

# **An Overview of Contemporary Scriptural Exegesis and Ethics on Jesus' Nonviolence**

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What evidence do we have that Jesus was radically nonviolent? The following paper provides an overview of Jesus' nonviolence from contemporary scriptural exegesis of the roots, significance, principles, ethical approaches, and core practices of Jesus' nonviolent way in the context of first century Palestine. The emphasis is on scriptural witness and draws on the revolution of exegetical and theological research over the past half century on the centrality of nonviolence to the life and message of Jesus.

## **New Testament Scholarship on the Nonviolence of Jesus**

For the past fifty years the stream of scholarship on the nonviolence of Jesus, and its relationship to the Church's teaching on war and peace, has widened and deepened—and the current continues to pick up speed. Numerous seminal works by theologians and scripture scholars illuminating the nonviolence of Jesus have been published since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, from Lisa Sowle Cahill to James Douglass, from Leonardo Boff to John Dominic Crossan, from Albert Nolan to Eileen Egan, from John Dear to Ched Myers, and from Rev. Emmanuel McCarthy to Eli Sasaran McCarthy. Here are a few highlights of this contemporary research.

Robert Daly, SJ, in his article on nonviolence in the New Testament and the early church<sup>1</sup> concludes that there is little scholarly doubt that the message of nonviolence is central to Jesus' life and teaching as well as part and parcel of the faith in early Christianity. He cites the survey work of Rene Coste: “Rene Coste, for example, is summarizing a broad consensus of gospel criticism when he affirms: ‘It is an incontestable fact that Christ did preach nonviolence, both as a condition and a consequence of the universal love that he taught us. To pretend, as is sometimes done, that his directives are only meant to be applied to individual...relationships is a supposition nowhere to be found in the New Testament.’”

Many influential moral and systematic theologians have incorporated this New Testament scholarship into their work. Edward Schillebeeckx, for example, wrote a two volume study, the first of which entitled *Jesus*<sup>2</sup> was a summary of contemporary scripture scholarship and the second, *Christ*<sup>3</sup>, translated that scholarship into a systematic Christology. Schillebeeckx concluded that based on scripture scholarship Jesus died because of the way he lived –with nonviolent resistance.

Bernard Haring's 1986 volume, *The Healing Power of Peace and Nonviolence*<sup>4</sup>, is a clarion call to Christians to embrace nonviolent action. Fr. Haring, recognized as the finest moral theologian of the twentieth century, rooted his research in the work of a set of scripture scholars who helped him to see vividly the nonviolent Jesus, including Rudolph Schnackenburg, Rudolph Pesch, Norbert Lohfink and Heinrich Spaemann. They found that nonviolence is at the heart of the gospel.

Another important contribution to this area of study was the publication in 1972 of John Howard Yoder's book *The Politics of Jesus*,<sup>5</sup> called by the eminent theologian Stanley Hauerwas “the most important work of theology of the twentieth century.” Using the latest tools of historical/critical biblical scholarship, bridging the gap between scripture studies and moral and systematic theology, and drawing on the work of C.H. Dodd, Hans Conzelmann, Rudolph Schnackenburg, John L. McKenzie, SJ, Robert Margenthaler, Robert North, SJ, Krister Stendhal and Hans Dieter Betz, Yoder concluded that Jesus taught an ethic informed by the

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Daly, SJ, “The New Testament and the Early Church,” in *Nonviolence: Central to Christian Spirituality*, ed. Joseph Culliton (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1982), 41.

<sup>2</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1981)

<sup>3</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*. (New York: Crossroad, 1980)

<sup>4</sup> Bernard Haring, *The Healing Power of Peace and Nonviolence* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1986)

<sup>5</sup> John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1994)

sociopolitical realities of first century Palestine whose content consisted most importantly of nonviolence and love of enemy and that this is normative for Christians.

The moral theologian Richard Hays, exploring the moral vision of the New Testament<sup>6</sup>, recognizes that the call to nonviolent peacemaking, while not easy, stretches people beyond what is typically considered “realistic” or “natural.” He wrote: “God broke through the borders of our standard definition of what is human and gave a new formative definition in Jesus.”

The scripture scholar and theologian Walter Wink also made definitive contributions to a revitalized understanding of the nonviolence of Jesus. Through careful exegesis of New Testament texts—including the “hard sayings” of Jesus like “Turn the other cheek” (MT 5:38-41)—he illuminated Jesus’ “third way” of nonviolence as an active and transformative alternative to either violence or passivity.<sup>7</sup> Wink’s pioneering exegesis and theological analysis has dramatically underscored the centrality of Jesus’ programmatic nonviolence.

The growing consensus of contemporary scriptural and theological research is that Jesus proclaimed and lived nonviolence.

### **Jesus’s Nonviolence**

To illuminate, recover and live Jesus’ nonviolence today, it is critical that we understand the context in which he lived and ministered.

Jesus was born into a land seething with violence. The people of Galilee at the time of Jesus’ birth were murderously angry. They were angry at the Roman occupiers who squeezed them for tribute to fight their wars, angry at Herod and his sons for bleeding them dry with taxes to build their glorious buildings and towns, angry at their priests for sending thugs into the countryside to steal their grain, their only source of meager wealth. It was not surprising that after Herod died in 4 BC (just after Jesus’ birth) Judas the Galilean was able to tap that anger and spark a violent revolt. He and his followers attacked the capital of Galilee, Sepphoris, the home of wealthy landowners allied with the Temple priesthood, and raided the armory there. The Roman general in the region, Varus, sent part of his army into the countryside. Josephus wrote: “They caught great numbers of them...those who were the most guilty he crucified; these were in number about two thousand.”<sup>8</sup>

Sepphoris was four miles from Jesus’ hometown of Nazareth. Jesus no doubt grew up hearing the story of the “Day the Romans Came” when Rome used its favorite tool to strike terror into the hearts of a people, crucifixion. Two thousand rebels nailed or tied, naked, to crosses for all to see, slumping, pulling themselves up again and again, slowly, painfully, asphyxiating, gasping for breath, and at last giving up their spirits. The constant threat of blood and violence was in the air that Jesus breathed. The city of Sepphoris was rebuilt by Herod Antipas during the years of Jesus’ youth.

Before Jesus’ lifetime, during his life, and for decades after, uprisings and rebellions continued, escalating each time in violence until the final, fateful destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in the year 70 CE and the end of the Jewish people in their own country.

His people were an oppressed people—kept in line by the threat of violence. Jesus could see what was going to come down on their heads if they stayed on the path of escalating violence. He wept over the city of Jerusalem. “Oh, Jerusalem I wanted to take you under my wings as does a hen her chicks” (Luke 13:34) and “Oh

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<sup>6</sup> Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1996), 105

<sup>7</sup> Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 175ff.

<sup>8</sup> Josephus, *War of the Jews* (sacred-texts.com, translated by William Whiston, 1737), Book 2, Chapter 5.

Jerusalem, if only today you had known the ways of peace” (Luke 19:42). He imagined what was likely to happen and described what did happen quite accurately--“not a stone will be left on a stone...” (Matt. 24).

So what did Jesus do about it?

He did two things. One, he gave them a powerful alternative to violence and, two, he worked to change the underlying causes of their suffering -- the structural violence built into their political system.

### **One: Jesus’ Powerful Alternative to Violence**

It was thought at the time that there were only three ways forward: flight, fight or accommodate. The Essenes, the faction of the Jews that we learned about from the Dead Sea Scrolls, chose flight. They fled into the desert to build their own version of the Jewish religion and refused contact with any outside their fold. The priests and the Herodians had chosen accommodation; collaborating with the Romans meant they could continue to practice their religion and as long as they did what the Romans wanted they could wield a degree of power and even build some wealth for themselves. The Pharisees and later, the party of violent resistance, chose to resist, maintain their identity against the pagans, keep it clear that they were enemies, and eventually to fight.

Jesus pointed out a fourth way for Israel. Build an inclusive community, even including so-called enemies, by using the power of nonviolent, loving, willing-to-risk-suffering action. Later it will be called the Way of the Cross. Instead of a way of narrow exclusion, Israel could practice the way of arms-wide-open inclusion and be the city on the hill that the rest of the world was looking for: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5:44). It is at the same time a warning that the way they are choosing will be a dead end. As Albert Nolan wrote: “Jesus’ message was to persuade the Jews that their present attitude of resentment and bitterness is suicidal... The only way to be liberated from your enemies is to love your enemies.”<sup>9</sup>

Jesus expands on his recommendation in the Sermon on the Mount when he says:

“You have heard it said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but I say to you, ‘Do not violently resist one who does evil to you. If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the left; if someone goes to court to take your coat, give him your cloak as well; and if anyone presses you into service for a mile, go a second mile.’” (Matt. 5:39-41)

Many people have read this passage and concluded that Jesus is counseling passivity in response to violence. Contemporary exegesis shows that Jesus is recommending just the opposite—creative, nonviolent resistance. Gerhard Lohfink wrote: “There is a widespread consensus in New Testament exegesis that in this text we hear Jesus himself.”<sup>10</sup> Jesus lays out three very tightly drawn examples of violence that his disciples very well might recognize, namely an abusive superior insulting an inferior with a backhand slap on the face (*right* cheek is the clue), a person taking another to court to sue for his last stich of security, the cloak that a poor person, reduced to homelessness, wrapped himself in at night to keep out the cold; and a Roman soldier pressing a Jew to carry his 60 pound service pack for a mile.

The function of this kind of language, a series of examples, one after another, is to invite the listener to think of still more examples of everyday violence. The language is evocative, inviting thought and imagination. Jesus is not laying down a law. As Robert Tannehill wrote: The language arouses moral imagination, enabling hearers to see their situation in a new way and to contemplate new possibilities of action.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Albert Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 13.

<sup>10</sup> Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) 50-51.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Tannehill, “The ‘Focal Instance’ as a Form of New Testament Speech: A Study of Matthew 5:39b-42,” *Journal of Religion* 50, no. 4 (1970): 382.

Jesus invites his hearers to think what they would do if someone slapped them backhanded on the right cheek. Instead of striking back, might there be a nonviolent, more productive response? Imagine the inferior in the situation looking the one who has committed the insult in the eye and then turning to that person the other cheek—saying in effect “I am not cowed. And you are acting in a way that is beneath yourself. So go ahead, if you really want to lower yourself, now punch me in the face. You still will not intimidate me. But I will not strike you back. I will maintain my dignity.” Such a response is not a surefire way to avoid further trouble. But it is a response that just might work. The one insulted does not respond to the violence with violence but with a gesture that says, “I am willing to endure additional pain to reach you with a message about our common humanity.” Jesus is certainly not counseling rolling over passively in a situation of violence. He is saying instead, “Stand up for yourself, but don’t respond in kind.” He is suggesting that his followers act as he acted—with creative nonviolence.

The second example is set in a court of law. As scripture scholar Walter Wink explains:

Someone is being sued for his outer garment. Who would do that and under what circumstances? Only the poorest of the poor would have nothing but an outer garment to give as collateral for a loan. Jewish law strictly required its return every evening at sunset, for that was all the poor had in which to sleep. The situation to which Jesus alludes is one with which his hearers would have been too familiar: the poor debtor has sunk ever deeper into poverty, the debt cannot be repaid, and his creditor has hauled him into court to wring out repayment. Indebtedness was the most serious social problem in first-century Palestine. Jesus' parables are full of debtors struggling to salvage their lives. It is in this context that Jesus speaks. His hearers are the poor ("if anyone would sue you"). They share a rankling hatred for a system that subjects them to humiliation by stripping them of their lands, their goods, finally even their outer garments. Why then does Jesus counsel them to give over their inner garment as well? This would mean stripping off all their clothing and marching out of court stark naked! ... You had no hope of winning the trial; the law was entirely in his favor. But you have refused to be humiliated. At the same time you have registered a stunning protest against a system that spawns such debt. You have said, in effect, "You want my robe? Here, take everything! Now you've got all I have except my body. Is that what you'll take next?" Nakedness was taboo in Judaism. Shame fell not on the naked party but the person viewing or causing one's nakedness (Genesis 9:20-27).<sup>12</sup>

The legal system that countenances such a lawsuit leaving someone in such dire straits is called into question. As Wink comments: “such an action unmasks the cruelty embedded in the structures of the society and its pretenses of justice.”<sup>13</sup>

The background for the third example is Rome’s occupation of the country. The Roman soldier had the right, according to Rome’s code, to press into service at any time a member of the occupied country to carry his pack of sixty to eighty-five pounds. To limit resentment from the local population, the code stipulated that impressment of an individual could be only for one mile. Forcing someone to carry the pack more than a mile could warrant punishment from the centurion. Jesus says imagine when you come to the end of the first mile, you take the initiative and make the choice to carry the pack a second mile. In that action you would be saying to the soldier—you see me as a person without power, a veritable beast of burden. I am letting you know I am a person who can make choices.

With these examples Jesus is putting forth an alternative way to the presumed limited choices of an oppressed people, a direction that is neither fight nor flight nor accommodation. It is instead a way to resist without being infected by the very violence that one is resisting. People have an unlimited array of possibilities once they are able to see their way past the violent response. Jesus calls on his disciples to act against domination using their imaginations, courage and strength.

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<sup>12</sup> Walter Wink, “Christian Nonviolence,” ZNet magazine, December 17, 2004.

<sup>13</sup> Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 104.

The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' summons us to act like he acts, which in turn is to act as his Father acts--who "sends the rain on the just and the unjust alike." His disciples have observed him. They have heard him speak of his Father as one who approaches humans with a free offer of love and grace—unearned. And they have seen him deal with people in the same way—none are outcast, none are beyond the pale. All are embraced—even when they choose to turn away from him, he does not give up on them. So living the Sermon on the Mount is to live in a different way—beyond the way people “naturally” act. Act not because of laws but out of love that gives strength and knows no bounds. It is to live in the free air of those who know they are loved without limit and who as a result can pass that spirit on to others. It is no wonder that Mahatma Gandhi, after first reading the Sermon on the Mount as a young man, said that it went straight to his heart. It confirmed for him the best of his tradition and made him admire Jesus as the “Prince of the Satyagrahis” (“practitioners of nonviolence”), a person of creative, nonviolent action. It is also no wonder that Pope Benedict XVI said:

Love your enemies... This page of the Gospel is rightly considered the ‘magna carta’ of Christian nonviolence: it does not consist in surrendering to evil—as claims a false interpretation of "turn the other cheek" (Luke 6:29)—but in responding to evil with good (Romans 12:17-21), and thus breaking the chain of injustice. It is thus understood that nonviolence, for Christians, is not mere tactical behavior but a person's way of being, the attitude of one who is convinced of God's love and power, who is not afraid to confront evil with the weapons of love and truth alone. Loving the enemy is the nucleus of the "Christian revolution."<sup>14</sup>

Pope Benedict moreover said this of the nonviolent Jesus:

He was always a man of peace. It could be expected that, when God came to earth, he would be a man of great power, destroying the opposing forces. That he would be a man of powerful violence as an instrument of peace. Not at all. He came in weakness. He came with only the strength of love, totally without violence, even to the point of going to the Cross. This is what shows us the true face of God, that violence never comes from God, never helps bring anything good, but is a destructive means and not the path to escape difficulties. He is thus a strong voice against every type of violence. He strongly invites all sides to renounce violence, even if they feel they are right. The only path is to renounce violence, to begin anew with dialogue, with the attempt to find peace together, with a new concern for one another, a new willingness to be open to one another. This is Jesus' true message: seek peace with the means of peace and leave violence aside."<sup>15</sup>

### **Jesus' Nonviolent Alternative: Dramatized in His Life**

It is thrilling to read the Gospels and see how Jesus' dramatized the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount in his own life, including reaching out in love to those whom society treated as outcasts. For him there are no enemies—not even Roman officials. He healed a Roman officer's servant. Not the Samaritans. Jesus celebrated that traditional enemy of the Jews as an embodiment of charity in the parable of the Good Samaritan. Not even the Pharisees and Herodians who went out of their way to trap and humiliate him. He tried very hard to turn those who thought they were his enemies into friends. He continued to reach out to them again and again-- using forceful disputation, witty responses to trapping questions, appeals to their hearts, shaming examples of their contradictory teachings—hoping against hope that he would melt their hearts and change them.

In the Gospels we find examples of his personal courage and creativity in the face of violence.

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<sup>14</sup> “Pope Benedict XVI Calls for a ‘Christian Revolution,’ Invites Faithful to Respond to Evil With Good,” Public Address in Vatican City, February 18, 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, Good Friday Sermon, 2011.

When people in his home town were so resentful and angry at him that they were about to throw him off a cliff-- somehow, without violence, he walked right through their midst. (Luke 4:28-30)

Consider how he dealt with a mob of men who were ready to stone to death a woman they had taken in adultery. They felt completely righteous—they felt their own law commanded them to act. First note the courage of Jesus. He did not shrink away from the scene, he walked right into the middle of it. Note his creativity. He did not use superior force to overcome their violence. He bent down in front of them and began writing in the dust—a classic diversion of attention move. They evidently cooled a bit. John’s gospel says that he then stood up. He must have looked at them but probably not in a condemnatory or angry way—that would have further inflamed the situation. Probably a composed, benign face. He then put them back on their heels with a simple statement of truth: “the one among you without sin, cast the first stone.” They melted away—the older ones first. (John 8:4-11).

In Caesarea Phillipi, the northernmost part of the country, he decided that he needed to go to Jerusalem to confront the leaders in their own bailiwick. As Jesus set his face to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51), the disciples were afraid. He knew he was walking into the maw of state-sponsored violence. He had a vivid sense of the evil that would most likely come down on him. But he kept walking.

If we follow him through his passion we see the same centered, nonviolent way of responding to events as they unfold. The gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John, all describe one of his disciples meeting violence with violence, taking a sword and cutting off the ear of a servant of the high priest. Luke has Jesus say vehemently: “Enough of this!” (Luke 22:51) and then healing the servant’s ear. Matthew has Jesus say: “Put your sword back, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword” (Matt. 26:52). Jesus certainly knew the siren song of violence. Matthew has Jesus go on to say: “or do you think I cannot appeal to my Father, who would promptly send twelve legions of angels to my defense?” (Matt. 26:53) That would be thirty-six thousand angels.

Can the sword be used in self-defense? The guards have arrived in the garden with their swords. As Dominic Crossan wrote: “if opponents use violence to attack Jesus, should his disciples use violence to defend him? The answer is quite clear. Even when opponents use the sword to attack Jesus, the disciples must not use it to defend him. But if not then, when? If not then, never!”<sup>16</sup>

As the trial scenes unfold, Jesus continues to respond forthrightly and with dignity. When a soldier feels free to slap him for the way Jesus answered the high priest, Jesus responded calmly but assertively, “If there is some offense in what I said, point it out; but if not, why do you strike me?” (John 18:23).

In Jesus’ dialogue with Pilate, he renounces the right of self-defense—because he has brought into the world in his person a kingdom that is unlike Pilate’s; it does not depend on violence to exert power. His kingdom is not of this world, meaning Pilate’s world. His kingdom relies on the power of truth and nonviolent resistance. Jesus says to Pilate: “Mine is not a kingdom of this world; if my kingdom were of this world, my men would have fought to prevent my being surrendered to the Jews. As it is, my kingdom does not belong here” (John 18:36). He goes on to explicitly say what gives him his power: “I was born for this; I came into the world for this, to bear witness to the truth and all who are on the side of truth hear my voice” (John 18:37).

After he had been condemned to death and led to the place called, The Skull, Golgotha, where they crucified him, Jesus—consistent with his entire message concerning the way one should respond to one’s so-called enemies, and consistent with his message about the centrality of forgiveness in the kingdom—said: “Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:24). He died as he had lived. His last words expressed love and forgiveness for those who were killing him.

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<sup>16</sup> Dominic Crossan, *God and Empire*, (San Francisco: Harper, 2007), 178.

## **Two: Jesus Worked to Relieve the Underlying Causes of the Jews' Suffering—the Structural and Cultural Violence Built into Their Political System**

Understanding the vision and mission of Jesus involves understanding his context, including what was going on politically and economically in his time. As Donald Senior wrote, “The more we want to know about Jesus, the more we should know about his world.”<sup>17</sup>

Rome was an occupying force demanding an ongoing stream of tribute through the king they had put in place. Their client king, Herod the Great, had spent profligately on building such magnificent structures as the Temple with blocks of stone up forty feet long, the wonder of the world that brought people from all over the civilized world to gaze at its grandeur. He built the fortress Masada out in the Judean desert. He built a magnificent town on the shores of the Mediterranean, Caesarea, which he dedicated to the emperor, Caesar. The tax burden on the common people to support all this was beyond their strength. The high priestly family of Ananias that reigned for over sixty years had no respect from the people. The Temple revenue was directed into their family coffers.

Most important to understand was the work of the Pharisees, the lay renewal party that had come back into power under Pilate. Under Herod they had been on the outs due to their resistance to his attempts to introduce Hellenism into the country. Before Herod, under the Hasmoneans they had enjoyed considerable influence and even had the power of the sword behind them. As John Meier wrote: “They were willing to use the power of the state to impose their legal practices on the people—even to bloody vengeance on their foes.”<sup>18</sup> Respected by the people they were intent on seeing the practices of ritual purity and dietary laws prescribed for the priestly class apply to the people as a whole. They had a great zeal for purity. They believed that the people needed to remain pure and undefiled to be faithful to Yahweh and to renew Israel. Many things could make people impure—certain occupations such as shepherding, contact with dead bodies, contact with gentiles, bodily fluids, lack of physical wholeness from illness and perhaps what was most important, not keeping the rituals surrounding food and tithing according to the law.

The number of rules that grew up around eating was astounding. Of the 341 rabbinic texts attributed to the Pharisaic schools of Shammai and Hillel of the first century, 229 pertained to table fellowship—everything from meal preparation to serving to hand washing. Not to observe these rules meant a person was considered not practicing, outside the circle of faith. Just as important to them were the tithing obligations. At every stage of the food growing and production process a small fee had to be paid to the Temple. Not to pay these tithes meant that one was outside the circle of purity.<sup>19</sup> With this emphasis the Pharisees were intensifying the burdens on the people. To what were already insupportable burdens on the backs of the people were added these additional tithes. Religion was, in effect, further supporting what was already a very unjust social structure.

Purity reinforced separation. Separation exacerbated the view that the gentiles were the enemy. The Pharisees believed that defending against the inroads of paganism would eventually lead to the dream of national liberation. They stoked those fires of resistance and when the time came to revolt, they joined the fight against Rome—except for the faithful remnant that left for Jamnia and founded the version of Judaism that depends not on the Temple but on the study of Torah. N.T. Wright wrote: “Strong evidence exists that the position of the house of Shammai, was held by the majority prior to 66...the Pharisees in the period between the death of Herod and the outbreak of war in 66 were concerned with politics, not merely piety; with resistance and revolution, not merely with private holiness.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Donald Senior, *Jesus: A Gospel Portrait* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 26.

<sup>18</sup> John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 3 (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 331.

<sup>19</sup> Marcus Borg, *Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teaching of Jesus* (Harrisburg, Pa. Trinity Press International, 1998) 96.

<sup>20</sup> N.T. Wright, Foreword to Marcus Borg, *Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teaching of Jesus*, xii.

What was Jesus' take on this political and economic situation?

In the third chapter of Mark, Jesus has healed a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath. It is stunning to read what happens next: "Then the Pharisees went out and immediately began plotting against Jesus, together with the Herodians how to destroy him." (Mark 3:4) By this early in the Gospel—the third chapter!-- they are ready to kill Jesus? Why? What had he done?

Jesus could not countenance an order built on exclusion. He took action to challenge structures that dehumanized and diminished and destroyed, including a system where the disabled were regarded as unholy and that healing and wholeness must be delayed.

He could not abide exclusion, separation, and hatred of the enemy—in the name of religion, in the name of their God. If there is no violence in God, only unfathomable love, that undercuts the age old tendency of humans to label those who are outside a privileged circle as threats, as enemies, as evil—to dehumanize them and then make them objects of righteous, sacralized violence. As he read their shared history, he understood that Israel was indeed God's chosen people—but chosen as the hope of humankind. Yahweh is God of all the earth. Jesus therefore resisted with all his might the temptation to sink into tribal religion and its violence.

He was not just opposing their interpretation of their religion, a way of exclusivity that featured a hidden threat of eventual violence, he was trying to have them change the way their society was structured. The pivotal structures of their society were the Torah, the Sabbath and the Temple. Jesus was taking issue with the ways all three were being interpreted and used. He felt that injustice was being baked into the structures of the society. He was working to change the reasons why there was so much suffering for the people. He was trying to change not just attitudes but dominating, harmful structures.

He preached and acted in ways to bring outcasts back into the fold. In his first sermon he called for a return to the Deuteronomic year of jubilee that gave a special place in society to protecting the most vulnerable: the widows, the orphans and the sojourners. Holiness for Jesus was not purity but compassion, not exclusion but inclusion. He associated with and even ate with those who supposedly were outside the circle of faith--tax collectors, sick people, prostitutes. He healed lepers and told them to go see the priest so they could be reincorporated into the community. He declared that it is not what goes into a person that makes them unclean but what comes out of their hearts—in effect denying and undercutting the entire edifice of branding people unclean through food laws.

Jesus opposed the structures that embodied unjust cultural norms and attitudes. Jesus attacked the way that the Torah had become a tool for ostracizing people, fomented a spirit of hatred for outsiders and, through the hundreds of rules governing food, had become another way to squeeze money from the poor. Jesus went to Jerusalem to oppose the way the Temple institution had become the pinnacle of a system that robbed the poor. "You have made my Father's house a den of thieves. (Luke 19:46) Even the sacred Sabbath had been made into an oppressive institution—people were afraid to do even the most obvious good for others for fear of violating the Sabbath. The fundamental problem Jesus had with the institutions of his time was that they had become buttresses of a terribly unjust social and economic system that systematically transferred wealth from the peasant class to the priestly and royal class. There can be no positive peace if the institutions have injustice baked into them.

This second contribution makes Jesus a bonafide peacemaker. Not only did he live a style of life that was nonviolent. He went further and used nonviolent action to fight for justice and peace. Why did they want to kill him so early on? Because he had upset the system. Why did he die? Because of the way that he lived.



## Discipleship: Following Jesus, the Nonviolent Peacemaker

Scripture scholars make a careful point about the audience for Jesus' message of "love your enemies" and indeed of the entire Sermon on the Mount. He is addressing first and foremost the *circle of his disciples*. "Jesus saw the crowds and went up a hill, where he sat down. His disciples gathered around him and he began to teach them" (Matt 5:1-2). To follow the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount presupposes that practitioners have heard, responded to and are leaning in to Jesus and his message. The circle of disciples however represented the whole of Israel. The message is directed not to individuals but to a community of disciples. This is why the church is so important for living this message. Only seeing others live the way of nonviolence and resistance can the individual continue to live it. It calls for continual unlearning of the usual ways of the world and continually modeling nonviolent action for one another. As Stanley Hauerwas wrote: "Discipleship is not a heroic endeavor of individuals, but rather a way of life of a community... The practice of peace among Christians requires constant care in our lives together, through which we discover the violence that grips our lives and compromises our witness to the world."<sup>21</sup>

At the same time, it is amazing how freeing and bracing is the practice of nonviolent action. Participating in the work of Christian peacemaking is to experience grace which transforms every "natural" pattern. It is to experience something of our higher selves. Peacemaking is not a summons to follow a set of rules or a utilitarian ethic, but rather a virtue to be practiced. As Eli McCarthy wrote: "Virtues are habits responsive to the good rather than acting from duty or fear of punishment."<sup>22</sup> He argues that Jesus calls us to cultivate a virtue of nonviolent peacemaking, which realizes the "goods of a conciliatory love that draws enemies toward friendship, and truth, particularly the truths of our ultimate unity and equal dignity." McCarthy draws on the witness of Jesus to identify core practices to help us cultivate this virtue.<sup>23</sup>

Jesus' life is normative for Christians. The new commandment calls us to "love *as* he has loved us" (John 15:11-13). The official creed statements, the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed, jump from "he was born of the Virgin Mary and became man" to "suffered under Pontius Pilate, died and was buried." They leave out the most important part—his *life*. We cannot understand the meaning of his incarnation or his death on the cross unless we understand how he lived. He became a human being to show us the way. He died on the cross because of the kind of life he lived, a life of nonviolent, hopeful, insistent resistance to the structures of domination of his society and arms wide-open, inclusive compassion. He was willing to risk suffering. When he asks us to take up our cross and follow him, he asks us to live life as he did. Over the centuries the words "taking up one's cross" have been emptied of their political content. The cross is not about enduring a personal tragedy or an illness or a difficult family situation—except by extension. As John Howard Yoder wrote: "The cross of Calvary was... the political, legally to-be-expected result of a mortal clash with the powers ruling society."<sup>24</sup>

The Sermon on the Mount and the drama of Jesus' life give to us more than adequate ethical guidance and inspiration for peacemaking. When the Church used the "just war" approach to embody its teaching on issues of war and peace, it lost, or allowed to be muted, the strong, prophetic teaching of the gospels. Rarely was the bold call to peacemaking greatness in the Sermon on the Mount heard in the church. No longer was the

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<sup>21</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004), 73.

<sup>22</sup> Eli Sasaran McCarthy, *Becoming Nonviolent Peacemakers* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012), 32.

<sup>23</sup> These include celebrating the nonviolent Eucharist, with secondary components of prayer, meditation, and fasting; training and education in nonviolent peacemaking and resistance, with the secondary component of forming nonviolent peacemaking communities; attention to religious or spiritual factors, especially in public discourse, and learning about religion, particularly in the form of intra-religious or inter-religious dialogue; a constructive program with its particular focus on the poor and marginalized; conflict transformation and restorative justice; unarmed civilian protection, and nonviolent civilian-based defense. See Rev. Emmanuel Charles McCarthy, "A Nonviolent Eucharistic Jesus: A Pastoral Approach." [http://www.centerforchristiannonviolence.org/data/Media/NV\\_Eucharist\\_PastoralApproach\\_01d.pdf](http://www.centerforchristiannonviolence.org/data/Media/NV_Eucharist_PastoralApproach_01d.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, MI.: William B. Eerdmans, 1994) 129.

example of Jesus' nonviolent life held up for study and emulation. Strangled was the call to restless, creative peacemaking. As Walter Wink wrote: "The removal of nonviolence from the gospel blasted the keystone from the arch and Christianity collapsed into a religion of personal salvation."<sup>25</sup>

Thank goodness we are again reading the New Testament, listening to the Sermon on the Mount and attempting to follow the arc of Jesus' courageous life of peacemaking.

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<sup>25</sup> Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 217.