

# Christological Pacifism

by Stanley Hauerwas  
Duke Divinity School

John Howard Yoder is the great representative of Christological pacifism. He developed his account of Christian nonviolence in his great book *The Politics of Jesus*, but his account of the distinctiveness of Christological pacifism is perhaps best found in his book *Nevertheless*. In that book he outlined over twenty types of pacifism each of which he describes for their virtues as well as their limits.

Most forms of pacifism in modernity developed after World War I. The assumption was that war, given the experience of WWI, was simply irrational. So pacifism named the rejection of war because war could not accomplish its declared purpose, that is, peace. Yoder, like Reinhold Niebuhr, was a relentless critic of that kind of pacifism. He was so because such an account of nonviolence was too easily defeated by showing the necessity of violence in this or that circumstances to produce limited ends.

In contrast, Yoder developed an account of Christian nonviolence which depends on the doctrine of God. Yoder certainly thought that there are numerous New Testament texts that require Christians to live nonviolently. We are expected to forgive our enemies, and Paul requires in Romans 12 that Christians do not retaliate. But Yoder's account of Christian nonviolence does not turn on any one text. Rather Christian nonviolence is made possible by the Son of God suffering on the cross, thereby revealing that the Father refuses to save the world through violence. Rather the Father in the Son takes upon himself our violence so that violence might be forever ended.

That is why in *Nevertheless* Yoder observes that his account of nonviolence is

"the only position for which the person of Jesus is indispensable. It's the only one of these positions which would lose its substance if Jesus were not the Christ and lose its foundation if Jesus Christ were not the Lord.

"Since Jesus is seen in his full humanity as responding to the needs and temptations of a social character, the problems for our obedience to him are not problems in the interpretation of texts. Nor is the question of our fidelity one of moralism, a stuffy preoccupation with never making a mistake.

"The question put to us as we follow Jesus is not whether we have successfully refrained from breaking any rules. Instead we are asked whether we have been participants in that human experience, that peculiar way of living for God in the world and being used as instruments of the living God in the world, which the Bible calls *agape* or *cross*."

Therefore, Yoder speaks of the pacifism of the messianic community. Nonviolence names not just a response to the violence of the state, but rather a way of life of a

community that lives through practices of reconciliation and forgiveness. So Matthew 18 becomes crucial for this account of nonviolence because Christians must be willing to expose and have exposed their sins to one another in a way that their community can live in peace.

The nonviolence that is Christologically displayed is also an ecclesiological position. Christians are called to a community of nonviolence in a world of war thereby creating the division between Church and world. Therefore, Christian nonviolence is not a strategy to end war, though of course it certainly wants to make war less likely. Rather Christians are called to nonviolence in a world of war because they can do nothing less as faithful followers of Christ. Christian nonviolence is an eschatological position that reminds Christians that we live in a new age begun by Christ yet not yet consummated. Accordingly, Christian nonviolence is the exemplification of God's patience as found in the cross to redeem us so that we might be for the world his promised people.

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