

Comments for NWC War, Peace and Pacifism Panel Discussion
Nov. 8, 2006

1. My understanding of these issues is clearly shaped by my upbringing in the Anabaptist tradition, including my undergraduate education at a Mennonite college. It is also shaped by my insights as a professional social scientist and my understanding of Christian history from the days of the early Christians under the persecution of the early Roman Empire (“purification by fire”) through what church historians call the “Constantinian reversal,” through the tragedy of the Nazi Holocaust when most German Christians followed a Caesar named Hitler into battle with *Gott mit uns* engraved on their government-issue belt buckles, through the American Holocaust against the American Indian in the name of “Manifest Destiny” and more recent American history, including the Vietnam war, Gulf War, and the war in Iraq. I have a strong conviction that nationalism (whether Roman, German or American) greatly pollutes our understanding of these issues as it becomes a very real and seductive form of idolatry to which many Christian groups, sadly, have yielded. Early Christians realized that they could have only one primary loyalty, to Christ or to Caesar, and thus refused to “bow the knee” to Caesar,” including, for many, refusal to serve as armed combatants in Caesar’s legions. We are faced with a similar choice today, as James Bierly so eloquently pointed out in last week’s Beacon editorial. To quote the last line of that editorial, “Let’s remember that our primary allegiance is not owed to the United States of America, but to the Kingdom of God. (NWC Beacon, Nov. 3, 2007)
2. With that starting point and taking a high view of Scripture as a pacifist evangelical Christian, I understand God’s revelation to us as progressive, starting with the Old Testament attempt to limit rather than endorse the sinful human tendency to violence and retribution through the well-known standard of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” rather than endorsing the human tendency to disproportionate retaliation against those judged to have wronged us. This standard, however, is superseded for Christians by Christ’s commandment that we love our enemies, turn the other cheek, walk the second mile and practice virtually unlimited forgiveness (70 times 7). Love rather than vengeance is to be the way we as followers of Christ respond to those who have harmed or would harm us and our loved ones. Vengeance belongs to God, not to fallible, self-serving human beings.
3. In many cases but not every case, non-violent loving responses to violence committed against us will “work” to defuse and overcome the evil of past or present perpetrators. (Examples here are M.L. King’s insistence on violence in the American Civil Rights movement, Gandhi’s successful non-violent independence movement in former British India, and the recent example of my Amish cousins in Pennsylvania following the tragic school shooting there.) However, Christ’s non-violent disciples are not guaranteed that non-violence will “work.” Sometimes we and our loved ones will end up injured, dead, or property-less. We are called to be faithful disciples, rather to

seek retribution to evil or to right real or imagined wrongs through misguided attempts to use fatally-flawed violent means (war) to seek desirable ends. The end does *NOT* justify the means. If Civil War General William T. Sherman was correct in his observation that “War is Hell” (and he should know, because he personally wreaked it on the South in his infamous march from Memphis to the sea), how can we permit ourselves, citizens of Christ’s Peaceable Kingdom, to use it?

4. Thus in my understanding, pacifism is simply a faithful response to Christ’s teachings, an individual and group ethical standard for Christians even if it is not shared by “enemies” so defined by the Caesar of the moment. It is not primarily a political strategy, although it may clearly have political implications. I reject the implication that pacifists must somehow “justify” pacifism. In my view the shoe is on the other foot. Those who would justify war must prove how they can love their enemies by killing them, which to me is an oxymoron.
5. As I suggested in my opening point, Christians and Christian groups who allow themselves to be seduced by the desire for power, under the seductive but false assumption that if they gain it, they can then use it for good and “force” people to be Christian, are doomed to failure. This failure has been repeated time and again since the days when Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. The Crusaders made lasting enemies of Muslims in the Holy Land with their misguided attempts to “take back the Holy Land from the *infidels*” in their unholy mixing of patriotism and Christianity. We in the “Christian West” are still reaping the whirlwind sown by deeds of the Crusaders. However, perhaps the most recent manifestations of Christians yielding to this temptation are the misguided attempts of the “Christian Right” to ally themselves with the Republican party in an attempt to gain and wield power to “make America Christian again,” as if it ever was!
6. I do not deny the Biblical mandate, seen most clearly in the book of Romans, for the state to exercise a police function to maintain order and restrain the worst forms of evil in society. However, I see no Biblical mandate for one nation-state, in this case the U.S., to police even neighboring states like Canada, Mexico, Haiti, Nicaragua, etc., much less to police the entire world.
7. In sum, the task for faithful Christians, in my view, is to work in a Christ-like way to further the Kingdom of God. For me, that precludes participation in war. That is the stance I took during the Vietnam War, and it is the stance I take today.