

A Case for Nonviolence

By Del Gray

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A theological journey

Good afternoon. I would like to begin by thanking the Board of Faith and Life for extending to me the invitation to give this presentation today. It would be a great understatement to say that I was surprised when Larry Nikkel approached me with the request to read a paper on nonviolence at a national study conference for our denomination. I immediately thought of many names of pastors and scholars in the MB family that were much better qualified to make a case for nonviolence than me. Quite a few of those names belong to people sitting in this room!

My knee-jerk sense of inadequacy was rooted in the fact that I am a relatively new Mennonite. In fact I grew up a card-carrying Baptist and spent many years as a student at Baptist schools, as a Baptist missionary in southeast Asia and as a Baptist pastor in Los Angeles. It is only in the last six and a half years, after the age of 40, that I “saw the light” and joined the MB community. This means that, unlike many of you, I have not been steeped in the great Anabaptist traditions, stories and theology all of my life. Anabaptism is still relatively new and fresh for me. I still look forward to bierocks in the Tabor cafeteria as something different, I haven’t quite read everything that Elmer Martens has written, and the story of Dirk Willems is still new enough that it puts a lump in my throat whenever I hear it. All of this is to say that I stand before you this afternoon with humility regarding the task ahead of me and a keen sense that my thinking on the topics of the weekend are still in process.

Although I am obviously self-conscious about making a case for pacifism to a national gathering of Mennonites, perhaps what I really have to offer today is a description of a theological journey. For several years now I have identified myself as a pacifist. And while it is true that my thoughts on this are still being worked out, at the same time I believe the position presented in this paper with conviction. My opening comments have perhaps given the impression that my “conversion” to MB and pacifism came all at once as a Damascus road type of event. The truth is that it has been a long slow process to get to this point in my faith. This process has involved a movement away from the strong tradition of just war in which I grew up. It has involved a lot of emotion, significant anxiety, difficult conversations with pastors and my family at holidays, alienation from the church I pastored, calls by church members for me to be fired because of

my doubts about the war (since I must be a “liberal”), and even a loss of points for giving the “wrong” answer on an exam in seminary over a question on the Sermon on the Mount.

In thinking about how to outline this paper, I struggled with the selection of arguments to present. I have come to see the peace position as something much more than a simple application of a handful of proof texts, and the task of surveying the richness of this position is daunting. I also recognize that the same arguments are not always as compelling for one person as they are for another. In fact it never ceases to amaze me how in the world of academia one scholar will write 200 pages crafting a tightly developed argument making a point that another scholar will then casually dismiss in a footnote. We are not all convinced by the same things, so I have decided that what I can do best today is share with you what compelled me to become a pacifist. Because my own views have undergone changes through the years, I would like to present arguments for nonviolence as I experienced them in my own life.

Questions about just war

My first remembrance of a question about just war was during a Sunday school class at the church in Ohio where I grew up. I was in high school but I was attending the adult class that morning and the issue of retaliation and violence came up in the discussion. One of the elders in my church at the time became quite forceful in asserting his right to defend his family, his land and his possessions, and he clearly expressed that he would be quick to use his gun against anyone who would threaten them. When pressed by a few members of the class on how, then, he would understand the teachings in the New Testament about not retaliating, turning the other cheek and loving enemies, this elder could not articulate any application for those teachings in his life at all, either personal or social. He struggled to basically explain them away entirely. I remember being aware of the fact that it seemed like he was trying cut all of those texts out of his Bible and saw no need to even attempt to harmonize them into the ethical fabric of his worldview. There was an awkward dynamic in the class that morning because it felt to me like most members of the class actually agreed with Ray’s conclusion but were uncomfortable with his hermeneutic, however nobody else could produce an alternative system that made sense of it all.

Although I did not realize it at the time, in looking back I think this was a turning point for me. I was aware that what I had just heard was not a valid approach to a position on the use of violence, even though I also agreed with him. What was so striking for me was I knew this man to be a godly person who cared deeply about his faith and applying the Bible to his life, but here I had seen something completely different. These texts were a threat to his core values that originated more in his cultural worldview than from the Bible itself.

Since that day I have read several works by Walter Wink which have helped me think more about this situation. His writings on the “Myth of Redemptive Violence” describe a powerful worldview in our culture

that overwhelms us from all sides with the presumption that the only antidote to a powerful bad person is a more powerful good person. This view says that violence can and should be used in certain cases where it would make a situation better, like when we are threatened by evil and it needs to be stopped. Through Wink's writings I recognized that everything from the cartoons I watched as a kid to popular movies to video games to the nightly news were permeated with the ideas that violence is an inextricable part of human existence and we need to be as strong as possible to fight back against violent evil. This was just an unchallenged given in my experience. As Americans it is an integral part of our identity rooted in the narrative of the founding of our nation. For most of us who do not grow up in an Anabaptist context, pacifism begins with three strikes against it already. The competing narrative is simply too pervasive and too strong to challenge. The fact that this dominant cultural mindset agrees with the normal inclinations of human nature to get revenge and to fight back prevents many Christians from ever giving any thought to other views. In the case of the elder in my home church, the assumption that violence could be used redemptively was so engrained that it did not even need biblical support. The fact that it might actually stand in tension with the Bible was unthinkable.

Violence is sometimes justified

Even after this incident at my church I still strongly agreed that it must be justified to use violence in some situations, but I began to recognize that this could not be based simply on what I intuited was right. I was beginning to see the need for a move from a theology that was embedded in me, passively inherited from my context, into a deliberative position that I owned. Surely the Bible had to address such an important topic with more than a passing mention or proof text. So I began a search for a good theological explanation that would validate what I already thought was right.

That, then, basically describes what I went through in college. As a Bible and theology major in my undergraduate studies at a Christian college, I had the wonderful luxury of being assigned readings from St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and Reinhold Niebuhr. Because I was Baptist I had turned of course to systematic theology for answers. I had finally found the thinkers I was looking for who had brilliant, insightful, theological things to say about war in the Bible. I connected with Augustine's reasoned defense of the need to protect a Christian empire through which God had clearly been at work. All the good things that Rome had become since Constantine were certainly worthy of protecting from pagan invaders who would plunge the world back into violence, chaos and ignorance. This was the mid-1980s, and it was not too difficult for me to project this same line of thinking to my own country at a time when the Cold War with an enemy atheist regime was lingering and our president was challenging the Soviets to "tear down this wall." I was becoming fluent in the tenets and arguments of just war theory. I believed, and still do believe, that America is a good place. I never went so far as to believe that we had a privileged place in God's plan, or that America was somehow a new Israel, but it was a home that was

worth fighting a war for. God was at work here through the church and our society promoted freedom of worship and had something of a moral center that contributed to preserving peace and order in the lives of millions.

God desires peace

It was Niebuhr, however, who left the biggest impression on me, because for the first time I began to wrestle with the idea that violence was evil. I left college convinced that though it was terrible, violence was sometimes necessary to prevent something even more terrible. It was a form of Niebuhr's "Christian realism." I came to believe that war and violence were not God's intention, but that it was only the tragic realities of living in a fallen world that necessitated a compromise in order to uphold a greater good. Previously I had thought that God approved of the use of violence at certain times, but in Niebuhr I found a voice that defended just war but also thought war was counter to God's will. This view took the horrors of war and violence seriously. God did not want war at all but neither did he want genocide. That was the great dilemma we were stuck with living in a broken world. It is the dilemma that Bonhoeffer was caught in when face to face with the evils of Hitler, and like him I concluded that the better choice would be to join the fight for the greater good, knowing, however, that whatever was decided it was not what God wanted.

I still think that it is important for us to feel the full weight of this dilemma. Sometimes war and personal self-defense was simply the lesser of two evils. The classic scenarios were convincing to me: Faced with the prospect of my nation being occupied by an evil foreign power with no respect for human life or my family being attacked and killed by an intruder, fighting back was a reasonable, though regrettable concession from God's ideal. There was a long time when I felt a sense of despair at this. In my mind there was no course of action for Christians that was morally right. This position marked an important shift in my thinking because even though I still held to a just war theory, I now felt a fuller sense that God desired peace, not violence. I also still felt uncomfortable with the tension when I framed the issue as the question, "What does God want me to do in this situation?" and my answer was that he wanted me to do this (lesser) evil rather than that (greater) evil.

In those days I was much more familiar with Paul's thinking than I was with the Jesus of the Gospels, and it was my study of Paul that confirmed for me this relatively new idea that violence, even when forced to use it redemptively, was not God's intended way for us to live. Knowing that I was going to seminary after college, I poured myself into studying the epistles in order to become a Pauline scholar someday. The book of Romans was the great object of my affections and Paul's instructions in 12:17-21 seemed to be relevant to my ongoing process of thinking about violence.

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

This text is found shortly after the turning point in 12:1 where Paul transitions from theology to exhortation. His instructions here are part of a larger point he is making about love to a church that is divided. The challenge to love sincerely (12:9) extends not just to friends but even to enemies. In verse 14 Paul has commanded the Romans to "bless those who persecute you," and he goes on to explain exactly what that entails. The message is clear and straightforward: There is no place for retaliation; instead we are called to proactively bless any enemy who does evil to us. Verse 21 suggests that retaliation for evil would be an example of letting evil "overcome" us. Responding in love, however, has the effect of actually defeating evil with good.

I do not see any loopholes in this passage that would allow us to qualify or limit it. There is the statement in verse 18 where Paul concedes "if it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all." Some interpreters understand this to say that we should try everything we can to live at peace, but when an enemy makes that impossible by an act of aggression then we are off the hook and free to defend ourselves by fighting back. But this interpretation seems inconsistent because it is clearly not an example of overcoming evil with good. I think it is better to see here Paul recognizing that sometimes we can do all that is in our power to live in peace with others but it still does not work out that way. In this case we are no longer responsible for the lack of peace that exists, although this does not mean we should stop trying or become violent in response.

The example of the cross

This text in Romans, along with ones like it in 1 Thessalonians 5:15 and 1 Peter 3:8-9, were an important part of my understanding of the Bible on violence, but it was a more theological perspective that was most compelling to me. When Paul and the other authors of the epistles reflected back on the meaning of Christ's death on the cross, there was frequently a theme that Jesus died not only for forgiveness of our sins, but also as a model for how we should live now. The cross is the ultimate revelation of who God is and how he wants his people to live. It was not just a special event relevant to Jesus' ministry only, but Paul sees it as a foundation for the ongoing ethical lifestyle of the believer. There are many examples of

this in his writings. In Romans 6:1-4, for instance, Paul addresses an anticipated objection to his message of salvation by grace not works. “Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” Note how his response points to the cross. We do not presume on God’s grace, but we live righteously because like Christ we have put sin to death. We have been crucified with Christ, and this does not just mean we are now forgiven and go to heaven someday, but here it is also a statement about how we live as believers in the world.

This same pattern of thinking is found in Philippians 2 where Paul is again advising the church how to handle an internal division. After encouraging them to be humble and put others first, he goes on in 2:5 to exhort the Philippians to have the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus. What follows is an early Christian hymn that lifts up Jesus’ self-sacrifice culminating on the cross as a model for how we should treat each other. Ephesians 5:1-2 sounds similar: “Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” We love because it is what Christ did on the cross. In fact throughout Paul’s writing it becomes clear that the cross is for him a central theological paradigm for what life “in Christ” looks like. While there are many facets to this, one of the most important is the ethical exhortation for believers to imitate Christ by putting others, even their enemies, above themselves. Though this took shape for me as a Pauline concept, it is summarized well in 1 Peter 2.21-23: “To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. ‘He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.’ When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.”

If Paul’s theology and Romans 12 supported my growing sense that God’s ideal is love and nonretaliation, Romans 13 continued to provide the tension that caused me to remain a just war adherent. At this point I had further clarified my thinking to say that the ethic of nonretaliation was an interpersonal guideline, but did not apply on a national level. I saw no inconsistency between the two.

Wrestling with a real war

After college my new wife and I moved to Chicago where I became a graduate student at a large evangelical seminary. In the next few years two major developments happened that continued to shape my position. The first important event was the outbreak of the Gulf War in the early 90s. I clearly remember staying up late at night to watch news on TV of the first real war in my adult life. The whole nation was gripped by live coverage of reporters actually in the battlefields. War was real, and we were all seeing it in front of our eyes. The question of just war was no longer abstract, but I was left with a real

decision to make: Was this war just or not? Of course there was no draft at the time so my personal safety was not on the line with my decision, but I still felt very invested in the question theologically.

I thought that since I was in a large seminary with many other students and faculty members that I would get to participate in a healthy community discussion, perhaps even debates about the war. Instead there was almost nothing. Plenty of talk about it here and there, of course, but no real intentional theological reflection. I was sorely disappointed, but then I also began to wonder what this meant. It was obvious to me that most people around me had no questions about supporting the war. When I brought the topic up and began to gently push I got the feeling that many students had already settled in their minds that war was justified. What I did not hear was anyone reflecting on whether this war was justified.

In their book *Kingdom Ethics*, Glen Stassen and David Gushee write that the very name “just war” is a reminder that war always needs to be justified. Killing and violence are soundly condemned throughout Scripture as a rule (Ex. 20:13, Matt. 5:21-26), and there is a heavy burden of proof on any position which seeks to make an exception to this. Coming to the conclusion that war can be just in general is not enough to support any specific war or act of violence. In that first Gulf War I had serious doubts about whether it was really a last resort after all other options had been exhausted. Others didn’t really want to talk through this, though, and in my experiences this kind of reluctance to actually attempt to evaluate a war according to the standard criteria of just war theory was more common than not.

Years later at a mission conference in Los Angeles I ran into another extreme example of this. The second Gulf War in Iraq had just begun and I was talking to another mission pastor about the war. I expressed my concerns about the tragedy of civilian casualties and how it gave me pause, but he became defensive and responded, “That’s just collateral damage.” He assured me that was a normal part of war and we shouldn’t let it bother us. I couldn’t help but come away feeling that this man’s pride in his identity as an American had seriously complicated his sense of judgment about what was ethically right. Killing innocent people was made less morally difficult by assigning a euphemism to it. Extreme nationalism was here justifying itself, even in an otherwise rational, godly person who had dedicated his life to evangelism of people outside of North America.

These kinds of experiences led me to believe that if the church simply practiced a rigorous application of the just war theory most of us professed, that in itself would be a major step forward in our ethical thinking. This new modern style of warfare and the lack of a draft allowed us to stay insulated from the violence that was happening, and I thought that as Christians it was our duty to speak prophetically about violence in a way that would cause our nation to weigh all the factors more realistically. The idea that a strict adherence to just war criteria would end up justifying very few wars of only the most extreme cases became attractive to me.

I took another long look at the standard list of criteria for just war formulated by Augustine and refined through the centuries. Far from being a rubber stamp on the political motivations of a government, the criteria were actually quite ethically demanding. For a long time after this I thought that strict just war was the best way to put all the pieces together. Even now as a pacifist I still have a great deal of respect for careful just war thinking and practice. It seems to me that there can be a great deal of common ground between them before the road forks into two different paths.

Learning from the Gospels

The last major development in my thinking came when I took my first seminary course on the Gospels. I was immersed into a world that was almost entirely new to me, full of questions, terms and categories of thought that I had very little knowledge of since my undergraduate emphasis was Pauline. In the Gospels I was now meeting Jesus with fresh eyes, and it was inspiring. By the time I finished at seminary I had become convinced that I wanted to switch to the Gospels as my field of study, and this is where I eventually did my doctoral work.

As I sought to understand Jesus' way of talking about faith, it was his proclamation of the kingdom of God which ultimately had a radical effect on my theology. Jesus' "kingdom" language is significantly different than the way Paul speaks, and over many years I struggled to put it all together. Eventually, though, the shift of emphasis in my studies to Jesus was so significant that I am confident I would not have become a pacifist without it.

What I came to see, and what I still believe now, is that the kingdom of God is the center of Jesus' life and teaching. This one insight has become the starting point that ultimately led me into pacifism. The Synoptic Gospels record over 100 instances of Jesus referring to the "kingdom" in some form, making it the most prominent concept in his teaching. Through Jesus' ministry God's reign over the earth had broken into human history in a new way. The realm where God ruled as king was now brought to earth, and although it was not in its full and final form yet, God was inviting people through Jesus to join this alternate kingdom right here and now.

In Jesus' teaching, then, we find not only the announcement that this kingdom has begun, but we also see what kind of kingdom it is. It is a domain where the values of the kingdoms of this world are flipped upside down as the weak, powerless, and marginalized are lifted up and promised God's favor. It is a kingdom where the cross is the model for defeating evil, not an army. I have come to see the Sermon on the Mount, and especially the Beatitudes, as expressions of what God cherishes. God smiles upon the

poor in spirit, the meek, the mourners, the peacemakers, the persecuted, and he promises that some day when the kingdom is fully consummated their lot in life will be reversed from their low position now.

This idea that the kingdom of God is an alternate reality to the kingdoms of the world has become a theological framework for me in understanding Jesus' teaching. Jesus' mission of healing and reconciling is the centerpiece of God's plan to redeem the world and restore it. The concept of peace, *shalom*, lies at the heart of this. Through his life and death Jesus brings peace into the world where before there was alienation and brokenness. This is true in our relationships with God as well as our relationships with each other. The kingdom that Jesus proclaimed and revealed has a personal spiritual dimension, but it also contains an undeniable social component. We love each other, even our enemies, not just as an act of obedience and discipleship, but because we are members of a kingdom where love is a core value. We care for the poor and oppressed, not just as a duty because it is commanded, but because the kingdom of God is characterized by health and wholeness.

Understanding Matthew 5

This concept of the kingdom serves as a helpful backdrop in reading the important passage in Matthew 5:38-48. It is this text most of all that functions as the heart and soul for many Christian pacifists. Jesus has already spoken frequently of the kingdom thus far in the Sermon on the Mount, and starting in 5:17-20 he begins to explain the place of his teachings and ministry in the kingdom. He adamantly asserts in this paragraph that the Old Testament is permanent and still relevant in the kingdom. Jesus did not come to abolish it, but he does fulfill it. This statement is nuanced and just ambiguous enough that Jesus goes on to clarify it by illustrating what he means by it throughout the rest of chapter 5. He reveals a pattern where his teachings serve not to make the Law obsolete, but to bring out their fullest intent. In the kingdom of God Jesus is the interpretive grid through which we read the rest of the Bible. Certainly this is also what the voice from the cloud meant at the Transfiguration when Jesus appeared with the two great Old Testament figures Moses and Elijah, and God proclaimed "This is my Son.... Listen to him!" Jesus' life and teachings fulfill the Law and constitute the pinnacle of God's revelation.

After explaining four other examples Jesus finally gets to verses 38-39 where he says, "You have heard it was said, 'Eye for eye and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you do not resist an evil person." He has quoted from the Law here, and it is widely agreed that the passage in Exodus 21:24 was intended to limit retribution and revenge. When injury had been done, the Law would only allow the retribution to be proportional to the crime, so only an eye for an eye, no more. It is this intent to keep our desire for revenge in check that Jesus develops in his response. If the Law limited retribution, Jesus was now eliminating it altogether.

One reading of this section of text has led to a widespread misunderstanding of Jesus' position on resistance and retaliation. The command not to resist and the following exhortations to "turn the other cheek," "give him your cloak as well," "go the second mile" and "give to him who begs from you" have given the impression that Jesus is asking his followers to respond to aggression by being completely passive. We are all too familiar with this misunderstanding. It is still very common among my students at Tabor, most people in our society, pastors in my former denomination and many others to mistake "pacifism" for "passivism." Passivism is the opposite of activism, while pacifism is built around the root word meaning peace. If indeed Jesus were telling us not to resist evil people and let them do whatever they want, that would be passivism. But this is not what he was saying at all. Instead we find here instructions that exhort us to be active in making peace; peacemakers are among those who are blessed. Pacifism does not have to accept the idea that we do nothing to resist. As those actively striving for peace we do all we can to protect the weak, defend those oppressed, and resist evil, short of acting unethically. There is, then, no choice between loving enemy and loving the oppressed. This misunderstanding that pacifism encourages doing nothing seems to be at the heart of many people's rejection of the position. Because of this it warrants a closer look.

Active peacemaking

Walter Wink has convincingly argued that most English translations do not, in fact, properly catch the original meaning when they translate, "Do not resist an evil person." A survey in Liddell and Scott of the definition and uses in classical Greek authors reveals that the verb here, "resist," is actually a military term in that refers to opposing an enemy in battle. This is the main image that the word alludes to (although NT writers do also sometimes use it metaphorically in contexts where no violence is intended). If its normal military context is allowed to have full force here, though, then Jesus is saying something more like "do not strike back at evil in kind," or "do not retaliate against violence with violence." This saying then changes from being an exhortation to be the proverbial "doormat for Jesus" who does nothing in the face of evil into a statement about the means we use to resist evil. Jesus resisted evil throughout his ministry, and what he commands here is for us to do the same but to avoid using the same violent tactics and therefore stooping to the same level as the evil person.

In the next sentence Jesus goes on to tell his disciples, "If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." Again, on the surface this appears to be another example of Jesus asking his disciples to passively allow aggression to have its way. The little detail that this is the right cheek, however, reminds us that there are cultural factors at work here. Ancient cultures were biased toward the right hand (as are many contemporary cultures as well). In ancient Latin the word for "right" is "dexter," from which we get English words like dexterity and ambidextrous. It connotes skill and coordination. On the other hand the word for "left" is "sinister." This bias even lingers in modern French where right is "a

droit” and left is “gauche.” So people would avoid using the left hand altogether in their interactions with each other, instead using their right hand.

Given this, it becomes clear that a strike with the right hand on an adversary’s right cheek is not an ordinary blow of a fistfight. Instead the context is a backhand slap. Even today we associate this action with an especially disrespectful insult. In Jesus’ culture this would have been a statement of putting a person beneath you socially into his place, asserting your dominance and position of power. It is not a fight, and in fact fighting back would not have even been an option for a slave or child or wife that would have been receiving this from a superior. In this context the act of turning the other cheek, then, is not inviting a fight to continue, but it is a challenge to the aggressor’s attempt to humiliate you. It says that you no longer will allow the other person to treat you as inferior. You have taken away the ability to use the backhand slap and forced the oppressor to use a normal strike on the left cheek. This type of strike would require recognition that the other person was an equal. The simple act of turning the other cheek creates a scene that becomes a subversion of the social system that allows oppression and dehumanization. This instruction is a creative way of resisting evil without resorting to violence, standing up to an injustice even when the other person is in the position of power. It is resistance, but nonviolent resistance.

The next three examples in this paragraph continue in the same vein. In each case what seems to us an act of passivity is actually best understood in the culture as a response to evil that stands up to it in a way that uses creativity and resourcefulness rather than force. Giving your cloak to a person suing you would have brought great shame on him, and going a second mile with a Roman soldier forcing you to take his pack would have caused him embarrassment or confusion. In each case a protest is being made against an injustice but with peaceful means.

The following paragraph in vv. 43-48 develops some more of these same ideas. Jesus commands us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. The grounds for this command is especially interesting. It is by loving our enemies that we truly act as God’s children that reflect the character of our Father. God himself does not only love those who love him, but he pours out his blessings to all, both the righteous and the unrighteous alike. Put all together our actions toward evil people who make themselves our enemies should include both love for them as well as a nonviolent objection to the hostility of their actions.

A third way

Jesus’ language in this broad passage makes it clear he rejects the use of force, but on the other hand he also rejects an approach that does nothing. As an alternative to these two normal responses of fight or

flight, we have here a third way that seeks to actively grow the kingdom of God by being faithful to the way of the cross. The emphasis on this passage goes deeper than the role of a proof text because it flows out of Jesus' core teaching on what the gospel is all about, the kingdom of God breaking in to restore and reconcile the world to God and each other.

In this passage a distinction between goals and means looms large in Jesus' instructions and in our theological reflections on this topic. Pacifism places a high value on integrity in both goals and means. In this context our goals include peace and justice that characterize the kingdom of God. As followers of Christ we hope to be peacemakers and agents of restoration and healing in this world. At the same time we affirm that it is important that the means we use to promote the kingdom of God are consistent with the values of the kingdom itself. A good goal does not justify the use of unethical means to accomplish it. Since the Bible prohibits killing, and Jesus has here set out a prohibition against the use of violence in our attempts to bring peace and justice, this must be considered a line that we cannot cross in our efforts to bring peace.

We all recognize that effectiveness in accomplishing peace is very important. When conflict arises with the possible outcome of war the stakes are incredibly high. The welfare of entire societies is threatened and thousands of human lives are endangered. If our families and the people of our nation are threatened, we have cause for alarm. Jesus would call us to act to resist such an evil. Working for peace is a vital component of our role as Christians in this world. It is kingdom work.

As important as this goal is, however, it is not our only consideration as followers of Christ. The way we achieve the goal of protecting the lives of people must also have integrity and be consistent with the values of our faith. Because of this I no longer consider my earlier view of war as the "lesser of evils" a viable position. If Jesus teaches us not to use force to resist evil, then no matter how bad the evil is we must continue to resist it Jesus' way. The fact that the threat is great and the goal is critical presents a strong temptation to use whatever means at our disposal to bring peace. We easily fall into the trap of thinking that the current crisis is so crucial that we need to be effective at all cost, even if this means doing something that we ordinarily would not consider right. We get into difficult situations where we are forced to weigh the goodness of a goal against the immorality of the means we use to accomplish it.

But a good goal does not justify unjust means. When means are allowed to run unchecked and get pushed to extremes in war they present horrible scenarios. Even proponents of just war recognize that not all means are just. Typically about half of the just war criteria outline when it is just to go to war, but the other half usually describe how to fight a war without crossing these lines. This is why even countries at war with each other often sign treaties pledging not to use chemical, nuclear or biological weapons, not to torture prisoners of war and to reject other such forms of warfare. While these tactics could provide a

decided advantage in the war, civilizations recognize that these measures are extreme and there are ethical lines that should not be crossed even in war.

The point here is that killing people is already an example of an extreme measure that Jesus condemns as crossing the line. It should be avoided entirely as a means of bringing peace. Faithfulness in our discipleship is more important even than effectiveness in stopping evil. If God wants to accomplish a goal that we cannot achieve by acting righteously, then he will do it himself. It is a part of what we mean by faith.

As I conclude I recognize that there are many other arguments and issues to discuss. How we read the Old Testament and its examples of violence is important. Our hermeneutics in relating the Old Testament and the New Testament is a crucial piece of this discussion as well. There are many other passages to exegete and more theology to think through, but I've tried to share with you what has changed my mind. In the end, it is a vision of a kingdom of God that is good and beautiful that compels me to pray with Jesus, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

One of the most difficult parts of my journey in coming to this theological conviction is the way that it has alienated me from other Christians in my former denomination who have looked at me with suspicion. Many people in my church in Los Angeles didn't really know how to talk with me about these issues, and that in turn spilled over to many other relational contexts. I remember well what it felt like to be in the minority and to wonder if there was a place for me here. In fact growing tensions of this kind with my church family were one of the reasons why I applied to teach at Tabor. In the process of candidating I told myself at every interview that I was going to be myself, not play spin games with my convictions (which is a real temptation when you need a job), and to let the chips fall where they may.

What a relief it was, then, to find a new community where I could relax. I thought my combination of evangelical and Anabaptist beliefs made me a strange hybrid without a place where I would be totally at home. I was excited to find that there was a whole denomination as "strange" as me. When Tabor offered me the position I could hardly wait to join a group that not only focused on personal, biblical faith in Jesus but also had a strong heritage of social concerns, community and especially peace. I will always be grateful for the contribution that Mennonite Brethren have given the broader church, a place where we can work together at this Anabaptist-evangelical experiment.

Del Gray is assistant professor of biblical and religious studies at Tabor College, Hillsboro, Kan. He is a member of and in leadership at Parkview MB Church, Hillsboro, Kan.