



C. Kutz-Marks, preaching

The Morality of Armed Conflict

Luke 6:27-35

Oct. 26, 2008

Forum Sunday on the same theme

This afternoon at 2 p.m. right here in this Sanctuary where we worship - will be another important gathering. Oh, many of the people will be similar, in that we hope all of you will join in the fellowship lunch downstairs and then make your way back to the Sanctuary. But there will be more people joining us: Jews, Muslims, and Christians from a variety of backgrounds. We expect a broad spectrum of beliefs to think together, to reason together about when- if ever- a person of faith can morally justify violence upon another child of God. It should be a fascinating discussion as we have a distinguished panel of scholars to lead our thinking about the matter.

But before we join together with a diversity of folks this afternoon, it seems proper that this morning we take a careful look at what our particular tradition, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has said and taught about this matter, as a prologue for our forum later today. Now, you might rightly chuckle, since we are the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), intent on making sure that each

Christian makes her or his own determination about such matters, you would be correct in saying that almost every conceivable position has been espoused.

You might further rightly assume that throughout the nearly 200 years of our development, Disciples have often mirrored the values of other Christians in North America, with a wide spectrum of belief about violence and war. That is true, as well. But as you shall hear, the leadership of our movement, has consistently taken one position on the matter at hand.

I.

Now, I'd like to draw your attention to 3 periods in our Christian development to ascertain the major influences on our thinking about armed violence generally, and its extreme, war. The first, as Disciples, is a return to scripture. We have for two hundred years as Disciples, we have called ourselves, a people of the Book. We said, *Where the scriptures speak, we speak; where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent...* Our people have said, *"No Creed but Christ, no book but the Bible."* Our people have said, *"Christ's New Testament teachings are the first and best guide for living, and for RESTORING churches to the essential faith seen in New Testament Christianity."* So let us look together at the New Testament witness.

We have already begun our review with what Jesus taught us about violence in our scripture lesson this morning :

Jesus was responding to Lev. 24, in how violence is to be dealt with when it said: *Lev. 24:19* Anyone who maims another shall suffer the same injury in return: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; the injury inflicted is the injury to be suffered.

So in Luke, Jesus says, "But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt....

35 love your enemies...

Jesus taught a radical renunciation of revenge, so that Jesus was known to the early church as the Prince of Peace. They found in the Hebrew scriptures ancient prophecies that the early Christians said pointed to Jesus, foretelling that as messiah He would usher in a reign of peace that would bless all the world, such as the Is. 2:4 passage: "He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more."

Let me quickly grant that there are passages in the book of Revelation and other rare places in the New Testament that envision an apocalyptic struggle between the forces of evil resisting the inbreaking of God's victorious forces of good. There is some expectation of violence ahead, but time and again the earliest Christians, not only refrained from violence in any form, but from war in particular. With Jesus' words echoing in their ears at the time of his arrest in the Garden, "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword."

In response to Jesus' teaching, those who followed Jesus for the first 150 years were indisputably pacifists, and then overwhelming still pacifists for the next 150 years until the reign of Constantine. These early Christians simply would

not fight in war. The early church to which our Disciples forbearers pointed us for guidance, would not allow their sons to join anyone's army. They would not even fight for their own liberation from Roman oppression.

To those who would challenge these early Christians that they were being naïve or impractical, that people have to stand up for themselves and defend themselves or the world will trample them in its path, Christians would quote their paradoxical Jesus in Matt. 10 "whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

II.

With this background, perhaps we should not be surprised how our forbearers, the early Disciples stood on the issue. They believed that a simple, straightforward reading of Scripture should guide the Christian, and the New Testament teachings against the use of violence, even in self-defense, are clear.

Though the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has never been lumped as a whole in the Peace Church tradition of the Mennonites, the Church of the Brethren, and their like, one wonders why.ⁱ For, if I ask to you to name the one most important speaker and teacher in the founding of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), who would you name?

Barton Stone, declared "Nothing appears so repugnant to the kingdom of heaven as war;" In the July 1835 Christian Messenger, Stone [*approvingly*] published portions of a letter from a minister who refused a commission as a chaplain for the Maine militia because, in his view, "war was at variance with the Gospel that calls us to love our enemies and pray for them."ⁱⁱ

Alexander Campbell is unequivocal in concurring with Barton Stone here. In the year 1848, which Texans will recall as the conclusion of the Mexican-American War, Campbell delivered his famous ADDRESS ON WAR at Wheeling, Virginia, 1848.

89 years later as the U.S. was on the brink of WWII the Hon. Joseph B. Shannon of Missouri had Campbell's address entered into the U.S. Congressional record with these words, "Mr. Speaker, I ask unanimous consent to extend my remarks and to include an Address on War made in 1848 by that great Christian and scholar Alexander Campbell. It is the most eloquent discourse I have ever read on that subject. His arguments against war are as tenable today as they were when advanced by him in 1848." It is interesting to note that here as WWII was about to begin, 69% of Disciples ministers were pacifists.ⁱⁱⁱ

But what does Campbell say? His carefully worded address would take something over two hours to read aloud, so I invite you to find his address in its entirety by linking to this sermon's file at our congregation's website.^{iv}

But let me say, Campbell confesses that as important and central as this issue of violence and war is, he wished he'd spoken to the issue decades earlier, or at least before the beginning of the Mexican-American War so that his ideas might have saved "some lives that since have been thrown away in the desert." That us, friends.

Campbell reminds his audience that for the first 3 centuries the Church of Jesus Christ would not allow anyone to bear arms, then he goes on to summarize:

“(5) The precepts of Christianity positively inhibit war - by showing that "wars and fightings come from men's lusts" and evil passions, and by commanding Christians to "follow peace with all men," and

(6) The beatitudes of Christ are not pronounced on patriots, heroes, and conquerors but on peacemakers, on whom is conferred the highest rank and title in the universe: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the sons of God." “

How would nations then deal with aggression by another?

Perhaps here Alexander Campbell was far ahead of his time, and our time, too. He said, “Why not have a bylaw-established umpire? Could not a united national court be made as feasible and as practicable as a United States court? Why not, as often proposed, and as eloquently, ably, and humanely argued, by the advocates of peace, have a congress of nations and a high court of nations for adjudicating and terminating all international misunderstandings and complaints, redressing and remedying all wrongs and grievances?” He envisions a United Nations and World Court with teeth enough to maintain the peace.

III.

But let us make one more stop in the history of Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), stopping this historical train at our own time. What are Disciples now saying about violence, about war and peace?

15 months ago about a dozen of us from UCC participated in the General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Ft. Worth with many thousands of Disciples from all over the U.S. and Canada. This is the biennial gathering of the Disciples and it is an opportunity for the delegates there to speak a

word from the assembled church to the churches back home. In 2007 the General Assembly voted^v:

1.) A resolution that any and all use of torture is totally unacceptable—that it is contrary to the Word of God^{vi}

2.) A resolution that “after due reflection and a respectful discussion, [the General Assembly would] go on record as conscientiously opposing the war in Iraq as an action inconsistent with the teachings and example of Jesus Christ, and a violation of the traditional standards of just war,”^{vii}

But that also said, “we lift up the men and women of the armed forces who are stationed there for their courage and sacrifice and hold them and their families in our prayers”

3.) “BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) affirms the God-given right of conscience and offers moral support to men and women who volunteered for military service but who, on the grounds of Christian conviction, refuse deployment to Iraq, realizing that this action may subject them to military discipline,

4.) And finally, that same Resolution directed the General Minister and President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Rev. Sharon Watkins, to write a pastoral letter to the churches, which she did only 3 months ago, and which can also find on our website.^{viii}

And I tell you, you can almost hear her tears as she lists in the letter:

- the pains suffered by families of Americans killed in the war;
- the pain of the Iraqi people.

- the pain of those among us who view peace not only as a point on a distant horizon, but who insist that non-violent interaction is a way of life to be lived right now. who believe... God's commandments to love our enemy actually apply in our own time, *[whose]* pain is multiplied as their faithful insistence on waging peace causes their love of country and patriotism to be questioned.
- There is the pain...of those who absolutely believe it was and is right to have entered Iraq ... who believe at the core of their faith that we must defend liberty and justice in all places....*[who also suffer the]* pain of being labeled warmongers or lovers of hatred.

Rev. Watkins' letter then calls us to work together for the common good in Christian love, to talk civilly and honestly with one another, as we will together here this afternoon.

So, here is what our tradition has taught. But that is not a prescription, or a proscription, but just a prologue. For as a Disciple, you are now charged to discern afresh your own position; to make your own rationale and communicate it; and to stand boldly as you understand the call of Christ in your life.

May God give us all the strength and the wisdom for such a task

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Amen.

ⁱ “A.T. DeGroot says that “this background enables us to understand why, with the exception of Walter Scott, most of the best known early Disciple leaders were pacifists”.^[2] Most notably, our founders, Alexander Campbell and Barton Stone were both pacifists.” DeGroot, A.T. Disciple Thought: A History. Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University, 1965, p. 168. Found at <http://dpfweb.org/discipleshistory.html>

ⁱⁱ Williams, D. Newell. Barton Stone: A Spiritual Biography. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000, p. 234-236.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kirby Page, a Disciples minister who published The Sword or the Cross in 1921, he sent a questionnaire on the topics of war and peace to 100,000 Protestant ministers in 1935. Of the 935 Disciples who answered, 69% were pacifist in belief- the highest percentage among the ten largest denominations.^[16]

^{iv} <http://www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/acampbell/ac2.html>

^v <http://www.disciples.org/Portals/0/PDF/ga/pastassemblies/2007/resolutions/0728.pdf>

^{vi} <http://www.disciples.org/Portals/0/PDF/ga/pastassemblies/2007/resolutions/0721.pdf>

^{vii} <http://www.disciples.org/Portals/0/PDF/ga/pastassemblies/2007/resolutions/0728.pdf>

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<http://www.disciples.org/OfficeoftheGeneralMinisterandPresident/NewsandUpdates/PastoralLetterabouttheWarinIraqfromGMP/tabid/350/Default.aspx>