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Collection of essays answers fundamental questions of nonviolence in Christianity

John Dear | Sep. 18, 2012 On the Road to Peace

It's hard to handle the profound challenges of Gospel nonviolence, especially when they stand in such stark contrast to our culture, our country, our world, even our church. That's why this new collection of essays, *A Faith Not Worth Fighting For: Addressing Commonly Asked Questions about Christian Nonviolence* [1] (edited by Tripp York and Justin Bronson Barringer, Cascade Books/Wipf and Stock Pub., 2012, with a foreword by Stanley Hauerwas and an afterword by Shane Claiborne), is such an important book for these painful times.

You'll say I'm biased, since an essay of mine on Jesus' civil disobedience in the temple is included, but I say this is a necessary book, even required reading for every Christian struggling to accept the nonviolence of Jesus in this world of permanent warfare.

I agree with my friend, evangelical activist and author Shane Claiborne, who writes in the afterword that this book will become "a classic, a handbook for Christian peacemakers around the world."

Yes, we need to fight for justice and peace, but nonviolently. So maybe a better title might have been *A Faith Not Worth Killing For*. The point: Christians do not kill, no matter what the cause, no matter how noble, no matter how holy. We do not kill. End of story.

If only that were true. In some remote non-Christian corners of the world, people think that to be a Christian requires killing. Western Christians kill in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan; they threaten to kill now in Iran. Isn't killing what it means to be a Christian? they might ask. Of course not. The tragic truth is that the Gospel forbids killing; it commands universal, nonviolent love.

The editors asked pastors, activists and scholars to confront the basic questions of Gospel nonviolence and gathered them together in a one-of-a-kind collection that will feed the mind and stir the soul. I urge everyone interested in following the nonviolent Jesus to get this book (available from wipfandstock.com [2]).

"I should like to think that this book represents a new stage in the conversation between Christians about the viability of nonviolence as a stance necessary if we are to be adequate witnesses to Jesus Christ," theologian Stanley Hauerwas writes. "Too often, past discussions of Christian alternatives for justifying Christian participation or nonparticipation in war or other forms of violence address their interlocutor as if he or she is tone deaf. By contrast, the authors of the essays in this book take seriously objections to their commitment to nonviolence. As a result, these essays help pacifist and non-pacifist alike better understand that a commitment to Christian nonviolence is not so much a position but rather a declaration that requires ongoing reflection."

The 13 chapter titles explain the nature, seriousness and uncommon validity of the book:

- Isn't pacifism passive?

- What about the protection of third party innocents?
- What would you do if someone were attacking a loved one?
- What about Hitler?
- Must Christian Pacifists Reject Police Force?
- What about those men and women who gave up their lives so that you and I could be free?
- Does God expect nations to turn the other cheek?
- What about war and violence in the Old Testament?
- What about Romans 13: 'Let every soul be subject'?
- Didn't Jesus say he came not to bring peace but a sword?
- What about the Centurion?
- Didn't Jesus overturn tables and chase people out of the temple with a whip?
- What about the warrior Jesus in Revelation?

I've spent my life traveling the world speaking about the nonviolence of Jesus, and write this from the Yorkshire Dales in the north of England after having addressed a thousand Christians at the annual Greenbelt Festival near London. These were almost the exact questions I was asked. They are the standard questions raised by everyone when they are first confronted with the nonviolence of Jesus. That's why I think this book is so important: It deals with every one of our basic questions, objections and problems about the nonviolent Jesus. If we want to become mature Christian disciples, we need to deal with these questions.

I found many helpful insights, such as the conclusion of Samuel Wells' essay about Jesus' question regarding peace or the sword: "Jesus does not call for a sword of violence. That is not the way of peace. But sometimes a sword of division is called for. This is not the nature of peace, but it is sometimes the inevitable result of witnessing to the truth of Christ. To avoid division at all costs may sometimes be the substitution of a bland peace for a truer, more hard-earned one. Sometimes the sword of division is needed, that healing may more truly come."

In his conclusion, editor Tripp York tells the story of St. Maximilian of Tebessa, who was executed in 295 for refusing to fight for the Roman military.

"I cannot serve in the army; I am a Christian," St. Maximilian famously told the proconsul. "Cut off my head if you like, but I cannot be a soldier of the world. I am a solider of my God. My service is for my own Lord. I cannot engage in worldly warfare. I have already told you that I am a Christian."

Maximilian's testimony and martyrdom were standard fare in the first three centuries. To be a Christian meant you were nonviolent, which meant you refused to join the military or serve the empire, so you were probably killed.

"What we need to ask now is this: How did a once predominantly nonviolent movement like Christianity ever become so thoroughly entrenched in a warrior mythos?" Tripp York asks. "How has Jesus been so easily co-opted into a mentality by which many of his followers are willing to kill to preserve their own life, their family, or their nation? How is it possible that so many Christians throughout history and today are capable of killing in the name of the very one who demands that we love our enemies?"

"It seems we have strayed a long way from the path of Jesus," York concludes. "We are told by politicians, moviemakers, and no shortage of priests and ministers that the only good, responsible, and moral way to deal with our enemies is through violence. That Christians ever found themselves in a position of having to have a discussion on the ethics of waterboarding, much less stockpiling nuclear arms, is proof that our understanding of God certainly has nothing in common with Jesus. Jesus freely gave his life for his enemies, and then, no surprise, demanded that we do the same. For what else could he have meant when he commanded us to pick up

our cross and follow him?"

"This conversation about violence is one of the most urgent conversations of our day," Shane Claiborne writes in his afterword. "We have tried the 'eye for an eye' thing over and over. We have learned the 'pick up the sword, die by the sword' less all too well. We see the collateral damage of the myth of redemptive violence nearly every day -- in Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel-Palestine, and among the soldiers themselves whose suicide deaths outnumber combat deaths. But as Jesus promises us: 'there is a better way.'"

Shane Claiborne continues:

> *A Faith Not Worth Fighting For* will put fresh wind in the sails of a postmodern generation that is quickly moving away from the triumphalistic, militant, God-and-country Christianity of American theocracy and toward the peaceable, humble, uncompromisingly nonviolent Christianity of Christ again. At the end of the day, that's what we need -- a Christianity that looks like Jesus again, and that takes the cross seriously. After all, we can look at the Bible and find verses that justify violence and nonviolence. We can look at history and find strong arguments to make a case for war and to make a case for pacifism. But in the end we must ask, what looks the most like Jesus?
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> If we want to see what love looks like as it stares evil in the face, we need only look at the cross. It is the cross that shows us the nonviolent love of God, a God who loves enemies so much he dies for them ... for us. It is that cross that makes no sense to the wisdom of this world and that confounds the logic of smart bombs. That triumph of Christ's execution and resurrection was a victory over violence, hatred, sin, and everything ugly in the world. And it is the triumph of the glorious resurrection that fills us with the hope that death is dead -- if only we will let it die.
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> As the early Christians said, "For Christ, we can die, but we cannot kill." That is a truth at the heart of the Gospel: there is something worth dying for, but nothing in the world worth killing for.

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John Dear will lead a daylong retreat, "Blessed are the Peacemakers," Sept. 29 in Los Angeles. He will speak on "Thomas Merton and the Wisdom of Nonviolence" Oct. 6 in Belleville, Ill., near St. Louis. To see John's 2012 speaking schedule, go to John Dear's website [3]. His new book, *Lazarus, Come Forth!* [4], explores Jesus as the God of life calling humanity (in the symbol of the dead Lazarus) out of the tombs of the culture of war and death. John's talk at last year's Sabeel conference in Bethlehem is featured in the new book *Challenging Empire* [5]. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, *Divine Rebels* [6] by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* *[7]*; *Put Down Your Sword* *[8]* and *A Persistent Peace* *[9]*, are available from Amazon.com.

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