

Matthew 5:38-48

Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: but I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away. Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so? Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.

Nonresistance or Pacifism?

The essential doctrine of nonresistance is taught by Jesus in Matthew 5:38-48. From His words we see that nonresistance is personal. It has to do with the Christian's response to others who wrong him. This passage does not speak to social issues. It does not even speak to the Christian's response to people who wrong others. It assumes that the Christian stands apart from general society, even though he is in it. Nonresistance is not a method for social reform, but a personal response to evil.

Nonresistance is for born-again Christians, not for unregenerate men. It is for those who are willing to let loose of everything in this world and to suffer for His sake. It is a workable philosophy only for them. It holds no assurance of safety for life or possessions. The nonresistant Christian trusts God, not human agencies, to care for him.

Nonresistance is for the church, not for the state. It is not tailored to meet the needs of society in civil government. It is for the society of the

redeemed. God has ordained that civil authorities govern general society, formulate laws, correct inequities, and punish evildoers. He has not ordained that nonresistant Christians function in that capacity.

How is it that we have come to this question: Nonresistance or Pacifism? Formerly nonresistance was the peace doctrine of the Mennonite Church. The Bible taught it, Mennonites believed it, and that settled it.

But something happened to the church's position since the 1960s. Perhaps Mennonites became more aware of social issues than was previously the case. Perhaps the inevitable prophesied in the early 1950s has happened: with the loss of nonconformity, nonresistance was bound to fall as well. At any rate, by the time of the great peace-witness emphasis in the 1960s, much of the church was already off balance with regard to this doctrine. Peace was the principal thing. Faith and doctrine were minimized and shoved into the background.

Mennonites could link arms with anyone—Christian, Jew, atheist—in protests to the war in Vietnam as long as they were for peace. “Peace” was the unifying factor, not faith. “Peace”

superseded the doctrines of separation, the unequal yoke, the virgin birth, saving faith in Jesus Christ, and the return of Christ.

Could we not see that we were in danger of losing faith and sound doctrine, even the doctrine of nonresistance, through our obsession with peace? Is not peace only one facet of the Christian life? Why was there no love emphasis, or joy emphasis, or longsuffering emphasis, or gentleness emphasis, or goodness emphasis, or faith emphasis? Does the world need peace any more than the rest of these? What was needed then, and is needed today, is a faith-in-Jesus-Christ emphasis. Then men will find peace. "There is no peace, saith the LORD, unto the wicked" (Isaiah 48:22).

How foolish to try to force peace upon the wicked! What they need is a change of heart. Then they will have peace and live peaceably. "When a man's ways please the LORD, he maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him" (Proverbs 16:7).

This peace-witness emphasis represented a subtle though strategic shift in Mennonite thought and action. By stressing peace instead of nonresistance, room was made for both

nonresistance and political pacifism. The question was not “Nonresistance or Pacifism?” but the assumption was “Nonresistance *and* Pacifism!” The church made room for both philosophies in the interests of peace in the world and in the brotherhood. And those inclined toward pacifism seized the initiative. Those holding to Biblical nonresistance did not sufficiently counter it.

Since that time, pacifism has emerged as the dominant peace position of [the non-conservative branches of] the Mennonite Church. It appears in literature and in life; it is heralded from the pulpit and in seminars; it is promoted in conferences. Numerous issues that arose in the 1960s and '70s brought the nonresistance/pacifism issue into sharp focus—the capital punishment issue, the race question with the nonviolent resistance movement under the leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr., the antiwar protests, the draft resisters, the war taxes debate, the amnesty question—all of which relate to this question of nonresistance or pacifism and on which diverse views and positions were taken. These issues and the differing views did as much to lead to polarization in the brotherhood as any other single issue facing the church in those decades, including