

JESUS AND PACIFISM

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JESUS AND PACIFISM

*An Exegetical and Historical
Investigation*

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I: CONTEXT

“BUSH lied, people died.” I came of age politically and intellectually during the presidency of George W. Bush. As a self-proclaimed Christian evangelical, the president’s statements and decisions provoked countless arguments and discussions among my friends about the relationship of Christians to the state. During my years as an undergraduate, I encountered and studied the works of both Drs. Oliver O’Donovan and John Howard Yoder, along with some of Dr. Yoder’s most renowned students (like Drs. Stanley Hauerwas and Richard Hays), and for a time Dr. Yoder convinced me of his version of Christian pacifism. At that time, for an evangelical who was concerned about obedience to scripture, he seemed to have the stronger exegetical case. Many of my friends agreed, and defenders of his basic position continue to publish books today.¹

However, I was not satisfied in his camp for very long. As time went on, I began to have questions that Dr. Yoder did not satisfactorily answer for me, and yet neither did his contemporary anti-pacifist critics. These questions included the significance of the Old Testament (hencefor-

¹ A recent example would be Preston Sprinkle, *Fight: A Christian Case for Non-Violence* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2013).

ward abbreviated “OT”) for Christian ethics, the place of natural law in the same, and the precise details of some Yoderian exegesis. At the same time as these questions arose for me, I was also studying issues of biblical authority, hermeneutics, and early church history, and all those studies inevitably coloured my thoughts on the other areas.

Being satisfied neither with Dr. Yoder nor with the already published criticisms of his work, I began to look for cognitive rest on the issue by studying the sources directly and with biblical commentators and church historians (rather than primarily Christian ethicists). The answers I give here are the results of that search. I have developed some of the arguments present here even further than they appear in this work, and hope to write something more comprehensive on the subject in the future. For the time being, however, since interest in the subject is not waning, and because I haven’t seen any other work that answers the questions I had in a way that satisfies me, I offer them to other readers who might be on a similar search for answers.

This book originally made its appearance as a series of posts at *The Calvinist International*, and has been lightly edited and supplemented for this new publication. When I originally conceived the series, I decided that the clearest way to tackle the issue would be to focus on the teachings of Jesus, and to address pacifism as an historical hypothesis. I still think this way of approaching the question is the best, given my purposes. This way of ingression was partly motivated by the audience I was attempting to engage, and still hope to reach. In my experience, many Christian pacifists have a stronger commitment to following Jesus

than to the authority of scripture *per se*. My argument was—and is—an attempt to have a conversation with that demographic on common ground. To this end, I treat the OT and the NT outside of the “Red Letters” primarily as documents that provide the historical context to Jesus’ teaching, rather than as authoritative as such. Thus, this book will attempt to come at an interpretation of Jesus’ teaching in a kind of pincer movement, from the direction of both its background context and its foreground interpretation. Following this survey, it will provide a positive exposition of Jesus’ teaching in accord with these contexts. Finally, it will offer several possible causes that could explain how the early church slid from Jesus’ teaching to a more stringently pacifistic stance.

Four contexts provide the backdrop against which Jesus presents his views: natural law, literary practices, social setting, and the Old Testament.

It is important to begin our analysis of Jesus’ teaching with his background context, because it is this context that he would have shared with his original hearers. One of the basic rules of hermeneutics, a rule Dr. Martin Joos called “Semantic Axiom Number One,” is the principle of relevance. This principle dictates that “the best meaning is the least meaning.”² More explicitly, it states that communicators will assume common context with their audience, and will attempt to convey a message in the most economical means they can.

From one perspective, this hermeneutical rule is simply an application of Ockham’s razor: in attempting to explain the meaning of a communication, we should

² Martin Jones, “Semantic Axiom Number One,” in *Language* 48 (1972): 256-265.

postulate the fewest causes (of meaning) we can. If we can explain all the details of a text with the words themselves and with two contextually assumed ideas, that interpretation is preferable to one which requires we assume three contextual ideas.

With this point in mind, we can begin to look at what ideas were “in the air”, available to both Jesus and his hearers, when he first spoke his words.

NATURAL LAW

At the *Calvinist International* I have argued that Jesus appealed to natural law as authoritative in his own teaching;³ this argument will appear in a forthcoming book as well, but in the meantime I will assume that previous argument and proceed accordingly. I have contended that Jesus assumed natural law existed, that it was binding, and that his audience knew it. In light of this, it is fair to ask: what does this law teach about matters of violence and war?

First, Aristotle argued,⁴ rightly, that nature directs man towards forming both family and political community. His argument was essentially that human beings cannot survive as isolated individuals, and that they flourish when they live in community. For this reason, he

³ See the final post here, which contains links to the earlier installments: “An Exegetical Case for Natural Law: Concluding Thoughts,” *The Calvinist International*, May 24, 2013, <https://calvinistinternational.com/2013/05/24/an-exegetical-case-for-natural-law-concluding-thoughts/> (accessed September 26, 2016).

⁴ Aristotle, *Politics*, Book 1.

⁵ See my post, “Zanchi on What Natural Law Teaches,” *The Calvinist International*, May 6, 2013, <https://calvinistinternational.com/2013/05/06/zanchi-on-what-natural-law-teaches/> (accessed September 26, 2016).

called man a political animal, in that human nature as such directs people towards life in the *polis* as its natural end. Within this general trajectory, the freedom open to human beings allows for different ways for communities to govern themselves, but most often communities tend to choose to have representative rulers of some kind.

Second, throughout history, most natural law thinkers⁵ have recognized that the natural order directs animals toward self-preservation, and self-defense. When we recognize that the “self” in human life expands beyond the individual, as people have property and loved ones they also regard as in some way bound up with their own flourishing, the right to self-defense extends to the right to defend others. Again, this is basically taken as common sense throughout the world. It is important to note that “defense” here is not necessarily an amoral concept, nor is it necessarily physically passive. Rather, defense is aimed at the preservation of natural goods, and so shares in that natural goodness. Hugo Grotius writes in two sections of *The Rights of War and Peace* I.II.I:

1. Hence comes it, says [Cicero], that there’s no Man left to his Choice, who had not rather have all the Members of his Body perfect and well shaped, than maimed and deformed. And that is the first Duty of every one to preserve himself in his natural State, to seek after those

⁵ See my post, “Zanchi on What Natural Law Teaches,” *The Calvinist International*, May 6, 2013, <https://calvinistinternational.com/2013/05/06/zanchi-on-what-natural-law-teaches/> (accessed on August 13, 2016).

Things which are agreeable to Nature, and to avert those which are repugnant.⁶

3. ... Among the first Impressions of Nature there is nothing repugnant to War; nay, all Things rather favour it: For both the End of War (being the Preservation of Life or Limbs, and either the securing or getting Things useful to Life) is very agreeable to those first Motions of Nature; and to make use of Force, in case of Necessity, is in no wise disagreeable thereunto; since Nature has given to every Animal Strength to defend and help itself.⁷ ...

But Right Reason, and the Nature of Society ... does not prohibit all Manner of Violence, but only that which is repugnant to Society, that is, which invades another's Right: For the Design of Society is, that everyone should quietly enjoy his own, with the Help, ... and by the united Force of the whole Community.⁸

This brings us directly to the issue of punishment. And here, too, we find that basically all the cultures of the world have recognized that punishment is a just and necessary form of behaviour in appropriate circumstances. It consists of giving to people what they deserve (the

⁶ Hugo Grotius, *The Rights of War and Peace* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2005), 180, <http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/grotius-the-rights-of-war-and-peace-2005-ed-vol-1-book-i> (accessed on October 14, 2016).

⁷ Grotius, 182-183.

⁸ Grotius, 184.

definition of justice in general) when they deserve to hurt, because they have injured others. Prof. C.S. Lewis describes this view of punishment:

[T]he concept of Desert is the only connecting link between punishment and justice. It is only as deserved or undeserved that a sentence can be just or unjust. I do not here contend that the question 'Is it deserved?' is the only one we can reasonably ask about a punishment. We may very properly ask whether it is likely to deter others and to reform the criminal. But neither of these two last questions is a question about justice. ... On the old view the problem of fixing the right sentence was a moral problem. Accordingly, the judge who did it was a person trained in jurisprudence; trained, that is, in a science which deals with rights and duties, and which, in origin at least, was consciously accepting guidance from the Law of Nature, and from Scripture. We must admit that in the actual penal code of most countries at most times these high originals were so much modified by local custom, class interests, and utilitarian concessions, as to be very imperfectly recognizable. But the code was never in principle, and not always in fact, beyond the control of the conscience of the society. And when (say, in eighteenth-century England) actual punishments conflicted too violently with the moral sense of the community, juries refused to convict and reform was finally brought

about. This was possible because, so long as we are thinking in terms of Desert, the propriety of the penal code, being a moral question, is a question in which every man has the right to an opinion, not because he follows this or that profession, but because he is simply a man, a rational animal enjoying the Natural Light.⁹

Third, following from these general principles, the classical tradition rightly derived fairly obvious consequences, distilled into the just war tradition. There are many ways of listing the criteria of a just war, but two distinct categories have fixed themselves into the tradition: criteria for whether someone should go to war (*jus ad bellum*), and criteria for how a war should be conducted (*jus in bello*). For the purposes of this survey, only the first set need be discussed, and only three of the criteria within that category.

From the fact that the common good represents the highest temporal end of human activity, it follows that whatever acts individual and communities perform must be for the common good. But from this follows the axiom that no one should act when the foreseeable effects of an act will cause more harm than good. This is the just war criterion of reasonable prospect of success. Further, the obligation to act for the good of others entails that no one should harm another person unless they deserve it, in which case such actions would take the form of punishment, an expression of justice; in general, people should do

⁹ C.S. Lewis, "The Humanitarian Theory of Punishment," in *God in the Dock* (1970; Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2014), 319-320.

good to their fellow human beings. This intuition is summarized in the criterion of just cause. These two points entail a third. In general, political authorities are only such if they possess enough force to overpower any given threat from their subjects (though not necessarily from their entire body politic). In modern terms, they must have a monopoly on violence. The result of this aspect of governments is that the chances of revolutionaries successfully overthrowing the rulers is less probable than failure. Of course, sometimes exceptions happen, but as a general rule, governments are the most powerful force in a given state. In light of this general reality, prudence directs subjects to remain subordinate to their rulers. And the political nature of human beings more directly leads to this conclusion: people should act in community, and insofar as a government represents a community, members should act in accord with their own government. (Of course, there can be exceptional situations when a government becomes unbearably tyrannical, when it clearly is no longer acting for the common good. But this is not always the case.) This entails the third relevant *jus ad bellum* criteria: wars should be waged by legitimate authorities, by governments and those they have deputized, not by private actors.

The natural created order, then, provides reason for there to be governments that use coercion, and for subjects to remain subject to them, including in not taking that coercion into their own hands. This provides one context for Jesus' teachings.

LITERARY PRACTICES

A second context comes in the literary customs deployed in the writing and interpretation of law. In the context of

his interpretation of Jesus' teaching on divorce, Dr. Craig Keener writes:

It was perfectly natural in Matthew's day to suppose that any law would need to be qualified; that there were exceptions to general rules which would need to be articulated was simply assumed. For instance, Quintilian, a famous Roman rhetorician of the first century, cites a Roman law but proceeds to show that exceptions are implicit within it: "Children shall support their parents under penalty of imprisonment.' It is clear, in the first place, that this cannot apply to an infant. At this point we turn to other possible exceptions and distinguish as follows." Quintilian's book is about rhetoric and he was thus making the sort of argument that lawyers would have used when they approached legal texts.¹⁰

This principle of allowing for unstated exceptions also applied outside of strictly legal contexts, in the genre of "wisdom":

Wisdom sayings, as one gathers quickly from the book of Proverbs, are general principles stated in a succinct manner designed to grab the reader's attention and to make a point. But wisdom sayings do not exhaust all that is to be said on a subject, nor did anyone sup-

¹⁰ Keener, Craig, S., *And Marries Another: Divorce and Remarriage in the Teaching of the New Testament* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 27.

pose that they did. For instance, Proverbs often speaks of wealth as God's blessing; just as often, however, it condemns wealth acquired by evil means. It is not that some wisdom sayings in Proverbs contradict other wisdom sayings; rather, each states a general principle, and most principles would need to be qualified if we were to try to enforce them in every situation.¹¹

When Jesus made statements like he did in the Sermon the Mount, then, he spoke into a context where people would assume general rules could have unstated exceptions.

We should not overlook that this principle is not a curiosity of first century Rome or Judea. Rather, this is a general convention of human communication, and in fact is an expression of Semantic Axiom Number One. People do not explicitly state things that they regard as obvious, or as assumed by their audience; to make such explications on every occasion would be needlessly onerous.

SOCIAL SETTING

A third context for Jesus' teaching was his social setting, and that of his listeners. More explicitly: Jesus spoke as a man without political power to people who were mostly without political power. That this was true of Jesus is obvious, but a little reflection can show it is also true of his audience. First, First-Century Palestine was a client kingdom, ruled by the Herods, on behalf of the Roman Emperor. Even within the government, then, the number

¹¹ Keener, 24-25.

of people who had power was actually quite small. There was no democracy functioning here. Second, in general, representative governments (and all governments claimed to be representative) are smaller in population than the mass of subjects they govern. These two reasons together imply that, if Jesus drew crowds, the average person in those crowds would not have any role as a public representative, with a correlative right to exercise coercion. They were all (at least in general) private citizens.

THE OLD TESTAMENT

The *locus classicus* of pacifist proof-texts is the Sermon on the Mount. The nearest context to this purported teaching contains an important interpretive guardrail for all of Jesus' teachings: Matt. 5:17: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them."¹² While we will discuss the meaning of this text further on, the *prima facie* sense of it implies we must at least consider the OT context of Jesus' words when discerning their intention. Further, even if Jesus had not made this statement, his context would demand it: Jesus was a faithful Jew, speaking as a religious teacher; everyone listening would have knowledge of the OT law, and thus it forms part of the context of his words.

So we can turn to those scriptures and consider whether he is echoing OT teachings. And when we do this, we find that he is. The OT commands subjects to submit to their rulers (Prov. 24:21-22), though not

¹² All quotations are taken from the English Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.

unconditionally,¹³ and prohibits murder (which, usually, is motivated by anger and so is a way of taking natural justice into one's own hands). Dr. Charles E. Carlston rhetorically asks, stressing the perennial nature of the proverb, "[a]nd who first said—or last applied—the truth that 'All who take the sword will perish by the sword?'" He gives the OT example of Prov. 22:8, and outside of the OT, Sirach 27:25-27; Homer, *Odyssey* 16.294; and Pindar, *Nemean Odes* 4.32).¹⁴

¹³ E.g., 1 Sam. 14:43-45, and countless texts which make clear that loyalty to God must overrule loyalty to king when they are in conflict.

¹⁴ Charles E. Carlston, "Proverbs, Maxims, and the Historical Jesus," *JBL* 99, no.1 (1980): 100. Dr. W.D. Davies and Dr. Dale C. Allison note further regarding this idea:

Perhaps proverbial, a piece of folk wisdom. The form, which recalls the *lex talionis* and NT's so-called sentences of holy law, is in any event thoroughly conventional. We recall m. Abot 2:7: Hillel said: 'Because you drowned (others) they drowned you' (probably of Pompey). Cf. also Prov 22:8; Hos 10:13; Ecclus 27:27; Rev 13:10a. (Davies and Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, vol. 3, *International Critical Commentary*, (New York: T & T Clark, 2004), 512n51)

The words remind one both of Gen 9:6 ('Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed') and Tg. Isa. 50:11 ('Behold, all you that kindle a fire, that take a sword, go, fall into the fire you have kindled and on the sword you have taken. From my Memra you have this: you shall return to your destruction'). (Davies and Allison, 512)

Dr. John Nolland writes of other relevant texts: "E.g., Ps. 7:15 (in terms of digging a pit and falling into it); Pr. 26:27 (as Ps. 7:15, but also in terms of setting a stone rolling down a hill); Ec. 10:8 (as Ps. 7:5); Is. 50:11 (in terms of those who set destructive fires); Sir. 27:26 (as Ps. 7:5)." *The New International Greek Commentary: The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 1113.

It also commands private citizens to treat their enemies lovingly.¹⁵ Further, it assumes it is possible for normal human beings to determine the guilt of others in a legal situation (Deut. 13:12-15; 17:2-7; 21:18-21; 22:22; 25:1-3), and that punishment was a permissible kind of action for normal people to perform (Deut. 13:6-9). More specifically, it affirmed that normal judges could determine when capital punishment was an appropriate sentence, and that the sentence could be carried out (Deut. 13:6-9; 16:18-20),¹⁶ but prohibited private citizens from killing (Deut. 5:17; Lev. 19:18).¹⁷ It also taught that coercive punishment could effectively deter future lawlessness (Deut. 13:11; 17:13). Further, the OT law clearly was aimed at dealing with serious injuries (Ex. 21:23; Lev. 24:17-21), not with trivial harms like insults (Lev. 19:17-18).¹⁸

¹⁵ Pr. John Day notes this is commanded in Ex. 23:4-5 and Prov. 25:21-22, and exemplified in 2 Kings 5-6. He adds: "While it must be granted that the command to 'love your enemies' is nowhere to be found in the Old Testament, the concept 'cannot be confined to the words themselves. When enemies are fed and cared for, rather than killed or mistreated, love for enemy is being practiced.'" John Day, *Crying for Justice: What the Psalms Teach us about Mercy and Vengeance in an Age of Terrorism* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2005), 88.

¹⁶ The people are gathered here, which suggests public approval of the punishment.

¹⁷ For these two passages to be consistent with the rest of the OT law code, they must be about private citizens, not public officials.

¹⁸ The instruction not to take vengeance or hold a grudge, but to reason with your brother and show love, implies an expectation that some "injuries" could be sufficiently dealt without outside the system of law, and no doubt these were injuries of less severity. Dr. Greg Welty's essay, "The Eschatological Fulfillment and Confirmation of Mosaic Law: A Response to D.A. Carson and Fred Zaspel on Matthew 5:17-48," alerted me to this aim of the OT Law. It can be found online at Analogical Thoughts: The Virtual Home of James N. Anderson, March 28, 2002, <http://www.proginosko.com/welty/carson.htm> (accessed on August 13, 2016).

It is worth noting that many of these statements stand side by side with laws and narratives that suggest limits, as I noted briefly regarding the general obligation to obey rulers. Further, it should be obvious that the commands to love one's enemies were not meant to contradict commands directing the community to go to war, or to punish murderers, even though qualifications are not explicitly given in the immediate context of either of these kinds of texts.

The principle of charity dictates that we should attribute as much coherence as possible to the words of others, taking into account common context. As a general rule of communication, it applies just as much to ancient writings as it does today, and thus Moses wrote assuming we would apply it to his words. Certainly, by the time of Jesus, Moses' words were considered absolutely authoritative and true; all of Jesus' contemporaries would assume all texts related to the ethics of violence would be consistent on final analysis. This is not only because they followed the principle of charity, but also because they regarded the text as the word of God, and so undoubtedly beyond the possibility of internal inconsistency.

TYPES OF PACIFISTIC RATIONALES

With these principles found in the Law, along with the three contexts noted above (including especially the natural law context, which the Old Testament law essentially republishes on this subject) we can return to our central subject of pacifism. The first thing that must be acknowledged when analyzing a thing like pacifism is that there is not just one kind. Rather, many rationales are offered by

different individuals and traditions for a common practical end, that of nonviolence.

This means that any attempt to determine whether a position is pacifist, or to refute pacifism, is more complicated than one might anticipate. However, one useful way to classify the position is based on scholastic types of law. Aquinas famously subdivided law into four categories: eternal, natural, human, and divine. The first category is not relevant to our question, as it is too broad: it refers to the order that the entire universe participates in, including inanimate and sub-rational creatures. Further, human law is not relevant, since we are seeking the answer to a moral question, and since human law has clearly not been pacifist in many cases. Rather, the kinds of pacifism we are interested in come in two major varieties: those based on an appeal to natural law, and those that appeal to divine positive law.¹⁹

In my encounters with pacifistic advocates, I have encountered six recurring arguments for absolute non-violence that fall under the category of natural law arguments. They are:

The Cycle of violence: violence always provokes further violence, and so never really solves anything.

The Limits of human knowledge: human beings can never truly determine the guilt of another person, and so coercive judgment can never be verified as just.

¹⁹ Though he does not use this classification, John Howard Yoder's *Nevertheless: The Varieties of Religious Pacifism* (Waterloo, Ontario: Herald Press, 1992) is probably the best work to make clear the widely variegated rationales that traditions have offered throughout history for pacifistic practice. The different flavours he discusses could be divided into my two categories, but for the sake of brevity I will avoid doing so.

The Immorality of punishment and vengefulness: the very idea of retribution and vengeance are immoral and barbaric,

The Unloving character of violence: violence is inconsistent with the virtue of love.

The Utopian character of violence: violence can never truly achieve real justice or common good, even while claiming that it can.

Hierarchy as intrinsically dominative: any sort of hierarchy is unjust intrinsically, and thus so too for one person to punish someone under his or her authority.

One characteristic that each of these arguments have in common is that they all imply pacifism is trans-historically mandatory. That is, because they appeal to aspects of reality that remain true across redemptive history, they must imply that non-violence has always been ethically obligatory.

And then there is the other kind of rationale for pacifism, the one based on divine positive law. In this kind of position, the reason for non-violence is not strictly moral; rather, it is based on divine fiat, a suspension of the natural order in favor of a transcendent grace. The reason for prohibiting violence does not derive from the nature of human beings, nor of the current state of the created order (including the presence of evil), as such, but rather derives strictly from an additional divine command given in history, the new law of the gospel. With this kind of rationale, pacifism need not be ethically mandatory in every age, but it is nonetheless binding for Christians and an essential element of the New Covenant order.

What all these arguments have in common is a specific conclusion. They all entail, at minimum, that no

Christian can participate in the state use of violence, especially in the form of killing another person. The moral/natural approaches entail a stronger conclusion: that no one could rightly participate in such activity at all.

The next section will discuss how the Old and New Testaments both affirm the content of the context mentioned in the previous section, and then will determine whether any of these pacifistic arguments, and thus pacifism in general, are consistent with that content.