

# The awkwardness of being a pacifist

Paul Doerksen

Trying to be a faithful pacifist puts me in awkward situations and conversations. I know that feeling awkward is not among the most important dimensions that surround issues of violence, war, and peace. Nonetheless, it's difficult to articulate pacifist ideals in certain contexts such as discussions that seek to determine what might be done in volatile situations in which it appears that deployment of military measures might make sense. Negatively described, pacifism is a belief that violence should not be used; positively, it is the belief that peace should be pursued using peaceful methods. Many different versions of this view exist, and the one to which I cling is part of my Christian faith. I believe that in the person, work, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus we find the example of and the direction for pacifism, as well as the strength to live in peaceful ways, especially as part of the body of Christ, the church.

## The awkwardness of Remembrance Day

Because I embrace Christian pacifism, I find Remembrance Day rather awkward—that is, I don't quite know what to do when it comes around each year. Many people buy and wear red poppies, which function as a symbol, drawing on the image of the famous poem "In Flanders Fields," especially the immortal line, "In Flanders fields the poppies grow between the crosses row on row." The wearing of the poppy serves as a way of remembering the sacrifice of millions of soldiers—in the form of death, injury, giving of years of service, and so on—and a commitment to remember the kinds of values that were being fought for: democracy, freedom, resistance to tyranny, and so on. As a way of remembering all those things and more, many have taken to wearing poppies, and some years I have simply joined in and worn one as well.

But I'm not quite comfortable doing so, I must admit. Part of the reason for my discomfort is the role of war within the story that is part of wearing a poppy—which, to be clear, is not a straightforward glorification of war. It's important, I think, to acknowledge and commemorate the depth of sacrifice given by those who died and those who survived. Further, I want to acknowledge that the purpose of war is in some ways the same as pacifism's goal—that is, the purpose is peace, the end of war.

After all, Woodrow Wilson, the American president during World War I, argued that that war was the “war to end all wars.” So, ironically perhaps, soldiers and pacifists share similar purposes. I ask myself, why not wear the poppy? Yet, the story represented by the poppy, insofar as I understand it, is not a story that I embrace in its entirety.

Sometimes I’ve worn a pin that displays the slogan, “To remember is to work for peace.” I like the message but am keenly aware that some people find it just a bit condescending, as if those who went to war weren’t doing exactly that, as if we know better, and so on. But I have worn that button sometimes.

And, just to show how inconsistent I am, I’ve sometimes worn both at once—thus sending mixed messages, no doubt—but on purpose. And then, sometimes, I don’t wear either one because I don’t quite know what to do with all of this.

To address this awkwardness head on, below I describe my belief and offer it as something to be considered. I do not take up every argument or try to show how wrong others are. Rather, I offer this description of pacifism as a kind of personal testimony. Above I offered a negative and positive definition of pacifism. Here I give this basic description more shape and content so that it doesn’t remain so amorphous. I’ll begin this process negatively by saying what pacifism is *not*.

### **What pacifism is not**

First, pacifism is not the same as being *passive*. The two words sound similar, but that similarity is misleading. Pacifism does not call you to stand around with your hands in your pockets while all around people are being beat up, shot, robbed, kicked, punched, slapped, whipped, and so on. Pacifists want to be *active* but in ways that are nonviolent, which signals an important difference from a passive stance. For the pacifist, peace is not a complete lack of tension or conflict, like some soft summer evening at the lake with the surface of the water as smooth as glass. The pursuit of peace itself may bring a certain kind of conflict and tension; pacifism is not tranquility at all costs. The absence of tension or conflict in a given situation does not necessarily mean that there you find peace; it might simply indicate the ignoring of real issues. At any rate, I offer up for your consideration the life of Jesus Christ; for a peaceful person, he sure created a lot of trouble—but it was trouble of a certain kind.

Second, pacifism is not something embraced by people who are simply nonviolent by nature. I haven’t embraced this view because of how

peaceful I am already. Quite the opposite, I have all kinds of practices, reactions, propensities, leanings, actions, and attitudes that are more violent than not. To clarify, I haven't killed anyone—but there are many other ways of being violent than murdering. You might say that I embrace pacifism in part as a way of addressing my tendencies. So, if someone were to say to me, “You claim to be a pacifist, but you are inconsistent,” I would simply agree. I'm a pacifist not because I'm already peaceful but because I want to shape my life in that way.

Third, pacifism is not a quick, easy answer to complicated problems in our world. My embrace of pacifism does not mean that I know what to do in complicated situations where it seems that something must be done. I struggle with many questions to which I don't have clear answers: What about personal self-defense? What if someone is attacking my loved ones? What can and should be done about a tyrant like Hitler? Put a different way, the embrace of pacifism is far from a guarantee of success in any given situation. It's not as though a difficult scenario arises where people who allow for the use of force in certain situations can't fix things and along comes pacifism to the rescue with the solution to the problem that would otherwise remain insoluble.

### **What pacifism is**

Having described what pacifism is *not*, I turn now to what it *is*. First, pacifism is part of the life of a disciple of Jesus Christ—or at least the version of pacifism that I embrace finds its genesis, its source, and its shape in Jesus Christ. In other words, I am not a generic pacifist; I'm a Christian, and intrinsic to that faith, I believe, is the pursuit of peace in peaceful ways. This is not to suggest that anyone who does not embrace this view is not a *real* Christian, a real follower of Jesus. Truth be told, I'm keenly aware that the view I'm putting forward is a minority Christian understanding. Far more Christians across history have embraced what is known as the just war tradition than those who have embraced pacifism—and the same holds true for Christians around the globe at this moment. Most Christians believe that under certain circumstances it is legitimate and maybe even required to temporarily embrace violence, and many in that majority of Christians are also engaged in attempting to follow Jesus Christ in a life of discipleship. My point is not to say that anyone who is not a pacifist is not a Christian. Rather, my point here is that I'm a Christian, and, as I understand it, part of being a Christian is to be peaceful. To put this in another way, if the Bible did not give an account of the faith in the way

it does, I would not embrace this view. But I read the Bible as teaching us about Jesus in a certain way—that is, Jesus came to earth to display to the world what God is like—and so I don’t depend just on a couple verses such as “turn the other cheek” to undergird my pacifist beliefs. Rather, it seems to me that when looking at what the Bible shows us about the kind of being Jesus is—the kind of life he led, the things he taught, the way he embodied peaceful responses to violence, his death, his resurrection, his

**The pursuit of peace is something that calls for a way of living in the world in all areas of our lives, and at all stages of life, and not just when faced with the question of war.**

establishing of the church, his promised return—when I look at all of this, I have been led to believe that to follow such a person, I am invited to embrace peace.

Second, pacifism is more than being anti-war. I would argue that war is wrong, but that view is not unique to pacifists. Some people who start wars—and many who fight in them—are against war in general but see particular wars as tragic exceptions. But beyond

that, the pursuit of peace is something that calls for a way of living in the world in all areas of our lives, and at all stages of life, and not just when faced with the question of war. In other words, it is not enough for me to say that I will never go to war. At my stage in life, that’s not saying much. I’m too old to fight, and besides, I would be bad at it since I have no fighting skills and don’t know how to use most weapons. And yet, pursuing peaceful paths in my life is nonetheless challenging. I think about questions such as these: What does it mean for me to teach peaceably? How can I be a peaceful dad? How can I contribute to a culture that celebrates peace more than violence when I’m fully aware that violence is more interesting? How can I pursue real and important disagreements with people but in peaceful ways? It would be a lot easier if being a pacifist was only about resisting war. But to try to live pacifism out in all the dimensions of life—that’s complicated.

And so I conclude with another assertion: Pacifism is humanly impossible. By this I mean that I’m under no illusion that by my pursuit of peace means that peace will somehow finally carry the day. To assume that would not only be naïve; it would also show a deep misunderstanding of Christian pacifism. True peace will only come when God brings it to pass. To say otherwise would be to display the kind of arrogance that borders on idolatry, in my view. It is a lack of faith that claims “peace, peace”

when there is no peace; it is a lack of faith that thinks peace is a human construction.

In the end, whatever the truth and validity of my embrace of pacifism amounts to, I am called to trust that the vision displayed in the Bible, as seen by the prophet Isaiah, who claims that God

*shall judge between the nations  
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;  
they shall beat their swords into plowshares  
and their spears into pruning hooks;  
nation shall not lift up sword against nation;  
neither shall they learn war any more. (2:4)*

That vision is God's, both in content and in the task of bringing it to reality. Someday, then—in a time that is God's alone and in a way that God will bring to pass—we will work together in peace, and Remembrance Day will no longer be awkward for me. More important, God will rid the world of violence, thanks be to God. May God help us live in peace until that day, insofar as God gives us grace. And may the peace of Christ be with us all.

### **About the author**

Paul Doerksen is associate professor of theology and Anabaptist studies at Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg, Manitoba.