

Can we talk about torture?

by Vicki Sairs

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it? Jeremiah 17:9

When I first saw the Abu Ghraib pictures, part of me wanted to believe that they were evidence of an aberration; I wanted to believe that this was the work of “a few bad apples.” But another part of me—the part that was willing to acknowledge what is in all of our hearts—knew that this probably wasn’t so.

And indeed, it wasn’t. The American soldiers in the pictures, doing things few of us wanted to see or believe, were not the only ones doing those things (and worse) in our name. In December 2008, when the Senate Armed Services Committee released the executive summary of their inquiry into the treatment of detainees in U.S. custody, Chairman Carl Levin (D-Mich.) said: “The abuses at Abu Ghraib, GTMO [Guantánamo] and elsewhere cannot be chalked up to the actions of a few bad apples. Attempts by senior officials to pass the buck to low ranking soldiers while avoiding any responsibility for abuses are unconscionable. The message from top officials was clear; it was acceptable to use degrading and abusive techniques against detainees. Our investigation is an effort to set the record straight on this chapter in our history that has so damaged both America’s standing and our security. America needs to own up to its mistakes so that we can rebuild some of the good will that we have lost.”

This report and others (please see sidebar) have provided details on U.S. interrogation practices since 9/11; they have also provided a cautionary glimpse into what can happen in the heat of war. Abuse of detainees has been widespread and brutal.

What does this have to do with us?

In a recent Pew survey, 49% of the general public and 62% of white evangelicals said torture was sometimes or often justified. This seems to indicate that many Americans, including some Christians, are comfortable enough with torture not to speak up against it.

Do we include ourselves in this number?

It seems to me that we should be talking about this in our churches, not just to clarify the issue for ourselves, but also for our young people and for anyone in our churches who is thinking about joining the military or has already done so.

I realize that it’s hard to have such a discussion, and I have some theories about why that might be, at least among CMC churches.

Theory #1: It’s none of our business. Those congregations that take a more traditional, two-Kingdom approach to Anabaptism see themselves as clearly separate from the government and the military and the decisions that these institutions make. They don’t believe in participating in the military or in using force or coercion, so they don’t necessarily feel obligated to try to do anything about torture, etc. War is war, war is awful, and they aren’t a part of it.

Theory #2: This is way too controversial to bring up. CMC congregations that have focused on outreach have sometimes downplayed Anabaptist theology. Many newcomers to these churches might be surprised to find out that some among them believe in nonresistance. Other congregations may talk about it, but not expect everyone to agree with nonresistance. In a time of war, feelings run high and conversations on war-related issues can be dicey. Either way, it’s easier not to bring it up.

Theory #3: What torture? This theory has two subsets. On the one hand, a lot of people really haven’t been exposed to this topic in any kind of depth, so they don’t feel informed enough to comment. On the other hand, some people have studied it and reached different conclusions. They don’t think we’ve tortured anyone as a matter of policy, so why would they speak out against it?

Difficult as opening up discussions on this issue may be, I think it’s the right thing to do. Our young people need our help in figuring out what to think, not just about torture, but about war as well. As a denomination, we have the theological tools to work on this. We owe it to our children to educate ourselves on this and think through the consequences of what we do and don’t say about it.

Working at RBC, I feel this keenly. We have faculty-led student discipleship groups that meet regularly for prayer. It’s been my privilege to lead a group for several years now, and at times we’ve prayed for students’ friends who are in the military in Iraq. War is a part of our young people’s world. They need help thinking clearly about it.

A straw poll on torture

I asked a student, Hans Shenk, to talk to other students and ask them what they thought about torture. Their responses ranged from an admission that they hadn’t

thought about it much to articulate statements against the dehumanizing effects of torture not just on the victim, but also on the person inflicting the torture.

Generally, they agreed that torture that caused permanent physical damage was wrong; several felt some torture might be justified if it could lead to information that would save many lives. Some cited Jesus to explain their opposition: “Christ says to love our enemies, so I don’t see how people can support torture in light of that.”

One said, “I think it comes down a lot to what you think about war, and about loving your enemies. I think it could definitely present a moral dilemma, but I’ve also heard it never works. If it does work, it could present a moral dilemma.”

And another: “I really, really want to be able to say flat-out that I think torture is always wrong, because I think it’s always terrible, and always grotesque, but I feel like the question is too complicated. Christians are supposed to love, right? So are we actually showing any more love to anyone if we don’t save lives by torturing someone? Are you really being unloving to someone, if you’re trying to foil their plans to kill other people? I haven’t reached a conclusion.”

These students are bringing up some of the key questions involved in this discussion: What about the ticking time bomb scenario? What if torture works? What about the long-term effects of torture on everyone involved? How can we argue against torture honestly? And, ultimately, what about war?

These are not questions that have no answers. Torture is not easy to parse morally, but arguments can be made against it ethically (rule of law) and also pragmatically (torture delivers unreliable information; the way we’ve treated detainees has been an effective recruiting tool for Islamic extremists; our policies have undermined protection for our soldiers when captured). And while the question of war is even more complicated, Anabaptists have done some serious thinking on that. We have some things to say.

If we can’t talk about this...

If we can’t talk about this in the body of Christ, what can we talk about? Our nation has been at war since October 2001. War and torture are moral, life-and-death issues. Isn’t that the kind of thing we should be able to talk about with our brothers and sisters?

I know these issues have become politicized, and I know it’s hard to bring them up when you fear you’ll be hurting or angering someone in your church who sees things differently. But I’d like to think we can make room for this kind of discussion in our congregations. Not talking about it doesn’t make the issues go away, it just makes us less well equipped to deal with them.

You can talk to Vicki about this by sending an email to vsairs@rosedale.edu. Or check out the sidebar for resources and talk about it with your friends—even at church. It won’t be boring.

Hans Shenk contributed to this article.

TALKING ABOUT WAR, TALKING ABOUT TORTURE

To find out more about nonresistance, Nick suggests the following titles:

- *What Would You Do* by John H. Yoder
- *No Easy Answers*, edited by Stephen Miller
- Two secular books about war that he liked are Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* and John Hersey’s *Hiroshima*. Nick says, “Both books show the awfulness of war and have deeply affected my thinking. I read *Hiroshima* about the time that I was really struggling with the guilt of what I had done.”

To find out more about U.S. treatment of detainees and related issues, you can check out:

- The Senate Armed Services Committee Inquiry into the Treatment of Detainees in U.S. Custody: <http://levin.senate.gov/newsroom/supporting/2008/Detainees.121108.pdf>
- The Red Cross torture report: <http://www.nybooks.com/icrc-report.pdf>
- The website of Evangelicals for Human Rights: <http://www.evangelicalsforhumanrights.org/>
- A thoughtful piece on what to do about the information we now have and why that matters, by a man who’s done extensive reporting on this topic, Mark Danner: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/22614>
- Key excerpts from the Taguba Report (a military inquiry into detainee abuse at Abu Ghraib, headed up by Major General Antonio Taguba (<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/4894033/>))
- Jane Mayer’s *The Dark Side: The Inside Story of How the War on Terror Turned into a War on American Ideals*
- A review of Philip Zimbardo’s book, *The Lucifer Effect: How Good People Turn Evil*, is at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/apr/29/politics1>. Zimbardo conducted the infamous Stanford Prison Experiment in 1971 to study the psychological effects of imprisonment. He had to cancel the experiment when student ‘guards’ began abusing student ‘prisoners.’

Articles in *Christianity Today*:

- “Five reasons torture is always wrong”: www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/february/23.32.html
- “Silence on Suffering: Where are the voices from the Christian Community on cruel and degrading treatment of detainees?": www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/octoberweb-only/12.0b.html
- “The Evil in Us”: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/july/2.22.html?start=1>
- “I was in prison and you abused me”: www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/mayweb-only/5-24-53.0.html