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Peace Essay

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Practicing vs. Preaching: Are we acting on our own theology?

Most everyone has heard the old saying, “You can talk the talk, but can you walk the walk?” Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. surely had this idea in mind in 1963, when, while sitting in an Alabama jailhouse, he composed his “*Letter from Birmingham Jail*”. Some of you may even have read his passionate critique of the Alabama clergymen, written at a time when the Civil Rights movement had taken hold of the south. King asserted his belief that the church’s bystander-approach to segregation was hypocritical because segregation in the south contradicted its moral principles when he said: “The contemporary church is so often a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound.” (King 5). From his perspective, only a disconcerting few church leaders had stepped up to “walk the walk” and defend the rights of their Christian brethren. Unfortunately, King’s letter still resonates today, albeit in a slightly different manner. The ever-changing social sphere may present new challenges on a daily basis, but our convictions regarding peace and moral justice are only relevant so long as our actions reflect our theology.

The idea of being a peace witness has long been central to Mennonite church theology. The term “peace witness” itself is derived from Hebrew and more accurately refers to a “peace community” (Witness 1). Regardless of its true meaning, the term is sometimes associated with inaction, as the common school of thought places passivity in the face of violence at the very peak of the moral high ground. Debunking this type of thinking was perhaps King’s main purpose for writing “*Letter from Birmingham Jail*”. While pacifism is certainly a defining

element of Christ's teachings, the danger of falling into a routine of laxity as a result of strict obedience to this idea has been a concern of some theologians.

Theologian Walter Wink's desire to clarify Christ's teaching and denounce the laxity that had come to be paired with pacifism resulted in the creation of a new concept known as Jesus's third way. In his book, *Engaging the Powers*, Wink encourages his readers to move beyond the common fight or flight responses and consider an alternative, a third way, located somewhere between the submissive behavior associated with flight and the violent retribution that materializes out of our instinct to fight (Wink 187). His argument revolves around the most notable quote from Jesus's teaching on nonviolence, from Matthew 5:38-39: "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." When taken at face value, the quote appears suggest that the most virtuous response to direct violence is absolute submission, but Wink insists that this is not what Jesus was trying to convey (Wink 176). Instead, this quote provides the basis for Jesus's third way: active, nonviolent confrontation.

The wording of Jesus's message, however, can lead to some misunderstandings. The resistance he advocates *against* in Matthew is more specifically that of violent retribution, not active protest. In fact, the very act of "turning the other cheek" was meant to be an act of protest, for a blow to the face in those days did not occur in actual fighting as often as it did in shows of authority; it was a method of denouncing an indolent slave or marking an inferior through a backhanded slap (Wink 176). Therefore, if a slave were to one day turn his cheek after receiving such a blow, it would not only diminish the effect of the master's attempt at humiliation, but also empower the slave (Wink 177). If the master decided to strike again, the positioning would force him to do so with a fist, effectively elevating the slave to the status of an equal (Wink 176).

While it is true that Jesus's instruction at that time was specifically directed at slaves, social outcasts, or oppressed citizens, we must not forget that the essence of his message is unending, and its relevance can be found in many historical struggles.

When segregation had taken hold of the south in the 1950s and 1960s, some took Christ's calling to heart, while others fell into the shadows of conformity. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was perhaps the biggest voice for social reform during segregation, and even though his protests are considered peaceful and Christian today, they were initially challenged by many religious authorities. Some theologians went so far as to say that his tactics were "overly aggressive" and claimed that segregation could only be defeated through unhurried negotiation (Brown 14). King, however, saw the perfect opportunity to put Christ's theology to work and change the social climate of Alabama, and the nation as a whole, for the better. He refused to accept the situation that many, including several church leaders, had come to see as a tolerable injustice. In his letter to these very church leaders, he stated plainly, "I came to Birmingham with the hope that the white religious leadership of this community would see the justice of our cause...[But] I have been disappointed." (King 5).

Unfortunately, some of these apathetic tendencies seem to have trickled into modern customs. The church as a whole is sometimes perceived to be a model for conformity and conservatism instead of as the active body of peaceful diligence it could become. Maybe this is because we too see Christ's teachings as a model of perfect passivity and forget that his words are a true roadmap for nonviolent engagement. According to Mennonite theologian Lauren Friesen, "[Some] Mennonites have regarded the absolute claims of Jesus (pacifism) as an impossible ideal, retained as an article of faith subject to various compromises when put to the test." (Friesen 15). His concept of the "responsible pacifist" is centered on his fear that pacifism

itself has pushed many upright Christians into a state of social indifference so that they can remove themselves from conflict entirely. However, Friesen believes that shifting towards activism allows Christians to “hold fast to the ideals of Jesus while developing paradigms for responsible Christian participation within society.” (Friesen 15)

Friesen’s argument serves as a reminder that Jesus implores all of us to be champions of peaceful opposition, not passive bystanders or witnesses of oppression. As Mennonites in a world of continuously-escalating violence, starvation, homelessness, discrimination, and radical ideologies, it is our Christ-given responsibility to break away from the habit of being “peace witnesses” and begin again with a desire to see the harms of society rectified through nonviolent engagement. Dr. King was able to break away from the mindset of “waiting for change” and led an entire nation in peaceful protest against unjust social norms, eventually shattering the stigma associated with active opposition. In the first century, the apostle Paul resolved to see Gentiles given the same opportunities to worship God and take part in the Kingdom of Heaven, eventually leading to his arrest and condemnation by his own people (Acts 21:27-29). Even Jesus, the living epitome of nonviolence and goodwill towards all people of the earth, was crucified after calling for the masses to break away from a stagnant ideology and participate in the new, living message. This form of active, public involvement is God’s mission for us as well.

Now, nearly two thousand years later, society has become much more complex, but Jesus’s message has not changed. Our theology may be what holds us together as followers of Christ, but it is our actions that truly represent the purpose of Jesus’s commission. Today we are so often faced by social and political strife that at times it can be hard to conceptualize a reasonable and nonviolent response, but our response cannot be to do nothing. The church as a whole has certainly progressed since Selma in 1965, but modern race issues such as those we

have seen Ferguson, Missouri are still facing us today. We still have to take the active role Dr. King exemplified and be true advocates for peace and social justice, not just conscientious bystanders. Yes, it is true that some will question our beliefs and even challenge the viability of pacifism in the modern world, but as long as we remain true to our theology and strive to become the ambassadors of peace Christ envisioned, our ability to change the world is limitless.

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