

The Biblical Basis of Non-resistance #1.

We live in a strife-torn world. We have no choice in the matter. There is no other option. Where else could we live? From north to south, from east to west, the blight of strife is everywhere. The practice of non-resistance presupposes that the saint finds himself in this kind of world, a strife-torn world.

Nonresistance was not needed in the Garden of Eden. Neither will there be any occasion for it in heaven. But at this stage of history, we must live our life in a fallen world, inhabited by many people who do not know the way of peace (Romans 3:17).

The Origin and Spread of Strife.

Genesis 3 tells us of the spoiling of a once congenial relationship; let us call it man's first quarrel with God. That is followed very closely, in Genesis 4, with the story of man's first quarrel with man. However, even before Cain killed Abel, his father Adam, had started the habit of blaming his wife, but not until he had first committed with her the first act of disobedience to God. We ought to learn from the sequence of those happenings that strife between man and man is the inevitable result of an impaired relationship between man and God.

After the Fall, it did not take long for the fighting spirit to become deeply embedded in fallen human nature. If I want my way in preference to God's way (Isaiah 53:6), I will likewise want my way in preference to my neighbour's way. A world in which each person wants his own selfish way is bound to have in it a great deal of interpersonal and intergroup conflict. Even large-scale wars have this as their underlying source. The prevalence of this element of conflict in society is the circumstantial factor that has necessitated God's call for His people to be characteristically non-resistant in the midst of a strife-torn world.

Restraining Measures Introduced.

Following the Flood, lest the earth be quickly filled with violence again (Genesis 6:13), God introduced restraining measures. Noah was told, "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man" (Genesis 9:6). Possibly this was the point at which God implemented the principle of civil

government. However it is viewed, clearly this announcement was designed to be a deterrent against crime. The offender was not to go free as Cain seemingly did. The note at the conclusion of this announcement highlights the sanctity of human life. “For in the image of God made he man.” This is God’s call to stop and think: “That person on whom you are tempted to inflict harm is My workmanship and bears My image.”

After calling to Himself a covenant people, God gave them laws. Some of these were civil in nature, for God knew the degree to which they remained a carnally minded people given to strife. In the Ten Commandments, murder was forbidden (Exodus 20:13). Furthermore, personal retaliation was prohibited and legal retaliation was restricted to a just and equivalent injury (Leviticus 24:20).

The Envisioned Ideal

The spiritual restoration of man has always been God’s ultimate purpose. God’s ideal, in terms of human relations, is depicted in the words of Isaiah 11:9: “They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain.” However, the full realization of this goal needed to wait until the arrival of a new stage in God’s program. The Old Testament was therefore an era during which God depended heavily upon outwardly imposed restrictive measures. And, since the majority of people still choose to remain in their unregenerate state, the need for restrictive laws today, based on those given to Israel, continues.

How Does This All Relate to Me?

In a very direct way. For there are unavoidable consequences attached to living in this kind of world. Like everyone else, I will at times be taken advantage of, mistreated, and falsely accused. At some time or other, I will likely become the object of someone’s jealousy or hatred. Furthermore, if I am a Christian, this fact alone will bring upon me additional suffering. For, in the degree to which I live a blameless life, I will be to the ungodly people around me a source of irritation. Jesus forewarned His followers that this would be their normal lot. “If the world hate you, ye know that it hated Me before it hated you” (John 15:18).

Where Do I Learn How to Respond to Such Treatment?

“Is there any word from the LORD?” (Jeremiah 37:17). There is, positively! From the lips of the holiest men who have ever lived has come repeatedly this claim, “Thus saith the LORD. . .” Under the promptings of God, this spoken Word, as much of it as God wanted preserved, became the written Word.

This process, known as divine revelation, was progressive in nature. As “holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost” (2 Peter 1:21), more and more of God’s plan and will for man became known. Hebrews 1:1 highlights the culmination of this process: “God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by His Son.” During His ministry, the rate of divine revelation was accelerated like never before. But still the process was not completed. Before His return to heaven, Jesus told His followers, “I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now” (John 16:12). When He came back to earth on the day of Pentecost, in the Person of the Holy Spirit, He began to teach them these “many things.” Under His direction, the New Testament Scriptures came into being. This explains why Paul could make the claim recorded in 1 Corinthians 14:37: “The things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord.”

We now have our answer to the question in focus. The Bible is the highest and final authority by which Christians live. Therein every sincere seeker can learn how God wants him to respond to those who commit wrongs against him. *From The Eastern Mennonite Testimony, volume XXXIII, October 2001*

The Biblical Basis of Non-resistance #2.

A Common Mistake

The normal place to start reading a book is at its beginning. The Bible begins with the Old Testament. Sometimes those who want to find the answer to a question get stalled in the Old Testament. The Old Testament, no less than the New Testament, does constitute a

part of the divinely inspired Word. However, much of it was designed to be temporary and preparatory in nature. Since, as has been shown, God revealed His will for man gradually, it is not surprising to find in Old Testament times, even among the people of God, a lower ethical norm than God requires now. A further reason for this difference lies in the unique duality that characterized the Old Testament people of God. For reasons known best to God, Israel had assigned to her the functions of both church and state. Accordingly, God supplied her with regulations to implement the maintenance of law and order and the curbing of violence. Even capital punishment was to be administered for some crimes (Exodus 21). That Israel was God's agent to punish wicked nations is another dimension of how God used His people in this Old Testament period. Unfortunately, These God-directed actions are built upon to justify participation in warfare by many today.

Early Appearances of Nonresistance

As already indicated under specified circumstances during the Old Testament era, the use of coercive measures was sanctioned by God. However, we must not allow this detail to distort the total picture. Even before the giving of the Law, along the godly line, the light of divine revelation was sufficiently bright to allow men to perceive that peaceable personal relationships constituted God's ideal.

Rather than becoming involved in a quarrel, Abram contented himself with the less than best choice of land (Genesis 13). Rather than strive for them, Isaac allowed the herdsmen of Gerar to take from him the wells that his servants had dug (Genesis 26). Joseph, the once-badly-mistreated brother, when the opportunity for revenge arrived, chose rather to forgive (Genesis 45). In their response to those who wronged them, these Old Testament saints, on at least these occasions, rose to the New Testament level of returning good for evil.

It is noteworthy that the Old Testament Law had woven into its strands of teaching wherein the way of peace and non-resistance was held forth as the prescribed way for an Israelite to respond in the situations described (Exodus 23:4 and Leviticus 19:18). In this Leviticus passage, loving one's neighbour as himself is made

mandatory. Finally, in Proverbs 25:21-22, the call for non-resisting love is sounded so clearly that a New Testament writer (Romans 12:20) employs it to strengthen his appeal to New Testament saints for non-resistant behaviour.

So then, what shall we conclude? Was non-resistance taught and practiced during that era? Within certain limits it definitely was. But for reasons already noted, it could not be for them their total way of life.

Nonresistance Becomes a Rule Without Exception

This change was one of many changes associated with the inauguration of the New Covenant. Arrangements that had always been preparatory and temporary in the reckoning of God became outdated as God's plan unfolded into its next stage.

A very significant announcement of this transition is heard in the following passage: "Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil" (Matthew 5:38, 39).

Because He not only brought the Word of God but also was Himself the Word personified, Christ could thus speak with an authority that was obvious to all. By the choice of His terminology, He was here identifying Himself as the Lawgiver of the New Covenant.

In effect, He is saying that from now on for the people of God, it is going to be different. There can be no more participation in war. Neither can there be any involvement in the punishment of evildoers and the maintenance of justice. These functions are incompatible with the role to which His New Covenant people are to be assigned. They would also be incompatible with the higher-than-ever ethical norm to which He is herewith elevating the level of Christian morality.

The Label - Nonresistance

The passage in Matthew 5:39 is the source for the term *non-resistance*. As a label, it accurately reflects the meaning of our Lord's words that we are to resist not evil, and that which follows clarifies that the evil in focus is evil treatment. Like most non-resistance passages, this one needs very little interpretation; the

meaning is so obvious. Under no condition should we allow ourselves to retaliate or in any way strike back at one who mistreats us.

Does This Prohibit Every Form of Resistance?

The resistance that is here prohibited is obviously, as shown in the following verses, the kind to which the man of the world would naturally resort. Spiritual resistance, the kind that saints must exercise in order to survive spiritually, is nowhere forbidden and, on the contrary, is expressly commanded (James 4:7). “We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against . . . spiritual wickedness in high places” (Ephesians 6:12). “The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds” (2 Corinthians 10:4). These Scriptures reflect an often overlooked fact. In the most important battle of all (while their worldly counterparts remain passive), non-resistant Christians wage an intense warfare. Those who charge the non-resistant Christian with being a passive parasite are usually blind to the important contributions he makes to the preservation of society.

But It Sounds So Negative

Our day is one in which popular opinion is anti-negative. In many minds, positive thinking is almost equated with Christianity. The poorly instructed saint, influenced by this mentality, may hesitate to accept any teaching that carries a negative label. Nonresistance is that kind of label.

But do not be intimidated by public opinion. When He gave the Ten Commandments, God Himself employed a whole list of negatives. Christian behaviour cannot be fully defined without employing some negatives. If you are a Christian, you are that not only by virtue of what you do but also by virtue of what you do not do. Nonresistance singles out one thing the true Christian does not do. When he is wronged, he does not in any way fight back.

Nonresistance Illustrated

For the purpose of further explaining the spirit of non-resistance, our Lord, after issuing His call to be non-resistant, related four simple illustrations. “Whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law,

and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away” (Matthew 5:39-42). These four responses reflect a similar spirit. Rather than retaliate, the non-resistant person patiently endures insult and even injury. When taken advantage of, he remains very gracious. If imposed upon, he goes beyond what is demanded of him. The fighting spirit is completely absent, and in its place is open-handed generosity. By the use of these illustrations, our Lord has drawn the portrait of a beautiful, non-resistant personality. *From: The Eastern Mennonite Testimony, volume XXXIII, Nov. 2001.*

The Biblical Basis of Non-resistance #3.

The Active Side of Nonresistance

By poorly informed people, the non-resistant person is frequently viewed as a liability to society. Being thus misunderstood is part of the Christian’s experience of bearing the reproach of Christ (Hebrews 13:13). Commonly overlooked is the fact that non-resistance is only part of the package of love. Non-resistance is love absorbing the wrongdoing of others. But love, the kind that God sheds abroad in the heart of His regenerated children (Romans 5:5), is expressed also in other ways. Because he is motivated by this kind of love, the true child of God is able and required to do good as opposed to evil.

“Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you” (Matthew 5:43, 44).

Even while we are absorbing mistreatment, we are to be aggressive doers of good. This is possible and, in a sense, natural because agape love expresses itself in both ways-passively and actively, in non-resistance and in assistance.

Being Non-resistant Identifies You as a Child of God

After dwelling on the active aspects of the non-resistant way of

life, our Lord introduces a further reason for choosing this way of life. Structure wise, the verse that follows begins in the middle of an unfinished sentence. However, subject wise, it forms a unit of its own. “That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for He maketh His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matthew 5:45). Our claim to be His children ought to be verified by an actual likeness to Him. Our non-resistant love should be expressed in the ways outlined in verse 44 for this reason: so “that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven.” As is suggested in the remainder of the verse, in His relating to the children of men, more often than not, God is non-resistant in that He is good to all irrespective of how they treat Him. Doing likewise identifies one as His child.

Being Non-resistant Identifies You as a Follower of Christ

Those who look with disfavour upon non-resistance are hard pressed to reconcile their stance with the non-resistance of Jesus. The one perfect life that was ever lived had in it instance after instance revealing that our Lord was consistently non-resistant. How can anyone ignore His example and still claim to be His follower?

“For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow His steps: Who, did no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth: Who, when He was reviled, reviled not again; when He suffered, He threatened not; but committed Himself to Him that judgeth righteously” (1 Peter 2:21–23). In this passage, the non-resistant aspects of His life are expressly singled out for us to pattern after.

Non-resistance Is the Way of the Cross in Human Relations.

The typical worldling is quick to protect his supposed rights and to employ physical force or the arm of the law to keep others in place. Giving in, allowing ourselves to be mistreated by others — these are viewed by such as symptoms of weakness. In contrast to that, rather than inflict suffering on others, the Christian, following the example of His Lord, chooses the way of the cross in human relations. Paul chided the Corinthians because they employed the law against each other when they ought to have rather suffered themselves to be defrauded (1 Corinthians 6:7). A better example can be found in

those apostles who are represented as “rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name” (Acts 5:41). In another context we read of Christians who “took joyfully the spoiling of their goods” (Hebrews 10:34). These soldiers of the cross were demonstrating fortitude of the highest order. It is only by being non-resistant that a Christian can be consistent; for whoever really loves his neighbour as himself will not in any way harm him, violently or otherwise.

Being Non-resistant Identifies You With the Kingdom of Christ

In Colossians 1:13 saints are said to have been delivered from the power of darkness and translated into the kingdom of God’s dear Son. Every living person belongs to one or the other of these two kingdoms. This two-kingdom concept appears also in Romans 13:1-7. In that passage, the pronouns *he* and *they* are employed to designate an officer of the state; the pronouns *thee* and *ye* are employed to identify the saints to whom the passage is addressed. The agent of the state “beareth . . . the sword” for he is “the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil” (Romans 13:4). Obviously, he cannot fill that role and also be consistently non-resistant. Nevertheless, Christian people recognize that the civil officer is serving as an agent of God to administer justice in a society of evildoers. Although we cannot serve as government agents, we ought not to be antigovernment in attitude.

Our Anabaptist forefathers correctly asserted that the state is ordained of God outside the perfection of Christ. By making that assertion, they were acknowledging that the ethic of love and non-resistance is for Christians, not for the state. In a very noteworthy statement, our Lord spoke thus of the two kingdoms and the cleavage that exists between them: “My kingdom is not of this world: if My kingdom were of this world, then would My servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is My kingdom not from hence” (John 18:36).

Significantly, the point of cleavage is here the employment or non-employment of violence. This declaration of our Lord compels every man to choose to identify with one or the other kingdom, for they are not sufficiently compatible to allow identity with both.

Non-resistance Allows God to Retain His Prerogative

As early as the time of Moses, God made this disclosure: “To me belongeth vengeance, and recompense” (Deuteronomy 32:35). In the light of this declaration, the wrongness of purely personal retaliation stands out in bold relief. Centuries later, another divinely inspired writer, Paul the apostle, grounded his appeal for non-resistant living on this unchanging fact:.....

“Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men. If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is Mine; I will repay, saith the Lord” (Romans 12:17–19).

Non-resistance Is the Paradox That Promotes Peace

Being negative in name, it is nevertheless positive in expression. The above-quoted passage ends on this note: “Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:20, 21). The exercise of non-resistant love holds the best prospect for turning an enemy into a friend. It is here implied that in the withholding of physical force, there is an unleashing of spiritual force. Non-resistance coupled with assistance, motivated by love, and practiced in the Name of Christ — is the greatest peacemaking power on earth. Therefore, let us not be intimidated by those who heap disdain upon our non-resistant stance. In a world of violence, non-apologetic non-resistance is still the Bible way. And because it is the Bible way, it is the best way.

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Suggested additional Reading: Pacifism or Non-Resistance PDF Article.