



Accents & Issues

Christians and War

We live in a violent culture. Domestic abuse, ethnic and racial strife, and religious or international conflict break out in violence. While humankind has made progress in communication, transportation, education, and medicine, at the same time, weapons of destruction have become more horrendous, terrifying, and available.

Our violent culture stands in contrast to Jesus' rejection of violence and his manifestation of compassionate, caring love. Jesus loved his enemies and called us to love ours. When Jesus' disciples heard about his imminent crucifixion, they found it unbelievable, but after the cross, resurrection, and empowerment by the Holy Spirit, they experienced God's love and spread the gospel of peace across the Roman Empire.

Here was a new way of responding to sin, evil, and violence: proclaim the gospel of God's love to transform hearts and turn enemies into brothers and sisters in Jesus the Christ. In the early Church, the converted entered a new community where Jesus — not the nation — was Lord. Followers of Jesus accepted martyrdom rather than using the sword — choosing to give life, not take life.

Jesus' Teachings

Jesus surpassed the Old Testament's "eye for an eye and tooth for tooth" principle by telling his disciples: "Do not to resist an evil person" (Matt. 5:39). 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" (Matt. 5:43-44). Jesus also taught: "do good to," "bless," and "pray for" those who "curse you" and treat you badly (Luke 6:27-28). By so doing, Jesus' disciples imitate God's love for his enemies. Jesus came to reveal an understanding beyond what is natural — overcoming evil with good.

Jesus' Actions

The deeds of Jesus also reveal the new way to relate to others. Jesus loved people considered by many to be unlovable — Samaritans, Romans, Canaanites, lepers, prostitutes, tax collectors, and the demon-possessed. Jesus also cared for those who sought to violently stamp out his ministry — Herods, Jewish leaders, and Romans. In sharp contrast, Jesus' "powerless" loving ministry manifested the "true power" of godly love.

When Jesus' disciples wanted to call down fire on Samaritans, Jesus rebuked them. During Jesus' arrest, when Peter defended him with a sword, our Lord admonished him, "all who draw the sword will die by the sword" (Matt. 26:52). In responding to Peter, Jesus even rejected the defensive use of violence. Later, responding 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 violent way to establishing his Kingdom, choosing instead the way of sacrificial, forgiving love.

The cross was the climactic act of Jesus' loving service. This apparent defeat turned out to be the supreme act of love and power. God's love makes it possible for each new believer to be "a new creation" because he "reconciled us to himself through Christ," forgiving our sins, and giving "us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:17-21).

Through Jesus, enemies are changed into friends. Paul wrote, "when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son" (Rom. 5:10). Jesus died to save his enemies. We were turned from enemies to lovers of God through the atonement of his Son. The cross brought, not defeat, but a new way of loving.

Moreover, Jesus' love is our spiritual and moral example. We are to be faithful, even if our enemies threaten our lives, as Jesus' life was taken from him on the cross. Just as Jesus' death was followed by resurrection, the faithfulness, even unto death, of biblical peacemakers is used to further God's Kingdom.

Jesus' Followers

For followers of Jesus, the basic divide is between the saved and the lost, not between two or more political systems. Nations make war with their enemies. In sharp contrast, Christians share the gospel with non-Christians; they love those hostile to God. To kill non-Christians cuts them off from becoming followers of Jesus. Our task is not to take their lives but to give our lives so they can say yes to Jesus.

Moreover, if we fight against and kill fellow Christians, we are dividing the body of Christ — his Church. For Christians, the basic spiritual and social unit is the Church with Jesus, 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 Pet. 2:9). By his death on the cross, Jesus overcame the most glaring social hostility in the ancient world — the Jewish-Gentile divide — and made provision for harmonious Christian community (Eph. 2:11-22).

The book of Acts is the exciting story of God's people becoming interracial, transcultural, and supranational. Christians became a loving and caring fellowship. This mutual interdependence will be consummated when Christians “from every nation, tribe, people and language” bow before the “throne ... of the Lamb” (Rev. 7:9). The Church is the global society whose faithfulness to Jesus 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 is not passivity in the face of evil but a vigorous, loving, nonviolent response to provide a redemptive solution. To some, loving enemies is foolishness, 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 Jesus.

