

Peacemaking among the Early Followers of Jesus

Is Christianity a Nonviolent Faith?

Introduction

This resource provides an introduction to the witness to peace and nonviolence found in the New Testament and the writings of the Church Fathers. It is not intended to be exhaustive. It introduces issues and invites participants to seek further insight and understanding. Nonetheless, the resource covers a great deal of material. Depending on the time available, the resource may be a two-week study or may be easily extended to four or more weeks.

Goals

- To explore the witness to peace and nonviolence found in the New Testament and the writings of the Church Fathers
- To examine the question “Is Christianity a nonviolent faith?”

Session 1—A Time of Exploring

Materials

- Bibles
- copies of the material for each of the three teams
- paper
- pencils

Advance Preparation

- Copy the material for each of the three teams.

Opening (5 minutes)

Briefly introduce the participants to one another, if needed. Invite the participants to join in prayer. Describe the purpose of the study. Use or adapt the following words:

As we reflect upon Christian attitudes toward the use of violence, we turn to the early church. What was the understanding of the early Christians of the appropriate role of violence for the followers of Jesus? How did the first generations of Christians approach nonviolence? What might we learn from them for our lives today? In this study, we will explore these questions by looking at passages in the New Testament and

in the writings of the Church Fathers, the theologians and writers of the first five centuries after the death and resurrection of Jesus. In this session, we will create teams that will explore various writings to see what they say about how the followers of Jesus approach violence and nonviolence. One team will look at passages in the Gospels; one team will look at passages in the Epistles; and one team will look at passages in the writings of the Church Fathers. Each team will engage in discussion of how their passages speak to nonviolence. Next week the teams will report back.

Exploring the Witness of the Early Church

(45 minutes)

Divide the participants into three groups. Assign one group to look at the material from the Gospels, one group to look at the material from the Epistles, and one group to look at the material from the Church Fathers.

Gospel Team

Your task is to work through the various passages and create a report on what the Gospels say about how the followers of Jesus approach violence and nonviolence.

1. Read Matthew 5:9–12, 38–42. Discuss the following:
 - What did you notice?
 - What surprised you?
 - How do these verses speak to the role of nonviolence in the lives of the followers of Jesus?
 - What attitude are the followers of Jesus called to have toward those they consider their enemies?
 - Walter Wink and other biblical scholars argue that Jesus' instructions to turn the other cheek, to give over one's coat as well as one's shirt, and to carry the soldiers' pack two miles would, in those days, have all been exchanges that shamed the instigator of the conflict. What does that say about the nature of nonviolence? How does it speak to the view that nonviolence means simply becoming the “door-mat” of evildoers?

2. Read Matthew 10:16–22; Matthew 24:9–14; Mark 13:9–13; and Luke 21:12–19. Discuss the following:
- What did you notice?
 - What surprised you?
 - How do the passages speak to the role of nonviolence in the lives of the followers of Jesus?
 - What kind of treatment does Jesus tell his followers that they should expect?
 - How does this fit with God’s purpose to share the good news of Jesus?
 - How does the willingness to be a *martus* (literally, “a witness,” the root of the English word “martyr”) relate to the salvation of the individual?
 - Do you think the church should engage in violence to avoid suffering?

3. Read Matthew 26:47–56; Mark 14:43–50; Luke 22:47–53; and John 18:1–11. Discuss the following:
- What did you notice?
 - What surprised you?
 - How do the passages speak to the role of nonviolence in the lives of the followers of Jesus?
 - What does it mean that Jesus told his followers to “put away the sword”?
 - Though he rejects violence to establish his kingdom, which is “not of this world,” Jesus demonstrates that he is master of his anger and the entire situation, and thus shifts the focus from himself as the disturber of the peace and back onto the Romans. What does Jesus’ refusal to retaliate, though he easily could have, reveal about his understanding of the Roman soldiers?
 - How does the refusal to use force to protect oneself create the opportunity for others to reflect on their violent behavior and thus open the possibility for transformation?

Epistles Team

Your task is to work through the various passages and create a report on what the Epistles say about how the followers of Jesus approach violence and nonviolence.

1. Read Romans 12 and 13. Discuss the following questions:
- What did you notice?
 - What surprised you?
 - How do the passages speak to the role of nonviolence in the lives of the followers of Jesus?
 - How are followers of Jesus called to respond to those who are considered the enemy?
 - What are the most important messages in the two chapters?

2. Read 1 Peter 3:8–18a. Discuss the following questions:
- What did you notice?
 - What surprised you?
 - How does the passage speak to the role of nonviolence in the lives of the followers of Jesus?
 - Persecution and abuse are the presupposed realities for the followers of Jesus, according to this passage. What behavior does the author teach is appropriate in such a situation? What specific responses are identified?

Church Fathers Team

For the first three centuries of the Christian church, though there was a wide divergence of opinion on matters like the relationship of the Father to the Son, the nature of Christ, and the books that should be considered canonical, the Church Fathers were unequivocal in their opposition to the use of violence. Your task is to work through the various passages and create a report on what the Epistles say about how the followers of Jesus approach violence and nonviolence.

1. Read the following passages from Justin Martyr. Justin Martyr was born at Flavia Neapolis (present day Nablus in Palestine, just north of Jerusalem) around the year 100. He converted to Christianity in about 130. He taught and defended the Christian religion in Asia Minor and at Rome, where he suffered martyrdom about the year 165.

We who hated and slew one another, and because of (differences in) customs would not share a common hearth with those who were not of our tribe, now, after the appearance of Christ, have become sociable, and pray for our enemies, and try to persuade those who hate (us) unjustly, in order that they, living according to the good suggestions of Christ, may share our hope of obtaining the same (reward) from the God who is Master of all.¹ (Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 14.3)

We, who had been filled with war and mutual slaughter and every wickedness, have each one—all the world over—changed the instruments of war, the swords into ploughs and the spears into farming instruments, and we cultivate piety, righteousness, love for men, faith, (and) the hope which is from the Father Himself through the Crucified One.² (Justin Martyr, *Dialogue*, 109)

Discuss the following questions:

- What did you notice?
- What surprised you?
- How do the passages speak to the role of nonviolence in the lives of the followers of Jesus?
- In the quote from the *First Apology*, how does Justin respond to the accusation that Christians do not properly contribute to the civic good by refusing military service?
- How is a life committed to nonviolence actually beneficial to the larger community, according to Justin?
- In the quote from the *Dialogue*, how does Justin connect Isaiah 2:4 to the church of his day?
- How has Jesus transformed his followers?

2. Read the following passage from Hippolytus, who probably was born around 180. Hippolytus was a presbyter of the Church of Rome at the beginning of the third century. He came into conflict with the pope and the majority of the Church of Rome over questions of Christology. Around 217 or 218, Hippolytus left the communion of the Roman Church and had himself elected as the head, or bishop. He became reconciled to the Church of Rome and, during a period of persecution by the emperor Maximus Thrax, was exiled to Sardinia with the pope and other church leaders. He died in the mines on the island. After his death, his remains were returned to Rome. He was revered as a martyr and named a saint.

A military man in authority must not execute men. If he is ordered, he must not carry it out. Nor must he take military oath. If he refuses, he shall be rejected. If someone is a military governor, or the ruler of a city who wears the purple, he shall cease or he shall be rejected. The catechumen or faithful who wants to become a soldier is to be rejected, for he has despised God.³ (*The Apostolic Tradition*, Canon 16, 9–11)

Discuss the following questions:

- What did you notice?
- What surprised you?
- How does the passage speak to the role of nonviolence in the lives of the followers of Jesus?
- What does the threat of excommunication say about the Church's understanding of the prohibition against killing?
- Copies of this passage show that it was translated and used in Latin, Greek, Ethiopic, and Egyptian well into the fourth century. What does that say about how Jesus' followers viewed its proscription against military service?

3. Read the following passage from "The Martyrdom of Marinus at Caesarea," from *The Church History*, written by Eusebius. Eusebius was born around 275. He became bishop of Caesarea around 313. His many writings include *The Life of Constantine*, *Panegyric of Constantine* (In Praise of the Emperor Constantine), *The Church History*, and materials focused on martyrs. He played a key role at the Council of Nicea and in various theological controversies until his death in 339.

This story tells of a Christian soldier about to be named a centurion, who is challenged by another man about the legality of a Christian serving in this position. The soldier is then warned by his bishop that he must make a choice.

When he came out from the tribunal, Theotecnus, the bishop there, took him aside and conversed with him, and taking his hand led him into the church. And standing with him within, in the sanctuary, he raised his cloak a little, and pointed to the sword that hung by his side; and at the same time he placed before him the Scripture of the divine Gospels, and told him to choose which of the two he wished. And without hesitation he reached forth his right hand, and took the divine Scripture. 'Hold fast then,' says Theotecnus to him, 'hold fast to God, and strengthened by him mayest thou obtain what thou hast chosen, and go in peace.' Immediately on his return the herald cried out calling him to the tribunal, for the appointed time was already completed. And standing before the tribunal, and manifesting greater zeal for the faith, immediately, as he was, he was led away and finished his course by death.⁴ (Eusebius, *The Church History*, 7.15)

Discuss the following questions:

- What did you notice?
- What surprised you?
- How does the passage speak to the role of nonviolence in the lives of the followers of Jesus?
- How would such a story have illustrated the community's values to the young people who sought to follow Jesus during the period in which it was written?
- How would it speak to the young people?
- How would it impact the church's young people who might be tempted to resort to violence?

Closing (5 minutes)

Bring the groups together. Remind the teams that they will report at the next session on how the material they read speaks to the nonviolence of the followers of Jesus.

Encourage the participants to continue to explore questions related to how the followers of Jesus approach nonviolence during the coming week. Suggest that they visit www.pcusa.org/peacemaking/actnow/actnow.htm#nonviolence to find ideas for further reflection. Note that their reflection could involve keeping a journal in which they dialogue with Jesus about their feelings, doubts, concerns, insights, and more. Close with prayer.

Session 2—A Time of Sharing

Opening (7 minutes)

Open with prayer. Allow the teams five minutes to finalize their presentations.

Sharing What We Learned (30 minutes)

Give each team ten minutes to present their insights into the ways the material they studied speaks to how the followers of Jesus are to respond to violence and nonviolence. Allow questions for clarification to make sure all the participants have as full an understanding as possible.

What Do We Do Next (15 minutes)

Discuss the following questions:

- What do you notice about what you heard?
- What surprised you? What is missing?
- What questions do you have?
- What did you get out of this study?
- What are you going to do with what you gained?
- What steps do you want to take next in living nonviolently as a follower of Jesus?

Closing (3 minutes)

Thank group members for participating. Close with prayer.

Resources for Further Study

The Presbyterian Peacemaking Program provides links to a variety of resources at www.pcusa.org/peacemaking/actnow/actnow.htm#nonviolence.

Readings

Walter Wink, *Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003.

John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994.

Willard Swartley, ed., *The Love of Enemy and Nonretaliation in the New Testament*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992.

C. John Cadoux, *The Early Christian Attitude to War: A Contribution to the History of Christian Ethics*. London: Headley Bros. Publishers, 1919 (available in the public domain online at http://oll.libertyfund.org/Texts/Cadoux0358/Christian-War/0305_Bk.html).

Organizations

Presbyterian Peace Fellowship

(www.presbypeacefellowship.org)

Christian Peacemaker Teams (www.cpt.org)

Fellowship of Reconciliation (www.forusa.org)

Christian Alliance for Progress (www.christianalliance.org)

About This Resource

The Rev. Timothy F. Simpson is President of the Christian Alliance for Progress and parish associate at Lake Shore Presbyterian Church in Jacksonville, FL. He teaches in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at the University of North Florida and is editor of the journal *Political Theology*.

Ervin Bullock, Associate for Network Support, and W. Mark Koenig, Associate for Resources and Publications, Presbyterian Peacemaking Program, served as editors.

Notes

1. http://oll.libertyfund.org/Texts/Cadoux0358/Christian-War/HTMLs/0305_Pt04_Part2.html#LF-BK0305pt02ch01_ftnref112.
2. http://oll.libertyfund.org/Texts/Cadoux0358/Christian-War/HTMLs/0305_Pt04_Part2.html#LF-BK0305pt02ch01_ftnref206.
3. <http://www.bombaxo.com/hippolytus.html>.
4. <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf201.iii.xii.xvi.html>.

