

3. PACIFISM: Is It Wrong For a Christian To Defend Himself?

www.thebiblejesus.com

I did not plan on writing this third instalment on pacifism, though I did realise I may have been letting the proverbial cat out amongst the pigeons because it's a subject passionately debated. And, if I may change metaphors, leading with the chin invites a slap on the other cheek — metaphorically speaking of course!

Representative of those who endorsed my articles is this encouraging note from a Biblical scholar who has himself written a ton of work (I withhold his name):-

Hi Greg, What a wonderful and balanced 2 articles on this problem of pacifism. Thank you so much for your excellent biblical reasoning. Your brother in Christ ... However, some readers expressed dismay at the position I have taken. This article will endeavour to address their legitimate concerns.

From the outset I wish to sincerely reiterate that, whatever position each one lands on, I genuinely respect the convictions of all who seek to honour our Lord according to the light each is given.

Those who have written that their position of non-resistance to all forms of physical attack upon themselves or their loved ones admit their journey along this path of pacifism has been "agonizing". They admit that offering no resistance to an attacker, whether verbal, emotional, or physical, towards their own persons is one thing, but to stand by and watch when loved ones are being violently abused takes it to a whole new dimension.

So far I have not touched upon the matter of our suffering as Christians for the Name of Christ. ***This is an entirely different question*** for, when we suffer for his Name and for the sake of the Gospel, then the NT is absolutely clear ... suffer that gladly! It's an honour to suffer persecution, even martyrdom, for Christ Jesus.

Repeat: To suffer violent persecution, torture, the loss of home and family without any physical resistance because we are suffering as a believer is ***an entirely different subject*** to what I have so far addressed.

So, without conflating these two entirely different matters, let's get straight into the objections to what I have so far written about pacifism, shall we?

SWEARING ALLEGIANCE TO SECULAR POWERS

One reader is convinced that under no circumstance should we take an oath of allegiance to the State. Logically they believe a Christian should not therefore enlist in the police force or the military for that requires the taking of oaths.

I argued that for those of us who are blessed enough to live in nations where there is a significant Christian heritage that this really is no objection, for in our Western nations we are permitted to swear allegiance to "God, King, lawful constitution, and

our country.” God first! However, should our government subsequently ask us to disobey the God of the Bible, then conscientious objection is perfectly acceptable, even necessary.

This is not the place to enter a lengthy discussion on whether Christians are permitted in the NT to make oaths, but I will say that when a woman gives her oath before God as her witness, and to her husband to honour and respect him, that she may still have to disobey her husband should he ever demand something clearly forbidden in the Bible. If such a case should arise, a wife is not breaking her first allegiance to her God. By her conscientious objection she is respectfully trying to correct her husband and may, in fact, be the instrument of his salvation by her ‘loyal disobedience’.

There are a number of examples in Scripture when God told a man to heed the voice of his wife — a classic example is **Abraham (Gen 21:12)**. And a woman commended for disobeying her husband is **Abigail (1 Sam 25:25)**. The same applies to our fine Christian men and women in the military should they ever be commanded to do that which God clearly has forbidden. Obey those in authority — until they ask us to disobey God.

When God judged Israel for apostasy and carried them off to Babylon, He told them to **seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the LORD for it; for in its peace you will have peace (Jer. 29:7)**. Since we are to pray for our Prime Ministers, Presidents, Kings, Parliamentarians, Congressmen and Senators, Judges and civil magistrates, then can it be wrong to serve the State by assisting civil law and order, and indeed even in the cause of international peace? Remember **Joseph, Daniel, Mordecai et al** were God’s men serving pagan kings and governments.

If we are training for royal positions in the coming Kingdom where Christ will rule with a rod of iron, then why is it wrong for a Christian today to promote Kingdom values of Divine law which anticipate the coming Government of our God on earth?

Indeed, at this very moment of writing, my part of Australia is being smashed by cyclone Alfred. There is massive flooding and devastation, extensive power outages, loss of life. Our Prime Minister has just announced **“This is a very serious event”**. How thankful our communities are that the Australian Defence forces and Police Departments and volunteer organisations are on the ground. Many of these personnel are involved precisely because they are Christians wanting to be salt and light for Jesus Christ.

As I asked previously, when did you last give your heavenly Father thanks for the brave men and women who have sacrificed themselves for your present security? I am thankful to the God who has given to my country the means and yes, even the arms necessary to protect its citizens administering justice with the necessary force.

QUOTING THE OLD TESTAMENT

Another reader wrote that, "quoting the OT is as far 'as the East is from the West'. We are under the Law of Messiah ... who radically changed the rules".

In my previous articles on pacifism I showed that in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus' aim was to correct those who were misquoting and mis-applying their holy Scriptures — either by adding to, or subtracting from, the foundational moral principles of God's law (e.g. 5:46-47; 6:1-2,5,16; 7:29). Our current theme of pacifism provides a classic example of Jesus' aim and method.

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOUR?

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven ... (Matt 5: 43-45).

Surprisingly, most Christians (and apparently even many secular Jews) think Jesus was the first one to teach the love of our enemies. They are unaware Jesus was simply quoting the Torah; **You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the LORD** (Lev. 19: 18).

However, we will search the Pentateuch in vain for any teaching which made it okay for the Israelites to entertain any malignity against their neighbours ... **hate your enemy** was thus a *rabbinical invention*, a man-invented addition, pure and simple!

The Jewish teachers of Jesus' day evaded the law by restricting the definition of **neighbour**. They applied it only to their friends or those closely related, indeed, even only to those of their sect, but a careful reading of the OT shows that the word **neighbour** is used in two ways.

In its limited sense, it includes a blood relative or a fellow Jew who lives next door, so speak. This was how the scribe who asked Jesus the question, "**And who is my neighbour?**" wanted to define it so that he might **justify himself** (Lk 10:29). But Jesus' reply was that one's **neighbour** carried a far broader and more general application. A neighbour is any other human being on the planet, no matter their colour or creed!

If this lawyer had only understood what was *already written* in the OT he would have known the answer Jesus would give. Surely he had read, for example, **Speak now in the hearing of the people, and let every man ask from his neighbour and every woman from her neighbour, articles of silver and articles of gold** (Ex 11:2). The very next verse defines who the neighbours were. ***They were the Egyptians!***

And in **Leviticus 19** we see that **strangers** (foreigners) are to be **loved as though he was one of your own family**, indeed, **he was to be loved as yourself** ... And if a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not mistreat him. But the stranger

who dwells among you shall be to you as one born among you, and you shall love him as yourself ... (vs. 33-34).

Thus, from the Old Testament's point of view, the Divine law that, **You shall love your neighbour as yourself**, is not restricted only to those of our kind who are already naturally friendly disposed toward us. In fact, even if a complaint went before Moses and the law-court, *an adversary is still called a neighbour* ... **When they have a difficulty, they come to me, and I judge between one and his neighbour; and I make known the statutes of God and His laws ...** (Ex 18:16). (¹)

Thus, the scribes and Pharisees should have already known they were to love all men, including those seeking to injure them, as the law had said. But they drew the wrong inference by adding the words, **hate your enemy** — something God had not said. In fact, as we saw above, the law had already determined, **You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself**. To harbour ill will and enmity in one's heart against anybody, friend or foe, was directly opposed to the law of God in the OT ...

If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey going astray, you shall surely bring it back to him again. If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden, and you would refrain from helping it, you shall surely help him with it (Exodus 23:4-5). **And, If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; And if he is thirsty, give him water to drink** (Prov 25: 21). *Can anyone show where these instructions or precepts are annulled in the NT under the Law of Messiah?*

BUT ... it will be countered, what about other OT passages which seem to say otherwise? For instance, what about when David the Psalmist said, **Do I not hate them, O LORD, who hate You? And do I not loathe those who rise up against You? I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies** (Ps. 139: 21-22)?

Arthur W. Pink helpfully writes; **Upon these verses we may remark that first we must distinguish sharply between private and public enemies. The former is one who has done us some personal injury: even so, we must not hate him or retaliate. The latter is one who is in open and inveterate revolt against God, a menace to His cause and people: even so, though we righteously hate his evil cause and sins, we must not [hate] his person. So in the above passage, it was the public enemies of Israel and of God whom David hated.** (²)

This is a critical distinction with direct bearing on our treatment of pacifism. The Christian who serves in the police force (where he may need to fire a gun for public safety) or the Christian who serves in the defence of his country, is not killing out of personal revenge or hatred. *He is serving in a Divinely appointed institution ordained for the good of society* — no less sanctioned than the Divinely established sacred rite of marriage!

¹ Your English Bible probably says **and I judge between one and another** but the Hebrew text definitely calls the adversary, the litigant, a **neighbour**!

² *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount* (Baker, 1950, 1953) 131. I acknowledge my indebtedness to **Pink** for his helpful thoughts.

So let's get the picture in focus. Jesus was **not** **changing the rules** of OT morality. He was appealing to restore them to their original and spiritual intent. He explained, **You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment. But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, "Raca" shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, "You fool!" shall be in danger of hell fire (Matt 5: 21-22).**

Thus, all unjust anger, all contemptuous provocation, whether by speech or gesture, according to the law was already considered as murder. Jesus was pointing out what was *already written*. **"You shall not kill"** really signified **"You shall not hate!"** (³)

But what did Jesus mean when he said, **You have heard that it was said to those of old ... ?** Who was this group Jesus was referring to by **those of old**? It certainly cannot be Moses. It cannot be the law. It cannot be Yahweh. It undoubtedly refers to the oral traditions as handed down by the 'official' teachers of the law such as the scribes and the Pharisees.

Since **the Babylonian exile** most of the Jews were unable to read the original Hebrew Scriptures. They had become reliant on the "official" teachers, the scribes, 'lawyers', and the Pharisees. (⁴)

As we read throughout the Gospel records, the rabbis, the teachers, the scribes and sect of the Pharisees, by and large, had become self-seeking, concerned to maintain their control, wealth and dignity, before the people. Accordingly, they gave interpretations with loose paraphrases to suit their own ends. By saying, **hate your enemy** they were the ones who changed the law of God. This is the situation that our Lord addressed in his teachings in the Sermon on the Mount.

So when Jesus said, **Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfil. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled (5: 17-18),** it should be evident that he was **not** **radically changing the rules** concerning the law's standards for moral behaviour! What he was doing was exposing the corruptions (both unwarranted additions to, and subtractions from, the law) by which the scribes and Pharisees and teachers were effectively draining the law of its moral power.

Jesus clearly refuted their narrow definition as to who their **neighbour** was. He upheld what the OT Scriptures say — to **love our enemies as ourselves**. The law of God had already told them that such love was to be expressed in acts of kindness even to the point of bringing their enemy's lost property back home safely to them!

³ Scripture allows ample room for godly anger which has the good of the one towards whom it is directed in mind — hoping for a change of heart, i.e. repentance. It's controlled, principled, dispassionate anger with a righteous cause and God's honour in view. Jesus modelled such "righteous anger" (e.g. **Mk 3:5**. See also **Eph. 4:26**, not to mention God's revealed wrath through the Gospel of Christ **Rom. 1: 18**).

⁴ The same thing happened during the so-called Dark or Medieval Age when the laity had no access to the Scriptures and had to rely on the priests of Rome to interpret for them from the Latin Vulgate.

Our Lord was not pitting himself against any Mosaic precept, nor even making an addition thereto: rather was he purging that Divine statute from corruptions of the scribes and Pharisees, and revealing the scope and high spirituality of God's precepts. (⁵)

Jesus linked inseparably the OT law with the New covenant by *summarising* it all in this one sentence: **You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and your neighbour as yourself** (Matt 22: 37,39). We may put it perhaps in this startling way: We are to love our neighbour with the same devoted love we have for God our Father, for in loving our neighbors we are really loving God Himself in whose image they are created. How far above the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees must ours be if we would participate in His Kingdom rule!

This shows us that the spiritual and moral requirements of God's law were not altered from the OT. In fact, the NT plainly says, **by faith we establish the law** (Rom 3:21)!

TILL HEAVEN AND EARTH PASS AWAY

There is some discussion as to what Jesus meant when he said, **"Do not think I came to destroy the law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfil** (Matt 5:17). The word **destroy** is perhaps better nuanced to read **abolish, annul or cancel**, but you get the picture. Jesus plainly states he has **not** come to **change the rules**!

Indeed, the standards and precepts of the law are said to be as immutable as the heavens and the earth: **For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. The moral requirements of the law are inviolable! The spiritual precepts of the OT law are to last as long as the heavens and the earth!**

Jesus came to **fulfill**, that is to "fill out", to cause to abound, to render perfect, so that nothing is wanting to the full measure of what his God and Father had already said in the law. **The only thing Jesus added to the moral law was his own perfect example.** Jesus was the law's substance. Until Jesus, not one human being on God's earth had fulfilled all that the law demanded. Sure, there were some who walked with God and were called "righteous" but the record still shows they were imperfect sinners. Only Jesus was sinless, undefiled, perfect.

What the New covenant in Messiah has achieved which the OT law was unable to accomplish, was to give us the power of the risen Christ himself to properly obey it; being new creations in Christ **the righteousness of the law is fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the spirit** (Rom 8: 4). By the indwelling Spirit of the risen Jesus we can **be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect** (Matt 5:48)!

So, Jesus set his seal, gave his *imprimatur*, to the OT moral law. If following Jesus means listening to his voice, then we should not be hesitant to quote the OT nor live by its moral precepts which he himself perfectly taught and exemplified!

⁵ Ibid p132

Therefore, in my previous two articles my point in citing some of the later Jewish difficulty with Jesus' teaching was to say that I am not convinced some Christian commentators of **Matthew 5: 38f** have correctly interpreted Jesus. It's not the Jesus of the Bible the Jewish commentary has a problem with. Their problem is with interpreters who make Jesus say what he did not.

In **Matthew 5: 38f** our Lord was NOT addressing matters relating to involvement as a soldier in the army, or an officer in the police force, or a Christian's service to the State, or even defending one's own family from physical violence. Jesus was not addressing the question of pacifism *per se* in these verses.

SO WHAT 'RULES' DID JESUS CHANGE?

Another reader provides a more nuanced addition to the question by adding this excellent observation; **It seems to me that your articles fail to recognize the vast difference between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. You quote Old Testament texts and Jewish writers, but we under the New Covenant are in a brand new system! We all recognize that Old Testament heroes were commanded to go to war, even to wipe out whole nations. But that was because God's people were in one nation – actually "one nation under God"! One of the major points of the New Testament is that now there is a radical change – the people of God now are scattered throughout the nations of the world. We are resident aliens, ambassadors for the Kingdom, and ambassadors don't fight for the countries where they live. The true church is the only "Christian nation" (1 Pet. 2:9), but we happen to live in different countries. Therefore if we go to war for our worldly nations, we would inevitably end up killing other Christians, fellow members of our true "nation.**

It is absolutely true that under the New Covenant we now belong to **a brand new system** which supersedes all other ethnic and national allegiances. God's folks are now scattered amongst all the nations. In Messiah we are indeed **a holy nation** called to show forth his praises (**1 Pet 2: 9**). In God's new economy **there is neither Jew nor Gentile. There is one body and one Spirit ... one hope of your calling ... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all ... (Col. 2:11f; 3:11; Gal. 5: 6; Eph. 4: 4-6, etc.).**

So, yes. The old national boundary-markers between the Jew & Gentile are swallowed up **in the law of Messiah**. To become a member of the international Church of God in the New Covenant body means there is now no obligation to keep the ceremonial rites of the old law.

Instead of circumcision, believers' baptism became the rite of entry to the New Covenant blessings. Other specifically Jewish markers such as Sabbath-keeping and holy day observances, food and dress restrictions, have indeed **'changed'** under the Law of Messiah. The **middle wall** which partitioned the two has been broken down. However, I see no NT teaching indicating that the moral law which was rooted in the character of God Himself, has been abrogated. In this sense the law will last as long as the heavens and the earth — i.e. until the new heavens and the new earth in which righteousness dwells, arrives.

Meantime, and to repeat; **The righteousness of the law is fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the spirit (Rom 8: 4).** And, by obedience, that is, **by faith we establish the law (Rom 3:21)!**

THE LESSER OF TWO EVILS

It's been said that the standard we walk past is the standard we accept. In relation to non-violent resistance, the sobering reality is that sometimes we must choose the path of the lesser of two evils. Do we offer no resistance to an attacker who is about to commit a grave crime where an innocent person will be violated, ruined for life, or worse?

Is it loving our enemy to let him commit grave violence without intervention? I would think that to love an enemy is to do everything in one's power to stop him committing crimes of violence. If he heeds no reasonable warnings and is determined to continue on his murderous path, then self-defence or the defence of another is the loving thing to do, surely? (Remember, we are not talking about suffering as a Christian!) Not easy, I know. Not straightforward, so let each be convinced in his own mind.

I hardly think another true Christian would be breaking into my house, and attempting to rob, pillage, rape and murder me and my family! Perhaps I am naive, but my immediate assumption would be to think; this person, these invaders, are not followers of Jesus! (Nor for that matter, on the bigger scale, would I assume there would be any Christians in the Nazi death squads, or in Hamas, or Hezbollah, and similar anti-God regimes.).

I stand by my understanding that the more Christians in the police service and the armed services the greater Christ's love, light and salt, will be disseminated in the midst of an evil generation.

SOME LOGIC TO CONCLUDE

If the NT says failure to provide care for my family financially, emotionally, spiritually, means that I **have denied the Faith and am worse than an unbeliever (1 Tim 5:8)**, then is it not logical to conclude that a failure to meet obvious murderous intent against my home and family to protect innocents, would be a denial of the Faith of Jesus? The greater is surely covered by the lesser (an argument employed by Jesus himself, e.g. in **Lk 13: 15-16**) !?

I hasten to add that in asking this question I am not alleging that the one committed to unconditional pacifism is a denier of the Faith. I have made it abundantly clear I do not believe this. I have stated I absolutely respect each conscience wherever it lands. I assume we are all trying to live according to the light God has so far been pleased to grant. I simply ask a legitimate, and I think logical, question for serious contemplation.

