



by Layton Friesen

# You Are a Pacifist *and* You Called the Police?

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“If someone broke into your house, wouldn’t you call the police?” This question is often used as a handy trump card to dispense with pacifism, but it actually presents little problem to Mennonite pacifism.

Our broad Anabaptist tradition—with the notable exception of Balthasar Hubmaier—has had the moxie to claim that while the good of society may sometimes need the use of force, and while we may even depend on military or police defense for our own well-being as pacifists, we ourselves will not swing the sword. Others will.

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The Anabaptist pacifist tradition, until recently, has not been absolutely anti-war or anti-police. Read the Schleithem Confession of 1527. It says the sword is “ordained of God” and “punishes and puts to death the wicked, and guards and protects the good.” So far, that’s basic just war thinking. We cannot appeal to the tradition here to denounce every military or police action. Mennonites have generally assumed that a certain amount of killing is necessary to keep evildoers from ruining the world.

## An Elite Special-Task Force

But while Mennonites have not called for the abolishing of armies, they have also seen that you cannot announce God’s good news while killing people. Mennonites have thus seen the Church as an elite, heroic, special taskforce unit within God’s wider providence sent on a limited mission. We do not claim to be the totality of everything God is doing in the world, and we do not claim to know exactly how God is using our special mission within his Kingdom, but Christ has told us to exempt ourselves from killing in order to evangelize the world.

Our pacifism does not claim to be the solution to all the world’s immediate problems. It is a gesture towards the Kingdom of God that is in lock step with Jesus now redeeming the world—that’s all. In order to carry out this special task within the larger providential care of God for the world, we give up the right to kill people even for reasons of social order.

Try this analogy. Many countries recognize that doctors, politicians, clergy or others need to be exempt from combat in order to maintain the long-term viability of society. If all doctors are sent to combat, the nation will be crippled by disease; thus they can be exempt from fighting. A similar claim is made by Mennonites. God has a destiny of reconciliation in store for the world that someone needs to proclaim and live towards. Those on this mission have no weapons but love and forgiveness. It does not even occur to us that you could do what Christ leads us to do by killing people.

## Short- And Long-Term Solutions for Evil

God has both short-term and long-term solutions for evil. War is apparently a necessary short-term solution to keep a lid on chaos. To simply abolish killing is naïve, for now. But killing will never redeem the world—it’s a bloody mess that only breeds more hatred. It’s only a stop-gap measure given by God to create a measure of time and space for the Church to proclaim the Gospel.

But the Church has a specific vocation within God’s long-term plan of ridding the world of evil for good. In order to be faithful to this longterm project, we have to free ourselves from some parts of the short-term plan. By preaching the gospel, by creating church communities of vulnerability and forgiveness, by working to restore justice in a zillion ways, and by refusing to kill, we put on a drama, quite the theatre, of the Kingdom of God, overcoming the world and its war—eventually.

We are the shape, the figure of Christ in the world, Gethsemane-bent in suffering love. That is our elite mission, our heroic task in the providence of God: watching, waiting, worshipping, praying, loving, evangelizing and suffering in union with the Saviour.

## Our Mission is Not God's Sum Total

Our mission is not the sum total of what God is doing in the world. God’s hands move within the world in hidden, dark places, outside the Church. In his mysterious wisdom states, kings, and armies end up doing God’s will. Their own hell-bent idolatry and savagery and God’s calm use of them seem to coexist in God’s providence. Wars can be a servant of God’s will, though again, it is foolish to draw too clear a line from the war to the will of God.

## The NT Basis for Missional Pacifism

The New Testament basis for this missional pacifism is simple. First, the sum total of our existence as humans is now to preach the Kingdom of God (Matt. 6:31-33). Second, Christ bids us to follow him in the total abandonment of killing even for the benefit of society—that’s what the Kingdom looks like right now in its hidden fruitfulness within the world (Luke 6:27-31; John 16:20-22). Third, the New Testament never condemns the state’s use of the sword. In fact, the sword in the hands of the state is praised and appealed to by Christians themselves as an instrument of God to bring justice to the world (Acts 23:16-24; Rom. 13:1-4).

## Implications

This does not mean that Christians cannot be involved in government, though some Mennonites have drawn this conclusion. The New Testament forbids Christians to kill; it

does not forbid them to take leadership in their communities where this can serve the Church’s mission. Our modern welfare state provides many good ways to serve the world without being directly involved in killing.

This does not mean we cannot actively oppose unjust wars, military actions, or police brutality. God has not given governments a blank cheque to kill whomever they will. It may be that as the human community develops better methods of justice and conflict resolution, war will become like slavery, useless and stupid.

We should use whatever wits we have to find more peaceful, humane and effective ways of resolving conflict. For example, “restorative justice” is in many cases a vastly better form of justice than brute punishment. Capital punishment is an antiquated, ineffective, brutal way of solving crime. Romans 13 does not require us to keep it on the books. There’s no reason we can’t point that out in public.

When we do oppose a military action though, we should not simply say, “Christians do not kill; therefore neither should the military.” We should know the situation in, say, Syria, and point out exactly how a military action there will be useless or unjust. We have to provide factual knowledge of a specific action, not just general condemnations about armies and swords.

There will always be grey areas, murky places where discernment is hard and we are not sure how the Church’s vocation and the world’s sword relate. That in itself is not a weakness—any true Kingdom ethic will sync with society in fits and starts. I would rather be inconsistent than wrong.

This pacifism makes no sense if the Church is not proclaiming Christ to the world. It is not merely an “ethic” or a “moral,” though it is that. Pacifism is one of the necessary conditions of the Church carrying out the Great Commission.

There are other pacifisms, but this older Anabaptist version seems to me to deal with both the place of the sword in the state and the rejection of killing that Christ bids his followers to do. I invite all to join me in discerning this vocation of the Church. Can this be sharpened, pointed and fueled more fruitfully?

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