

Is Nonviolence Naive?



...and other questions about Jesus' most controversial teachings.

by **ANDREW KLAGER** • illustration by **CRAIG FRAZIER**

'NONVIOLENCE' EVOKES IMAGES of well-known protests—Gandhi's Salt March, Martin Luther King Jr.'s March on Washington—and conveniently flimsy stereotypes: anarchist hippies, utopian peaceniks, futile protesters. The reality is more complex.

Christian nonviolence adds the further complexity of a shockingly irregular king who was enthroned on a Roman cross. If secular nonviolence seems naive, Christian nonviolence is downright scandalous.

What counts as violence?

Violence is any action that undermines the dignity of another human being, whether direct, structural, or institutional. This can be emotional, psychological, spiritual, or physical abuse; actions that dehumanize the Other; forms of injustice, oppression, or marginalization; and war, genocide, mob violence, and armed insurrection. But violence is not the same as conflict. Conflict provides the space to air grievances and expose injustice; nonviolence entails ending conflict by eroding its causes without succumbing to the allure of violence. Nonviolence requires "the willingness to face conflict head on, to resolve it, and to make it a link in the chain of a new process," explained Pope Francis.

Does nonviolence mean passive withdrawal from conflict?

Practitioners of nonviolence do not withdraw from conflict; they face it with courage and creativity. A call to alleviate injustice propels practitioners of nonviolence from the sidelines to active solidarity with and participation in the struggles for human dignity. This intentional involvement provides practitioners front-row engagement with injustice, oppression, and exploitation that undercuts any naiveté about the challenges our world faces.



Getty Images

At left, a leader of a neo-Nazi group speaks to a handful of supporters in Georgia.

Is it okay to punch a neo-Nazi?

NEO-NAZIS AND WHITE SUPREMACISTS are marching again. Counterprotesters are opposing and disrupting. Where do Christians stand? In April, *Sojourners* senior associate editor Rose Marie Berger launched this question on social media: Is it okay for a Christian to punch a Nazi? A lively conversation followed, eventually generating nearly 100 replies—and about as many different understandings (and misunderstandings) of Christian nonviolence. Excerpts from the conversation below are edited and used with permission. —**The Editors**

ROSE: Is it okay for a Christian to punch a Nazi? Discuss.

MAUREEN: Last time I checked it is not okay to punch anyone, no matter who you are. Right?

NATE: Yes. Pacifism doesn't work against genocide. You have to have an opponent who can feel shame. Nazis call for the extinction of my people and have proven they are willing to try and carry that out.

ROSE: Is pacifism the same as organized unarmed resistance?

NATE: In my head it has the same results against Nazis. Nazis are my only punching exception.

LARRY: Ask Dietrich Bonhoeffer ...

NATE: Show me where Bonhoeffer succeeded in stopping the Nazis. I'll wait.

LARRY: He didn't, but he didn't resist passively.

KORLA: Choosing to accept death for yourself is substantially different from choosing to accept it for other people, particularly from a position where you're incredibly low on the list of targets. That's cowardly and colonial.

MARIA: Depends on your goals. Pure individual self-defense? Probably. Winning a street battle? Maybe, but not certain. Therapeutic release? Yeah, perhaps. Winning the strategic game of dismantling white supremacy? Probably not, since over time it will discourage participation and weaken the political jujitsu effect.

How do we engage with conflict nonviolently?

When we think about nonviolence, we often picture mass demonstrations, acts of civil disobedience, labor strikes, boycotts, and other forms of noncooperation—modes of engagement that burrow into our collective consciousness by their deliberate desire to get our attention.

But the tools of nonviolence also include a broad range of strategic and collaborative initiatives, customized to particular violent conflicts: problem-solving workshops that provide a shared space for grassroots actors, middle-range community leaders, and high-level officials to address real needs and grievances; shared actions between enemy factions to encourage humanization and mutual personal investment in addressing the root causes of violent conflict; disruptive measures that include intercepting arms transfers and cutting off financial resources that fund extremist violence; trauma healing and restorative justice initiatives that promote transformation and reconciliation; and development projects that address physical needs to create the conditions that build relationships and discourage conflict.

All this is just scratching the surface, but these methods insist that violence, which starts a cycle of retribution, can't end it. The cause can't also be the solution.

What makes nonviolence Christian?

Jesus, the author of Christian nonviolence, presents us with a choice between the counterintuitive, life-giving behavior of the kingdom of God—humility, compassion, and unity—and the “natural,” uninspiring logic of empire: violence, exploitation, and competition.

Jesus makes it clear that we can't serve two masters (Matthew 6:24). Christian nonviolence begins by pledging allegiance to a king who was put on a Roman cross rather than a throne. It's an upside-down kingdom whose constitution is the Sermon on the Mount and whose manifesto is the Beatitudes.

“You just need to look at what the gospel asks, and what war does,” Dorothy Day observed. “The gospel asks that we feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome the homeless, visit the prisoner, and perform works of mercy. War does all the opposite. It makes my neighbor hungry, thirsty, homeless, a prisoner, and sick. The gospel asks us to take up our cross. War asks us to lay the cross of suffering on others.” Christian nonviolence relies on the promises of a God who understands that exposing the myth of redemptive violence might mean a life of suffering rather than inflicting suffering on others (1 Peter 2:21; Hebrews 13:12–14).

Is Christian nonviolence about doing what works or doing what's right?

Doing what works and doing what's right often overlap, but Christian nonviolence is quick to smash the idol

of results. “We Westerners pride ourselves on results, effectiveness, and efficiency,” wrote Catholic peace advocate John Dear. “The entire culture of North America is built around the principle of achieving success.” But as Thomas Merton advised peace activist Jim Forest: “Do not depend on the hope of results. ... As you get used to this idea you start more and more to concentrate not on the results but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself.”

But since Christians are called to do justice, don't we have a responsibility to be as effective as possible?

Yes, definitely! Results shouldn't be idolized as an end in and of themselves. Just as the failure of the cross by the world's standards was followed by the victory of resurrection, there is still a confidence that doing what's right will ultimately be what works.

Embedded in doing what's right is a psychological means of awakening and influencing the true self deep inside our enemies by creating a positive cognitive dissonance. “The purpose of nonviolence,” activist and writer

Jim Douglass observed, is “to persuade the aggressor to recognize in his [or her] victim the humanity they have in common, which when recognized fully makes violence impossible.”

Think about the Sermon on the Mount: Jesus instructs us to reconcile with those who anger us, avoid violently resisting an evildoer, give more than what was stolen, offer the other cheek, go the

second mile, love our enemies, and pray for our persecutors. Though counterintuitive, these commandments are often effective ways to disorient the recipients of our behavior. Instead of inviting retaliation, these actions say: “If you can't acknowledge my dignity, I'll take the responsibility to acknowledge yours.”

That sounds pretty idealistic; does it actually work?

Nonviolent peacebuilders are resolutely pragmatic and science-based, taking and recommending measured responses that consider every conceivable factor, stakeholder, and repercussion. Research by political scientist Erica Chenoweth has shown that, during the 20th century, acts of nonviolent civil resistance were twice as successful in achieving political and socio-economic objectives as acts of violent intervention.

Nonviolence requires creativity rather than laziness,

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Maintaining nonviolent discipline has nothing to do with white privilege and everything to do with strategic efficacy. Also, self-expression and exhibitionism (which is often what punching is about) is hardly the same thing as organizing and winning. I'd probably focus on the latter.

JAMES: Nonviolence is not an adequate form of resistance against forces that advocate violence to achieve their means; nonviolence only makes the resisters easier targets, and martyrdom doesn't accomplish much in the short term. The only way to meet Nazis' evil violence is with righteous violence—but that doesn't mean it's okay just to walk up and punch somebody who's simply advocating reprehensible ideas. Until the Nazis start using their cudgels, it's better just to yell at them.

THEODOSIUS: There is no such thing as righteous violence any more than there is a just war. Both are wrong and against God, and what Satan wants from us.

JAMES: Well, that argument has no force in secular society.

CHUCK: And therefore? For the most part, the story of the cross is weakness and foolishness to secular society, but is the very power of God made manifest.

JASPER: My gut reaction is that Christian pacifism is relatively unconcerned with earthly outcomes. It's a personal decision to participate in the suffering of Christ regardless of how effective that decision is against injustice, because to do so is ultimately to join in a greater sort of victory. Resisting the evil of violence is more important than resisting the evil afoot in the world. Organized unarmed resistance takes its particular form because it believes it will be effective against injustice. Fidelity to Jesus' love command and the biblical precedent of social justice is of primary importance, not necessarily compassion or suffering-with. The actions of those engaged in both may be similar, but motivations differ—not all nonviolent resisters are necessarily pacifists.

THEODOSIUS: So how did the early Christian act about the violence directed at them? Did they not march to their deaths singing praises to their Lord and crying for forgiveness for those about to kill them? Were they fools to do that?

CHUCK: They were not. But without more context, the original question is nigh impossible to answer. I generally think of it like this: Striking another is always sinful, but in some cases it might be the least sinful thing to do. But I'm thinking that we must remind ourselves of our own brokenness, which causes us often to rightly read the context.

DEBBIE: In self-defense or defense of another: Yes!

THEODOSIUS: No. You stand in the way and take what is being directed at the other person.

JOEY: Considering it from a position of nonviolence, I don't even think it's fair to call such acts "violence" when you consider the vast scope of violence of the dominant systems of oppression. Punching a Nazi does extremely little harm to that Nazi compared to the harm done by the ideologies they espouse. Therefore, even calling those acts "violence" is spitting in the face of people oppressed by white supremacy and patriarchy.

MARC: That's just wrong, because the definition of the term is lost in the application. You can argue for punching Nazis, but not as nonviolence. It makes no sense. Nonviolence is about the means as ends, by definition.

JACKIE: Are you punching them while they are in the act of doing something awful? Or simply because they are a Nazi? I think that matters.

RYAN: If your right fist causes you to sin, cut it off. Then throw it at the Nazi. Then give them a left hook.

MARK: I'm personally more concerned with whether or not it is *helpful* to punch a Nazi at this point, not whether or not it is right or okay. I think the assumption that a Nazi-punch is effective or productive needs to be interrogated. Often it seems like a machismo release rather than tactically valuable, and the conversation gets stuck on the morality of violence vs. nonviolence rather than on tactical considerations. Personally, I don't think it is usually all that helpful. I think there are probably better tactics. In terms of morality, I don't get upset if some Nazi gets clocked. That's not the sort of violence that worries me. At the same time, I can't imagine personally punching Nazis in any way that actually benefits my development as a whole person.

MARCIA: It's okay to restrain them if they are punching someone else, to blockade them if they are intent on evil, to protest them when they rally, and to pray for their conversion at all times. It is even okay to heal them and bind their wounds when they are punched by someone else (I'm thinking of Charlottesville). But if we punch a Nazi, then they win. Their gospel is violence, and when we embrace their example, then we abandon the nonviolent gospel of Jesus Christ, who tells us to love not just our neighbor but our enemies as well. Or, as Dorothy Day put it, "Love is the only solution."

KORLA: So yes, their gospel is violence. But it is not an abstract violence. It is violence with quantifiable goals. If punching a Nazi interrupts them in the pursuit of those goals, that doesn't mean they win.

wisdom rather than impulsiveness, maturity rather than bravado, courage rather than fear. Consider the Otpor ("resistance") Movement in Serbia, that used street theater and other nonviolent tactics to overthrow Slobodan Milošević in October 2000. Or the Catholic bishops in South Sudan who invited armed factions, opposition leaders, and government agents to dialogue in a neutral forum.

Or CoMadres, the committee of mothers and relatives of those incarcerated during El Salvador's civil war that spread pamphlets and occupied a government building to pressure the Salvadoran government to release its political prisoners. Or Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace, a movement whose tactics included a sex strike and led to the end of the second Liberian civil war in 2003 and the election of the country's first female head of state. Even the Nazis gave in to the women of the Rosenstrasse protest whose tactics secured the release of their Jewish husbands and loved ones who they feared were about to be sent to death camps.

Despite these examples, we're still far too ready to cheer on knee-jerk violent means to achieving goals. "People try nonviolence for a week, and when it 'doesn't work' they go back to violence, which hasn't worked for centuries," said historian Theodore Roszak.

What about when limited use of violence could save lives?

"War is impatience," wrote theologian Stanley Hauerwas. Rather than indulge in quick solutions that produce unstable results, Christian nonviolence takes a long-term approach to the transformation of violent conflict. The so-called "collateral damage" of military munitions—the unintended victims—are the same people with whom practitioners of nonviolence engage to build peace and seek reconciliation. Whereas military interventions leave no room for human transformation, Christian nonviolence agrees with the one who preached that none of God's creation is beyond the re-creation of the Creator.

Conflict transformation recognizes that the type of cycle we want depends on the type of fuel we use to propel it. Even if violence seems to "work"—that is, stop more violence with less violence, or prevent a larger body count with a smaller body count—this is always temporary. Violence cannot disrupt a cycle of violence.

Instead, we aim to replace the cycle of violence with a cycle of *nonviolence*. Acting nonviolently disrupts the cycle of violence. "Despite recent scholarship demonstrating the greater effectiveness of nonviolent

Jesus refused to confront evil in the world using evil methods.

resistance," wrote political scientist Molly Wallace, "when faced with a brutal or blatantly unjust opponent, many people are inclined to believe that only violence will bring about needed change or be able to protect and defend one's community." Antifa groups, who do not rule out engaging in violent confrontations to fight fascism, are a contemporary example of this logic—and its counterproductive effects. Not only does the presence of a "violent flank" in a nonviolent movement "provide necessary or further justification for government security forces to fire on protesters," explained Wallace, but it further enflames the energy of "non-state groups, including neo-Nazi and white supremacists, mobilizing more recruits and ultimately increasing the vulnerability of anti-racist and anti-fascist activists and the marginalized and targeted communities whom they wish to defend."

Nonviolence not only removes opponents' incentive, it initiates a new cycle of love, hope, compassion, selflessness, mercy, empathy, and mutual altruism that renders violence incomprehensible and unattractive.

If Christian nonviolence leads to suffering, what hope can it give to those who are already suffering?

By choosing to accept suffering (1 Peter 2:21) rather than multiply the suffering of others, we follow the example of Jesus and refuse to fuel the cycle of violence. "We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering," said Martin Luther King Jr. "We will meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will and we will still love you."

Jesus refused to use evil methods to confront evil in the world. He had the option of calling on 12 legions of angels or allowing Peter to feebly hack at the Roman

Christian non-violence is hard; that's why we need practice.

soldiers, but Jesus subverted the Zealots' methods of violent insurrection—and the exclusivist "us vs. them" narrative on which it depended. Jesus also rejected the idea of a military messiah who would crush the brutal oppression of the Roman Empire. Instead, Jesus exem-

plified creative nonviolent conflict resolution (as he did when he prevented the stoning of the adulteress in John 8:1-11) and forgiveness (as he did toward his own killers as he hung on the cross in Luke 23:34) en route to conquering through his resurrection that which violence produces, death.

But this does not mean we seek out suffering as a goal. Suffering is the by-product of a fallen, oppressive, violent world; when we choose to accept suffering, we participate in a form of dramatized truth-telling that

RANDALL: In self-defense, it is sometimes necessary to be proactive before a threat grows to the capacity to do you, your family, your community, or your nation harm. Therefore, although I am not a big fan of the antifa movement, I must admit that they have done a remarkable job at discouraging, bringing attention to, and making fools of Nazis and their rallies.

If our government fails to take the steps necessary to stop Nazi terrorism in the United States, fails to protect victims and targets of fascist "alt-right" attacks, the least people can do is punch them in the face and expose them as the racist cowards they are. However, actions must be well calculated to avoid escalation, and most of the emphasis needs to be on massive nonviolent direct action, including the strategy of identifying and exposing Nazis and other members of racist, nationalist militias.

NATE: Nazis. The people who tried to exterminate my people. Nazis should be punched. I'm not for violence in many other circumstances. But history has taught violence is the only defense against specifically Nazis.

THEODOSIUS: God creates all of us as true icons of Christ. That means that the person you would strike out at is in fact Christ himself. Now, stop your ego and discover the real truth of how others faced and fought the Nazis. Not by guns, but rather by prayer. And by acting as Christ.

SUSAN: I am increasingly compelled to consider how much my non-violence values are a luxury of my white privilege.

DIANE: No. Would Jesus punch a Nazi? There are other ways to fight evil. Self-defense would allow a person to punch another, but that doesn't really have anything to do with who the two people are.

KATE: I taught a class on just war theory and pacifism today and am finding this to be a fascinating thread. One interesting question is about the role of nonviolence in solidarity. Measuring U.S. (civilian) solidarity with the Sandinistas, for example, against solidarity with the second intifada. When, where, and why is nonviolence a prerequisite for solidarity, and when, where, and why is it not?

BILL: Was World War II a "just war"? Does nonviolent resistance only work against the "civilized" British or Americans, but not against Nazis? It's only our failure to imagine and practice new nonviolent tactics in such situations that makes this question serious.

DAVID: It brings to mind the old question, "What would Jesus do?" Would Jesus punch a Nazi? If he accepted being tortured and executed without violent resistance, what would compel him to react differently to 20th and 21st century oppressors?

PHIL: The correct question is, "Is it okay for a Christian to do nothing toward a Nazi?" This is an astronomically more important question. ■



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exposes violence—much like the cross. Though we may choose to accept suffering in the interim, non-violence is ultimately about undermining violence, relieving us of our own suffering that the violence of others engenders.

This also means we cannot *prescribe* this suffering for others. Participation in nonviolent acceptance of suffering is a personal and often difficult choice that isn't applicable in all circumstances, least of all in situations of domestic and sexual abuse that disproportionately affect women, even more so women of color.

"We must measure Christian ethics by the extent to which its rhetoric on violence is applicable to the circumstances of women's lives," wrote Christian ethicist Traci West. "This is the proper test of the viability and adequacy of its moral prescriptions." West reframed nonviolent acceptance of suffering not as a masochistic approval of abuse but as a form of *resistance* against the violence that engenders this suffering.

There is an important difference between the suffering of Christ on the cross and situations of abuse: The former was a *voluntary* means of exposing collective humanity's violence of such intensity that it actually killed God (John 10:18); the latter is *involuntary*, trapping the victim in a private cycle that enables injustice by keeping it hidden in a cloak of humiliation and shame. This is not nonviolence. Nonviolence is, according to West, part of "an ethic of resisting violence against women" through various means that subvert systems of dominance—especially publicly as a way to de-normalize this abuse and offer solidarity and courage to those facing abuse.

This all sounds ... hard.

Christian nonviolence *is* hard; that's why we need practice. We cultivate nonviolence *not* as a strategy to dust off in urgent circumstances or international crises, but as a way of life. Nonviolence is an antidote to the violence that infects our minds and souls. We need to practice it in everyday decisions, including interior and interpersonal struggles, our interactions with the environment, and our personal economic choices.

In all these actions, we try to recognize the image of God—the one who gives life and *is* life—in all human beings, whether we think they're deserving of this or not. The word "deserve" does not belong in the vocabulary of a practitioner of nonviolence. Nonviolence undercuts the "us vs. them" dichotomy and refuses to distinguish between the culpable and the innocent; there are only those who are in need of more transformation, restoration, and healing than are others.

Rather than *not* violence and *not* death, the positive expression of Christian nonviolence is the percolation of life that bubbles up among the many expressions of violence in our world so that death is eventually overwhelmed. And this sums up the entire Christian vocation: participating in life as a way to conquer death. This is Christian nonviolence. ■

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The Hungry Spirit

BY ROSE MARIE BERGER

Charlottesville, the Summer After

THERE IS NOTHING new under the sun, as the author of Ecclesiastes reminds us. In this, theologian Elsa Tamez said, we can "find solidarity in our discontent."

I visited Charlottesville in May, nearly a year after the "summer of hate." I heard from young Christians who had been on the frontlines at Robert E. Lee Park (now called Emancipation Park). I stood in the presence of their discontent, listening and witnessing to the ongoing, traumatizing effects of last summer's "fascist lollapalooza," as one University of Virginia professor put it.

Still reckoning with the memory of Aug. 12, one leader in his 20s shared how he had tried to be a nonviolent defender amid multiple "armed actors," including the Ku Klux Klan, neo-Nazis, anti-fascists, and police. By the end of that day, two state troopers were dead, one woman was murdered, dozens were injured, and the whole community was emotionally, spiritually wounded.

In small towns such as Charlottesville and more recently

who follow them" (1:11). There is a loss of historical memory. "Collective amnesia means the death of a people," wrote Tamez.

But to remember requires storytellers who will carry the stories and remember the details. At this year's Freedom and Liberation Day gathering in Charlottesville, the community gathered to mark the day 153 years ago when Union troops marched into the city and liberated more than half the population. In remarks at the event,

Jalane Schmidt, who teaches religious studies at the University of Virginia, provided context for the Lee and Stonewall Jackson statues that were the frontlines last summer.

"Neither of those Confederate generals ever came to Charlottesville, except Stonewall Jackson, who came through in a coffin on the way to his burial in Lexington," Schmidt said. "Yet these monuments and the decades of Lost Cause [pro-Confederate] textbooks ... have manufactured mistaken memories that have quashed our knowledge of our own local history." Legend focuses on Jackson as an unstoppable war hero. History brings us back to the fact that the brilliant military tactician for a despicable cause was brought down by friendly fire, then succumbed to pneumonia a week later.

Ecclesiastes reminds us that everything has a season. We in no way reconcile ourselves to the anti-human absurdities of the present. We learn how our present-day battles fit in history. We recall and retell the stories that keep us strong.

"Resist wisely in the face



At right, the covered statue of Gen. Robert E. Lee in Charlottesville, Va., last August. The statue was ordered uncovered in February.

of absurdity," wrote Tamez. This is the most important message in Ecclesiastes—"how to survive with dignity in a dehumanizing and annihilating reality."

In Charlottesville, there was a man with beautiful tattoos. On his arms were drawn long-feathered quetzal birds flexed for flight and a jade-colored double-headed serpent. The ancient history of Tenochtitlán was alive on him.

In Charlottesville, there were brave young leaders who have reclaimed an abandoned church. They're learning the stories of the founding circuit-rider pastor and the first parishioners who sat in its pews. Their worship banners are origami peace cranes and Black Lives Matter posters. Outside, they've planted a garden.

In Charlottesville, there is a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to plant and a time to uproot. ■

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