

Hard Questions in Difficult Times

A pastoral response

by Jon Showalter

What would you do if a gunman entered your church on a Sunday morning intending to shoot and kill?

That question moved from hypothetical to all-too-real last December in a Colorado congregation when a well-armed young gunman walked into the church lobby minutes after shooting and killing a parishioner in the church parking lot. There seems to be little doubt about his intentions—he planned to kill a lot of people—but before he could carry out that plan he was shot by an off-duty security guard, a young woman who happened to be carrying a gun.

The intruder was apparently injured by the woman's bullet, and then proceeded to kill himself.

The events in Colorado troubled Christians across the nation, in part because we recognized that what happened there could just as easily have happened in our church. And the events brought into focus questions about how Christians should respond in the face of senseless violence.

In the days that followed, a group of pastors from Conservative Mennonite Conference discussed those events in an email forum; a few weeks after that, the shootings were again the topic of discussion at a CMC pastors breakfast in the

Plain City area. The questions that emerged were practical ones. Is it justifiable to shoot and kill an assailant

under those circumstances? If not kill, maim? Is there a difference between defending myself and defending someone for whom I'm responsible?

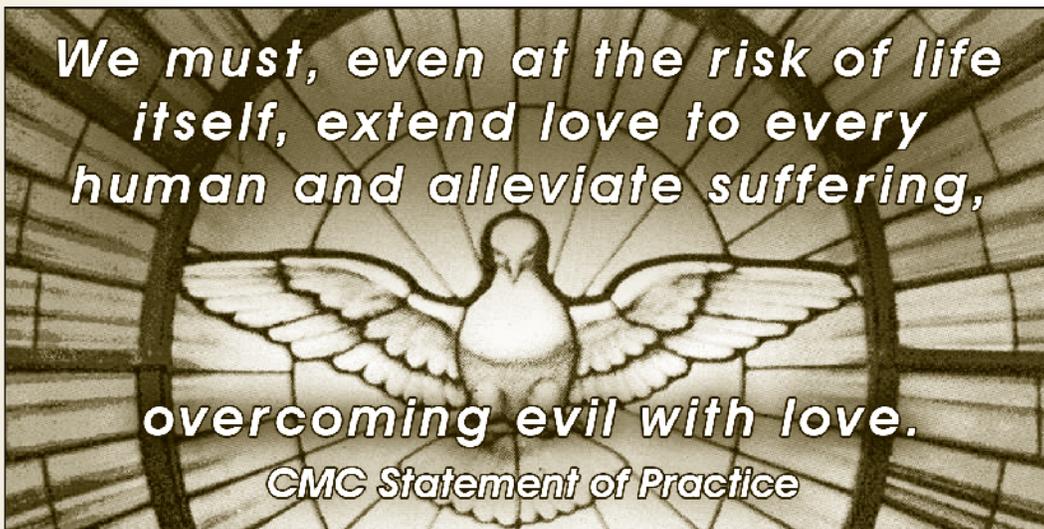
The churches of CMC have a long history of being committed to nonresistance; we've understood the teachings of Jesus in a way that had made us part of what is often called the historic peace churches. But the recent conversations among

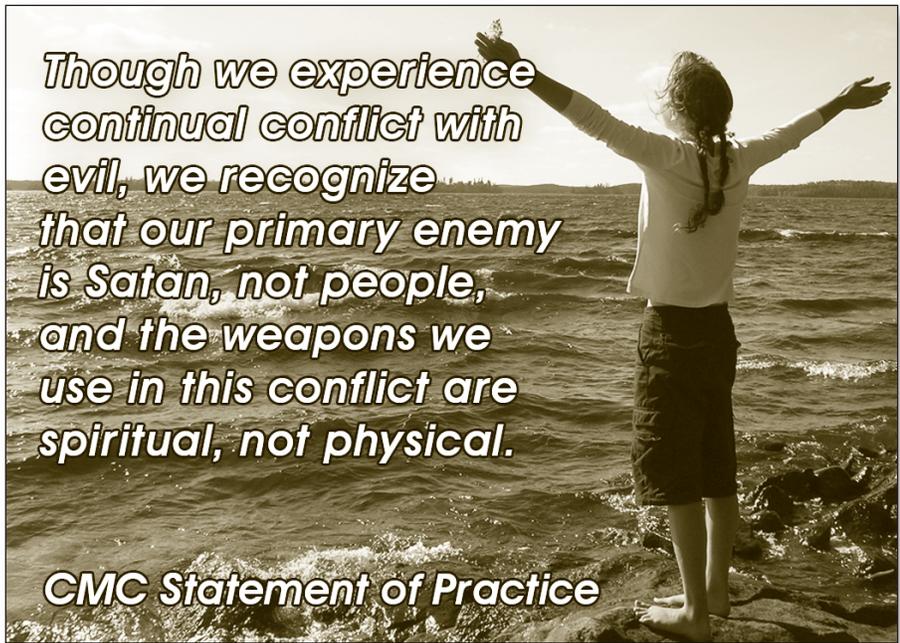
The recent conversations among CMC ministers have demonstrated that membership in a peace church is not the same thing as personally holding radical or strong convictions regarding peace.

We must, even at the risk of life itself, extend love to every human and alleviate suffering,

overcoming evil with love.

CMC Statement of Practice





Though we experience continual conflict with evil, we recognize that our primary enemy is Satan, not people, and the weapons we use in this conflict are spiritual, not physical.

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Last summer in the June issue of the *Brotherhood Beacon* Kevin Miller examined the uncertainty that exists among the current generation of young CMC adults regarding peace and nonresistance. Focusing on an extended family with roots in Greenwood, Delaware, he traced the ways convictions are shifting as generations come and go. Early in the twentieth century, Mennonites in Greenwood started their own Christian school rather than allow their children to recite the pledge of allegiance to the flag in the local public school. Nearly a century later some of the descendants of those families were, as Kevin discovered, prepared to fight to defend the nation if necessary. How does change of that magnitude come about? If the recent discussions among CMC

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pastors is a helpful indication, one important factor may be the changing convictions of pastors within the conference. As pastors discussed how they might have responded in the Colorado situation, it became clear that uncertainty about peace and nonresistance is not confined to young adults. In the course of those discussions—the email exchanges and the breakfast conversation—perspectives emerged that haven't historically been heard in the context of CMC.

Here are summaries of some of those perspectives, along with my reflections on them.

1. We need to consider the whole counsel of God, including the Old Testament. If we use the Old Testament as a guide, we'll recognize that God expects his people to exercise lethal force under some circumstances.

The Power of Love: John Mishler's Story

(written to the e-mail forum in which CMC pastors discussed the Colorado shootings and shared with John's permission)

My Dear Friends:

I hesitate to add my few ideas, but felt a personal experience might help us, since most of our speculations are usually hypothetical. I do this, not for any personal attention or honor, but to say, love and trust works. I have shared my experience only a few times and then only as an illustration in a sermon, but here goes.

Fifty years ago while pastoring the Talcum Mennonite Church in South-Eastern Kentucky, in a summer Sunday evening service, with our building about full with 100+ people, while I was just about at the end of the sermon for the evening, and with the double doors at the entrance open, a man stepped inside with a long barreled gun. In Kentucky, at that time, the gun was still an important symbol.

Everyone heard him, and as things got real quiet, he raised the gun and cocked it. No one missed hearing the "click". As he looked over the audience no one knew who he was after, since his parents, wife, and some of the rest of his extended family were sitting there, as well as many others of his acquaintances, including myself. The day before he had stopped in to talk with me at which time I again rebuked him for his drinking, to which he responded with "when I am drunk I carry a gun." So, who was he after?

No one moved and so without any hesitation, I left the pulpit and walked down the aisle towards him, who now had the gun turned right at me. I came to within less than six inches from the front of the gun barrel, I extending my right hand to him and calling out his name. After some hesitation, he dropped the gun and reached out his right hand.

I was not aware that one of our older men (one of the first members) was right behind me and while I was holding his hand, he said "let me see what kind of gun you have," at which time he slowly handed the gun to him. By that time his parents were there beside him leading him away without much resistance. It was over.

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A time elapse of only several minutes, but seemed like an eternity at the time. Some observations as I recall that incident:

Was I afraid? No (not then, but afterwards, yes). I had no time to consider what might happen. Only one thing mattered, he had to be disarmed for the sake of the 100+ people that were captive to him. Without much thought, I was ready to face whatever, for the safety of the others. Is that a Pastor's responsibility? What is in his heart?

Along with many other special particulars about the Mountain people, I had learned the value and importance of extending the right hand of friendship, which I felt he recognized as well. I had a congenial relationship with him, although I had witnessed to him a number of times about his need for a saviour, which he did not always appreciate. He was well known for his drinking and getting into fights, etc.

My only "add on" to the entire set of conversations, which I have appreciated, is that we so often underestimate the POWER OF LOVE and what God can do in even the worst situations. Obviously, God wanted some of us to live for a while longer, He has that in His hand, too. I am convinced that the most powerful entity in the universe is the exercise of LOVE. We are recipients of that love and have it to express in all our relationships. Paul says "For the Love of God is spread abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit." (Rom. 5:5). That is our Hope. Jesus said, "Greater love has no man, than that he would lay down his life for his friends." (John 15:13) I grew up during WWII and remember well the phrase used to justify the war effort, "To make the world a safe place for all people." That, of course, did not last very long after the war ended.

Nonresistance to evil is not, in my mind, a doctrine peculiar to our denomination, but is a way of life for all God's people in all our relationships. If this is too long, I am sorry, (you did not have to read it all). **BB**

Blessings,
John Mishler,
Bridgeville, DE

Each person is either our brother or sister in Christ or a sinner for whom Christ died.

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This argument goes to the heart of the issue of how we read the Bible. The just-war tradition has historically appealed to the Old Testament as an important source of guidance for how Christians should live. Since godly leaders in the Old Testament—Moses, Joshua, Samson, David—used violence with God's approval, it's clear that the use of violence can't be outside of God's will for his people. In contrast, the peace church tradition has emphasized that the life and teaching of Jesus has introduced a radically new way of living and a new way of being the people of God. That's why it's called the New Testament, after all, and why the writer to the Hebrews notes that "if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another." (Heb. 8:7)

This is not really an argument to be won or lost. It's rather a matter of deciding how to read Scripture most faithfully, and then following the implications of that decision to their logical conclusions. The way one understands the relationship between the two testaments has huge implications for how we live. And in CMC we've consistently affirmed the priority of the New Testament.

2. Let's recognize that we are nonresistant only because our parents or our churches have taught us that way; if we had been raised in a patriotic Baptist context, we'd all be patriotic Baptists instead.

There is no question that where and how one was raised profoundly shapes one's beliefs. And if we follow this line of reasoning far enough, we might conclude that theology is nothing more than biography. In other words, if what we believe is shaped so profoundly by the experiences of our lives—by where we were born, where we went to school, what we were taught, the circumstances of our lives—then we will be able to accurately predict a person's beliefs simply on the basis of their biography.

But we can't take this line of reasoning very far without undermining the entire Christian faith at a fundamental level. If my belief in nonresistance is solely the result of being born into or nurtured by a particular faith community, why not argue that I'm a Christian only because I happened to be born and nurtured among Christians? If Christian faith is seen merely as a set of



We're not the only ones . . .

The Assemblies of God

The following statement was adopted by the Assemblies of God on April 28, 1917, on the entry of the United States into World War I, and remained the official position of the denomination until 1967.

Resolution Concerning the Attitude of the General Council of the Assemblies of God Toward any Military Service Which Involves the Actual Participation in the Destruction of Human Life.

While recognizing Human Government as of Divine ordination and affirming our unswerving loyalty to the Government of the United States, nevertheless we are constrained to define our position with reference to the taking of human life.

We, as a body of Christians, while purposing to fulfil all the obligations of loyal citizenship, are nevertheless constrained to declare we cannot conscientiously participate in war and armed resistance which involves the actual destruction of human life, since this is contrary to our view of the clear teachings of the inspired Word of God, which is the sole basis of our faith.

Pentecostal Pacifism: The Origin, Development, and Rejection of Pacific Belief among the Pentecostals. Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Hillsboro, Kansas 1989. Jay Beaman. Page 24.

Greg Boyd

Greg Boyd is the founder and senior pastor of Woodland Hills Church in St. Paul Minnesota. In April of 2004 he began a series of sermons entitled *The Cross and the Sword* in which he set out to expose the danger of associating the Christian faith too closely with any political point of view. About twenty percent of his congregation (roughly a thousand people) left the church. In 2005 that sermon series served as the foundation for a book titled *The Myth of a Christian Nation* (Zondervan, 2007).

Boyd examines the questions about self defense, and more specifically, what to do if someone attacked his family. Boyd acknowledges that it's hard to say with certainty what he would do. But what should he do?

religious beliefs that I happen to have been shaped by, there is little reason for me to urge anyone else to embrace it. Unless, of course, it's also true. And if it's true, then it is true whether or not I believe it, whether or not my community believes it.

And so it is with peace and nonresistance. If Jesus intended us to live that way, it doesn't ultimately matter whether or not there is consensus about it in the Christian community. Those of us in the free church tradition believe that Christians have been misguided about many things over the past two millennia: the idea that Christian orthodoxy should be enforced by the power of the state (consider the execution of Servetus, a non-trinitarian heretic, in Calvin's Geneva), or the idea that unless babies are baptized to remove the guilt of original sin they would be lost were they to die.

This is not to say that the testimony of church history is irrelevant. If my understanding of Scripture leads me to positions so novel that no Christian has ever held them before, I should be deeply suspicious. But peace is hardly a novel doctrine in light of the testimony of the first three centuries of Christian

history. And as the sidebars to this article demonstrate, it's not a doctrine unique to Mennonites in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries either.

3. It may be appropriate to respond peacefully as an individual to aggression, but when someone I have the responsibility to protect is threatened that's a different matter. Then I'm justified in using force, even lethal force if necessary.

Some version of this distinction has long been at the heart of Christian just-war theory. Augustine was the first to develop it carefully, arguing in the fifth century that a Christian soldier acting under orders is not morally responsible for his actions. The superior who gave the orders is accountable, but not the soldier who carries them out. Luther also argued that Christians should be nonresistant when they are attacked personally, but that they are permitted to use lethal force when necessary in the defense of others.

There have, for centuries now, been Christians who held this position, and many American evangelicals still embrace it. What's new is to hear

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“I think it is clear from Jesus’ teaching, life, and especially his death that Jesus would choose nonviolence. So, it seems to me that a person who was totally conformed to the image of Jesus Christ, who had thoroughly cultivated a kingdom mind and heart, would do the same” (166).

With respect to the question of Christians serving in the military:

“While I respect that people will have differing convictions about this, I must confess that I find it impossible to reconcile Jesus’ teaching (and the teaching of the whole New Testament) concerning our call to love our enemies and never return evil with evil with the choice to serve (or not resist being drafted) in the armed forces in a capacity that might require killing someone. . . however much we might wish it were otherwise, there is no plausible way to insert a “just war” exception clause into Jesus’ teachings” (167-68).

For more from Greg Boyd visit his website at www.gregboyd.org.

Brian McLaren

After pastoring for many years, Brian McLaren now spends most of his time writing and speaking. While not fully committing himself to nonresistance, in his 2006 book titled *The Secret Message of Jesus* (Thomas Nelson, 2006), McLaren has this to say about the peaceable kingdom:

“The secret message of Jesus, by dealing with the root causes of war in this way, does not promise the easiest, fastest, safest and most convenient method of ending violent conflict—but it offers, I believe, the only sure one. Perhaps as few people today will be willing to believe and practice this message as when it was first proclaimed. There are plenty of popular escape hatches for those who don’t want to go there. But perhaps nearly two thousand years of trying these alternatives should begin to make us ready to consider that Jesus may have been more right, more practical, and wiser than we realized, and his secret message may have meant what it said about loving—not killing—enemies” (156). **BB**

For more from Brian McLaren visit his website at www.brianmclaren.net.

these perspectives argued in conversations among pastors in Conservative Mennonite Conference.

4. Nonresistance is a pet Mennonite doctrine that we are in danger of overemphasizing. It may be okay for us but we mustn’t be divisive about it and we shouldn’t expect the majority of Christians to embrace it.

Clearly it is possible to emphasize peace and nonresistance so obsessively that other aspects of the gospel get crowded out. But in an environment like the one we live in, surrounded by evangelical Christian voices who reject this part of Christ’s teaching, that doesn’t seem like a serious danger. It is also the case that there are individuals advocating peace and nonviolence who hold all sorts of other views that we don’t embrace. But that’s not an adequate basis for constructing a theology.

With regard to some theological understandings it’s easy for Christians simply to agree to disagree. With others, the differences are important enough that it’s hard to bridge the distance in the context of congregational life. For example, if Christians disagree about the timing of Christ’s return, they can probably get along nicely until the rapture (if there is one!) without ever settling the question. A disagreement about the mode of baptism may be more complicated, but many congregations allow baptismal candidates to choose the one they prefer.

That kind of flexibility may be more difficult in relation to peace. A congregation may choose to pray public prayers of blessing on servicemen

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heading off to protect the country—prepared to kill our enemies on our behalf if necessary—but that’s not a ceremony that Christians committed to nonviolence are likely to stick around for.

As I noted above, questions about or objections to the way of peace are hardly new. Since Augustine first formulated a Christian version of what had already long existed in the Greco-Roman tradition as just-war theory, the majority of Christians in the West have

embraced the idea that Christians may use violence under certain circumstances. What sobered me about the discussions among CMC pastors was that we were hearing just-war arguments coming from fellow ministers in the conference.

Steve Swartz concluded his editorial in the February

Brotherhood Beacon with the observation that further study of the issue of nonresistance with the ministers of CMC “seems timely and appropriate.” I agree, but would put it more strongly than that. I believe further conversation is necessary and urgent. Were CMC to quietly discard its commitment to teaching and practicing Jesus’ way of peace, we would hardly be the first group of Christians to do so. But that would make it no less tragic. And it would be ironic timing were we to do so just as so many other voices in the Western church are wondering whether they haven’t been ignoring an important part of the Gospel of the kingdom.

May God give us wisdom and courage.

BB

Jon Showalter has taught at Rosedale Bible College since 1991, and has served as academic dean since 1996. He lives with his wife, Dawn, and their four sons in Rosedale, Ohio.

