

A CHOICE  
[written in oral form]

I'm not sure when I became a pacifist. I think I grew into it, and my understanding is still expanding. Early on, there were many contributing influences, including Mennonite youth leaders. Imagine that: Mennonite husband and wife as youth leaders in a Southern Baptist church. They were delightful, and I'm still very good friends with them.

There were other influences, and yes, the Bible was a source of significant persuasion, such as Paul's teaching in Romans 12. Those teachings made an impression on me.

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In the Romans 12 passage, Paul advises that "if possible"/ it's a choice, do your part to live peacefully with others. That advice includes, we should NOT take revenge. Revenge / attacking an enemy.....should be left to God, and that means believing God is big enough to handle such things and it means Trusting God, too.

To get the message across, Paul likely found some inspiration from Jesus when he said that we are to reach out to our enemies to meet their needs, such as feeding them if they are hunger. Paul humorously comments that treating an enemy with kindness will really blow their mind..... It will get their attention.

Verse 21 is the summation: "Do Not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with Good."  
.....over come evil with Good.

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Treating an enemy, perhaps someone who has hurt us, with kindness and generosity,.....is not easy. Moreover, aiding an enemy of the state,.... could get a person into serious trouble with one's own government.

I think it's safer to define pacifism as simply being against war and against violence. Quietly *being against war is usually easier*.

Yet, that desire to withdraw from violent engagement does not sell well in popular culture. Generally, pacifists are dismissed as naive/ idealistic, or worse. Pacifists are often perceived, especially during times of war, ... as cowards. In a way, I understand that perception. Declaring, "I won't kill; I won't use a weapon; count me out" is....to a degree, saying, "This is **not** my problem. It's yours. You or your love ones can kill and die, but not me."

Too often and unfortunately, pacifists have mostly deserved that inaccurate judgment.

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That "selfish" pacifism sure looks "yellow",... and according to the Bible, it's wrong / it's not the way of peace.

Pacifism is NOT passive.

Real pacifism lives and declares that violence is not a tool / violence is unacceptable. Violence is a sin. True pacifists work hard to prevent violence, they labour for and live justice... and they find ways for restoration / healing and peace.

This is done by CREATIVELY being proactive, even confrontational, without sacrificing love and grace.

This is what Jesus taught in the Matthew text.

Jesus opens by saying that we are NOT to fight back when assaulted, and then he gives three creative examples.

The first example is "turning the other cheek", and please don't think that Jesus is suggesting that we become a doormat and accept a violent assault." Jesus is presenting the "Third Way."

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Don't **fight** violence and injustice with violence and abuse.

Don't run away from violence and injustice.

Instead, the third way is the way of Christ, which is creatively, non-violently, confront the violence and injustice.

I like how Walter Wink presents this, and I'll quote him.

"You are probably imagining a blow with the right fist. But such a blow would fall on the left cheek. To hit the right cheek with a fist would require the left hand. [picture it ] But, in Jesus' culture, the left hand could be used only for unclean tasks; a person would never hit someone with the left hand.

Therefore, the only feasible way to hit someone on the right cheek with the right hand, is to hit with the back of the hand. [ It would be a backhand swing ].

The backhand was not a blow to injure, but to insult, humiliate, degrade. It was not administered to an equal, but to an inferior. Masters backhanded slaves; husbands, wives; parents, children; Romans, Jews. The whole point of the blow was to force someone who was out of line back into place.

Notice Jesus' audience: "If anyone strikes you." These are people used to being thus degraded. He is saying to them, "Re-fuse to accept this kind of treatment anymore.

If they backhand you, turn the other cheek." [picture what happens ]

By turning the cheek, the servant makes it impossible for the master to use the backhand again: his nose is in the way. And anyway, it's like telling a joke twice; if it didn't work the first time, it simply won't work.

The left cheek now offers a perfect target for a blow with the right fist; but only equals fought with fists, as we know from Jewish sources, and the last thing the master wishes to do is to establish this underling's equality.

This act of defiance renders the master incapable of asserting his dominance in this relationship.

He can have the slave beaten, but he can no longer intimidate him.

By turning the cheek, then, the "inferior" is saying: "I'm a human being, just like you. I refuse to be humiliated any longer. I am your equal. I am a child of God. I won't take it anymore."

Such defiance is no way to avoid trouble. Meek compliance is what the master wants. Such "cheeky" behavior may call down a flogging, or worse. But the point has been made. The Powers That Be have lost their power to make people submit.

And when large numbers begin behaving thus (and Jesus was addressing a crowd), you have a social revolution on your hands.

In that world of honor and shaming, the "superior" has been rendered impotent to instill shame in a subordinate. He has been stripped of his power to dehumanize the other. As Gandhi taught, "The first principle of nonviolent action is that of non-cooperation with everything humiliating."

This is very different from the usual view that this passage teaches us to turn the other cheek so our batterer can simply clobber us again!

Too often that wrong interpretation has been fed to battered wives and children. And it was never what Jesus intended in the least.

To such victims he advises, "Stand up for yourselves, defy your masters, assert your humanity; but don't answer the oppressor in kind.

Find a new, third "creative" way that is neither cowardly submission nor violent reprisal."

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The other two examples Jesus gave are similar in meaning.

They are confrontational, using embarrassment to neutralize a violent opponent.

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We can glean / lift the message from Jesus' teaching, but the exact tactics don't apply today. Our culture is different.

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To be sure, Jesus gave those examples to help equip those who were listening. Jesus was teaching them another option/ a choice.

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The way of peace / pacifism is a choice. It is choosing a Christ-like way to respond to violence and injustice.

And, good choices are in the forethought; rarely are good choices made in the heat of the moment.

Better choices are based on sound research and good education.

The best choices arise from experience and practice.

Think about that.

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For example, children are taught, I hope often, that if their clothing catches on fire, to drop and roll in order to smother the fire.

In the "heat of the moment", reflex--the poorer choice would be to take off running, and thus fan the flames.

This is true with pacifism: better choices are based on forethought, sound research and education.

The best choices come from skill.

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After I declared that I was a pacifist, I quickly realized that the declaration didn't automatically change me. I still had and have the capacity to do violence.

I can still make the wrong choice, even though I desire to avoid violence. Claiming to be a pacifist / saying the words is Not enough.  
Intent is nice, but....mostly shallow.

Peace is very much like love, and don't confuse giddy, hormone charged, infatuation with love. Love is a choice.

Willie Nelson's song, "You were always on my mind" is pathetic.  
In essence, the song states, "I love you and missed you, but I chose to be elsewhere and ignore you."  
The lyrics even state, "I never took the time". Ouch.  
Sorry, that character in the song does not understand love.

Love is a verb, and love is a choice.  
Love shines when we invest ourselves, our time and energy, to and for someone else or others.  
Love is better when actions are planned ahead, and love gets even better with time and knowledge, and is best with experience, and I'm not referring to romance. I'm talking about love,... *yet deep, devoted love will certainly enhance romance.*

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Likewise, Pacifists must plan ahead. Pacifists must be proactive.  
Pacifism demands creative, self investment to counter violence and injustice.  
And, pacifism is best when peaceful skills are honed.

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Soldiers train and train, so that when they have to make a choice, it will be the choice their leaders desire.  
We pacifists,.....must plan ahead and practice, .....so that we can make better choices--the choices that Christ taught.

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Christian Peacemaker Team members train and practice.  
Among many things, they learn a non-threatening stance [ ].  
They are training to be in very hostile situations. Situations, we hope to never be in.

Nevertheless, pacifists must learn, grow and practice, too, in order to make better choices.

One way to do that is by living what we declare; therefore, we must speak out and act out against injustices and violence.

We can teach our children to listen, to be respect self and others, and all the ways of Christ,...as we listen, respect self and others,... and strive to live the ways of Christ.

We can plan ahead, too, such as: do we really want to call the police in response to a violent situation? Do we want to introduce more violence. We need to think, in advance, about such options.

Moreover, learning and growing in the ways of peace includes how we treat the environment, too.  
Decreasing our carbon footprint prepares us to encounter greater challenges when they come our way.

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Love and Peace are a constant and daily choice.  
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When we live that,.....our choices will improve,.....and the world will witness Christ alive.  
That is a key part of the journey to peace.

And,.....as Paul suggested, we must first decide "Is God big enough" and is God trustworthy. Those are two choices for us to make.

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In a few moments, we will make a choice whether to do communion or not.  
Communion is a good practice that reminds us of the cost of making life giving choices / Christ choices.