

Harmless as Doves



*following Christ on the
path of non-resistance*

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Introduction

“Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also...” Matthew 5:38-39

“Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you;” Matthew 5:43-44

*“Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves. But beware of men: for they will deliver you up to the councils, and they will scourge you in their synagogues; And ye shall be brought before governors and kings for my sake, for a testimony against them and the Gentiles. But when they deliver you up, take no thought how or what ye shall speak: for it shall be given you in that same hour what ye shall speak. For it is not ye that speak, but the Spirit of your Father which speaketh in you.”
Matthew 10:16-20*

Jesus' teachings on non-resistance are perhaps among His most divisive and controversial. They seem to fly in the face of human instincts as well as common sense. Did He truly intend that we should not defend against those who would harm us, or worse, our loved ones? Are we really supposed to love those who are doing us evil?

The radical nature of the Gospel

In many ways, Christ's Gospel is a radical departure from conventional standards of morality. His teachings on marriage, money, honesty, purity, anger and almsgiving—to list but a few examples from the Sermon on the Mount—are all at odds with societal norms and man's natural tendencies. Christ underscores this vast difference between His way and the world's way with sayings such as:

“If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:26), and “He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal.” (John 12:25)

Some claim that the Sermon on the Mount is unattainable, given simply for the purpose of highlighting God's grace, a sort of “Version II” of the Mosaic Law. This view might seem plausible if it were not for the cross. The one who told others to turn the other cheek, gave His own back to the smiters and His cheeks to them that plucked off the hair (*Isaiah 50:6*). The man from Galilee who demanded that His followers take up their cross and follow Him, Himself led the way up Calvary's hill with bloody footsteps. And the Son of God who told his disciples to “*pray for them which despitefully use you*”, implored His Father to forgive the ones who were killing Him. Christ fully intended for us to follow His teachings and example. (*John 15:14-21*).

A different kind of Kingdom

When Christ told Pilate, “*My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight...*” (John 18:36), He was indicating that the nature of the conflict was spiritual, not physical, because His kingdom is not an earthly kingdom. His followers have no need of physical defenses but instead wait on God for justice, trusting His power and timing of deliverance. (Matthew 26: 52-53, Luke 18:7-8, Revelation 6:9-11).

Christ’s teachings on non-resistance and praying for our enemies were practiced by his disciples: Stephen, when he was being stoned to death: “... cried with a loud voice, Lord lay not this sin to their charge.” (Acts 7:60)

Persecution of the church followed, and nowhere do we read of the followers of Jesus reaching for weapons in self-defense. Instead, they fled as Christ had taught them to do (Matthew 10:23), and when some could flee no longer, they died as He did, trusting their souls to God.

In the final analysis, Christians are only pilgrims and strangers on this earth—they are seeking an eternal city “*whose builder and maker is God*”. As citizens of Jesus’ kingdom, they have pledged their allegiance to Him. If they would pick up carnal weapons to fight on behalf of an earthly nation, they would be joining the side of the kingdoms of this world and leaving the side of Christ. In effect, they would be changing their allegiance.

Historical Perspectives on Non-resistance

Today, only a small minority of Christian churches in the West—mostly those from the Anabaptist tradition—practice the doctrine of non-resistance. Is this just a denominational quirk?

To the contrary, both the secular historical record and the writings of Early Christian apologists show that for the first three hundred years of its existence, the Church was unequivocally non-resistant, despite great persecution.¹

This began to change rapidly when Emperor Constantine came to power in 312 A.D. and adopted Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire. In the space of about 20 years, the Church went from being the persecuted to being the persecutors, as they hunted down and killed heretics using the power of the state. Augustine (354-430 A.D.) and other church theologians looked to the Old Testament for justification of the church-state fusion and for Christians going to war, not understanding that Christ's teachings superseded the Old Testament and they were meant to be literally obeyed.² (*Matthew 7:24-27*).

During the Middle Ages, various sectarians kept alive the non-resistant teachings of Christ: Groups of Waldensians and Franciscan Tertiaries refused military service. The Cathari were non-resistant. The Hussite movement developed two branches, one that went to war under Jan Zizka and one that was non-resistant under Peter Chelciky.

The 1500's saw the birth the Anabaptist movement which fully embraced Christ's teaching on non-resistance.³ The Catholic Church and Protestant Reformers both had state backing and the power of the sword, while the Anabaptists could only flee from persecution. And yet, the Anabaptists' numbers grew significantly despite the most violent repression by Catholics and Reformers.

From its beginnings in 19th century Europe, the Apostolic Christian Church has consistently upheld the doctrine of non-resistance though it meant drinking deeply from Christ's cup of suffering.⁴ The testimony of our brethren was one of pain and tears, but also of great joy as they were made conformable to the image of Christ through suffering.⁵

¹ See Appendix A.1, ² See Appendix A.2, ³ See Appendix A.3, ⁴ See Appendix A.4, ⁵ See Appendix A.5

Non-Resistance and Pacifism

Since many equate Non-Resistance with Pacifism, it is important to understand both their similarities and differences. The late Mennonite Professor Guy F. Hershberger distinguished pacifism from biblical nonresistance in four respects:

1. *Pacifism sees international peace as an end in itself, while the New Testament sees it as the fruit of the Christian gospel.*
2. *Pacifism does not reckon sufficiently with the reality of sin in the human heart, and consequently, is too optimistic about the possible abolition of war.*
3. *Pacifism fails to understand the state is ordained to preserve law and order in a sinful social order. In this task, the state functions as an agent of the wrath of God against sin, and even employs the threat of bodily harm if the evildoer resists.*
4. *Pacifism sometimes is unwilling to suffer injustice and overcome evil with good, but is willing to use "nonviolent" resistance.*⁶

In summary, the worldly pacifist uses the methods of non-violent protest to achieve a social or political goal, triumphing over an enemy or opponent without the use of physical force. One of the best known examples of this form of political resistance was Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, known for successfully guiding India to independence from the rule of the British Empire by non-violent means. Ironically, shortly after India's independence, the country was riven by sectarian violence.

The Christian walks the path of non-resistance because he follows the example of Christ. The goal of Christian therefore is not social reform, but the transformation of the human heart. An illustration of this is found in the Apostle Paul's aiding of a runaway slave. His concern was not the abolition of slavery; rather his focus was on the regenerated human heart that would cause the Christian master to treat the Christian slave as a "brother beloved" (*Philemon 1:10-16*).

⁶ Hershberger, Guy F. "Pacifism." Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia, 1959.

The Apostolic Christian Church (Nazarean) and Non-resistance

Our aim as members of the Apostolic Christian Church (Nazarean) is to embrace the teachings of the Lord and the Apostles as recorded in the New Testament, regardless of the potential persecution ranging from ridicule to imprisonment, to torture, and even to death. Our purpose is to proclaim to the world every facet of the Gospel message taught and lived by Jesus.

The same non-resistant teachings of Christ that were upheld by our persecuted European brethren are also upheld in North America, though the nature of government on this continent has allowed our brethren to serve in non-combatant capacities when drafted in time of war. Article 12 of the *Statement of Faith of the Apostolic Christian Church (Nazarean)*:

“We Believe that government is ordained of God to enforce law and order, and to prevent evil works. Government ordinances—local, state, and national—are to be respected and conscientiously obeyed, except when to do so violates the commandment of God. The call to military service, likewise, is to be respected and obeyed, but with the limitation to non-combatant service, as taught by Jesus Christ: “Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.” Matthew 5:44, Romans 13:1-10, I Peter 2: 13-15.”

A number of our brethren were jailed during the First World War for not bearing arms, in spite of an Executive Order issued by President Wilson in 1918 regarding non-combatant service dated March 20, 1918. The Order has five sections describing non-combatant service and the procedures for those who were drafted to attain this status:

“2. Persons ordered to report for military service under the above act who have (a) been certified by their local boards to be members of a religious sect or organization as defined in section 4 of said act . . . will be assigned to noncombatant military service”

With the outbreak of the Second World War, a committee of the Apostolic Christian Church in Syracuse circulated a letter dated November 30, 1940, to all the churches with an extract of the Selective Service Draft Law that stated, *“Nothing contained in this Act shall be construed to require any person to be subject to combatant training and service in the land or naval forces of the United States who, by reason of religious training and belief, is conscientiously opposed to participation in war in any form.”* Following was the procedure for those who were drafted as to how to make the claim with the local board, including the process of appeal.

Many of our brothers served as medics during the Second World War in an effort to save lives rather than to take lives. They, along with many other soldiers, suffered the ravages of war; injury and death. Yet, they remained faithful to the Word of God by upholding the New Testament teachings about non-resistance.

After the Second World War, global conflicts continued to develop in Korea and Vietnam, among other areas. Those who were drafted into the United States Army in the time between these conflicts were privileged to receive Basic Training at Fort Sam Houston, near San Antonio Texas (along with other conscientious objectors of many faiths). They were not persecuted and were even given the use of one of the chapels on Sunday afternoons to hold services, either by recording or by visiting ministers. However, during the Korean and Vietnam conflicts, many of our brothers who served as non-combatants suffered injury and even death in their efforts to rescue and treat the wounded.

Walking with Christ in personal Non-resistance

Christ's command to "*resist not evil*" includes much more than conscientious objection to engage as a combatant in time of war. The doctrine of non-resistance is founded on the way of love and the cross as taught in the New Testament. As Jesus made the transition from the Laws of the Old Covenant to the teachings of the New Covenant, there are implications for every aspect of the Christian's life. It goes far beyond our stance regarding combatant military service, by beginning with relationships on a personal level:

"Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire. (Matthew 5:21-22)

"And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away. Ye have heard that it hath been said; Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust... Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect. (Matthew 5:40-45, 48)

Such teaching is totally contrary to human nature. It is obvious that in order to embrace such a way of life, a drastic change must take place. Man's fallen nature must be regenerated through the experience of repentance, faith in the shed blood of Jesus Christ, an in-filling of the Holy Spirit, and a submission to the Word of God. The new God-given spiritual nature enables us to have victory over the dictates of the old

sinful nature that would react with revenge and even hate to those who abuse us.

The “non-resistance” doctrine should be evident in all of our relationships: with our parents, spouses, children, relatives, church members, neighbors, acquaintances at work and school, even the stranger whose reckless driving endangers us; the list is all inclusive. If we do not live up to this standard in our personal interactions with people, we need to repent and ask both God and the person whom we resisted, for forgiveness. No one said this is an easy path—Christ called the gate straight and the way narrow that leads to life. Yet, it is the greatest witness we can provide for those who need to know the power of Christ’s love to transform a life.

Questions on Non-resistance

1. Doesn't Romans 13 require us to obey the government?

Apostle Paul's teaching on civil authority in Romans 13:1-7 is frequently cited in support of Christians going to war: *"Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God."* Does Romans 13 teach unconditional obedience to the government in all things?

What would we do if the government commanded us to worship idols? Would Romans 13:1-7 require us to obey this type of law? Ironically, this actually happened in the ancient Roman Empire. Authorities required the Christians to show allegiance by offering sacrifice to the emperor or to the Romans gods. It is clear that doing such a thing would mean denying Christ. The steadfast refusal of the believers to do this was the grounds for the persecution and martyrdom of many. Plainly, while Romans 13 teaches us to be submissive to governmental authority, the government's authority does not supersede God's. Killing another person, even with government sanction during wartime, is a denial of the validity, the power and the very purpose of Christ's gospel. Rather than the sword, we should be bringing the gospel to our enemies as ambassadors for Christ.

2. Didn't the Lord sanction bloodshed in the Old Testament?

Another justification often used to support Christians going to war is God's commands to the nation of Israel to kill and make war on heathen nations. Such thinking, however, overlooks the fact that there is now a New Testament, a direct revelation of God's will in the person of Jesus Christ that supersedes the Old Testament. (*Hebrews 8:6-13*) The Old Testament teachings only foreshadowed the manifestation of the full will of God given through His Son. (*Hebrews 10:1-2*) The Lord Jesus Himself made this distinction in His Sermon on the Mount (*Matthew 5-7*), by contrasting, *"Ye have heard that it hath been said"* with *"But I say unto you"*. God's dealings with Israel in the Old Testament were with a nation that had definable boundaries, civil law, and a directly God-instituted civil authority. Christ's New Testament kingdom has none of these things.

It is worth noting that in his teaching on non-resistance, Jesus did not make any distinctions between state-sponsored and personal actions. In fact, Jesus' quotation of the Mosaic Law, *"An eye for an eye, and a*

tooth for a tooth", is a reference to punishment by the judges and priests (*Exodus 21:22-24; Deuteronomy 19:16-21*) or by the whole congregation of Israel (*Leviticus 24:16-23*). The Lord superseded all this with His command that we love our enemies.

3. What if my family is threatened?

Perhaps the strongest objection to the doctrine of non-resistance is based on the hypothetical question: what if my family is threatened?

The fallacy in this objection is that it suggests there are only two possible options in this scenario, obedience to the Lord Jesus or protection of your family. In other words, it pits protecting your family against the will of the Lord Jesus. It is a wrong to assume the Lord Jesus does not care for the well-being of our loved ones.

The above objection appeals to our strong protective instincts towards our families, but are natural instincts necessarily the correct guide to right actions? What does Christ say about choosing between Him and family? (*Matthew 10:34-38*) What if a persecutor threatens to harm our family unless we change our beliefs? Would you renounce the Lord Jesus, or take a tolerant view towards immorality, or any other thing demanded by a persecutor in order to protect your family?

The above objection also ignores others statements the Lord Jesus gave that also speak to the appropriate response for a believer facing such dramatic situations.

"But when they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another...." Matthew 10:23.

"Greater love hath no man than this that a man lay down his life for his friends" John 15:13

These scriptures imply that trying to escape those threatening violence, or choosing to suffer ourselves in order to protect others are all concrete actions which would be right for us to do and do not involve doing violence to others. Though to the natural man it seems our options are limited, the spiritual man knows the Holy Spirit will help us through such heart wrenching situations. God does not leave us alone.

Concluding Thoughts

Christ closes the Sermon on the Mount with a parable in which He equates the keeping and doing of His sayings with building a house upon a solid rock; conversely, not keeping them is associated with destruction. How we treat Christ's teaching on non-resistance will be a key indicator of whether we believe His Gospel can be lived today. Thankfully, not only does Scripture provide us with instruction on non-resistance, it gives inspiration for it as well:

“But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. ...For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life.” (Romans 5:8, 10)

The Apostle Paul shows us the heart of our Heavenly Father that looked past his “enemies” to redeem them to Himself as His children. May God give us the faith to live in such victory, following the steps of His Son.

“For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously: Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed. 1 Peter 2:21-24

Appendix

A. 1

Justin Martyr: (100-165 A.D.) “We who formerly murdered one another now refrain from making war on our enemies.”

Tertullian: (160-225 A.D.) “Can it be 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 battle when it does not become him even to sue at law? Shall he apply the chain, the prison, the torture, and the punishment, when he is not the avenger of his own wrongs?”

Origen: (185-255 A.D.) “Nowhere does He [Christ] teach that it is right for his own disciples to offer violence to anyone, however wicked. For He deemed the killing of any individual to be against His own laws which are divine in origin.”

Cyprian: (200-258 A.D.) “The world is wet with mutual blood. Murder, which is admitted to be a crime when it is committed by an individual, is called virtue when it is committed wholesale. Impunity is claimed for the wicked deeds of war, not because they are guiltless, but because the cruelty is perpetrated on a grand scale.” “ Be it so, ye blessed, that the prison is irksome to the Christians: yet we must remember that we are called to the warfare of the Living God. You are now marching in a good contest, in which the living God is the dispenser of the prizes, and the Holy Spirit the keeper. The coronation is an everlasting jewel, the citizenship of angelic existence in heaven, a glory that shall endure forever.”

A. 2

Augustine wrote in reference the teaching of Matthew 5:39 to resist not evil, “*what is here required is not a bodily action, but an inward disposition.*” *Contra Faustum*, Book XXII, par. 76

A. 3

The “Anabaptist” movement separated themselves from the state-sanctioned churches of Catholicism and the Protestants by embracing the Gospel and all of the New Testament teachings without political

connections. In their Schleitheim Confession (1527), they addressed the topic of non-resistance with these words:

“Therefore there will also unquestionably fall from us the unchristian, devilish weapons of force -- such as sword, armor and the like, and all their use either for friends or against one's enemies...by virtue of the word of Christ, Resist not him that is evil.

“We are agreed as follows concerning the sword: The sword is ordained of God outside the perfection of Christ. It punishes and puts to death the wicked, and guards and protects the good. In the Law, the sword was ordained for the punishment of the wicked and for their death and the same sword is now ordained to be used by the worldly magistrates.

“In the perfection of Christ, however, only the ban is used for a warning and for the excommunication of the one who has sinned, without putting the flesh to death,

“Now it will be asked by many who do not recognize this as the will of Christ for us, whether a Christian may or should employ the sword against the wicked for the defence and protection of the good, or for the sake of love.

“Our reply is unanimously as follows: Christ teaches and commands us to learn of Him, for He is meek and lowly in heart and so shall we find rest to our souls...”

A. 4

In an article written by the historian Peter Brock, ***Freedom from Violence: Sectarian Nonresistance from the Middle Ages to the Great War***, he describes the struggle of the Nazarenes (the name of the Apostolic Christians in Eastern Europe). They were perceived as a threat to the political and military establishment:

“As a result, the Nazarenes suffered severely and their efforts to gain some relief for their conscientious objectors met with little success. Their peace witness thus recalls the ‘heroic’ age of Anabaptism and early Mennonitism when those ‘defenseless’ sectaries had endured persecution for their pacifism as well as for their general refusal to conform to the world.

“While it was from the practice of the English Baptists that Fröhlich adopted adult baptism on confession of faith, it was from the Mennonites that he took over the principle of non-resistance. In doing this, he distanced himself from the other sections of the evangelical awakening in Switzerland, who continued to believe it was right for Christians to bear arms in defense of their country.

“In the Austro-Prussian War of 1866 we hear of more executions of Hungarian Nazarene objectors and of prison sentences of ten to fifteen years being meted out not infrequently to those objectors who were fortunate enough to escape the death penalty.” “When fighting broke out in 1878 as a result of Austria-Hungary’s occupation of the Turkish territories of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Hungarian soldiers were involved. Once again, there are stories of Nazarene conscripts being executed for resisting military duties.

“After 1918, most of the Serb-speaking Nazarenes, who had formerly lived in Hungary, became Yugoslav citizens. The military question, however, remained for them much the same as it had been before, with lengthy and repeated imprisonment still the fate of most able-bodied Nazarene males called up for compulsory military service.”

A. 5

In a book edited by Kathleen Nenadov, ***Choosing To Suffer Affliction*** many accounts are recorded showing how difficult it was for the Nazarene brethren in Eastern Europe following the Second World War, because they would not bear arms or swear oaths:

“I cannot accept arms and I accept whatever God has in store for me.” That day, they put me in jail and beat me a little bit. They tried different things to convince me to change my mind. At times, it was hard, but with God’s help, I endured. I felt peace and joy that I was able to suffer for Christ. And that really helped.

“And then came the night that I will never forget. A soldier took me from my cell at 1 a.m. and brought me to the administration. There was a higher officer waiting for me. He

might have been a captain. His angry eyes glared at me as I entered. He spoke with malice, "Now is the time for you to decide if you will live or die." I didn't really understand what he meant, so I just said, "Whatever God has planned for me, I accept." He pulled out his pistol and loaded five bullets. He demanded that I look at him. So I did. He came up to me and put the pistol in my mouth. He said, "I will give you three chances to accept arms. And if you refuse on the third time, I'm going to shoot you." I stared at him and gave him no reaction. So, he asked the first time, "Will you take arms?" I calmly answered, "No." He was kind of surprised. Then, he asked a second time, and again, I said, "No." Now, he was even more surprised and was noticeably shaken by my answer. But, he proceeded to say, "Now, I'm going to ask you for the third time, and if you say no, you will be dead." I looked at him without hesitation and said, "No."

"With that, I saw a miracle before my very eyes. This man's face became completely black and blue. He could hardly breathe and he seemed to have some kind of seizure. He dropped his gun from my mouth and my life was spared. I never experienced such an amazing feeling like I had at that moment of deliverance. I could not be more thankful to God. Peace and joy overflowed in my heart. But, I truly felt that if I had died that night, I would have also been blessed. Never in my life would I ever go through something like that.

"After a few days, they took me to another jail where I would be sentenced. I was beaten a little and subjected to many officers who tried to persuade me to take arms. They did everything to show me that I was wrong. But, I kept reminding myself that I was right before God and what He wanted from me."