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QUAKERS ON THE SPECTRUM OF
NONVIOLENCE: IN CONVERSATION
WITH K. BARTH, REINHOLD
NIEBUHR, J. H. YODER, M. L. KING,
JR., AND ROBERT BARCLAY

CHERICE BOCK

Why don't all followers of Jesus abide by his clear teachings to love our enemies and to return good for evil? Ironically, Friends, Mennonites, and the Brethren have been singled out as the "Historic Peace Churches," when we believe that the commands and example of Jesus should be normative for *all* Christians. As we seek to uphold our Peace Testimony as central to the Christian Gospel, it serves us well to understand some of the positions on peace and nonviolence that have arisen within the last century or so. Our Gospel-calling not only extends to the conviction of the world, but also to the conversion of the Church.

Quakers, as we know, are a peculiar people: at our best balancing the transformative Gospel message of Jesus Christ as Lord with a radical understanding of the social nature of that Gospel. We are a people who do all we can to take Jesus' words seriously and live them out in our whole lives. Throughout our history, Quakers have taken the words of Jesus and the Christian Scriptures to mean that we are called to live out love in all areas of our lives: love for neighbors, love for those marginalized by society, and love for our enemies. By loving "the least of these," we love Jesus himself (Matt. 25:45). Because of this reading of Jesus' message, the Quaker movement has been largely peopled by pacifists. Having grown up Quaker myself, it is sometimes difficult to understand how other Christians could interpret Jesus' words any other way. It has therefore been helpful to me to see the spectrum of Christian belief on issues of war and peace, and to place myself and my denomination within this spectrum.¹

On one end of this spectrum is *Christian Realism*, outlined by Reinhold Niebuhr, stating that although Jesus teaches nonresistance, it is not practical and thus should not be followed. Next to him is Karl Barth, whose position has been called "*chastened non-pacifism*."

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Barth suggests Christians should live nonviolently in nearly all circumstances, but it is impossible to know that God will never direct us to use violence, because that would limit God by predicting God's future action. Barth himself joined the armed guard during World War II, although his nation (Switzerland) never entered combat. Next on the spectrum is Martin Luther King, Jr. His position is *nonviolent resistance*: Christians should not use violence themselves, but he is not opposed to creating situations where others might use violence against Christians, and so show the injustice of the actions of those others. On the far end of the spectrum is John Howard Yoder, a Mennonite theologian, who states that Jesus' teachings point toward *an ethic of nonresistance*. Not only should Christians never involve themselves in physical violence, but they should not resist evil in any forceful way, except by acting in positive ways themselves.

Where do Quakers fall on this spectrum? I posit that the majority of Quaker pacifists fit near Martin Luther King, Jr., leaning toward John Howard Yoder. Although this is the case, by studying the beliefs of the other thinkers we can further sharpen and clarify our own position. What follows is a more complete explanation of the theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr, Barth, King and Yoder, with a conclusion on Robert Barclay and Quakerism.

Theologians and sects across history have interpreted biblical intimations regarding war and peace differently. For the first three hundred years of Christianity, records show that most people believed Christians to leave war and violence behind upon conversion.² This changed with Constantine after 312 CE. He reported a vision of the cross of Christ leading him into a victorious battle and eventually required all in his forces to profess Christianity. Augustine (354-430 CE) wrote about his take on war and peace, and his ideas have come to be known as the just war theory, although he did not outline them as such.

The majority of Christians since Augustine have assumed that the just war theory is the practical way to live out the Christian faith in a fallen world. Since we cannot rid the world of violence and war, at least we can place a limit on the kind of war in which Christians can conscientiously participate. According to *just war theory*, Christians should not participate in unjust wars, even when required by their country to do so.

Although theoretically what most Christians say they believe is the just war theory, what has come to be followed as the "normal"

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Christian view is that God wants us to follow the authorities in whatever they ask us (although this has been questioned to some extent following the actions of the Christians in Nazi Germany).³ Responding to this Christian norm, Reinhold Niebuhr created his ideology called “Christian Realism.”

After flirting with pacifism, and indeed stating that pacifism is the ethic of love Jesus puts forward in the New Testament,⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr concludes that in reality pacifism is just a way of giving in to and being complicit with evil.⁵ The pacifism that Reinhold Niebuhr finds in the Bible is nonresistance to evil. He finds this to be so idealistic that Christians cannot follow it because of the reality of sin and evil in the world.⁶ Instead, if we believe God wishes for the world to be in a state of order, and if an evil person or nation is challenging that order, s/he or they should be stopped using whatever means necessary, as sanctioned by a just state. To do otherwise would be unethical, and since God requires of us the most love we have the ability to show, we should choose violent defense over nonresistance. Although Reinhold Niebuhr admits this is contrary to the biblical text, he assumes Christians will be forgiven because of God’s grace as they struggle to love in a fallen world in the most faithful way available.⁷ He also criticizes pacifism on the basis of its ineffectiveness, and he sees Jesus’ death as proof: Christians would all suffer and die if they lived as Christ did, and this is not practical.⁸

On the opposite end of the spectrum from Niebuhr is John Howard Yoder, who agrees with Reinhold Niebuhr that the New Testament advocates nonresistance, but he thinks this puts the Christian under a moral obligation to live *as* the Bible teaches, whether or not it is effective.⁹ Yoder’s is a pacifism based completely upon principle, not outcomes. The point of following Christ is not to be effective as humans measure effectiveness, but to do the will of God. Yoder suggests that in refusing to respond to violence in kind, and instead responding with the love of Christ, we will bring people face to face with that love. Whether or not this “works,” in terms of changing others’ behavior, it is the right thing to do, and as followers of Christ we can do nothing less. The outcome is up to God.

Karl Barth, noted twentieth century Reformed theologian, landed somewhere between Niebuhr and Yoder. His position has been called “chastened non-pacifism,”¹⁰ because it cannot see the just war theory as useful due to its basis in human discretion rather than divine revelation. He says that “pacifists are ‘almost infinitely right’ in their

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total refusal of war.”¹¹ His major problem with pacifism is that if we assume once and for all that God will never ask us to participate in physical war or violence of any kind, we are limiting God.¹² This is a continual theme in Barth’s theology: he attempts to protect the sovereignty of God in order to allow God to be God, recognizing that as humans we cannot know all of God’s will perfectly, even on a single issue. To profess pacifism is to limit God to always acting in a certain way, which we cannot know. He says, however, that Christians should act nonviolently in nearly all situations, as commanded in the New Testament and as exemplified by God’s love of enemies, which continued even to Christ’s death.¹³ Barth says there may be instances where we are asked to use violence. This does not mean that God has changed, but that we cannot know God well enough to predict God’s will. Barth is similar to Reinhold Niebuhr in his belief that using violent force to defend something that is good and godly—one’s just state, for example—is preferable in God’s eyes to allowing that just state to be taken over by an unjust regime.¹⁴ Sometimes Christians must choose the lesser evil, or choose to act in violent ways to preserve a greater good, even though the actions required seem to go against God’s will.

Martin Luther King, Jr.’s position is several steps closer to pacifism than Barth, but his definition of pacifism is also very different from that of Barth. King sees *nonviolent resistance* to oppression and injustice as the way Christians are asked to behave. For King this was both a strategy for effective social and political change as well as a reflection of his theology.¹⁵ Nonviolent resistance is a natural outpouring of the Kingdom of God, which King termed the “Beloved Community.” He believes in the inherent equality of all people in Christ: to kill or injure another human is to treat them unequally, and therefore not to be treating them as part of the Beloved Community.¹⁶ Love for enemies is not just a biblical mandate, but it is effective because it brings strength to those fighting for justice: both the internal strength of love and the external strength of helping outsiders see the justice of their cause.¹⁷ Love is the active ingredient. It is the fuel, the method, and the anticipated result. Through loving response to hate, he sought to persuade his enemies of the justice of the Civil Rights Movement. His hope was to make enemies into friends, or at very least to make them concede to fair laws and practices, based on the belief that God’s love is stronger than hate, and stronger than any other force or power. Nonviolent resistance enacted in love is the most powerful weapon one can use to effect positive change.¹⁸

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King was very practical, enacting nonviolent resistance, as well as talking and writing about it. He was still willing, however, to be protected by police officers, or to be escorted on marches by the National Guard. The presence of these armed personnel could be seen as proof that he was not a full pacifist, because he was willing to use the threat of violence in order to get what he (rightly) wanted. At the same time, he was working with many different groups and attempting to hold a tenuous balance between the beliefs and demands of very diverse people. It is thus difficult to know what he actually agreed with, and what concessions he made in order to continue the movement with as many adherents as possible.

King and Yoder share many similar views, but where they differ is in the kind of pacifism required of Christians. Yoder believed Christians are called to nonresistance: through the submissive nature of Christ and his followers, the evil of the world is shown up and transformed. King was a proponent of nonviolent, direct action. For him, Christ's power is in responding to evil with loving action. There is power in action, not in inaction. Yoder's nonresistance is too close to passivity for King.

Niebuhr would say that Yoder's perspective is the more biblical of the two, which can be supported by noting Jesus' words in Matthew 5:39 to not resist an evildoer, and numerous calls to bear our cross and accept persecution for Jesus' name. According to Romans 12:17-21, however, King's theology is more biblically accurate. In that passage we are asked to follow negative commands (do not repay evil for evil, do not take revenge yourselves), but we are also to follow actively positive counterparts: repay evil with good, overcome evil by staying in the good, allow God's revenge to come in its time, provide for the needs of enemies. Even in Matthew 5 we are not only asked to "not resist an evildoer," but to love our enemies and to pray for them. We cannot sit by and idly not resist evil. If we do this, we are living out Reinhold Niebuhr's allegation of complicity with evil. Instead, we must actively love those around us, even and especially those who do evil to us, and in so doing live out the radical, powerful force of God's transformative love.

Of these four twentieth-century perspectives, Quakers are closest to Martin Luther King, Jr. Quakers, and in fact all peace churches, did not begin with the idea of founding a denomination based on peace.¹⁹ Our movement began with a group of people seeking after an authentic experience of God, and finding that human-divine

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encounter in Jesus Christ. As early Friends explored the Bible they were drawn to similar messages as the Waldensians and Anabaptists before them: to the Sermon on the Mount and the call to a faithful, courageous following of the Spirit. They realized that the Bible called them to see and treat all people equally, as children of God. As they followed the Spirit, their actions did not make them popular, and because of this they were thrown into prison and threatened with death. They had a choice: would they militantly defend themselves from such unjust persecution? Looking to Scripture, they found that Christians were not asked to defend themselves using violence, but only to speak and act out the truth given to them by the Spirit. In 1660, a decade or so after the rise of the Quaker movement, George Fox and Quaker leaders issued a clear declaration of nonviolence to Charles II, which continues to this day to be a classic statement of the Friends position:

We utterly deny all outward wars and strife and fightings with outward weapons, for any end or under any pretence whatsoever. And this is our testimony to the whole world. The spirit of Christ, by which we are guided, is not changeable, so as once to command us from a thing as evil and again to move unto it; and we do certainly know, and so testify to the world, that the spirit of Christ, which leads us into all Truth, will never move us to fight and war against any man with outward weapons, neither for the Kingdom of Christ, nor for the kingdoms of this world.

The Quaker view of the sovereignty of God, then, is to take God at God's word: to do what we are instructed to do through the written and living Word, trusting that the Spirit of Christ will not "command us from a thing as evil and again to move unto it." This is very different from Barth, who wishes to protect the sovereignty of God by allowing God to change (or, as he would put it, allowing *our* understanding of whom God is to change). The Quaker view is that, until we hear differently, we are going to follow what we have heard from the Spirit, no matter what the consequences. Without knowing the implications of their approach, early Friends created a community that used nonviolent direct action in order to alleviate the oppression they saw around them. This action came out of their understanding of the Bible and the life of Jesus and his followers. It was not a strategy for effective change, so much as a simple response to the situations they witnessed coupled with their listening to the Spirit's directives and a willingness to suffer for their beliefs.

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Barth apparently could not imagine a situation where nonviolent resistance would be used effectively to keep a just society from being overrun by an aggressive, evil force.²¹ Like Niebuhr, he saw pacifism as nonresistance, non-action in the face of evil. For Barth, the orderliness of his native Switzerland is a top priority, and its defense in the face of an aggressive power such as Hitler's Germany is the "lesser evil" compared to the only other option he considers, passive nonresistance.

It is possible that if Karl Barth had known about the American Civil Rights Movement, he may have had a different view of pacifism. He may have been able to see that nonviolence, when used as a concerted effort of resistance, can be effective in overthrowing evil systems, and that this would be a "lesser evil" than violent force. It might also be seen as more effective, in that violent action inevitably brings about a violent response, especially from those using "justified bases for violence" as a warrant for retaliation.

Quakers also developed a unique response to the state compared to many of their Historic Peace Church counterparts. Most peace churches are more or less separatists, from the Amish who are separated completely from secular life, to the Mennonites who still live in the secular world but do not concern themselves very much with political change. Quakers have been involved with political action since their very inception because of their refusal to go along with laws that did not allow them to treat all people as equals, or to meet with one another as they felt led by the Spirit.²²

On the spectrum of Christian belief about the question of peace and war, most Quakers would fall fairly close to Martin Luther King, Jr., seeing nonviolent direct action as the best way to effect social and political change. Their attitude toward the state would be similar to King's as well: King submitted to the American government by going to jail when he broke the unjust laws of his country. Quakers have historically acted in the same way, although very few Quakers today actually find themselves serving jail time. Quakers on the whole would lean a little more toward a pacifism based on principle than King; he used nonviolence to achieve his goals, but some statements he made indicated that he would not use nonviolence in every situation. Because of the Quaker belief that the Bible asks us to not use violence, and because of the Quaker understanding of "that of God" in every person, most would continue using nonviolent action, even when it did not appear to be effective in a given situation. The principle of

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following the will of God and treating people justly wins out over effectiveness, because no one can know the ways the Spirit will use one's actions to transform the world.

Early Friends spoke of fighting the “Lamb’s War,” the war against the evil powers of this world: the war that is not fought with carnal weapons, but with weapons of the Spirit. This is the true war in which we are still engaged, and our greatest weapon is the love of God poured out lavishly and frivolously upon our enemies. Unfortunately, the majority of worldwide Christians do not agree with the Historic Peace Churches on this issue...yet.

Niebuhr’s critique, however, and that of most non-peace churches, is important for the modern Quaker pacifist to hear. He suggests that Christian pacifists see the Gospel in terms that are too simplistic and do not take the human sin nature seriously.²³ Quakers must take this critique to heart, recognizing its partial truth: we have a tendency to assume that if we all just act nicely we can get along—which may be true but is not going to happen. Quakers also must respond to Reinhold Niebuhr regarding our complicity with evil: are we truly following the will of God by simply refusing to take up arms? Do we do anything positively to stand against evil, or only the negative action of *not* killing others?

My response to Reinhold Niebuhr is that Christians are called to live *as if* living in the Kingdom of God, to follow the idealistic precepts in the Bible to the best of our abilities so that we actively help to bring forth the Kingdom of God in time and space. Because of Christ’s transformative power in us, we are able to work toward this ideal, even though it will never be fully realized. Reinhold Niebuhr is correct when he says, “The significance of the law of love is precisely that it is not just another law, but a law which transcends all law.”²⁴ We do not hold pacifistic views in order to follow a law; instead, through the freedom given in Christ to be obedient, however fragmentarily, we can live into this transcendent law with overflowing hope and transformative, nonviolent love.

Just as early Friends challenged the Divine Right of Kings as the basis for keeping order throughout most of Europe’s history, today’s Friends are called to engage in conversation with other Christians, upholding the way of Christ as a compelling vision to consider. While faithfulness is motivated by principle instead of outcomes, non-violent action also leads to peaceable situations leading to unforeseen possibilities. In living out of faith, hope, and love the non-violent

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stance of Friends within the larger spectrum of Christian stances on peace and nonviolence not only bears a testimony to the world; it also levies a needed witness to the Church.

ENDNOTES

- 1 This spectrum is based on a similar analysis outlined by George Hunsinger in a class I took from him at Princeton Theological Seminary entitled "Toward a Theology of Nonviolence," Fall 2006.
- 2 Robert Barclay. *An Apology for the True Christian Divinity: Being an Explanation and Vindication of the Principles and Doctrines of the People Called Quakers, 8th Edition* (York: Samuel Wood and Sons, 1827). HTML document from <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/barclay/quakers.txt>, Proposition XV. A§. XIII.
- 3 This belief is based largely on Romans 13:1-7, which states Christians should obey their governments, as well as on the "Holy Wars" commanded by God in the Hebrew Scriptures. In contempt of the "German Christians" acquiescing to the Nazi party's pressure, leaders of the German Evangelical Church met in Barmen in May 1934, confessing their historic loyalty to Christ first, and not to human rulers. Cf. <http://www.creeds.net/reformed/barmen.htm>. Many among the "Confessing Christians" in Germany suffered persecution under Hitler's regime for that Christ-centered stance.
- 4 John Howard Yoder. "Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism" (Church Peace Mission, 1961) 6-7.
- 5 Yoder, "Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism," 11.
- 6 Reinhold Niebuhr. *Christianity and Power Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946), 3.
- 7 Yoder, "Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism," 9.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 11.
- 9 This idea is based on such passages as: "Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also" (Matt. 5:39).
- 10 John Howard Yoder. *Karl Barth and the Problem of War and Other Essays on Barth* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2003), 8.
- 11 Yoder, *Karl Barth and the Problem of War*, 121.
- 12 Barth, quoted in Yoder, *Ibid.*, 122.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 116, 125.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 62.
- 15 John J. Ansboro. *Martin Luther King, Jr.: Nonviolent Strategies and Tactics for Social Change* (New York: Madison Books, 2000), xix.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 18, 20.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 8.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 150.
- 19 Yoder, "The Historic Peace Churches," 112.
- 20 For a helpful treatment of the Friends peace witness, see this website by Northern Yearly Meeting: <http://www.northernyearlymeeting.org/article/history-of-peace-testimony/>;

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for an integration of Jesus' clear teachings on peace with Friends historical stances, see "Blessed are the Peacemakers," by Don Green, <http://www.qhpress.org/quakerpages/qwhp/peacem.htm>.

21 Yoder, *Karl Barth and the Problem of War*, 63.

22 Barclay, Proposition XIV.A§.VI.

23 Niebuhr, 5.

24 *Ibid.*, 9.