

Pacifism in the Early Church

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1. What are some biblical examples of Christian behaviour in the face of violent or unjust attack?

Stephen stoned – Acts 7:54-60 when stoned to death, Stephen said ‘forgive them’

Christians dragged to prison and death - Acts 8:1-3, Acts 22:3-5, Acts 26:9-11, Galatians 1:13

James killed – Acts 12:1-3 was killed with the sword

Paul was violent before his conversion – 1 Timothy 1:13 “I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man.”

Paul threatened and arrested – Acts 28:19 had no charge to bring against those who conspired to kill him.

Christians treated violently – Romans 12:17-21 overcome evil with good

Christian slaves beaten for doing what is right – 1 Peter 2:18-25 suffer patiently as Christ did

Do not fear suffering violent attack – 1 Peter 3:14-15, Rev.2:10 be faithful unto death (Christians facing opposition were called to have their own blood shed – Heb.12:3-4)

Do not war as the world does but use your spiritual weapons – 2 Cor. 10:3-6, Eph.6:12-18

Conclusions: Although the Jews used violence against Christians, there is no teaching or approved example of Christians ever using violence in self-defence although they had grown to large numbers. Rather, nonviolence was the teaching and practice.

2. What was the teaching of early Christians after the New Testament, regarding the use of force to deal with evil?

Dead Sea Scroll 4Q246 - the Son of God Scroll (before 70 AD) - “He will be called son of God, and they will call him son of the Most High. Like the sparks of a vision, so will their kingdom be; they will rule several years over the earth and crush everything; a people will crush another people, and a city another city.... Until the people of God arises and makes everyone rest from the sword. His

kingdom will be an eternal kingdom, and all his paths in truth and upright[tness]. The earth (will be) in truth and all will make peace. The sword will cease in the earth...”

Ignatius of Antioch (80-140) – “If anyone the more he is injured displays the more patience, blessed is he.”

Justin Martyr (140) – “...and we who formerly used to murder one another do not only now refrain from making war upon our enemies but also, that we may not lie nor deceive our examiners, willingly die confessing Christ.”

Clement of Alexandria (150-215) – “By his own blood and by his word he has assembled an army which sheds no blood in order to give them the Kingdom of Heaven.”.... “In peace not in war we are trained.”

Athenagoras (177) - “We have learned not only not to return blow for blow, nor to go to law with those who plunder and rob us, but to those who smite us on one side of the face to offer the other side also...”

Irenaeus (183) – “...caused such a change in the state of things, that these nations did form the war-lances into plowshares... that is into instruments used for peaceful purposes... and when smitten offer also the other cheek...”

Tertullian (200) - “Shall the son of peace take part in the battle when it does not become him even to sue at law?”

“If one attempt to provoke you by manual violence, the admonition of the Lord is at hand: ‘To him,’ He says, ‘who strikes you on the face, turn the other cheek also.’ Let outrageousness be wearied out by your patience.”

“Christ, in disarming Peter, unbelted every soldier...”

“And shall he apply the chain and the prison and the torture and the punishment, who is not the avenger even of his own wrongs?”

Origen (225) - “We no longer take up ‘sword against nation’ nor do we ‘learn war anymore’

having become children of peace for the sake of Jesus who is our leader.”

Lactantius (260-339) – “How can a man be just who injures, hates, despoils and puts to death? Yet they who strive to be serviceable to their country do all these things...”

Martin of Tours (316-397) - “I am a soldier of Christ. To fight is not permissible for me.”

Conclusion: As with Martin of Tours and probably the Thundering Legion, Christians were forced into military service. Yet the literature shows a nonviolent position based on biblical principles.

3. When did Christianity change from a non-violent position to justification of the use of violence?

Lactantius on Constantine (240-320) – “Constantine was directed in a dream to cause the heavenly sign to be delineated on the shields of his soldiers...”

Eusebius (263-339) - “...then in his sleep the Christ of God appeared to him with the same sign which he had seen in the heavens, and commanded him to make a likeness of that sign which he had seen in the heavens, and to use it as a safeguard in all engagements with his enemies.”

Augustine (354-430) – “For peace is not sought in order to the kindling of war, but war is waged in order that peace may be obtained.”....”Let necessity, therefore, and not your will, slay the enemy who fights against you. As violence is used towards him who rebels and resists, so mercy is due to the vanquished or the captive, especially in the case in which future troubling of the peace is not to be feared....”

Conclusion: Constantine’s visions (including an earlier vision of Apollo in *Panegyrici Latini* 6.7.21) were politically motivated, and Christian leaders capitulated after centuries of persecution.

Thought Questions:

Consider carefully how the following questions are worded and how you would respond:

1. Who is at fault when one person murders or attacks another person? The murderer or the victim?
2. Who is at fault when one person murders or attacks another person, and a third person gives his life for the victim but does not use violence to stop the murderer?

3. Should you let other people kill your enemies and die to protect you while you only do nonviolent things like pray, quote scripture, give medical aid to the enemy, or become a human shield for the victims?

4. Why would God want his people to use violence in the Old Testament and not in the New Testament?

5. Would you be willing to commit sins against your conscience (e.g. killing the enemy, adultery, torture, child molesting, rape, deny Christ) to save your own life? To save the life of other innocent victims? Why or why not?

6. After reading the quotes from the early Christians above, are you convinced that nonviolence was their faith and practice?

7. If your answer is ‘yes’ in #6, how do you explain the shift to the Christians’ justification of violence, that occurred in the 4th century?

8. How do you apply the teaching of “love your enemies” when someone is trying to kill you or an innocent third party? Do you love your enemy only when he is not being an enemy? Do you love your enemy by taking his life?

9. Do you think the quotations of the early Christians above necessarily preclude their use of violence to deal with evil?

Scenarios:

Considering the teaching of Christ to love your enemy, do good to them, and to turn the other cheek, discuss what you would *want* to do in the scenarios described here:

Scenario #1: An armed home invader threatens to rape and dismember your family unless you kill him first, deny Christ, rape someone, or abuse a child.

Scenario #2: Your child is being bullied in school.

Scenario #3: Your friend is being physically abused by her husband.

Scenario #4: You see an elderly person being physically attacked on the street.

Scenario #5: You are verbally abused by your supervisor at work.

Scenario #6: You receive a notice to appear for military duty.

Scenario #7: Your child wants a violent hero video game for Christmas.