

Christians & War

by Martin H. Schrag

We live in a time of violence and wars. From child abuse to nuclear weapons, strife abounds. Humankind has moved forward in matters of communication, transportation, education, and medicine—while at the same time weapons of destruction have become more horrendous and terrifying.

The bleakness of the situation stands in contrast to Christ's rejection of violence and war for His followers and has revealed the way of positive caring love. He loved his enemies and calls us to love ours. When His disciples heard about Christ facing the cross, they found it unbelievable but after the cross, resurrection, and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, they experienced God's love in their hearts and spread the gospel message across the Roman Empire.

Here was a new way of responding to sin, evil, and violence: proclaim the gospel of God's love in Christ toward the transforming of hearts to the way of turning enemies into followers of Christ. In the early church the converted entered the new community and for them Christ—not the nation—was Lord. They accepted martyrdom (in imitation of Christ) rather than depend on or use the sword. They chose to give life, not take life.

Christ's Nature

The Brethren in Christ Church believes that the Bible is the authority in all matters of faith and practice. The Bible is clear that Jesus was God incarnate. John wrote that in Jesus "the

Word became flesh' (John 1:14), and Jesus himself said, "I and the father are one" (John 10:30). Jesus being the Son of God means several things. First, Jesus fully revealed God's spiritual/moral standards for His disciples. Second, the Old Testament is to be read in the light of Christ and the New Testament. Lastly, the ethics of Jesus Christ is not to be seen as unrealistic or naive. Jesus is Lord.

Jesus was also human. He was born of a woman, grew into adulthood, experienced human emotions including temptations, at times was limited in knowledge, suffered crucifixion, and died. His humanity gave Him understanding of the human condition, enabled the modeling of Christlike love, and opened the way to teach about sin, salvation, and holiness. Christ's humanity allowed Him to die in behalf of sinners and to make possible the resurrection and eternal life.

Christ's Teachings

Jesus sharply defined true love. Our Lord surpassed the Old Testament "eye for eye and tooth for tooth" principle evident in war by telling his disciples not to "resist an evil person" (Matthew 5:39) with evil, but to show love to the person.

Jesus continued, "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:43-44). By so doing, Jesus said, his disciples would be imitating God's love for

his enemies. The first half of the statement, “love your neighbor,” is a direct quote from Leviticus 19:18, and the Jews defined neighbor as a fellow Jew. The second half of the statement, “hate your enemy,” is not in the Old Testament, but in Jesus’ day, non-Jews were seen as enemies.

The approach of Jesus was radically different from that of the Jews. He taught, “pray for,” “do good to,” and “bless” those who hate you (Luke 6:27-28). He called for more than the usual response. Even sinners love those who love them, he would remind us today. Christ came to reveal an understanding beyond that of the natural person: overcoming evil with good.

Christ’s Actions

The deeds of Jesus also reveal the new way to relate to evil. It is amazing how many unlovable people he loved in his ministry. He cared for Samaritans, Romans, Canaanites, lepers, prostitutes, tax collectors, and the demon-possessed. Jesus also cared for those who sought to stamp out His ministry—Herods, the Jewish leaders, and the Romans—all who resorted to violence. In sharp contrast, Jesus, in his “powerless” loving ministry, manifested the true power of God.

When two of his disciples wanted to call down fire on the Samaritans, Jesus rebuked them. During the arrest of Jesus, Peter sought to defend him with the sword. Our Lord admonished Peter, “All who draw the sword will die by the sword” (Matthew 26:52). Here the defensive sword is rejected. Later, in response to a question from Pilate, Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place” (John 18:36). Thus Jesus repudiated the war/violence method of establishing his kingdom in this world, choosing instead the way of sacrificial forgiving love.

The cross was the climactic act of loving servanthood. This seeming defeat turned out to be the supreme act of love and power. God loved us so much that each new believer can be “a new creation” because he “was reconciling the world to himself in Christ,” forgiving our sins, and making us ambassadors to proclaim the message of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:17-21). Through Christ, enemies are changed into friends. On the one hand, God’s wrath is revealed against all sin (Romans 1:18). On the other hand, humanity stands in hostility to God (Romans 8:7). But the gulf between God’s wrath and man’s hostility was bridged by Christ. Paul wrote, “When we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son” (Romans 5:10). Christ died to save his enemies. That love of an enemy is at the heart of Christ’s atonement. We were turned from enemies to lovers of God because that which God’s holiness required, God’s love in his Son secured (2 Corinthians 17-21).

Before the crucifixion, the disciples did not understand the way of the cross. It was only after Pentecost that the disciples saw that the cross did not bring defeat but a new way of loving. Thus the example of Christ’s loving ministry became a major emphasis in the Apostles’ teaching. Christ’s vigorous enactment of love is our spiritual/moral example. We are to be faithful regardless of cost, even if our lives are taken by our enemies, as was Christ’s life. Just as Christ’s death was followed by the resurrection, the faithfulness of biblical peacemakers will be used by God to further His purposes.

Christ’s Body

For Christians the basic divide is between the saved and the lost, not between two or more political systems. Nations become hostile

toward their enemies. In sharp contrast, Christians share the gospel with non-Christians; they love those hostile to God. To kill non-Christians is to cut them off from becoming Christians. Our task is not to take their lives but to give our lives so they can say "yes" to Christ.

If we fight against and destroy fellow Christians, we are dividing the body of fellow believers. For Christians the basic spiritual/social unit is the church with Christ, not as the political ruler, but as head. Christians are "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God" (1 Peter 2:9). By his death on the cross, Christ overcame the most glaring social hostility in the ancient world—the Jewish-Gentile divide—and made provision for harmonious Christian community (Ephesians 2:11-22).

The Book of Acts is the exciting story of God's people becoming interracial, transcultural, and supranational. Christians became the loving and caring fellowship. This mutual interdependence will be consummated when Christians "from every nation, tribe, people and language" will be one before the "throne...of the Lamb" (Revelation 7:9). The church is the global society whose faithfulness to Christ transcends national commitments and whose mission is the Great Commission. "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation" (Mark 16:15).

Biblical nonresistance does not mean passivity in the face of evil. It calls for a vigorous, loving, non-violent response in which both the way we proceed and the end we seek provide the possibility of a positive solution. In war, the way we proceed corrupts the goal sought. To some, loving our enemies is foolishness or a stumbling block. But those whose hostility has been overcome by God's love understand that they are to love others as God loved them. Knowing the power of love, they follow their Master.