

RESISTING NONRESISTANCE

By Thomas M. Stark

Introduction

When asked by a group of soldiers what they needed to do to prepare for the kingdom of God, John the Baptist did not tell the soldiers to disarm. When Jesus encountered a Roman Centurion, far from condemning his profession, Jesus actually commended the warrior's faith! When Peter brought the kingdom of God to Cornelius' household, he did not command the Centurion to tender his resignation. When Jesus cleansed the temple, he put to death once and for all any simplistic notion that nonviolence is what being a Christian is all about.

Sound familiar? Sound convincing? There was a time when these kinds of “biblical” arguments against biblical pacifism were convincing to me. There are Christians to this day, Christians who command my utmost respect, for whom these kinds of arguments are still persuasive, if not conclusive. Ever since the fourth century, these and other arguments like them have been used—often by very well meaning Christians—to legitimate Christian participation in warfare; they have been used to resist “nonresistance.”¹

Nevertheless, as a Christian committed to the radically restorative vision of Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell, these kinds of arguments simply will not do. To begin with, Campbell himself regarded these kinds of arguments against apostolic pacifism with great contempt. Contrary to such abuses of Scripture, Campbell believed that the New Testament plainly taught

¹ I use the term “nonresistance” here and in the title primarily for metric effect. In fact, I do not believe *nonresistance* is what the New Testament teaches, so much as *nonviolent* resistance. In that sense, my title has two meanings. The first describes the activity of those who use biblical proof-texts in order to resist what I believe are the clear nonviolent teachings of the New Testament. The second describes my ulterior agenda in this essay to counteract the standard caricature of pacifism as apoliticism, by demonstrating how the majority of these proof-texts against pacifism actually help us better to understand the nature of Christian pacifism, first as resistance, and only secondarily (though indispensably) as nonviolent. In short, I share with the nonpacifists a need to resist the notion of “nonresistance.”

the renunciation of war as an integral part of Christian discipleship.² Moreover, an authentic commitment to the restoration of apostolic Christianity commits us to the painstaking process of asking the Scriptures themselves, as they would have been read in their historical, socio-political context, to challenge and to depose our traditional readings of them whenever and wherever our traditional readings contradict the authentic apostolic witness.

As such, upon closer examination it will become clear that each of the above referenced arguments against pacifism is in some way fatally flawed. Indeed, in virtually every case a closer examination of these texts *in their narrative context* will unearth some subtler, more nuanced expressions of biblical peacemaking, expressions the likes of which our conventional depoliticized reading of Scripture cannot decipher.

It is ironic that those who want to fault pacifism for being politically irresponsible so often appeal to such proof-texts as cited above on the assumption (anachronistic in nature) that New Testament Christianity was strictly apolitical. Yet a proper reading of these texts in their historical and literary contexts will reveal a Christianity very different from the one many of us grew up with, a Christianity that exists not in quiescence with the Roman Empire but one that can only exist as a subversive alternative politic—a kingdom of God.

Nevertheless, at this point all I have done is to make bald claims, to some eyes perhaps even wild claims that counter the dominant and traditional reading of the New Testament. Yet the proof of the pudding, as they say, is in the eating; and as my Spanglish family likes to say around our dinner table, *lechuga comer*.

Luke 3:14

Then some soldiers asked him, “And what should we do?” He replied, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.”

² Craig M. Watts, *Disciple of Peace: Alexander Campbell on Pacifism, Violence and the State* (Indianapolis: Doulos Christou Press, 2005) 23-27.

The Basic Argument

Here in Luke 3, John the Baptist is preaching repentance of sins and baptizing those who believe in his message of the coming kingdom of God. Various groups come to John to ask him how they ought to prepare for the kingdom's arrival. One of those groups is a group of soldiers. John tells them to be content with their pay, not to extort money, and not to accuse people falsely. Yet he does *not* tell them that soldiering is a sin. He says absolutely nothing to them about dispensing with their swords. This glaring omission indicates that 1) the Scriptures acknowledge, at least implicitly here, the state's right to wage war in its own defense, and that 2) the Scriptures approve of Christian participation in such warfare as is legitimately waged by the state in its own defense.

For Argument's Sake

This reading of Luke 3:14 has two things going for it. 1) The reading feels natural. After all, the soldiers do come to John with a straightforward question: "What should we do?" John's answer, on the surface, *feels* like a legitimization of the soldier's basic task. The instructions John gives them only obtain within the context of their normal duties as soldiers. 2) The reading is supported by the vast majority of theologians and ecclesiastical authorities throughout the centuries, including Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, and so on.

Why the Argument Fails

Nevertheless, there are several significant problems with this reading of the text. The first of which is logical in nature. The nonpacifist reading of Luke 3:14 represents one of the most basic logical fallacies of reasoning, the *argument from silence*. The mere fact that John was silent about the soldiers' swords does not tell us anything. John could have been decidedly against the

soldiers' use of the sword, yet remained silent about the matter for reasons not made explicit by the text. That is just as logical a possibility as the nonpacifist reading. The fact is, based solely on Luke 3:14, we do not know how to explain John's silence, let alone whether his silence even requires an explanation. This is important, because biblical pacifism is not derived from John's silence about the sword, but from—among other things—Jesus' very vocal renunciation of it. In fact, John's silence may be explained precisely this way: his task was not to determine the way *of* the Messiah, but to prepare the way *for* him. John's instructions were preliminary in nature, setting the stage for the more radical demands of Jesus.

In addition to the logical issue, the nonpacifist reading is based upon a hazardous view of biblical inspiration, namely that all of Scripture is equally and in the same way true. Apart from the problem that John is not making any kind of explicit statement about the status of soldiering as an occupation (the argument from silence wants to make the nonpacifist reading a biblical "truth"), this view of biblical inspiration obfuscates the narrative character of much of Scripture, and particularly, in this case, of the Gospels. The "truth" of Scripture is not found in any one element of the narratives that make up Scripture, or else we would be forced to concede, among other things, that polygamy is permissible because David (a prophet) had multiple wives. Based upon an argument from silence, the nonpacifist reading assumes John is making a positive statement about soldiering and that, because it is recorded in Scripture, it is therefore *God's* positive statement about soldiering. The problem here is that the same logic backfires on us when applied to other cases. Polygamy is never explicitly condemned in Scripture (with the exception of the case of elders), yet we would not want to argue that because it is not condemned it is therefore permissible. That is not what biblical inspiration means.

It does no harm to the doctrine of biblical inspiration to concede that John (though a prophet) might not have been omniscient. We do not fault any other biblical prophet for having incomplete knowledge (especially when what the prophet lacked is something about which that prophet was silent!). What reason do we have to require omniscience of John, if not, in this case, a pro-war agenda? No. We must leave open the possibility that John the Baptist had a limited mission, and with it a limited understanding of the kingdom. Indeed, we have good reason, scripturally, to accept this possibility.

First, at the time in question, John still had no idea who the Messiah was. Second, even after John learned who the Messiah was, we are given no reason, scripturally, to think that John's expectations were any different from the popular expectations of a militant liberator. In fact, just four chapters later in Luke 7, an imprisoned John the Baptist would send messengers to Jesus to ask whether he was the man John had originally reckoned. "Are you the one who was to come," John's disciples asked Jesus, "or should we expect someone else?" In other words, John wants to know why he is still incarcerated if Jesus is in fact the messianic liberator—the Messiah who was to bring about, among other things, "freedom for the prisoners" (Luke 4:18; cf. Isa 61:1-2). It is certainly significant that when in Luke 4 Jesus recites the passage from Isaiah 61, he stops just short of proclaiming "the day of vengeance of our God." As a good Isaian prophet, who could fault John for not quite grasping the nonviolent nature of the kingdom? Despite that, according to Jesus, John was the greatest prophet in the history of prophets (Matt 11:11), John was still expecting Jesus to usher in the kingdom by force of arms. In all likelihood, John died in that belief. Clearly, then, the insufficiency of John's knowledge of the kingdom is not a challenge to biblical inspiration. It is simply reflective of Scripture's narrative character.

A proper grasp of John's messianic expectations bring us to a related matter—John's view of government. Inasmuch as this reading projects a positive view of pagan government onto John the Baptist, it makes an historical anomaly of him. We must remember that it is very unlikely that John would have or could have had any Greco-Roman education. He was by class a peasant, not to mention that he spent his formative years in the wilderness. John would not have been familiar with Cicero's just war doctrine, nor with Roman military propaganda, other than the kind to which the general Palestinian populace was exposed regularly, and to their disdain.

John was a radical Jewish prophet, in the tradition of radical Jewish prophets such as Jeremiah and Isaiah, both of whom were executed for being—for lack of a better term—anti-establishment. John was a prophet of the *kingdom of God*, which means that John saw himself as the prophet whose charge it was to proclaim the arrival of the Messianic age in which Israel would finally be restored and the pagan empire finally toppled. In 3:19-20 (just five verses after our text!), Luke records that John was arrested for rebuking a Roman vassal for “all the evil things he had done.” This puts John squarely in the tradition of the apocalyptic Jewish prophets. Any attempt to read Luke 3:14 as representing a pro-Roman or an apolitical, “spiritual” John the Baptist is going to prove extraordinarily problematic given the politically charged context of Luke's narrative. To use this text to argue that John approved of soldiering in general requires us to think that John legitimated the Roman occupation of Palestine in particular. Historically, that is utterly untenable. Such a view would have been unprecedented outside of elitist circles, the temple regime in particular, and even there the issue is not Rome's legitimacy but the political and economic conveniences of collusion—hardly the interests of a wilderness prophet!

Furthermore, as a *Jewish* prophet, John was a reformer of Israel, not of Rome. His instructions to Roman soldiers must be read with that fact in full view. John's task was not to

make Rome over into the kingdom of God, but to prepare Israel for the Messiah. John's charge to the soldiers not to perpetuate the usual injustices should be seen with the coming of the Messiah in view, that is, we must read these instructions apocalyptically. John was not promulgating a timeless theory of just soldiering. Rather, he was warning the Romans not to incite the coming judgment of the messianic liberator. Perhaps (goes the logic) if they have refrained from injustice, they will be shown mercy under the new regime. This is why immediately following John's instructions to the soldiers he launches into a diatribe on eschatological judgment. The scales are about to tip in the other direction. Those who carry the swords now will soon find themselves at the other end of the blade. The one who is coming will baptize the oppressed with Spirit, which is a new kind of existence; but the oppressors he will baptize with fire.

In fact, the importance of the distinction between the Jews and the Romans in this text cannot be overstressed. It is a distinction that early interpreters of this text saw quite clearly. The earliest authoritative interpretation we have of John's instructions to the soldiers is found in the *Testament of Our Lord*. This text predates Augustine by more than a century at least. The *Testament* was one of what are called the "church orders." Essentially, the church orders were the authoritative rulebooks regulating the practice of the churches. In the *Testament*, John's instructions to the soldiers are seen not as universal ethical principles but as instructions to *catechumens*—those whom in today's idiom we would call "seekers."

If anyone be a soldier or in authority, let him be taught not to oppress or to kill or to rob, or to be angry or to rage and afflict anyone. But let those rations suffice him which are given to him. But if they wish to be baptized in the Lord, let them cease from military service or from the [post of] authority. And if not let them not be received.

Let a catechumen or a believer of the people, if he desire to be a soldier, either cease from his intention, or if not let him be rejected. For he hath despised God by

his thought and, leaving the things of the Spirit, he hath perfected himself in the flesh, and hath treated the faith with contempt. (*Testament of Our Lord 2:2*)

Here the understanding is that John was giving pedagogical counsel to those outside of Israel who were seeking to become participators in the kingdom of God. John's counsels, according to this early view, "were provisional, for catechumens while they were learning." They were to be supplanted "by a more complete fidelity specified by Christian teaching—which must have been imparted in the catecheses—which forbade military service and killing."³

Of course, as indicated above, I do not think this interpretation of John is exactly right. I believe there is good reason to think 1) that John expected the Messiah to be a militant revolutionary, and that 2) John's instructions to the soldiers should be read apocalyptically, in the context of his proclamation of the coming eschatological judgment. Nevertheless, what this early interpretation tells us is significant. First, it tells us that the early church saw a distinction in John's instructions between those inside the kingdom and those outside, and saw his counsels to be intelligible only in light of that distinction. (As we shall see, this distinction would soon disappear from view.) Second, it tells us that the earliest Christian interpretation of this text was pacifist.

Interestingly, about 70 years after Constantine came to power and commandeered Christianity in an attempt to unify his empire, a slightly altered version of this interpretation appeared in the church orders:

If a soldier come, let him be taught to do no injustice, to accuse no one falsely, and to be content with his allotted wages; if he submit to those rules, let him be received; but if he refuse them, let him be rejected. (*Apostolic Constitutions 8.32.10*)

Notice not only that the proscription against killing has been deleted; also deleted is the distinction between those outside and those inside the faith. Here we have, for the first time, a

³ Alan Kreider, "Military Service in the Church Orders," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 31.3 (2003) 428.

universal ethic, applicable to just anybody. Why this change? Because by now the vast majority of Romans had become “Christian,” many of them having been baptized as infants. Christianity is no longer a minority sect with a minority ethic of discipleship. It is now fast on its way to becoming the imperial religion, and as such an imperial ethic is required, not an ethic of discipleship but one of “political responsibility.”

This fact explains the two positive aspects of the nonpacifist reading which I noted earlier: 1) that the reading feels natural, and 2) that it enjoys the support of prominent theologians throughout church history. Prior to the ascension of Constantine (whom many Christians at the time believed ushered in the millennial kingdom) the fact is that no Christian document and no theologian or ecclesial authority legitimated Christian participation in warfare. For approximately the first 300 years of church history, Christianity was officially pacifist.⁴

Things began to unravel in that regard toward the end of the third century. And after Constantine made Christianity a legal religion in 313, the Church’s vision of itself changed dramatically. It became invested in the well-being of Rome, so much so that within another sixty years, Christianity would become the imperial religion. All within a one-hundred-year span, the Church went from forbidding Christian participation in war to baptizing all Roman soldiers. (Interestingly, even then when a soldier was baptized, he was baptized with his sword-wielding arm above the water.)

In the fifth century, Saint Augustine’s theological mentor Ambrose began to “christianize” Cicero’s just-war doctrine. With the barbarian invasions fast approaching

⁴ For the best account of early Christian pacifism to date, see Roland H. Bainton, *Christian Attitudes to War and Peace: A Historical Survey and Critical Re-evaluation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979). See also John Howard Yoder, *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution: A Companion to Bainton* (forthcoming). For an especially timely look at the witness of the early church, see C. Christopher Smith, *Water, Faith & Wood* (Indianapolis: Doulos Christou Press, 2006).

Augustine's gate, the bishop of Hippo took over his mentor's work in that regard. Augustine is the first ecclesial authority on record to use Luke 3:14 as an argument in favor of Christian soldiering, thus making his position—the just-war doctrine of a stoic philosopher and Roman politician—a scriptural position. Augustine allowed his prior, extrascriptural, neoplatonic vision of the world to distort his reading of the Scriptures, forcing the text to answer a question the text itself—in context—was not concerned to answer.

Indeed, the question of whether a follower of the Messiah could serve in the Roman army would have been unintelligible, not only to John the Baptist, but to any first century Jew. How could one who purports to be a follower of the Davidic King simultaneously serve the military agenda of a rival, pagan kingdom? Since the question would not have made much sense to anybody in the Roman Empire in the first century, it follows that Luke would not have been attempting to provide an answer to it. This is a question that only makes sense after Constantine. Thus, the fact that the nonpacifist reading of Luke 3:14 has enjoyed the support of so many theologians after Constantine, and the fact that it feels like the natural reading to us, says more about us and about the state of the postconstantinian church than it says about John the Baptist.

Luke 7:1-10

When Jesus had finished saying all this in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. There a centurion's servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick and about to die. The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant. When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him, "This man deserves to have you do this, because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue." So Jesus went with them. He was not far from the house when the centurion sent friends to say to him: "Lord, don't trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel." Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well.

The Basic Argument

The argument here is essentially the same as the one just examined, only this time, the players have been given a promotion. In place of the group of soldiers is a centurion, and in place of John the Baptist, Jesus himself. Here is the evidence that if Jesus *was* in fact nonviolent, his was a nonviolence of the religious sort, essentially apolitical. Jesus renounced the sword because he was a spiritual and not a political Messiah. If Jesus had meant for his nonviolence to be extended to the political realm he missed his chance to make that clear here, in his confrontation with the Roman centurion. Far from condemning his profession, Jesus actually *commended* the warrior's faith. This proves that in the Christian religion the life of faith and the soldier's life are wholly compatible.

For Argument's Sake

In the case of John the Baptist and the soldiers, I argued that we have sufficient scriptural reason to believe that John the Baptist did not understand the nonviolent nature of the messianic kingdom. If it *is* the case that John legitimated soldiering in general in Luke 3:14 (and I have argued from both historical and literary context that this could not have been the case), his legitimization of soldiering is best explained by his limited knowledge of the messianic kingdom. Of course, in the present case (of Jesus and the centurion) this point would not obtain. While John the Baptist may not have comprehended the nonviolent nature of the kingdom, Jesus most certainly did.

Why the Argument Fails

Nevertheless, the nonpacifist reading of Luke 7:1-10 suffers, as does the nonpacifist reading of Luke 3:14, from a logical fallacy: the argument from silence. Jesus' silence about the centurion's

sword is just that—Jesus’ silence. It tells us nothing either way about Jesus’ view of militarism. What the nonpacifist reading has done here is it has taken a narrative account whose point has nothing to do with the question of legitimate violence; it has pointed out the absence of the subject of legitimate violence; and then it has interpreted that absence as the approval of legitimate violence. This will not do.

However, merely pointing out that Jesus’ silence is not a positive statement in favor of militarism will not quite do either. Since my position entails that Jesus preached and embodied a consistent ethic of nonviolence, I am obligated to give some kind of explanation for his silence here in this instance.

First, unlike the soldiers in Luke 3:14, the centurion is not coming to Jesus with questions about the ethical requirements of the messianic kingdom. The centurion already has an allegiance to a kingdom (that of Caesar), and he gives no indication he is thinking about changing sides. His request is for the healing of his slave, and has nothing to do with conversion. His understanding of Jesus’ spiritual authority indicates that he sees Jesus as a miracle worker. Miracle workers, or believers in miracle workers, were not uncommon in the first century Mediterranean world. We must bear in mind also that as a Roman, this centurion was most likely a polytheist, or at least a pluralist, which means that his recognition of Jesus’ status as a miracle worker would not have obliged him to worship YHWH exclusively. In short, Jesus was silent about the centurion’s sword because the centurion was not asking.

Jesus’ proclamation of the centurion’s faith, then, must not be understood as a positive statement about the centurion so much as a negative statement about unbelieving Israel. Jesus’ point was that an idolatrous gentile’s (obviously imperfect) faith was superior to the sign-seeking

“faith” of his fair weather followers. The centurion’s faith was not a “saving faith,” but Jesus used it as an object lesson in order to shame his own people into better faith than they had.

This is significant because it is indicative of a second explanation for Jesus’ silence about the centurion’s sword. As with John the Baptist, Jesus’ ministry is to the “lost sheep of Israel” (Matt 10:5-6; 15:24) and not to the Romans. His conception of his task was to call out a remnant from Israel, to create a renewed Israel (hence one apostle for every tribe), in order that *through Israel* all the nations of the earth might be blessed. Of course, the call to discipleship would later be extended to the gentiles, but that was beyond the scope of Jesus’ own limited operation. Thus, just as his ministry was limited to the Jews, his silence about militarism was limited to the Romans. It is not because Jesus separated religion from politics (not even the Romans did that!), nor is it because he had a Lutheran concept of the “two kingdoms” that Jesus was silent about the centurion’s sword and strident about Peter’s sword. It is because the nonviolent messianic kingdom was to begin with the twelve, and at the appropriate time expand to Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth.

This observation brings us to the question of why Luke recorded this event in the first place. We have already noted that the encounter was not recorded to answer someone’s question about the use of legitimate violence. That would be an anachronism. The question is what role Jesus’ encounter with the centurion plays in Luke’s narrative. Is it not precisely to point out to his post-Acts 11 readers that the present reconstitution of Jew and Gentile into one new body politic is in fact a faithful elaboration of the very work of Jesus? For if Jesus can recognize and commend genuine faith in a gentile, the Jewish Christians certainly ought to follow suit. Questions about the use of legitimate violence, while not bad questions in and of themselves, are

not the questions Luke is raising here. Luke clearly has a different agenda than those who use the account to argue against pacifism.

Far from constituting biblical “proof,” then, that Jesus did not condemn soldiering, this episode points directly to the reconciliation of two formerly hostile communities that now are the very constitution of the body politic of the kingdom of God. This text is actually a pacifistic text, in that it points the reader to the peace Christ made when he made the church.⁵

All of that said, the likeliest reason Jesus does not give the centurion a good lecturing is that the centurion was not there to be lectured at. If we follow Luke’s account of the meeting, the centurion was not even present at the discussion; he had sent messengers to Jesus to speak on his behalf. According to the nonpacifist reading, then, if Jesus were against militaristic violence, he would have had to relay the message through the centurion’s servants, something like this:

Tell your master his request is granted, and while you’re at it, tell him he ought to resign from the military immediately. If he asks why, tell him that I am the Hebrew Messiah, and that I’ve come to show the way of nonviolent servanthood and suffering. If your master has any further questions, come find me, and I will be happy to speak with him face to face. If I am no longer in Capernaum, I will probably be in Nain. After that, I don’t know for sure. Luke doesn’t really say.

All bad humor aside, the point is that, if Jesus wanted to chastise the centurion for his occupational choices, this particular arrangement would not have been particularly appropriate for the discussion. It is purely a logistical problem.

Finally, according to the logic of the nonpacifist argument, if Jesus’ silence about violence indicates his approval of it, Jesus also must have approved of the institution of slavery, of emperor worship, of idolatry, of the ideological nature of the *Pax Romana*, of Roman political

⁵ “Church” is how we translate the Greek word *ecclesia*, but in its first-century use *ecclesia* referred to the gathering of citizens together for political purposes. The “church” is the body of kingdom citizens brought together to “deliberate” on how best to implement the policies of the kingdom. Today the word “church” has lost its earliest significance, but there would have been no mistaking its political nature in the first century. When Christians co-opted the public word *ecclesia* for their own purposes, they knew precisely what they were doing. In the United States, Christians could produce the same effect if they began referring to their Sunday meetings as “congress.”

strategy in general, and very likely of extramarital sexual relations (all of which were part-and-parcel of the typical centurion's lifestyle), for Jesus did not condemn any of these things either.

Acts 10:24-48

The following day he arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. But Peter made him get up. "Stand up," he said, "I am only a man myself." Talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. He said to them: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?" Cornelius answered: "Four days ago I was in my house praying at this hour, at three in the afternoon. Suddenly a man in shining clothes stood before me and said, 'Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor. Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He is a guest in the home of Simon the tanner, who lives by the sea.' So I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us." Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right. You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached—how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him. We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.

The Basic Argument

Here is a third case of the same basic argument. If soldiering really is sinful for the Christian, God missed his third opportunity to make that clear to us, here in Acts 10. When Peter brought

the kingdom of God to Cornelius's household, he did not command the centurion to tender his resignation. This fact puts the final nail in the pacifist coffin. This third and final case leaves us with no doubt that the soldier's life and the life of the Christian are not in conflict with one another, but can in fact coexist "peacefully," as it were.

For Argument's Sake

Despite the fact that this particular argument suffers from many of the same devastating problems as the arguments from Luke 3:14 and 7:1-10, it does have one advantage over them. While it may be argued that John the Baptist's silence to the soldiers is explained by his limited understanding of the nature of the kingdom (as betrayed in Luke 7:18ff), and while it might possibly be conceded that Jesus' silence to the centurion (also in Luke 7) is fairly explained by his limited mission to Israel, here in the case of Acts 10—Peter's encounter with Cornelius—neither of these two points obtain. Clearly, if entrance into the kingdom required the renunciation of the sword, a post-Pentecost Peter would have understood that fact. Moreover, the limited nature of Jesus' mission to Israel (to the exclusion of gentiles) ends exactly here in this very encounter of Peter (who holds the keys to the kingdom) with Cornelius, the first gentile citizen of the kingdom of God. If ever there was a time to speak out against Roman militarism, this seems to have been it! Yet Peter seems just as silent as Jesus and John.

Why the Argument Fails

Nevertheless, the problems with this reading far outweigh this single point in favor, and even this point is based on a mistake (I do not believe Peter was at all silent to Cornelius about the sword). We shall address that presently, but first it must be pointed out once again that even if it were the case that Peter was silent to Cornelius about the sword, the argument is still an argument from

silence. There simply is no way of knowing that Peter did not address the issue at some other point in time. Or perhaps Peter *did* address it in his speech and Luke simply did not record it, for literary, political, or thematic reasons. For instance, given the socio-political conditions of Luke's day, Cornelius's renunciation of the sword very well could have been one of the obvious implications of his conversion. Luke did not record it because it was simply understood. Or perhaps Luke did not make explicit what would have been obvious to most insiders in order to protect Cornelius from the repercussions of having defected from the imperial army. Luke did not record it because such a record would have needlessly endangered Cornelius's life. Perhaps both of those explanations are true. Or perhaps Luke did not mention the renunciation of Cornelius's sword because—as a gentile himself—this event's significance had more to do with the justification of the gentiles together with Israel, the reconciliation of two formerly estranged races of men. Luke did not record it because it was not the question driving his narrative, whereas the justification of the gentiles was. All of these readings are just as logically, textually, and contextually possible as the one posited by the nonpacifists. In fact, I would argue that the readings I have suggested (each compatible with the other) are much more likely readings than the reading that turns Peter's alleged silence into the legitimization of the Roman military machine.

We must bear in mind that the Peter the nonpacifist reading suggests is at least tacitly approving of Roman militarism is the same Peter whose master was murdered by Roman “justice.” Peter was anti-Roman *before* Rome publicly executed his master. Are we to believe that after this gross miscarriage of justice Peter found good reason to think that Rome had become a just state, with a legitimate military agenda—that the empire of Caesar had somehow become compatible with the kingdom of the Messiah, the same Messiah the empire had no

choice but to crucify? I think not. Especially since this particular injustice was only the culmination of centuries of the same. The resurrection of that Messiah from the dead changed a great many things for Peter, but are we to believe that the resurrection somehow magically transformed Rome from an unjust and idolatrous occupying force, in Peter's eyes, into a legitimate state with legitimate interests? If that is what the resurrection accomplished, it only achieved on Rome's behalf the objective of its propaganda. Nothing in this scenario has changed, except that Peter has now gone from being political to apolitical—which in effect just means that he has given his tacit political allegiance to whomever happens to be in charge.

But that is not at all what the resurrection means. The resurrection of the Messiah does not change what Rome is. Rather, the resurrection vindicates the one Rome crucified as the one who *really* is what Caesar claims to be—lord of the cosmos. What changes is not Rome's nature. Rome's nature remains idolatrous, rebellious, unjust, evil. What changes is how those who follow the Crucified One can relate to such evil. What changes is not Peter's knowledge of Rome's evil, but Peter's approach to it—from sword-swinging zealotism to Spirit-baptizing pacifism, for if the one who was crucified was also resurrected, his renunciation of the sword becomes perfectly intelligible.

Indeed, we must bear in mind that the Peter who converts the centurion is the very same Peter who in the second chapter of his first epistle reminds us that all Christians share the same calling. "To this you were called," Peter writes, "because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps." Does Peter have one standard for non-military Christians and another for centurions? We have no indication that he does. Silence, I am afraid, is not an indication of anything.

Yet church tradition is not silent about Cornelius's profession. According to both Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox tradition, Cornelius renounced his allegiance to Caesar and became bishop of Caesarea. According to Orthodox tradition, Cornelius would later be executed in Ephesus for preaching against idolatry. Granted that such tradition is not Scripture, but neither is the tradition that Peter was crucified upside-down Scripture, or the tradition that Paul was beheaded at the command of the Roman emperor. Yet we have no stake in challenging those traditions. Moreover, neither traditional Roman Catholicism nor Eastern Orthodoxy sees the conflict that I see between being a soldier and a Christian. In other words, the tradition about Cornelius is not an apologetic thought up by some pacifist.

Frankly, I have no stake in the Catholic and Orthodox tradition about Cornelius. I only bring it up to demonstrate, yet again, that there are other possibilities than the one upon which the nonpacifists wish to claim the legitimacy of biblical pacifism hinges. Yet another possibility—which is actually what Luke says happened—is that Peter instructed Cornelius further about the demands of discipleship. Luke tells us in 10:48 that after their baptism, Cornelius “asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.” And that is no surprise. If I were a Roman centurion, and if I had just learned that the whole basis for my life's work had been undermined by a Jew—a Jew executed by my own comrades-in-arms, no less!—I would want to hear more about it too.

One might ask in what way it can be said that Peter's sermon undermined Cornelius's whole life's work. This brings us to the question of Peter's alleged silence. Was Peter *really* silent about the sword in his sermon to Cornelius? Or are our own political categories obscuring the text from us? In Acts 10:36 Peter declares, “You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling *the good news of peace* through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.” That phrase, “*the*

euangelion of peace;” coupled with the fact that every scholar understands Peter’s sermon in Luke to be a condensed version of Peter’s actual sermon, leads me to the conviction that Peter was not silent, as is too often supposed, about the question of Cornelius’s sword. For what is the *euangelion of peace through Jesus Christ* if not a direct challenge to the *euangelion of peace through Caesar*?

In a postconstantinian world, it is no surprise that this tension implicit in the text should go undetected. Yet in the first century Roman world, it could not have been easily missed. Christians everywhere knew that to call Caesar lord was a denial of the lordship of Christ. Christians everywhere knew that the expansion of the kingdom into the gentile world was an extension of the command of Jesus to love the enemy. Christians, in other words, did not recognize the modern distinction between religion and politics. Religion was not about “spirituality” and politics about “public life.” For Christians, to be Christian meant to be a part of an alternative politic that challenged the politics of Caesar. To call Jesus “savior” and “lord” (these are political titles) was to call Caesar “not savior” and “not lord.” Everyone understood this, so much so that it would not have been necessary to make it explicit in conversion accounts such as that of Cornelius. To become a Christian in that context simply meant to give one’s allegiance to a different king and to adopt a different political agenda.⁶ Hence Peter makes it clear in his sermon to Cornelius that the resurrection of the crucified Jew means that God has controverted Caesar’s claims, proclaiming Jesus of Nazareth to be “Lord of all” (10:36). As such, the Cornelius account would have been read in a context where the subversive (yet nonviolent) nature of what was then called “The Way” was simply understood—it went without

⁶ In fact, the very word “repent” as it was used in the first century quite naturally entails such a radical change of allegiance. Thus the Pharisee Josephus, after going over to the Romans during the Jewish War of 66-70, can shout out to his fellow Jews, “Repent, and you will be saved. For God is with the Romans.” Josephus wanted his kinsmen to “repent,” i.e., to join the winning side.

saying. Yet it did not go without saying, because Peter preached a sermon on the *euangelion of peace*, not through Caesar's *Pax Romana*, but through Jesus Christ, whom Rome crucified.

At this point I ought to make it clear that by emphasizing the political nature of Peter's phrase (the good news of peace through Jesus Christ) I do not mean to deny the spiritual "aspect" of that peace. Yet we have made a mistake already once we have made an easy distinction between the "political" and the "spiritual" in the gospel story. That this peace is spiritual does not make it immaterial or apolitical. There is no way anyone in the Roman world would have understood "the euangelion of peace" to be an apolitical message. The word *euangelion*, from which we derive our "gospel" or "good news," was a political term. For instance, when Rome had been victorious on a military campaign, a messenger would come back ahead of the camp to proclaim the good news (the *euangelion*) to the city, the good news that Caesar had once again been victorious. "Euangelion!" he would say. "The battle belongs to Caesar and to the *Pax Romana*!" Thus, when the messengers of a different king came proclaiming in precisely the same language that a political revolutionary the likes of whom Rome had already dispensed with had been vindicated by God as the true universal peacemaker, the challenge to Caesar's legitimacy was wildly unambiguous.

Which brings us to the real problem with the nonpacifist interpretation of Cornelius's conversion: it fails to see the entirely pacifistic thrust of the account itself. Remember that as a centurion, Cornelius is commissioned by Rome as a peacekeeper, according to their definition of peace. Caesar proclaims himself to be the universal peacemaker; he calls himself the son of god. Thus as an agent of Rome, Cornelius is an agent of Caesar's peace. As such, the fact that Cornelius's conversion was a subversive activity is painfully apparent. The account of the conversion of Cornelius is not an answer to the question of legitimate violence. It is a direct

challenge to the *Pax Romana* of which Cornelius was formerly an agent. It is the conversion of Cornelius that heralds the beginning of the end of the enmity that for millennia had separated Jew from Gentile, Gentile from Jew—an enmity against which the *Pax Romana* was impotent. The conversion of Cornelius announces the truth that even homes bought by pagan violence are being visited by the peace of YHWH's kingdom wrought by Christ. The conversion of Cornelius is indeed the proclamation to Jew and Gentile alike that in Christ—not under Caesar—peace has finally been established among the nations (Eph 2:14-15). To become a Christian is precisely, through the sufferings of Christ and the martyrs, to become established as a citizen of the very peaceable kingdom that the Caesars, through the wealth of the exploited and the blood of the barbarians, tried but failed to achieve.

John 2:12-21

After this he went down to Capernaum with his other and brothers and his disciples. There they stayed for a few days. When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple courts he found men selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple area, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. To those who sold doves he said, "Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!" His disciples remembered that it is written: "Zeal for your house will consume me." Then the Jews demanded of him, "What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." The Jews replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" But the temple he had spoken of was his body.

The Basic Argument

Pacifism entails an ethic of nonresistance or at least nonviolence. Yet Jesus, filled with righteous indignation, is here seen raising havoc, overturning tables, driving folks out with a whip. Such an action is blatantly and deliberately violent. This goes to show (as Ecclesiastes says) that while there certainly are times *not* to use violence, just as certainly there are times that call for it.

However tempting it may be to read Jesus as a teacher of nonviolence, this *action* of Jesus—this temple cleansing—makes it abundantly clear that Jesus would have strongly objected to such reductionism.

For Argument's Sake

In its favor this argument has the virtue of dominical precedent. The pacifists can appeal to certain sayings of Jesus, but the nonpacifists can appeal to this *action* of Jesus. Both positions, then, appeal to the highest authority, and must be reconciled with one another. In addition, it does seem as though Jesus is flying off the rocker a bit here. He even goes to all the trouble of crafting a weapon of sorts. We cannot help but entertain an image like that of John Rambo “locking and loading” before taking on an entire army single-handedly. Jesus means business.

Why the Argument Fails

Nevertheless, Jesus is not John Rambo. A small amount of attention to the narrative thrust of the gospel accounts will make that fact obvious. First, however, we need to clear our path a bit. There are three points we need to consider before approaching this account in context.

(1) Jesus did not use the whip on human beings. He used the whip on the animals. This fact has been obscured by several of the English translations. The NIV has it right in this case: “He made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple area, *both sheep and cattle*.” There is no indication here that Jesus caused any harm to anybody. In fact, in driving the animals out of the temple, Jesus saved them from a sacrificial death (a sacrificial death he would soon undergo in their place). Far from inflicting violence, then, Jesus’ action here prevented violence.

(2) Whoever said a pacifist is forbidden from acting on anger? The old confusion between passivism (quietism) and pacifism (peacemaking) resurfaces. The nonpacifist argument

attempts to undermine the pacifist position by determining without the pacifist's own input what "pacifism" must mean. Christian pacifism is not passivity. Rather, it is subversive activity that derives its power not from force but from the truth of Jesus' identity. That Jesus acted in anger in cleansing the temple is not an argument against Christian pacifism.

(3) Despite point (2) above, the standard assumption that Jesus is flying off the handle here needs challenged. If we follow Mark's account, after the Triumphal Entry, "Jesus entered Jerusalem and went to the temple. He looked around at everything." After scoping the place out, "he went out to Bethany with the Twelve" (11:11). It was not until the following day that Jesus returned to the temple to drive out the merchants and moneychangers. Rather than a spontaneous outburst of righteous indignation, here we see a very calculated protest.

Granted that Jesus used some measure of "force," i.e., he overturned tables and created enough general chaos to prevent the ordinary transactions from taking place. But this is not the same thing as using force to enforce a new policy. We must keep in mind that after Jesus left, the temple went right on doing what it had always done. The "temple cleansing" is a bit of an unfortunate misnomer in that sense, because if Jesus' aim was to cleanse the temple, he did a poor job of it. Rather than an act of enforcement, this was a protest. Jesus was leveling a prophetic critique against the corrupt temple regime.

The temple, we must understand, is not just a house of worship. It is the political and economic epicenter of Jerusalem. The temple of first century Jerusalem was the equivalent of Capitol Hill plus Wall Street today. The nonpacifist interpretation is so focused on the (ostensibly) violent character of Jesus' act that it fails to hear what the narrative is actually telling us about Jesus. The narrative itself displays unequivocally a pacifistic Jesus. For what is at issue

in this text and its parallels is not what Jesus *did* do but precisely what he did *not* do. And what Jesus did *not* do was to follow the temple “cleansing” with a temple takeover.

At the height of his political career, overthrowing the temple regime and establishing himself as king and high priest of Israel would have felt very natural. Such a move was a real temptation for Jesus, if we take the wilderness temptations to have been genuinely tempting to Jesus. One recalls in Luke 4 when Satan tempts Jesus to throw himself down from the top of the temple. The temptation is not to show off his miraculous cat-like landing reflexes, as this text is often understood. The temptation rather is to overthrow the temple regime, counting on God’s angelic help (cf. Psalm 91 with Malachi 3:1-5). The temptation Jesus is facing here is the temptation to establish himself as Israel’s leader prematurely, not by way of suffering and servanthood but by the world’s means of power and violence. Satan is actually using Psalm 91 traditionally, inasmuch as he interprets it as a psalm of messianic triumphalism. That Jesus rejected Satan’s temptation means that Jesus rejected any temple regime whose authority is derived from force—whether it be messianic or Roman (the temple regime itself was installed by Herod to serve Rome’s agenda).

With this in view, what Jesus did *not* do here at the temple cleansing is all the more significant. For although Jesus was tempted to use violence to establish YHWH’s justice, he did not. It would have been just what his followers expected of him. In both the Matthean and the Markan accounts, the cleansing of the temple comes directly on the heels of “the triumphal entry.” As Jesus enters Jerusalem, hailed by the frenzied masses as the nation’s long-awaited messianic liberator, the implications are clear—to both the corrupt temple regime and to the Roman occupying forces: this revolutionary leader is raising an army.

The conventional understanding is that Caiaphas and Pilate were mistaken in classifying Jesus as a political revolutionary. To be sure, this understanding is correct in a sense—not in the sense that Jesus’ messianic revolution was “merely spiritual,” because it was not merely spiritual. Neither were they wrong when they saw that Jesus’ movement would pose a political threat to both Jerusalem and Rome; he posed a real threat, especially to the temple (and by extension to Rome’s grip on the populace). In classifying Jesus as a political revolutionary they were exactly right. If they went wrong it was only in the assumption that Jesus was instigating a *violent* revolution.

Sympathetically, however, it would have been very difficult for men in their stations and historical situation to have discerned otherwise. Jesus enters the temple with fire in his eyes, sending it abruptly into chaos. This the people expected. The messiah would cleanse the temple and establish a new regime (Malachi 3:1-5). Through this temple takeover Jesus would have gained a military stronghold, a battle fortress.⁷ Next, Jesus would have been expected to rally the troops and head straight for Pilate’s palace, only just around the corner. The war was clearly beginning. Passover—bloody liberation—was only a few days away now (John 2:13).

Fully understanding the messianic implications of Jesus’ action, the temple rulers put Jesus to the test: “What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?” In other words: *How are you going to prove your status as messianic liberator? How do we know YHWH is going to back you as you go into battle?* The “miraculous sign” was not the sort in which Jesus pulled a rabbit out of his yarmulke. One is reminded here of the signs that accompanied Moses in the first exodus event. The temple rulers saw that Jesus’ critique of the temple meant that Jesus was claiming to be nothing other than the new Moses, the liberator of

⁷ At the end of Jewish-Roman War of A.D. 66-73, the Jewish freedom fighters took their last stand inside the temple. It took the Romans years to penetrate its walls.

God's people. All they wanted to see was proof of the power. Jesus' answer, of course, was to point to the cross. "Kill me," he said, "and you will see my power." Of course, Jesus did not say, "Kill me." He said, "Destroy this temple." Jesus was indeed replacing the temple regime, not with another corrupt regime but with his own body, and not by violent revolution but precisely through his own suffering. In the resurrection, YHWH would establish Jesus as King and High Priest. Jesus' responsibility was thus to resist the temptation to take it by force. Following the lead of David, Jesus would not take the mantle of king for himself. His political ascension would be YHWH's doing, or else no one's.

The cleansing of the temple, therefore, was not a violent act, but a prophetic one. It was not an exercise in righteous violence. It was a prophetic critique that culminated in yet another reminder that the way to God's victory is through suffering. That is the meaning of the "temple cleansing." Matthew, Mark and John each use it to say one and the same thing—that the way to divine power is the way of the cross.

An objection to this reading might grant the overall interpretation I have just laid out while denying the characterization of the event as "nonviolent." That the so-called temple cleansing was calculated does not make it *eo ipso* nonviolent. Every battle in every war has been to some degree calculated. Moreover, even if, as the text says, Jesus used the whip on the animals and not on humans, it seems like nothing more than an evasive tactical maneuver to deny the violent nature of Jesus' protest.

Such an objection is fair enough, as far as it goes. We can call the protest violent if we must, so long as we clarify what we mean by violence. I have often said, aphoristically, that pacifism is not synonymous with nonviolence. Rather, pacifism is the "violence" of compassion and enemy-love. In that poetic sense, pacifism and "violence" are not always mutually exclusive.

In this sense we can call what Jesus did “violent” so long as we recognize that Jesus’ violence did not inflict harm on another human being, that it stopped short of taking power, and that it was an enacted metaphor of the very real violence that Jesus would soon allow the temple regime to inflict upon him.

Conclusion

In this brief investigation we have not dealt with every New Testament proof-text against biblical pacifism, but we have dealt with the most common and the most significant ones. We looked at three arguments from silence—the silence of John to the soldiers, of Jesus to the Centurion, and of Peter to Cornelius. In the first case, the nonpacifist interpretation failed to account for the broader narrative of John the Baptist’s experience. John’s doubt about Jesus’ messianity indicates that John too, like Jesus’ own mother (Luke 1:46-55) and most of Israel, expected a militant messiah. Similarly, the nonpacifist interpretation failed to read John’s instructions within their proper context of apocalyptic proclamation, overlooking the fact that John’s commission was not to enunciate a universalistic ethic that could or should be read as normative for all time but to prepare Israel for eschatological regime change.

In the second case, the nonpacifist interpretation forgot to mention 1) that the centurion was not present for the conversation in which Jesus was supposed to have condemned his occupation and 2) that Jesus did not condemn any of the centurion’s other sins, e.g., idolatry, emperor worship, etc. It failed to account for the fact attested to elsewhere in the Gospels that Jesus’ limited mission was to Israel and not to the Gentiles. It said nothing of the fact that (unlike in the case of Luke 3:14) the centurion here is not asking Jesus how to go about entering the kingdom. Rather, he is simply asking Jesus for help, to which Jesus simply grants the help, no strings attached. The nonpacifist interpretation overlooks the narrative significance of this

episode which is twofold: 1) that, immediately, its purpose was to shame Jesus' unfaithful followers into better faithfulness, and 2) that it was used by Luke to foreshadow his own grand agenda of "gentile inclusion."

In the third case, the nonpacifist interpretation asks no sociological questions and is ignorant of the ecclesiastical tradition regarding Cornelius' renunciation of power. It brings with it a prior, extrascriptural conception of pacifism, failing to allow the Scriptures to articulate what they mean by pacifism, namely, the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile into one body under Christ, "thus *making peace*" (Ephesians 2:15). It fails to recognize the broader scriptural testimony that resides in the background of the conversion of Cornelius—that Jesus of Nazareth accomplished by being crucified what Rome was attempting to accomplish by crucifying him, and thus misses the moment in Peter's sermon where the inevitable contradiction between the kingdoms of God and of Caesar is made explicit (Acts 10:36).

In the case of the so-called temple cleansing, the nonpacifist interpretation once again brings with it its own set of definitions, refusing to allow the Scriptures to define what "violence" is and what it is not. It cannot see that the temple cleansing is in the final analysis not an act of force but an enacted metaphor of Jesus' death.

In every case, the nonpacifist interpretations have lifted the texts out of their constitution in a particular narrative. With these out-of-context-texts, they have tried to answer questions the texts themselves—in context—were not concerned to ask. In doing so, they have consistently missed the narrative's attempt to form in us a different set of questions constitutive of an entirely different ethical world altogether. Many of the texts we have seen have in one way or another contributed to our understanding of what it means, biblically, to make peace. Once we have acknowledged that we come to the Scriptures with prior, extrascriptural political, ethical and

intellectual categories, the next step is to allow the world in the Scriptures to dissolve those categories and to reproduce its own categories within us—the church. For if there is one thing we have learned from these proof-texts against pacifism, it is that Rome with all its legions could not deliver the political reconciliation of humanity that Jesus delivered in the church by renouncing power and choosing the way of suffering servanthood. In the end, the only question these proof-texts against pacifism are asking is whether—in our own attempts to make peace on earth—we will conform to the image of this world or to the image of Christ (Romans 12:1-21).