

## **Response to “A Case for Nonviolence”**

By Paul Robie

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My name is Paul Robie, and I pastor South Mountain Community Church in Draper, Utah. My two mentors—Ed Boschman and Roger Poppen—are in the room today. If I say something that is controversial or wrong today, be sure to look them up. It is good to be here today so that we can reason together about some important topics that we, as a conference of churches, have tried, and now are trying again, to discuss in helpful and thoughtful ways.

I imagine that I was asked to respond to Dr. Grey’s position on Nonviolence for one or more of the following reasons:

**Reason #1:** I am a pastor of a church. I’ve never taught in a Bible college or seminary, I never authored a book or submitted an article for publication and I brought my golf clubs to Phoenix with me. So I assume there were those that were in charge of this conference who wanted someone who would be convincingly “non-academic” in his approach to the topics before us. I’m your man.

**Reason #2:** The four people in our church that I know have an MB heritage and therefore a background in matters of peace and nonviolence either work for me or are on our elder board:

- Andy Wiebe - Elder and someone who grew up at the Reedley church.
- Rod and Lynette Jost - Campus Pastor at our Daybreak campus.
- Their son, Josh Jost - a Tabor graduate and youth pastor at our Daybreak campus.
- Phil Wiebe - Associate pastor at our St. George campus and graduate of an MB Bible College in Canada. (He showed our church family how real MBs behave on the ice rink when we attended his championship hockey game. Let’s just say that he didn’t learn to fight like that in Sunday school.)

The point I think of me being here is to represent those that minister to folks who have no context for these discussions. They are trying their best simply to understand what is so different between Mormonism and biblical Christianity. It is a huge win for them to simply take their next step of faith in becoming fully devoted and fully delighted followers of Jesus Christ.

**Reason #3:** With all due respect to the history and heritage of our faithful and persecuted brethren—and I've been warned about this opinion—I am one that doesn't think that we should include Articles 12 and 13 as part of a statement of faith. I believe that we should have a two-tiered statement that allows us all to commit ourselves to MB and evangelical orthodoxy and then to discuss and debate those matters that we can and have changed our thinking on. Changing one's statement of faith (and in our case The Articles of Confession) is very serious. If a conference of churches changes what they believe too often, it speaks loud and clear to the faithful that we either don't know for sure what we believe, or we want to adjust to the changing environment that we find ourselves in. I don't think we want to say either of those things. As you can see from the handouts we have received, changes have been made to these two Articles (Articles of Confession 12 and 13) three times in our history. Speaking as a pastor from a world where almost no one has any idea who the Mennonite Brethren are (Utah is 1 percent evangelical) or what they believe, I think a two-tiered statement of faith that represents what we have always believed and will never change and secondly our best thinking on those topics that are important but less fundamental is essential for us to minister in these sorts of environments.

According to Acts 15 and the pronouncement of the Jerusalem council, we should not make it more difficult for the gentiles who are coming to faith in Christ. When a person coming out of the LDS faith comes to Christ at SMCC, they have no context for Articles 12 and 13. This doesn't mean that those Articles of Confession are not important but only that they should not stand alongside faith in Christ as a standard for fellowship in the body of Christ. Simply put, these well-intentioned and discipleship-rich concepts do not rise to the level of "essential" for the new believer to be accepted for baptism and membership.

The pharisees were excoriated by Jesus in Matthew 23 (the Seven Woes passage). One of the things that he warned them about was their propensity to add to the Law. They kept on making more rules and regulations for the Jews to obey, and Jesus called these the "traditions of men." These rules, Jesus said, were breaking the spiritual backs of the people. We need to take these warnings into consideration. Unless the Bible clearly teaches that a doctrinal position is essential for orthodoxy, we should not place our "leanings" or "preferences" in a statement of faith, but we could create another tier to the Articles of Confession to accommodate these.

Now that I have your attention, allow me to respond to Dr. Grey's fine presentation on the subject of nonviolence. Some things that I really appreciated about the paper presented were the following:

1. Dr. Grey's personal journey of faith. The thoughtful way in which he came to his position on nonviolence speaks of a man of deep commitment to truth. As I read this paper, I kept nodding my head, saying to myself, "Yep, got that, I agree, well said, use that in a sermon soon."

Del has read more widely and thought more deeply on many of these matters than I have, which has placed me in the position of a learner. Thank you for that.

2. I also was convicted by the Holy Spirit that I needed to be as thoughtful and as sensitized to what God wanted from me as I engage his Word. Dr. Grey's pilgrimage of conviction is not lost on me. He wants to be a doer of God's Word no matter what the cost to him personally. He has placed himself "under Scripture" and its authority in his life. I want that to be said of me as well.

3. Thirdly, I most appreciated his exegesis of the often confusing passages in the Gospel of Matthew 5 where Jesus teaches us to "turn the other cheek and to go the extra mile." It was refreshing to see that someone cares about context. Again, thank you for that rich sermon material.

The entire argument for nonviolence was well done. Having said that, I would like to point out a few areas of concern—ideas that I would want him to bring clarity to. Roger Poppen has covered all my arguments for the legitimate use of defensive violence, so I'll spare you the repetition of those. I have two main areas of concern.

First: Let's look at what he says in connection to his critique on just war theory. He states that, "Killing and violence are soundly condemned throughout Scripture as a rule, and there is a heavy burden of proof on any position that seeks to make an exception to this." And then in talking about the Sermon on the Mount, he says, "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 here has set out a prohibition against the use of violence in our attempts to bring about peace and justice, this must be a line that we cannot cross in our efforts."

I have two responses to this statement. First (and forgive me if this is too self-evident) our God has no problem using violence to distribute justice, ever. Just last Sunday, in talking about God's promises to Abraham—that he would become a great nation, that he would have a land of his own and that all nations would be blessed through him—I laid down the groundwork to talk about the battle at Ai. This battle was, of course, part of the God-ordered taking back of the Promised Land, and the God-ordered destruction of the nations there. For example:

**Deuteronomy 7:1-2** *When the LORD your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess and drives out before you many nations—the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites, seven nations larger and stronger than you—and when the*

*LORD your God has delivered them over to you and you have defeated them, then you must destroy them totally.*

**Deuteronomy 18:9-12** *When you enter the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there. Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the LORD, and because of these detestable practices the LORD your God will drive out those nations before you.*

**Question:** Besides the goal of taking back the land promised to Abraham, why did God want these nations destroyed? **Answer:** Because they were detestable to him. They needed to be wiped out of the land so that the “cancer” of their practices would not infect the Israelites. In short, God used his people, and they used violent means, to judge the Canaanite nations because of their evil practices. This was not ethnic cleansing or genocide, it was violent judgment ordered by God and carried out by his people.

Therefore, violence was used for good. I think we can agree that God’s judgments are good. After all, the “Day of the Lord” is God’s wrath revealed to the world in unmeasured violence and killing—his judgment of rebellion. Therefore, it is not true that all killing and violence are soundly condemned in Scripture. Not only that, we should not create an ethic regarding violence that God cannot live up to.

My second response to the assertion by Dr. Grey that God prohibits the use of all violence is this: God demonstrates his love to us by the use of appropriate, measured and reluctant violence on those who oppose His will. We understand that God is both a God of love and of justice. As true with all loving persons, God is sometimes filled with wrath, not just despite of, but because of his love. Becky Pippert wrote this in her book *Love Has Its Reasons*:

*Think how we feel when we see someone we love ravaged by unwise actions or relationships. Do we respond with benign tolerance as we might toward a stranger? Far from it... Anger isn't the opposite of love. Hate is, and the final form of hate is indifference... God's wrath is not a cranky explosion, but his settled opposition to the cancer... which is eating out the insides of the human race he loves with his whole being.*

She is right. The Bible clearly tells us that God uses violence as a tool of judgment because of his love, not in spite of his love.

I understand that there are things that are OK for God that are not OK for us. He is the center of his own affections, and he should be the center of our affections. For us to be self-centered is wrong, but when God is, it's a gift to us. This is what it means for him to be a jealous God. He is so convinced that no desire, no one, or no "thing" can bring ultimate satisfaction but him. So the question before us is not whether or not God has used violent means to accomplish his will, but in what ways does this apply to us? Because God used his people to carry out his judgments with the use of violence, this doesn't seem to be one of those issues where it is OK for God but never OK for us.

Secondly, I would like to respond to what Dr. Grey wrote about nonresistance in the New Testament. I want to affirm his discussion on the difference between seeking peace and doing nothing. I like his critique on what most people think of when they think about what it means to be a pacifist. A pacifist is supposed to do something: pray for their enemies, bless those who persecute them and love their enemies. This shifts the focus to the positive and captures the tenor of Jesus' comments to what we are blessed for. Notice the three things Jesus identifies as reasons to rejoice: "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matt. 5:11-12).

It is in this passage that Jesus introduces the topic/practice of what it means to be a peacemaker, a person who strives for reconciliation and a person who doesn't retaliate. The three categories are these: First: Be willing to suffer insults. Second: Be willing to suffer persecution. Third: Be willing to suffer the indignity of not retaliating against those that say all kinds of false things about you (gossip) because of your relationship with him.

Dr. Grey says in his follow-up to the discussion on the Sermon on the Mount that: "We all recognize that effectiveness in accomplishing peace is very important. When conflict arises with the possible outcome of war the stakes are high."

I agree with this sentiment, but I do not agree with the connection between these observations and the responsibilities of governments. The context of personal peacemaking, reconciliation, and nonretribution certainly is not the same as the context of national conflicts and the responsibility of governments to defend/reward the righteous and punish evil. This is overstepping the context of the Sermon on the Mount and confuses the responsibilities of individuals and governments.

According to Romans 13 the government has a mandate to protect and to preserve the good. The government loses this mandate from God when it does the opposite.

The application of the Sermon on the Mount to defensive violence, I believe, is not called for by the text. Remember, Jesus was dealing with three areas of concern—insults, persecution and gossip—not self-defense. The idea of defending our families against violence, I believe, is taken for granted and therefore is not mentioned by Jesus or Paul or anyone else in Scripture. In other words, it is expected by those of us who understand that life is a gift from God and there is something of value (in man) that needs defending. Also, it is taken for granted in Scripture that every legitimate government has the right and responsibility to protect their people from attack.

In 1 Timothy 5:8 the Apostle Paul requires men to provide for their families: “If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.”

Evidently, men were lazy and needed to be reminded of this responsibility. But it is so universal that men would provide protection for their families, there is no need for a specific command to do so. Not only that, but wouldn't it be incumbent on the head of the household to provide protection as well as food to his family? As men, loving our spouse like Christ includes laying down our life for her. That can mean getting involved with the protection of her and our children, even if violence is concerned.

Overall, Dr. Grey has gotten us to think about what we face most often—the need to get over ourselves and reconcile with those who oppose us and persecute us. He does well to remind us to be agents of reconciliation, because we are people so loved by God that we don't need the approval or kind words of others in order to live our lives with dignity. We live our lives in order to hear the words well done, good and faithful servant. If others don't like us, we love them in return, because we have been loved by the Father. I honor his efforts in this regard, and I have been moved to examine my life because of what he has written.

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