

Peace and the Church

by Wayne Northey

I once did a research essay at Regent College on the question: Was the early church pacifist? Not surprisingly, church historians' conclusions usually reflected their theological bias.

One frequent argument from the non-pacifist historians went: If the early church was pacifist, how is it that by the era of Constantine (fourth century) it jettisoned that position effortlessly, with no record of a major theological controversy or a Church Council around/declaring such a dramatic reversal? I did not know then what I know now through my work with the Mennonite Central Committee Canada: the Mennonites of the Fraser Valley. They too have largely jettisoned their pacifism, and for similar reasons to Christians of the fourth century. In the fourth century, Emperor Constantine offered the Church a «Judas kiss» of legitimacy and power. There has been in the church ever since an inverse relationship between wealth and power and taking Jesus seriously.

C.S. Lewis once wrote an essay entitled, Why I am not a Pacifist. In it he eventually turned to the «dominical sayings» in Scripture, and with each saying scrutinized, discerned a non-pacifist reading. Unfortunately though, he missed the one sublime saying of Jesus impossible of evading: Love your enemies. Theologically, agape love is the ceaseless attempt (Matt. 18:21ff) to make the other, supremely the enemy, a friend. It is God's central way in the Gospel centrepiece: the atonement (Rom. 5:6 - 11); Jesus' consistent teaching (Matt. 5 - 7; Luke 6) and example (Luke 23:34); and our primary vocation (Eph. 5:1 & 2; Rom. 13:8 - 10; James 2:8 - 13; Luke 10:25 - 37). If there is not evidenced this kind of love, Paul writes, our faith is nothing (I Cor. 12:30b - 13:13).

Whenever the church has tried to recapitulate Jesus' way and that of the early church, it has rediscovered Jesus' pacifism. Repeatedly the pattern emerges that wealth and power arise, like the thorns in Jesus' parable (Matt. 13:3ff), to choke out this way of costly discipleship. Wealth in the New Testament is almost invariably equated with a rival god called Mammon (Matt. 6:19 - 24; Luke 16:1 - 15). Power is usually something pagans do «over» others (Matt. 10:24ff; Mark 10:42ff; Luke 22:25ff). Jesus routinely and explicitly warned against them (read Luke's Gospel throughout), since they are idols. Yet most of us Christians in North America worship both.

Many Protestant denominations began as «restorationist churches» - set on recovering the life and vitality of the early church. The Plymouth or Christian Brethren, my earlier faith heritage, in the 19th century are an example. Their first generation of leadership, upon a fresh reading of Jesus, was pacifist. The Anabaptists, my current faith tradition, in the 16th century similarly rediscovered Jesus. Other groups such as the Holiness movements leading to the Nazarenes founded in the 19th century and Pentecostalism in the 20th century were pacifist in origin. A pattern with these groups and others is discernible: a fresh reading of Jesus together with an intense desire to restore primitive church living

repeatedly lead Christians to pacifism. Dorothy Day, founder of the North American peace movement, is a Catholic example.

The reality is: the vast majority of past and contemporary Christendom/Christianity is non-pacifist. Modern evangelicals fit this depiction. They are brilliant in their positing Jesus as the Wisdom of God (I Cor. 1:18ff) over against the watershed rejection of the faith since the Enlightenment. They are heretical however when it comes to Jesus the Power of God (I Cor. 1:18ff) over against the watershed rejection of pacifism since the era of Constantine.

There is only one recourse to unfaithfulness in the church: repentance and conversion. Can we dare hope to see the church universal of the third millennium reprise Jesus' way of peace in a world engulfed by violence? As theologian Walter Wink says, Jesus' teaching is clear: If we do not find God in the enemy, we have not found God at all.