

# **A Short Catechism on Christian Pacifism**

by George Hunsinger

## **What is a Christian pacifist?**

A Christian pacifist is someone who believes that in all situations of human life Jesus expects nothing less from his disciples than love. This love is especially marked by a spirit of forgiveness. Against those who inflict injury it refuses to retaliate, but instead responds with benevolence. "Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you; bless those who hurt you; pray for those who abuse you" (Luke 6:27-28).

## **Do Christian pacifists believe that the love expected by Jesus commits them to nonviolence?**

Christian pacifists have never been able to understand how they could love their enemies by killing them. They believe that the love expected by Jesus involves more than just an inward attitude. It requires the corresponding action. Christian pacifists, therefore, believe they must be willing if necessary to lay down their own lives, but not to take the life of another. "No human being has greater love than this, that one lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13).

## **What is the biblical basis for Christian pacifism?**

The biblical basis for Christian pacifism is not primarily the Sermon on the Mount, nor even the life of Jesus. Its primary basis is the theology of the cross. For the cross shows us how God deals with God's enemies. Quite amazingly, they are not destroyed, but met with an abundance of love. Christian pacifists believe that God's nonviolent love, even to the point of death on a cross, sets the norm for all our behavior. We are not to respond otherwise to God and one another than God has responded to us. "God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us . . . . While we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son" (Rom. 5:8, 10).

## **Doesn't Christian pacifism retreat from social responsibility?**

Some of the most socially responsible people the church has ever produced have been Christian pacifists. Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, Jr., and A.J. Muste, for example, were all Christian pacifists. Christian nonviolent resistance to Nazism was widespread and often had significant results. In Brazil today, base communities are actively protecting and extending the rights of urban workers and landless peasants. For such Christians, the question is not whether but how to oppose social injustice. Their Christian pacifism has allowed them, when necessary, to be as militant as Jesus when he denounced hypocrisy and drove the money changers from the temple. What Christian pacifism does not allow is strategies based on killing. What it encourages is the formation of socially responsible communities dedicated to the creative use of nonviolence. "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom. 12:21).

## **Isn't nonviolence ineffective as a means of social change and national defense?**

In nonviolence, as Christian pacifists understand it, there can be no such thing as defeat. For they regard nonviolence as a matter of faithfulness to Jesus Christ, from whose love no tribulation will ever separate us. Christian faithfulness and political effectiveness are not incompatible, but neither are they always the same. Faithfulness can lead to effective action in the world, including nonviolent strategies for social change and national defense. What Christian pacifists question is the supposed "effectiveness" of violent strategies, in which cycles of retaliation and counter-retaliation are merely perpetuated. Nevertheless, when faced with hard choices, Christian pacifists are convinced that nothing surpasses the importance of faithfulness to Jesus Christ, and therefore that even the possible tragedies of nonviolence are better than violent success. "Seek first God's kingdom and God's righteousness, and all . . . things shall be yours as well" (Matthew 6:33)

### **lit the nuclear age how can pacifist and nonpacifist Christians work together for peace?**

The nuclear weapon is not a weapon. It serves no rational purpose. It cannot be used without the massive and indiscriminate killing of noncombatants. It carries such grave risks as poisoning the environment irretrievably and exterminating human life on earth. By the standards of the historic "just war theory," to say nothing of more stringent standards like the Sermon on the Mount, the nuclear weapon is intrinsically immoral and has no right to exist. In a world bristling with nuclear weapons, all Christians, whether pacifist or nonpacifist, are called to oppose the escalating arms race and to strive for the reduction and eventual elimination of nuclear weapons from the face of the earth. "Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters dwell in unity" (Psalm 133:1).

### **What is needed for the emergence of a peace church today?**

The way for us to increase our commitment to peace is for us to increase our commitment to Jesus Christ. Increasing our commitment to Jesus Christ will lead us to that godly grief that produces repentance and brings no regret (II Con. 7:10). No peace church can emerge in America today which does not first grapple with its own fears and complicity—but a church which passes through the fires of self examination under the judgment of God's Word will renew its strength, and mount up with wings like eagles (Isa. 40:31). It will receive the courage to affirm what is needed for the emergence of a peace church today, for it will have recognized at last that saying "yes" to God without any "no" means saying "no" to nuclear weapons without any "yes." "And when he drew near and saw the city he wept over it saying, 'Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace!' " (Luke 19:41).

"A Short Catechism on Christian Pacifism" was originally titled "A Short Catechism for Peace". It was written in 1985 by George Hunsinger for the United Church of Christ Peace Fellowship, which gave permission to the Fellowship of Reconciliation to reproduce it. The FOR has extended permission to this website.

This article is posted as part of a project on "The Theology of Peace and War". For further information, go to <http://www.mupwj.org/theologyofpeaceandwar.htm>. Or contact Methodists United for Peace with Justice at 1500 16<sup>th</sup> Street, NW, Washington, D.C.20036 or at [mupwj87 \[at\] mupwj.org](mailto:mupwj87[at]mupwj.org)