemned on a Roman cross. Rather than defeating the hated Romans and reclaiming Israel's sovereignty as the rightful heir to the throne of David, Jesus confronted the existing powers and was lynched for it. Or so it would seem, if God did not raise him from the dead three days later! So, really there are *two* great twists in the story: (1) Jesus defeated evil by absorbing it nonviolently on the cross. As the representative of Israel, he self-sacrificially endured the curse of the Law on behalf of the people. (2) God brought him back to life, vindicating him, and marking him out unequivocally as the Son of God destined to rule the world on his behalf (Acts 17.31).

The next event we would expect to occur is the coming of the kingdom (which would be accompanied by justice, peace, outpouring of the spirit, resurrection for the righteous dead, return of sovereignty to Israel, judgment upon the wicked, etc.). There can be little doubt that the disciples thought this way. As we have already seen, their first question to Jesus just before his ascension concerned whether or not this was the time for the kingdom to be restored to Israel (Acts 1.6). Jesus clarified to them that the spirit comes before the kingdom to enable them to testify to Jesus' resurrection (and thus his messiahship) and then he ascended into heaven.

Next came the outpouring of the spirit during the Feast of Weeks. As we have already seen, the spirit prophecies in the Hebrew Bible were in the context of the kingdom. Thus, it would be wrong to divorce spirit from kingdom. Everything that flows from the spirit, all of the events

that bubble up from this new experience of the presence of God testify about the kingdom. Jesus' ministry was the paradigm that the apostles worked within as they went out to share the good news with the world. Before long, the Gentiles also had a Pentecost experience; the spirit fell upon those assembled before Peter while he preached at Cornelius' house. Peter concluded that if God had accepted the Gentiles into the people of God, then he could not refuse them to be admitted into the community of the redeemed, so he ordered them to be baptized in Jesus' name.

### **New Covenant Theology**

Suddenly, a fresh set of questions emerged about whether or not Gentiles needed to keep the Law in order to be included in the people of God. The apostles correctly decided in the famous Jerusalem council (Acts 15) not to put a yoke on the Gentiles that they themselves could not bear. Before long it became apparent that Jesus' death had ratified the new covenant, which meant that even Jews had been freed from the letter of the Law.

Jesus had already prepared the disciples for this revelation, for the night Jesus was betrayed he entered into a new blood covenant with his disciples by offering them the cup of wine: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood...which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26.28; 1 Corinthians 11.25). As time went on, the apostles (notably Paul) came to understand that Jesus' death, resurrection, ascension, and outpouring of the spirit brought about changes in how God related to his people. A new covenant had been established.

This covenant is a better covenant because Jesus belongs to a superior priesthood (Hebrews 7.22-24) and because he entered into the real tabernacle in heaven through his own blood (Hebrews 9.11-14) as opposed to entering into Herod's temple through the blood of animals. By one offering, Jesus accomplished permanent sanctification for the people of God (Hebrews 10.14). Furthermore, Jesus is the mediator of a better covenant than Moses because it has been enacted on better promises (Hebrews 8.6). Here is a list of new covenant promises as described in Hebrews 8.10-12:

1. I will put my laws into their minds  
And I will write them on their hearts
2. I will be their God  
And they shall be my people
3. Everyone will not teach his fellow citizen,  
saying "Know the LORD"

For all will know me from the least to the greatest

4. I will be merciful to their iniquities  
And I will remember their sins no more

The law was written on our hearts by the Spirit, which stands in contrast to “the letter” (i.e. the letters engraved on stones, which stands for the whole Mosaic Law) (Romans 2.29; 7.6; 2 Corinthians 3.3, 6-8).

#### 2 Corinthians 3.6-8

<sup>6</sup> [God] has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. <sup>7</sup> Now if the ministry of death, chiseled in letters on stone tablets, came in glory so that the people of Israel could not gaze at Moses' face because of the glory of his face, a glory now set aside, <sup>8</sup> how much more will the ministry of the Spirit come in glory?

Notice how the Holy Spirit is tied to the new covenant. We will return to this connection in a short while, but for now we need to establish that the new covenant is in effect today. It is true that in the parallel passages to Jeremiah 31.31-34, the context is eschatological. But, by now is this not what we would expect? The Messiah has come. The resurrection has occurred early to one man. The Holy Spirit has been poured out on all who are willing to submit to Jesus as Messiah through baptism. So, to think that the new covenant has already begun as well is not unreasonable. But, alas the author of Hebrews is not leaving anything up to inference; he (or she) states in no uncertain terms that the covenant has been brought into effect.

#### Hebrews 10.14-22

<sup>14</sup> For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. <sup>15</sup> And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us, for after saying, <sup>16</sup> "This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds," <sup>17</sup> he also adds, "I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more." <sup>18</sup> Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin. <sup>19</sup> Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, <sup>20</sup> by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), <sup>21</sup> and since we have a great priest over the house of God, <sup>22</sup> let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

Note that he focuses on promise #4: forgiveness from sin. Is there any Christian who would deny that our sins have been forgiven because of the shed blood of the Lamb of God? This blood inaugurated for us a *new and living way*. Our hearts *have been* sprinkled clean and our bodies *have been* washed, making us fit for relationship with God. We need not instruct one another to know God, for each one of us has been given firsthand knowledge of God through the Holy Spirit within us. Through our high priest we have permission to pass beyond the veil right into the holy of holies, where God dwells.

#### Ephesians 2.14-19

<sup>14</sup> For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. <sup>15</sup> He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, <sup>16</sup> and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. <sup>17</sup> So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; <sup>18</sup> for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. <sup>19</sup> So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God,

The people of God are one. There are not two standards: one for Jews who are bound to obey Torah and another for Gentiles who keep the Noahide laws. No, because of Jesus' death the dividing wall has been abolished in his flesh—the Law of commandments. The new covenant makes the first obsolete (Hebrews 8.13). This cleared the way for peace between Jew and Gentile as one new humanity. Furthermore, we have not been driven farther from God because of this; rather we are now given access in one spirit to the Father. There is no loss for the Jew either because the new covenant is superior to the old.

The new covenant is in full effect now. If it is not, then that means that we are under the old covenant (which means you can't eat bacon, mow the lawn on Saturday, or wear mixed fiber clothing). Either we relate to God through his covenant mediated by Moses or his covenant mediated by Jesus. If we are not now living under this *new and living way* then why does the Scripture use the present tense in referring to Jesus' mediation of the new covenant? For it says:

#### Hebrews 8.6

But Jesus *has now* obtained a more excellent ministry, and to that degree he *is* the mediator of a

better covenant, which *has been enacted* through better promises. (emphasis added)

By the blood of the Messiah our very consciences were cleansed, for we have been redeemed from the transgressions that occurred under the first covenant, so that we who have been called would receive the promise of the kingdom inheritance (Hebrews 9.14-15). We have not come to Mount Sinai with its blazing fire and blaring trumpet, rather we have come to Mount Zion, to the general assembly of the firstborn, to God the Judge of all, and to Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant (Hebrews 12.18-24). Notice how Paul speaks on the matter:

#### **Galatians 3.23-29**

<sup>23</sup> Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. <sup>24</sup> Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. <sup>25</sup> But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, <sup>26</sup> for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. <sup>27</sup> As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. <sup>28</sup> There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. <sup>29</sup> And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

The Law brought us to Christ, but now something *new* has come, which erases previous distinctions. No longer are their ethnic barriers (Jew vs. Greek), class distinctions (slave vs. free man), or gender inequalities (male vs. female), for we have all been made one in the Messiah (i.e. things have changed). We have been released from the Law, since in Christ we died to it, thus we are able to serve in the newness of the Spirit rather than the oldness of the letter (Romans 7.6). In fact, the requirement of the Law is fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the spirit (Romans 8.4). Thus, the Holy Spirit does not merely empower followers of the Messiah to testify about his resurrection in word, but also by their entire lifestyle as they live out the new covenant.

#### **Galatians 5.16-25**

<sup>16</sup> Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. <sup>17</sup> For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. <sup>18</sup> But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. <sup>19</sup> Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, <sup>20</sup> idolatry,

sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, <sup>21</sup> envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. <sup>22</sup> By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. <sup>24</sup> And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. <sup>25</sup> If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

Morality under the new covenant, the way of Jesus, is intimately linked to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. For example, once Paul cogently concluded that in light of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection, God's people are no longer under the Law, he immediately stressed that this does not precipitate antinomianism. The deeds of the flesh are still marked out by the Law as sinful, and pursuing those actions will block entrance into the kingdom of God. The solution is to "walk by the spirit," which results in the fruit of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. He says unequivocally, "If you are led by the spirit, you are not under the Law."

Furthermore the Holy Spirit is a pledge of what is to come (2 Corinthians 1.22; 5.4-5; Ephesians 1.13-14). For example, when one goes to buy a house he makes an offer for the house and sends with it a check, which, if accepted, seals the deal. The check is the pledge. It is the guarantee that his offer is serious, that if agreed to, he will go through the rest of the closing process to buy the house. Similarly the Holy Spirit is a pledge of the kingdom. The Spirit is what God has given his people to guarantee that the rest is coming. Thus, the pouring out the spirit not only regenerates our hearts but makes us heirs according to the hope of life in the coming age (Titus 3.5-7).

#### **Called to Embody the Kingdom**

Our tendency is to forget that the Holy Spirit really belongs to the age to come since it is already here now. The new covenant is the way of living and relating to God that belongs to the kingdom. Consider this list of Christian experiences:

*Adapted from Hebrews 6.4-5*

we have been enlightened  
we have tasted of the heavenly gift  
we have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit  
we have tasted the good word of God  
we have tasted the powers of the age to come

So, as new covenant people we are those who walk by the spirit, manifesting the lifestyle of the age to come,

even while we live in this present age. We are the kingdom people, the future of humanity. We are privileged and commissioned to give the world a foretaste of the kingdom through our actions *and* words, by modeling a new way of redemption, wholeness, reconciliation, and restoration. We are to reflect the coming kingdom both individually and collectively. Our lives should be characterized by outrageous acts of self-sacrificial cross-shaped love, not by the retaliatory ends-justify-the-means mentality which has justified so much bloodshed throughout the church's history. Once we enter into this new covenantal relationship with God through faith in the gospel, repentance by baptism, and receiving the spirit, we are changed. Our minds are no longer shaped by this age, but instead they are made new through God's transformative power (Romans 12.2).

Even so, we are not so naïve as to think that loving our enemies will solve all the problems of violence in the world. In fact, as Dr. Stanley Hauerwas has noted, our peace witness may actually make the world more dangerous. However, our goal is not fix all the problems of the world, but merely to be faithful to what Jesus has said. Our role is prophetic rather than goal-oriented. The question we ask is, "How can I bring forth signs of the kingdom like Jesus did?" rather than, "How can I fix this problem with a minimum of collateral damage?" Thus, as followers of the slaughtered lamb, sometimes we get slaughtered too. But how do we interpret this? Do we say, "Well, that was stupid, Polycarp<sup>35</sup> should have escaped! What good does he do now that he has been executed by the State?" No! Rather we say, "Look at Polycarp! He was *faithful* until the end, and he testified (martyr means one who testifies) to the existing powers and to the people in the arena that Jesus is Lord and that nothing can cause him to betray the Messiah." Perhaps we need to recover our theology of martyrdom?

Then again, sometimes our prophetic role as kingdom people does bring about lasting social change. As African-Americans protested nonviolently to the oppressive Jim Crow laws, the rest of society took notice, and today there are no such laws in the United States. Many other examples could be given, which describe the effectiveness of nonviolent campaigns for justice. However, as kingdom people, as sojourners, the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of a given action is not our determinative criterion, rather what matters most is whether or not we are testifying to the resurrection in word and deed through the power of the spirit. Our concern is to be like Jesus by embodying the kingdom and following his example.

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<sup>35</sup> Polycarp was martyred in the second century by the Roman official who was incensed that Polycarp would not offer a pinch of incense to Caesar and curse Christ.

We are the people of God who have a prophetic message to deliver. We announce the failure of the world's gospel of technological, therapeutic, consumer, militarism<sup>36</sup> while delivering the good news of God's coming kingdom of justice and peace. This gospel is delivered in conjunction with living out the new kingdom script (even though we still dwell in the midst of the old tattered world.) Thus, *we live the age to come in the present*, not as if the age to come has been spiritualized—that is, we have not domesticated the kingdom by redefining it into a few warm fuzzies in our hearts because Jesus "reigns" within us. Nor do we attest to a "spatialized" hope as if God has given up on this earth project in favor of scrapping it and moving his chosen to heaven at death. No, we live out the future in the present in the power of the spirit as an appetizer of what is to come, a sneak preview, a prophetic signpost of God's future stamped across our entire lives, from the way we do marriage to the way we do homework to the way we do evangelism. We are to be signs of the coming kingdom like the road sign one might see for an upcoming exit on the highway. Is that sign which says "Exit 6" really exit six? No, of course not, it testifies to the fact that in a couple of miles exit six will be here and so we should move over to the right lane in preparation. In the same way we are signs of the coming kingdom. Strictly speaking we are not the kingdom but by looking at us the world should ascertain that a kingdom is coming, for that is what our whole lives, both individually and as a community, communicate.

Pulling everything together, Jesus' teachings on nonviolence fit perfectly within this theological framework. One of the problems with other approaches to nonviolence is that by saying "violence is wrong," we unwittingly condemn the Old Testament saints as well as God for their use of violence. How can we say that Joshua was wrong to obey God when he was commanded to use violence to conquer the Promised Land? But, if Joshua was *not* wrong to use violence, then how can I say that violence *is* wrong? The answer is that things have changed. Massive events have occurred which open up a *new way* that was unavailable to the saints of old. The Messiah has come, a resurrection has occurred, the spirit has been poured out, and the new covenant has been brought into effect by the bloody sacrifice of the Lamb. Since these kingdom events have exploded onto the historical scene, the people of God are given a new way to live. For us to revert to the old covenant way of thinking and being would be amount to denying that the Messiah has already come.

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<sup>36</sup> See Dr. Walter Brueggemann's nineteen theses.

For example, when the Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, he had to address the issue of the Christians suing each other (1 Corinthians 6.1-9). Paul was bewildered that Christians were taking each other to court. He could barely believe that something so absurd could even happen. Of course, from an old covenant perspective, there is nothing wrong with taking one's neighbor to court if there was a just cause. In fact, extensive provision was made for exactly such a scenario under the Mosaic Law. So, what is so shocking here? Why is Paul beside himself? There are two offenses: (1) they were taking their fellow Christians to court and (2) they were going to court before non-Christians. His motivation for thinking is found in the statement, "Do you not know that the saints will judge the world?" If the Corinthians disciples are destined to rule the world, can they not figure out how to do community without appealing to outsiders to settle matters? Is there not even one wise man among them before whom the two could go? In fact, it would be better to be defrauded than to go before unbelievers since that would testify to the *opposite* of the kingdom message. Besides, the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom. Notice how the people's future role as kingdom citizens was to affect how they lived. The first question is, "How will it be in the kingdom." The next is, "How can I incarnate kingdom living now in this situation?"

Another example of this can be found in the way early Christians thought of themselves in light of the prophecy in Micah and Isaiah about swords turning into plowshares and spears turning into pruning hooks. Consider these quotations from the second and third centuries:

Justin Martyr (a.d. 160)  
[W]e who were filled with war, and mutual slaughter, and every wickedness, have each through the whole earth changed our warlike weapons,—our swords into plowshares, and our spears into implements of tillage,—and we cultivate piety, righteousness, philanthropy, faith, and hope, which we have from the Father himself through him who was crucified;<sup>37</sup>

Irenaeus (a.d. 180)  
If any one, however, advocating the cause of the Jews, do maintain that this new covenant consisted in the rearing of that temple which was built under Zerubbabel after the emigration to Babylon, and in the departure of the people from thence after the lapse of seventy years, let him know that the temple constructed of stones was indeed then rebuilt (for as

yet that law was observed which had been made upon tables of stone), yet no new covenant was given, but they used the Mosaic law until the coming of the Lord; but from the Lord's advent, the new covenant that brings back peace and the law that gives life have gone forth over the whole earth, as the prophets said: "For out of Zion will go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem; and he will rebuke many people; and they will break down their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks, and they will no longer learn to fight"... these [Christians] did form the swords and war-lances into plowshares, and changed them into pruning-hooks for reaping the corn, [that is], into instruments used for peaceful purposes, and that they are now unaccustomed to fighting, but when smitten, offer also the other cheek.<sup>38</sup>

Tertullian (a.d. 197)  
Isaiah in the ensuing words announces, saying, "...and they shall join to beat their swords into ploughs, and their lances into sickles; and nations shall not take up sword against nation, and they shall no more learn to fight." Who else, therefore, are understood but we, who, fully taught by the new law, observe these practices,—the old law being obliterated, the coming of whose abolition the action itself demonstrates? For the inclination of the old law was to avenge itself by the vengeance of the sword, and to pluck out "eye for eye," and to inflict retaliatory revenge for injury. But the new law's inclination was to point to mercy, and to convert to tranquility the original ferocity of "swords" and "lances," and to remodel the original execution of "war" upon the rivals and foes of the law into the peaceable actions of "ploughing" and "tilling" the land. Therefore as we have shown above that the coming cessation of the old law and of the carnal circumcision was declared, so, too, the observance of the new law and the spiritual circumcision has shone out into the voluntary obedience of peace.<sup>39</sup>

Origen (a.d. 248)  
And to those who inquire of us whence we come, or who is our founder, we reply that we are come, agreeably to the counsels of Jesus, to "cut down our hostile and insolent [wearisome] swords into plowshares, and to convert into pruning-hooks the

<sup>38</sup> *Against Heresies*, book 4, chapter 34 (ANF: Vol. 1, p. 512).

<sup>39</sup> *An Answer to the Jews*, chapter 3 (ANF: Vol. 3, p. 154).  
The following Old English words were replaced: glaive -> sword; wont -> inclination; tranquillity -> tranquility; clemency -> mercy; pacific -> peaceable; pristine -> original; obediences -> obedience

<sup>37</sup> *Dialogue with Trypho*, chapter 110 (ANF: Vol. 1, p. 254).

spears formerly employed in war.” For we no longer take up “sword against nation,” nor do we “learn war any more,” having become children of peace, for the sake of Jesus, who is our leader, instead of those whom our fathers followed, among whom we were “strangers to the covenant,” and having received a law, for which we give thanks to Him that rescued us from the error (of our ways)...<sup>40</sup>

The early Christian community applied the same thinking of Paul to the Corinthians to the subject of war and violence. One need only glance at a few of the grand portraits painted of the kingdom in Scripture to realize that the age to come will be characterized by peace: peace between individuals, families, tribes, ethnicities, nations, and even animals. The early church reasoned that if they were going to testify to the gospel of peace (that God would ultimately fix up this world and establish everlasting peace) then they should begin to live in peace already. Their prophetic witness to the world was that since the Messiah had come, since the new covenant was here, it only made sense to beat their swords into ploughshares and embark on a life of nonviolent peace. Just imagine having a dialog with a Jew and when he challenged you to prove that the Messiah had come, you say, “Just look at us Christians, we used to be violent but now we are at peace.” Such a line of thinking was normal for the first few centuries of the churches existence.

### The Testimony of the Early Christians

I have selected thirteen quotations from ten authors ranging from the Didache, which may be as early as the first century (before the book of Revelation was written), to Lactantius who wrote the same year as the edict of Milan<sup>41</sup> in the early fourth century. The quotations are each organized by date from earliest to latest, and all dates given are approximate. (This collection was made possible by the marvelous single volume topical index to the early Christian writings (Ante-Nicene Fathers) composed by David Bercot called, *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*.)

The Didache (a.d. 120)

<sup>3</sup> What these maxims teach is this: “Bless those who curse you,” and “pray for your enemies.” Moreover, fast “for those who persecute you.” For “what credit is it to you if you love those who love you? Is that

not the way the heathen act?” But “you must love those who hate you,” and then you will make no enemies.<sup>4</sup> “Abstain from carnal passions.” If someone strikes you “on the right cheek, turn to him the other too, and you will be perfect.” If someone “forces you to go one mile with him, go along with him for two”; if someone robs you “of your overcoat, give him your suit as well.” If someone deprives you of “your property, do not ask for it back.” (You could not get it back anyway!)<sup>42</sup>

“Mathetes” (a.d. 130)

<sup>1</sup> For the Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. <sup>2</sup> For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity...<sup>4</sup> But, inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, according as the lot of each of them has determined, and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life.<sup>5</sup> They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers.<sup>6</sup> They marry, as do all others; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring.<sup>7</sup> They have a common table, but not a common bed.<sup>8</sup> They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh.<sup>9</sup> They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven.<sup>10</sup> They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives.<sup>11</sup> They love all men, and are persecuted by all.<sup>12</sup> They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death, and restored to life.<sup>13</sup> They are poor, yet make many rich; they are in lack of all things, and yet abound in all;<sup>14</sup> they are dishonored, and yet in their very dishonor are glorified. They are evil spoken of, and yet are justified;<sup>15</sup> they are reviled, and bless; they are insulted, and repay the insult with honor;<sup>16</sup> they do good, yet are punished as evil-doers. When punished, they rejoice as if quickened into life;<sup>17</sup> they are assailed by the Jews as foreigners, and are persecuted by the Greeks; yet those who hate them are unable to assign any reason for their hatred.<sup>43</sup>

Justin Martyr (a.d.160)

[W]e who formerly used to murder one another do not only now refrain from making war upon our enemies, but also,

<sup>40</sup> *Origen Against Celsus*, book 5, chapter 33 (ANF: Vol. 4, p. 558).

<sup>41</sup> The edict of Milan in A.D. 313 legalized Christianity (along with other religions) and decreed that all meeting places and other properties which had been confiscated from the Christians and sold or granted out of the government treasury were to be returned.

<sup>42</sup> *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* 1.3-4

<sup>43</sup> *Letter to Diognetus* 5.1-17 (ANF: Vol 1. pp. 26-27).

that we may not lie nor deceive our examiners, willingly die confessing Christ.<sup>44</sup>

Clement of Alexandria (a.d. 195)  
For it is not in war, but in peace, that we are trained. War needs great preparation, and luxury craves profusion; but peace and love, simple and quiet sisters, require no arms nor excessive preparation.<sup>45</sup>

Tertullian (a.d. 200)  
But now inquiry is made about this point, whether a believer may turn himself unto military service, and whether the military may be admitted unto the faith, even the rank and file, or each inferior grade, to whom there is no necessity for taking part in sacrifices or capital punishments. There is no agreement between the divine and the human sacrament, the standard of Christ and the standard of the devil, the camp of light and the camp of darkness. One soul cannot be due to two masters—God and Cæsar. And yet Moses carried a rod, and Aaron wore a buckle, and John (the Baptist) is girt with leather and Joshua the son of Nun leads a line of march; and the People warred: if it pleases you to sport with the subject. But how will a Christian man war, nay, how will he serve even in peace, without a sword, which the Lord has taken away? For albeit soldiers had come unto John, and had received the formula of their rule; albeit, likewise, a centurion had believed; still the Lord afterward, in disarming Peter, [disarmed] every soldier.<sup>46</sup>

Tertullian (a.d. 211)  
Shall it be held lawful to make an occupation of the sword, when the Lord proclaims that he who uses the sword shall perish by the sword? And shall the son of peace take part in the battle when it does not become him even to sue at law? And shall he apply the chain, and the prison, and the torture, and the punishment, who is not the avenger even of his own wrongs? Shall he, forsooth [indeed], either keep watch-service for others more than for Christ, or shall he do it on the Lord's day, when he does not even do it for Christ Himself? And shall he keep guard before the temples which he has renounced? And shall he take a meal where the apostle has forbidden him? And shall he diligently protect by night those whom in the day-time he has put to flight by his exorcisms, leaning and resting on the spear the while with which Christ's side was pierced?

Shall he carry a flag, too, hostile to Christ? ...Then how many other offences there are involved in the performances of camp offices, which we must hold to involve a transgression of God's law, you may see by a slight survey. The very carrying of the name over from the camp of light to the camp of darkness is a violation of it. Of course, if faith comes later, and finds any preoccupied with military service, their case is different, as in the instance of those whom John used to receive for baptism, and of those most faithful centurions, I mean the centurion whom Christ approves, and the centurion whom Peter instructs; yet, at the same time, when a man has become a believer, and faith has been sealed, there must be either an immediate abandonment of it, which has been the course with many; or all sorts of quibbling will have to be resorted to in order to avoid offending God, and that is not allowed even outside of military service; or, last of all, for God the fate must be endured which a citizen-faith has been no less ready to accept.<sup>47</sup>

Hippolytus (a.d. 215)  
A soldier of the civil authority must be taught not to kill men and to refuse to do so if he is commanded, and to refuse to take an oath. If he is unwilling to comply, he must be rejected for baptism. A military commander or civic magistrate who wears the purple must resign or be rejected. If an applicant or a believer seeks to become a soldier, he must be rejected, for he has despised God."<sup>48</sup>

Origen (a.d. 248)  
In the next place, Celsus urges us "to help the king with all our might, and to labour with him in the maintenance of justice, to fight for him; and if he requires it, to fight under him, or lead an army along with him." To this our answer is, that we do, when occasion requires, give help to kings, and that, so to say, a divine help, "putting on the whole armour of God." And this we do in obedience to the injunction of the apostle, "I exhort, therefore, that first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; for kings, and for all that are in authority;" and the more any one excels in piety, the more effective help does he render to kings, even more than is given by soldiers, who go

<sup>44</sup> *The First Apology of Justin*, chapter 39 (ANF: Vol 1. p. 176).

<sup>45</sup> *The Instructor*, book 1, chapter 12 (ANF: Vol. 2, pp. 234-235).

<sup>46</sup> *On Idolatry*, chapter 19, (ANF: Vol. 3, p. 73).

<sup>47</sup> Since leaving the military was illegal, a soldier who converted to Christianity was in a difficult spot. He could desert and make his escape, remain a soldier without offending God (which Tertullian thinks is impossible), or else die as a martyr in the same way as many civilians have.

<sup>48</sup> *The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus of Rome*, 16.17-19



forth to fight and slay as many of the enemy as they can. And to those enemies of our faith who require us to bear arms for the commonwealth, and to slay men, we can reply: "Do not those who are priests at certain shrines, and those who attend on certain gods, as you account them, keep their hands free from blood, that they may with hands unstained and free from human blood offer the appointed sacrifices to your gods; and even when war is upon you, you never enlist the priests in the army. If that, then, is a laudable custom, how much more so, that while others are engaged in battle, these too should engage as the priests and ministers of God, keeping their hands pure, and wrestling in prayers to God on behalf of those who are fighting in a righteous cause, and for the king who reigns righteously, that whatever is opposed to those who act righteously may be destroyed!" And as we by our prayers vanquish all demons who stir up war, and lead to the violation of oaths, and disturb the peace, we in this way are much more helpful to the kings than those who go into the field to fight for them. And we do take our part in public affairs, when along with righteous prayers we join self-denying exercises and meditations, which teach us to despise pleasures, and not to be led away by them. And none fight better for the king than we do. We do not indeed fight under him, although he require it; but we fight on his behalf, forming a special army—an army of piety—by offering our prayers to God.<sup>49</sup>

Cyprian (a.d. 250)

Consider the roads blocked up by robbers, the seas beset with pirates, wars scattered all over the earth with the bloody horror of camps. The whole world is wet with mutual blood; and murder, which in the case of an individual is admitted to be a crime, is called a virtue when it is committed wholesale. Impunity is claimed for the wicked deeds, not on the plea that they are guiltless, but because the cruelty is perpetrated on a grand scale.<sup>50</sup>

Cyprian (a.d. 250)

Adultery, fraud, manslaughter, are mortal crimes. Let patience be strong and steadfast in the heart; and neither is the sanctified body and temple of God polluted by adultery, nor is the innocence dedicated to righteousness stained with the contagion of fraud;

nor, after the Eucharist carried in it, is the hand spotted with the sword and blood.<sup>51</sup>

Arnobius (a.d. 305)

For since we, a numerous band of men as we are, have learned from His teaching and His laws that evil ought not to be requited with evil, that it is better to suffer wrong than to inflict it, that we should rather shed our own blood than stain our hands and our conscience with that of another, an ungrateful world is now for a long period enjoying a benefit from Christ, inasmuch as by His means the rage of savage ferocity has been softened, and has begun to withhold hostile hands from the blood of a fellow-creature. But if all without exception, who feel that they are men not in form of body but in power of reason, would lend an ear for a little to His salutary and peaceful rules, and would not, in the pride and arrogance of enlightenment, trust to their own senses rather than to His admonitions, the whole world, having turned the use of steel into more peaceful occupations, would now be living in the most placid tranquillity, and would unite in blessed harmony, maintaining inviolate the sanctity of treaties.<sup>52</sup>

Lactantius (a.d. 313)

Or why should he carry on war, and mix himself with the passions of others, when his mind is engaged in perpetual peace with men? Doubtless he will be delighted with foreign merchandise or with human blood, who does not know how to seek gain, who is satisfied with his mode of living, and considers it unlawful not only himself to commit slaughter, but to be present with those who do it, and to behold it!<sup>53</sup>

Lactantius (a.d. 313)

It is not right that a worshiper of God should be injured by another worshiper of God.<sup>54</sup>

### The Mutation of Christianity under Constantine

Reading through these quotations it is hard to envisage such a church today. Naturally, the question we ask is: What happened to the non-violent way of Jesus to which the early Christians testified? Of course the church didn't wake up one day and suddenly become militaristic; it was

<sup>49</sup> Origen Against Celsus, book 8, chapter 73 (ANF: Vol. 4, p. 667-668).

<sup>50</sup> *The Epistle of Cyprian: Epistle I: To Donatus*, chapter 6 (ANF: Vol. 5, p. 277).

<sup>51</sup> *The Treatises of Cyprian*, Treatise 9.14 (ANF: Vol. 5, p. 488).

<sup>52</sup> *The Seven Books of Arnobius Against the Heathen*, book 1, chapter 6 (ANF: Vol. 6, p. 415).

<sup>53</sup> *The Divine Institutes*, Book 5: *Of Justice, Wisdom, and Folly*, chapter 8 (ANF: Vol. 7, p. 153)

<sup>54</sup> *A Treatise on the Anger of God Addressed to Donatus*, chapter 14 (ANF: Vol. 7, p. 271).

a process that took time and thinking in order to produce new theology in place of the old. Surprisingly, brutal persecution by the State did *not* bring about Christian violence; rather, it was the invitation to imperial power that wooed the church away from her radical kingdom witness. Rome got a “Christian president,” as it were.

When, beginning with the emperor Constantine, the Christian church began receiving referential treatment by the empire that it had once so steadfastly opposed, war, which had once seemed so evil, now appeared to many to be a necessity for preserving and propagating the gospel.

Christianity's weaponless victory over the Roman empire eventuated in the weaponless victory of the empire over the gospel. No defeat is so well-disguised as victory! In the year 303, Diocletian forbade any member of the Roman army to be a Christian. By the year 416, no one could be a member of the Roman army unless he was a Christian.<sup>55</sup>

John Howard Yoder identified six fundamental shifts<sup>56</sup> between pre and post-Constantinian ethics. Each of these resulted from the historical occurrence of Constantine's “conversion” and subsequent promotion of Christianity as the “in” religion of Rome.

1. The church was redefined from those committed souls who were willing to follow the way of Jesus by life or by death to a preferred society looked upon as something to join in order to win favor with the “Christian” emperor. Thus, the church flooded and it was suddenly difficult to discern between genuine and nominal Christians.
2. The kingdom of God was no longer conceived of as a political governance to be established at the return of the Messiah, but instead it became conflated with the Christian kingdom of Rome. Now that the government was “Christian,” the kingdom had come and Jesus began to rule through his representative—Caesar.
3. Since the emperor was Christian a new question arose in place of the old. Before people asked: What does it mean to follow the way of Jesus? Now people asked: Is it

<sup>55</sup> Walter Wink, “Beyond Just War and Pacifism: Jesus' Nonviolent Way,” ([http://www.cres.org/star/\\_wink.htm](http://www.cres.org/star/_wink.htm)).

<sup>56</sup> These six shifts were taken from Mark Nation's book: *John Howard Yoder*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans 2006), pp. 65-67.

reasonable to expect the emperor to be constrained by such a radical way? Does he not have “duties” that require a certain leniency?

4. Since many of the new Christians did not have personal commitment, regenerated hearts, the guidance of the Holy Spirit, or the encouragement and mentoring of the family of God it was now considered unreasonable to expect them to actually follow the teachings of Jesus. Besides if everyone in the empire lived a radically Christian life, who would hold off the pagans from seizing the power? Who would stop the barbarians from invading?
5. For the first time, the measure of a given ethic became its effectiveness. What's good for the Roman Empire (the church-State) is how ethics needed to be measured. The notion of being faithful to the instruction of Jesus and the apostles was not enough reason to insist on a given behavior.
6. Lastly, a new dualism emerged into Christian thought. A split was made between inward attitudes and actual deeds. Thus, one could love the enemy internally while cutting his head off with an axe as the State executioner. Inner disposition became the primary place for Christian ethics over and against actual obedience (especially with respect to civic duties).

The cumulative result of these shifts is well illustrated by Yoder's remark, “Before Constantine it took courage to be a Christian; after Constantine it took courage to be a pagan.”<sup>57</sup> Many men and women went off into the desert in protest to the corruptions that they witnessed all around them. They became the desert fathers and mothers from whom sprang monasticism and intense personal piety combined with irrelevance to the larger society due to their withdrawal from the world. Now, many of the true Christians who could decry the mass deception were cloistered off; they were neither *in* the world nor *of* the world. Still, the deal was not completely sealed until Augustine with his towering intellect, persuasive rhetoric, and philosophically trained mind imported pagan just war theory and baptized it Christian. Walter Wink explains:

It fell to Augustine (d. 430) to make the accommodation of Christianity to its new status as a

<sup>57</sup> John Howard Yoder as quoted by Stanley Hauerwas at The Burke Lecture, UC at San Diego delivered in April 2004, (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FPPJckfxdT>).

privileged religion in support of the state. Augustine believed, on the basis of Matt. 5:38-42, that Christians had no right to defend themselves from violence. But he identified a problem which no earlier theologian had faced: what Augustine regarded as the loving obligation to use violence if necessary to defend the innocent against evil. [In other words, violence cannot be used to defend oneself but it should be used to defend others.] Drawing on Stoic just war principles, he articulated the position that was to dominate church teaching from that time right up to the present. Ever since, Christians on the left and on the right, in the East and in the West, have found it exceedingly easy to declare as "just" and divinely ordained any wars their governments desired to wage for purely national interests. As a consequence, the world regards Christians as among the most warlike factions on the face of the earth. And little wonder; two-thirds of the people killed in the last 500 years died at the hands of fellow-Christians in Europe, to say nothing of those whom Christians killed in the course of colonizing the rest of the world."<sup>58</sup>

#### **A Call to Return to Nonviolence**

Before returning to the Constantinian corruption and the challenge that faces us today, allow me to summarize the major themes that form the framework for the Christian notion of nonviolent enemy love. A millennium before the birth of Jesus, God had promised that one of King David's descendants would be his Son and would rule forever. Several hundreds of years later God gave Daniel visions about the coming son of man who would rule over all peoples and nations. These two promises converged on one man—Jesus from Nazareth who was both Son of God and Son of Man, who was destined to rule on the throne of David and come as cosmic victor. Jesus' ministry was soaked with kingdom symbols, kingdom language, and kingdom activity. Jesus came preaching the gospel about the kingdom, teaching the way of the kingdom, and performing miraculous signs of the kingdom (through healing and exorcism). Through his death Jesus won the decisive victory against evil and dealt with sin once for all. Through the resurrection, death itself was conquered and Jesus was vindicated as God's true Messiah. But, then rather than liberating Israel from Roman oppression and establishing the kingdom of God on the throne of David, Jesus ascended to heaven with the promise that he would return. Then, just a few days later, the Holy Spirit was poured out on both the apostles and all who repented through baptism. Then God began to call Gentiles to the faith, which caused no small stir. The consensus among the nascent

Christian community was to accept Gentiles as full Christians without requiring them to keep the Law. Before long God revealed that neither Gentiles nor Jews needed to continue living the old way now that the new had come. As the writer of Hebrews explains, between Jesus' death and the coming of the spirit a new and living way had been inaugurated, which meant the old way of being the people of God was obsolete. Sin and death have been defeated and the Holy Spirit has come for all who repent and believe. As a result, Christians are enabled to embody the kingdom like Jesus did. Now, until he returns, we are called to speak the kingdom message while living out the ethics of the kingdom in order that we would both individually and as a community be a sign of the coming kingdom.

The new reality Jesus proclaimed was nonviolent. That much is clear, not just from the Sermon on the Mount, but his entire life and teaching and, above all, the way he faced his death. His was not merely a tactical or pragmatic nonviolence seized upon because nothing else would have worked against the Roman empire's near monopoly on violence. Rather, he saw nonviolence as a direct corollary of the nature of God and of the new reality emerging in the world from God. In a verse quoted more than any other from the New Testament during the church's first four centuries, Jesus taught that God loves everyone, and values all, even those who make themselves God's enemies. We are therefore to do likewise (Matt. 5:45; cf. Luke 6:35)...Thus nonviolence is not just a means to the Kingdom of God; it is a quality of the Kingdom itself. Those who live nonviolently are already manifesting the transformed reality of the divine order now, even under the conditions of what I call the Domination System.<sup>59</sup>

We could summarize the case for nonviolence in the following manner:

1. Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant, commanded his followers to love their enemies.
2. The Apostles confirmed this teaching with instructions to "never return evil for evil" and "overcome evil with good."
3. The early Christians for more than two hundred years were faithful to Jesus' teaching on nonviolence.
4. Under Constantine, who used the name of Christ on the shields of his soldiers in order to violently conquer Rome, the church was duped into thinking that a new change had

<sup>58</sup> Walter Wink, "Beyond Just War and Pacifism: Jesus' Nonviolent Way," ([http://www.cres.org/star/\\_wink.htm](http://www.cres.org/star/_wink.htm)).

<sup>59</sup> *ibidem*

occurred making the way of Jesus obsolete. Now the emperor was Christian, which meant that the empire was a Christian nation, and the church should support Rome even if it meant compromising the way of Jesus.

5. Finally, Ambrose and then Augustine developed the necessary theology to insure Christian cooperation with the State through Just War theology

The early peace witness mutated with time, largely due to the irresistible temptation to make Rome a Christian Nation. When Constantine invited the persecuted bride of Christ into his imperial bed-chamber, he adorned her with a scarlet dress, fit for a princess, and whispered innumerable sweet promises of protection and fidelity if she would only wed herself to Rome. The bride who was already betrothed to the Jew from Nazareth exchanged her white garments adorned with the blood of the lamb and the martyrdom of the saints for the comfortable silk royal robes of imperial glory. She was beguiled by the serpent and before long switched from persecuted to persecutor, from salt to just more manure—the stinking stench that everyone accepts as normal and civilized. Her new husband and Lord, Caesar, brainwashed her to believe that spiritual warfare was not enough; the army of Christ must fight with the sword, in order to defend the kingdom of god from the “barbarians.” Before long the church’s light grew dim, faith in the kingdom was transplanted by an abstract idea for heaven, and the church merged with the State to produce Christendom.

Ironically, once Christians got into political power, the *pax Romana* ended and Rome began to decline rapidly. A thick river of blood reaches from that day to this, filled with the violent acts of Christendom against the heretics, the Jews, the Muslims, and whoever else got in the way.

It is time for the bride of Christ to wake up from this bloody nightmare, and call for a divorce from the Serpent and his client kings. Maybe, just maybe, the slaughtered lamb will have the slaughtering bride back if she will repent of her wicked complicity with the empire? Maybe she could put her sword down, take off the mantle of power—the royal robes of Babylon, and adorn herself once again in the wedding dress washed clean by the forgiveness available through the blood of the lamb? Then perhaps the church could begin to testify that her groom is the Prince of Peace not the Lord of War. Conservative theologian Ben Witherington summarizes the point nicely:

The issue I am raising is just this— can Christians in good conscience participate in violence. Many Christians of course will say yes. They will not interpret ‘thou shalt not murder’ in a way that

prohibits such activity, nor will they interpret the Sermon on the Mount the way I and many other pacifists do.

I respect these other opinions, but I am quite convinced they are wrong. Before Constantine Christians simply refused to serve in the military, refused to co-operate with violence, and were often killed because of it. They saw this as a matter of ethical principle. So do I.

It is the job of Christians to provide the world with a window on the future eschatological kingdom, or heaven if you like. We are meant to be a preview of coming attractions, as the prophets foretold about peace on earth and goodwill to all humans. Call us the loyal opposition to the majority, in any given age. This in turn means that the ethics applicable to general persons in the culture are not the same as the ethics required of Christians who signed on to follow Jesus.<sup>60</sup>

As Christians we are called to embody the kingdom, to bring forth signs of God’s future, and testify that the Messiah has come, that we have been justified already in anticipation of the justification of the whole world. Our message is that there is something worth living and dying for, something lasting, something beautiful. It is time to lay down our sword, pick up our cross and follow the one who stood power on its head, who won the greatest victory by loosing his life to a State execution. Our testimony says the story didn’t end there because God raised him from the dead. Therefore, the world is not the same because Jesus, not Caesar, is Lord. The question is whether or not we take him seriously?

**Luke 6.46-49**

<sup>46</sup> "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I tell you?"

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<sup>60</sup> Ben Witherington III, commenting on his blog post “Deck the Malls with Guns and the Gory” ([benwitherington.blogspot.com/2007/12/deck-malls-with-guns-and-gory\\_12.html](http://benwitherington.blogspot.com/2007/12/deck-malls-with-guns-and-gory_12.html)) on December, 17, 2007.