

## **Jesus in North America (7) The Pacifist Jesus**

One human life, seen before God, is priceless. But while reading S.L.A. Marshall's *World War I*, I was reminded again how "cheap" life is during wartime. Soldiers become "cannon fodder," and civilians unnamed casualties. For example, in World War I, Turkey lost one fourth of her population. Of 4,000,000 adult males, about 1,600,000 were called to service. More than 1,000,000 families were left without breadwinners. The first Ypres battle cost Germany at least 130,000 soldiers. British casualties were 2,368 officers and 55,787 other ranks. French losses made the blood toll nearly one quarter million. No wonder that pacifism – the belief that all disputes can be settled peacefully – became a strong movement after the Great War that was supposed to end all wars. It opposed military ideals, war, or military preparedness, and proposed that all international disputes be settled by arbitration. Many believed that historical progress was inevitable and human perfectibility was possible here on earth. The dream of a perfect society, a utopia on earth, seemed within reach.

### **The Anabaptists**

Is pacifism a moral obligation for Christians? "Yes," say the Anabaptists, who trace their roots to the 16th century "Radical Reformation". They believe that they cannot legitimatise involvement in war. Menno Simons said, "The regenerated do not go to war." In 1976 the General Conference of the Brethren in Christ reaffirmed the position this way: "our belief has been that Christ forbids us to participate in war in any form. This we continue to believe." Harriet Bicksler, a member of the Brethren in Christ, served on her congregation's Peace Social Justice Committee. She noted in her book, *Perspectives on Social Issues*, that Project Ploughshares figures that the lives of one million people worldwide could have been saved if the \$229 million that Canada spent in 1991-92 spent for ammunitions (during peacetime) had been spent on immunizations instead. Emergent leader, Brian McLaren, influenced by the Anabaptist view of pacifism, argues that as more and more people take Jesus' teachings on neighbourly nonviolence and peacemaking seriously, as more and more people live out the simple way of Jesus in their communities, our world comes closer to the day when God's will is done on earth – which includes the extinction of war.

### **Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) and Gandhi (1869-1948)**

Two prominent advocates of pacifism were Leo Tolstoy and Gandhi. The famous Russian author's idealistic-pacifist ideology had a great impact on the liberal mindset. He believed in the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth rather than anticipating it in an afterlife. Christ's Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) was for Tolstoy the key to achieving this end. This sermon expresses the essence of love and the guidance for conduct that must follow it. And love admits no exceptions. Tolstoy's most lasting influence was in India. He and Gandhi began a correspondence in the early years of the twentieth century, with Gandhi referring to himself as Tolstoy's "humble follower." In fact, Gandhi's campaign of civil disobedience and passive resistance owes much to Tolstoy. Gandhi taught that non-violence is infinitely superior to violence,

forgiveness is more manly than punishment. He also said that the religion of nonviolence is not meant merely for the holy men and saints. It is meant for the common people as well. After Gandhi had read the Sermon on the Mount, he came to the conclusion that it is a first-class human tragedy that people of the earth who claim to believe in the message of Jesus, whom they describe as the Prince of Peace, show little of that belief in actual practice. "It is painful to see sincere Christians...limiting the scope of Jesus's message to select individuals. For many Americans, Gandhi, with his rather successful resistance of British "imperialism", became the grand exemplar of the Christian "way", the "strategy of love", the "politics of the Cross".

### **Jim Wallis (1948-)**

Jim Wallis, peace activist and editor of the controversial magazine, *Sojourners*, has Gandhi and Martin Luther King for his role models. In his *The Soul of Politics. A practical and Prophetic Vision of Change*, Wallis argues that while human conflict is inevitable, war is not. He believes that war is a sign of failure of warring parties to resolve their conflicts in some more peaceful, effective, less costly, and less violent way. He argues that peace making is an attempt to resolve the sources of the conflict and restore a situation to justice of balance, thereby eliminating the need for victory and defeat. For Wallis the Sermon on the Mount is key to his political views. Jesus said, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who abuse you." Wallis notes that this statement may be the most admired and most ignored teaching of Jesus. And he adds, "but rather than being naive and impractical advice, this is the insight at the heart of effective peacemaking. This is practical wisdom." But Wallis lives in a dream world. Pacifists can exist only at the good graces of those who are willing to use force to protect those who will not protect themselves.

### **Jesus the Pacifist?**

It is alleged by pacifists that the teachings of Jesus forbid the Christian to take part in war. Jesus taught and modelled the way God was working in the world to bring salvation and make disciples of all nations. They cite the Sermon of the Mount (Matt. 5-7), where Jesus told his disciples to love our enemies (5:38-48). They point to the cross, where He paid the penalty for our sins, reconciling us to God while we were still enemies (Rom. 5: 8-11) and demonstrating how we are to respond to our enemies (Luke 23:34; 2 Cor. 5:18-20). His resurrection was God's victory over the forces of sin and death (Matt. 28:18-20). Furthermore, Jesus refused the devil's offer of the kingdoms of this world (Matt. 4:8-10) and rejected a military option of bringing in the kingdom (John 18:36). He did not identify with the Zealots, who were Jewish revolutionaries committed to overthrowing their political oppressors by brutal force. Whenever Jesus' disciples showed the slightest inclination towards a violent solution, Jesus emphatically encountered it. James and John wanted to call down fire on an offending village, but Jesus firmly said "no". In the Garden of Gethsemane Peter seized his sword and began to defend Jesus. But Jesus said, "Put your sword back in its place, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword" (Matt. 26:52).

Despite all these texts cited, it is still not possible to call Jesus a pacifist. Jesus Himself appears to sanction the use of swords by His disciples in two rather perplexing passages. Jesus's words seem plain enough: "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to earth, but a sword" (Matt. 10:34). This is not an endorsement of violent warfare; the statement alludes to the adverse circumstances that the disciples will experience from the world as a result of their faith and love (Luke 22:35-38). Jesus himself drove out the moneychangers with a whip of cords. He did not remain passive in the face of evil; He acted forcibly to remove evil from His presence. In other words, pacifism finds no support either in Jesus' words or in His conduct.

## **The Fall**

Pacifism is a mistaken ideology. It is an impossible position to hold in a fallen world. We are not "fundamentally good". We live in a fallen world where evil people do dastardly things. The ultimate causes of war are not to be found in the social and economic circumstances external to man, but within man himself (James 4:1). The Bible paints a realistic picture of human nature. It plainly states that "there is no one who does good, not even one" (Rom. 3:12). "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). War is ultimately a result of man's fallen, sinful nature. We confess with the *Heidelberg Catechism* the brutally frank truth about ourselves that we have a natural tendency to hate God and our neighbours (Q&A 5). Human nature, therefore, may not make war inevitable, but it does make war difficult to avoid. We cannot be trusted to keep the peace. John Calvin said the Anabaptist pacifist position would be right "were we angels in this world." But the sad fact is the world is full of "cruel monsters and wolves and rapacious men." The use of the sword will therefore continue to the end of the world.

While the Christian is commanded to love his enemies, that does not mean that he cannot defend himself or his loved ones against them. Peace is not merely the absence of war; more fundamentally it is a condition that obtains such basic human freedom as freedom of speech and worship. For example, nonmilitary resistance would not have helped the Jews against the brutality of the Nazis. Such genocidal prescriptions are a travesty of both biblical peace and biblical justice. Calvin argues that if we refuse to use force in a just cause, we "become guilty of the greatest impiety" (*Institutes* IV.20.21).

## **Peace yet to come**

Many will continue to dream about a world without violence and war, with everyone living in peace and harmony, but it will remain a dream. We will have to live with wars and rumours of wars until the end of time. The coming universal peace is bound to the coming of our Lord. The earthly city of self-love and rebellion against God will be replaced then by the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem. In the new heaven and earth (Rev. 21), there won't be any more wastage of the earth's resources for war preparation, no more fear of nuclear proliferation and no more terrorist attacks. The followers of Jesus, therefore, look forward to the end of time when God will intervene to bring about peace, "when nation shall not take up sword against nation, nor will train for

war any more" (Isa. 2:4). While the Church waits, prays, and longs for the Lord's return, she has the responsibility to proclaim "the good news of peace by Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all" (Acts 10:36).

Continue

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