

VIOLENCE AND PEACE UNDERSTOOD IN LIGHT OF BIBLICAL PROGRESSIVE REVELATION

Introduction

“I only have two cheeks. Now that I have been slapped on both cheeks, I have no more cheeks to turn and so now I am free to respond in a way my enemies will understand.”

“Near the end of his ministry, Jesus encouraged his disciples to buy swords. This statement justifies the right of Christians to buy and use weapons.”

These are two of the arguments often used by Christians to justify responding to violence with violence. Have our Christian brothers properly reflected the teachings of Jesus when they defend their actions with the “no second cheek” and the “buying a sword” arguments?¹ I will attempt in this presentation to demonstrate that the Christian teachings about violence and peace are progressive—they focus more on peace and less on violence in the New Testament than in the Old Testament and they are also comprehensive—they are taken from all parts of the New Testament and they are also uniform—they are consistently interpreted and applied from the time of Christ to the end of the New Testament.

Christians believe in what theologians call “progressive revelation.” In order to understand that doctrine we must understand both of these words.

Revelation refers to truth that is communicated to a person that could not be known otherwise. We human beings can learn to count; we can learn to read and write; we can learn to ride a bicycle through normal learning techniques. We can even learn sophisticated concepts of physics like the law of gravity and the law of aerodynamics through observation and experimentation. However, it is impossible to learn too much about God through normal means because God exists in the realm of the spirit world which is beyond our ability to observe or experiment or even comprehend through ordinary means of learning. Therefore, when it comes to the nature of God and the things that please and displease him, these things have to be revealed to humanity through means other than our physical senses.

The word “progressive” means something that takes place gradually. If I go to the market, I can buy a yam instantly. One moment the yam belongs to the trader; the next moment it belongs to me. However, for a farmer to get a yam, he has to select the place where he will plant; he has to prepare the soil; he has to plant a small piece of yam or a yam vine; he has to cultivate it; he has to wait for months while the yam develops. Finally he is able to dig around the yam and harvest it. That is a progressive process.

What progressive revelation means is that God did not reveal everything we need to know about himself and his values at the beginning of creation or even in the first few millennia of human history. God has gradually revealed these important truths about himself to humankind and a record of the revelation has been given to us in the Bible.

¹ It is beyond the scope of this presentation to address all of the specific verses related to peace and violence. The purpose of the present paper is to address issues of violence and peace as they progressively unfold from many parts of the Bible and particularly the New Testament and not focus on individual controversial texts.

Although the initial revelation came to the prophets and apostles and others who received those messages through the supernatural ministry of the Holy Spirit, the subsequent communication of these revealed truths has passed down to us through normal communication transfer means. God directed that these revelations should be placed in writing and these writings have been preserved for us for thousands of years.²

Although revelation was given to us differently from the way we normally learn, the progressive part is indeed similar to our normal learning processes. That means that we have gained knowledge about God a little bit at a time. Thus, the Bible, including the Old Testament, is a progressive unfolding of what God wants humanity to know about himself and his creation.

- God revealed some important eternal truths to Abraham.
- God expanded that revelation through his interactions with Moses.
- God revealed even more truths about himself through David and Solomon.
- God provided completely different perspectives about himself through the prophets.

When Jesus came into the world, he was the savior of the world and, as such, it was necessary for him to reveal many more things to us. When we look at the New Testament, we see a major portion of it is about Jesus, describing both what Jesus taught and what he did.

However, even though Jesus revealed to us many important things, truth continued to be revealed even after Jesus departed from this world. We believe that the apostles and their associates understood the truths Jesus taught more than anyone else. They in turn had the responsibility to explain and apply the truths Jesus had taught to the next generation. We believe they were guided in this process by the Holy Spirit.

The book of Acts describes the historical development of the church from the time Jesus ascended to heaven through the first 30 years of Christian history. In this historical book, we see examples of the way the church interpreted and applied the teachings that had been revealed earlier, particularly through the teachings and example of Jesus. The epistles were written by the apostles to people or specific churches to help them understand and apply the things Jesus taught and practiced.

When you look at all of the teachings about a certain topic in the Bible, you see a progressive unfolding of that doctrine. Even within the 60 years covered by New Testament era after Pentecost, there are ongoing refinements and explanations about the teachings and examples that Jesus gave. Therefore, no Christian doctrine should be taken from just one passage of Scripture or even one section of the Bible. Every Christian doctrine must be interpreted in light of the way it has been progressively revealed in the Sacred Scriptures. It is only in this way that one can have a comprehensive view of any Christian doctrine.

² The process of how this was done is known as the doctrine of inspiration and is beyond the scope of this presentation. For a simple approach to inspiration, see my book *We Believe I*, (Africa Christian Textbooks, Bukuru, 2004), Chapter Three entitled “Inspiration of Scriptures” (pages 39-51). Included in that process of transferring truth to subsequent generations is the hand copying of ancient manuscripts and the passing down of those manuscripts from one generation to the next. This topic is known as Textual Criticism. A simple overview of this topic is found in the book I co-authored with Craig Keener entitled, *Understanding and Applying the Scriptures*, (Africa Christian Textbooks, Bukuru, 2008). See specifically the chapter entitled “Textual Criticism,” (pages 47-60).

The Unfolding Doctrine of Violence in the Bible

Violence is an important topic in the Bible. The word “war” and its cognates are found 249 in the NIV translation of the Bible. The word “battle” is found 206; “fight” is found 226; “destroy” is found 579; and “enemy” is found 379. Interestingly the word “pray” and its cognates are found only 347 times. “Worship” is found 243; “repent” is found 72; and “confess” is found only 36 times. What this suggests is that warfare and fighting and violence constitute a major theme in the Bible. If that is true, we need to examine how the issue of violence developed in Scriptures and what a comprehensive view of violence looks like.³

The Teachings of the Old Testament about Violence and Peace

In the Old Testament era, God was working on this earth through the offspring of Abraham and particularly through the Jewish nation that had descended through him. Thus, God set up rules and guidelines for human living based upon a nation model. The Old Testament contains the promise given to Abram in Genesis 12:2-3 to build a great nation through him and the long difficult thousand year process of God building that nation. The Mosaic writings contain the laws of the nation God was building and the specific by-laws that were necessary for that nation to live in peace and prosperity, including laws about violence.

The Old Testament, particularly the historical books, contains a record of the various wars and conflicts that the nation of Israel experienced. Some nations were occupying or tried to occupy the homeland God had promised Abraham’s descendants so, at times, the Israelites initiated offensive wars to claim or reclaim that which God had given to them.⁴ Some nearby nations threatened their existence and, as a nation, the Israelites fought defensive wars to protect themselves.⁵ At times, various Jewish kings initiated foolish wars of aggression or retaliation that cannot be justified.⁶ The leaders of the nations of Israel and Judah were weak and imperfect human beings who did not always know or follow the will of God for their lives. These things are also faithfully and accurately recorded in the Holy Scriptures. The fact that an event is documented in the Bible does not mean that that event was authorized by God, even when done by his “chosen people”.

Though the “*eye for an eye*” policy in the Old Testament was primarily part of the judicial system which was implemented by recognized judges (Exodus 21:22-25; Leviticus 24:17-22; Deuteronomy 19:16-21), the individual citizen could participate at some level in this kind of justice (See Numbers 35:6-15). These policies and practices were all part of the nation of Israel and an official part of their constitution and bylaws. Individuals, even in the Old Testament period, did not have the right to take the law into their own hands.

Therefore, except for a few personal incidences of violence and a few inappropriate violent campaigns perpetuated by self-centered and irresponsible leaders, the issues of

³ The first example of violence in the Bible is when Cain killed his brother Abel (Genesis 4:8). There are several other examples of personal violence in the Bible. For the purpose of this paper, I have chosen not to focus on personal violence but more group or ethnic or national violence.

⁴ The battle against Jericho (Joshua 6:1-26) and all of the wars fought in the first half of the book of Joshua were offensive wars designed to capture and occupy the land that had been promised them.

⁵ The war that Gideon fought against the Midianites was a defensive war (Judges 6:11-7:24) Many other wars fought in the book of Judges were defensive in nature.

⁶ The war Jehoshaphat and Ahab initiated against Ramoth Gilead fits into this category. See 1 Kings 22:1-38.

violence and peace found in the Old Testament are nearly all related to national issues and most of those were related to a sovereign nation protecting its people and national integrity.

Jesus' Teachings about Violence and Peace

Jesus came into this world to expand the revelation that God had given earlier. This revelation was to demonstrate God's care and concern for all the peoples of the earth not just one nation. This should not surprise us. God was and is concerned about all of the people in the world. Jesus came to explain and implement God's plan to the whole world.

However, since God was planning to bless and work with all the people of the world, this would require a different structure than the nation which he had used in the earlier era. God wanted to create a body that would truly be international.

- This entity would not be restricted to one geographical area.
- This entity would not be restricted to just one culture.
- This entity would not speak only one language.

Jesus introduced this new body by saying to Peter and the other disciplines, "*You are Peter and upon this rock, I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it*" (Matthew 16:18). In this sentence Jesus made two points. First, he declared that he was going to use Peter and the apostles to build this new entity. Second, he stated that this body would be so successful the pagan gods would not be able to stop its powerful advance.

This new body was to be known as the "church" (*ecclesia*). This church would primarily be made up of those who followed the teachings and example of Jesus. This church would be universal in the sense that all of the followers of Jesus in the whole world would be a part of it. However, it would have a local identity in that those individuals in one geographical area would be considered to be part of a local church.

An important question is this: How does this new church relate to the former nation? In other words, what are the similarities and differences between the church and ancient Israel? We know that there are certain differences because in perhaps the most important speech Jesus ever made, the Sermon on the Mount, he said five times, "*you have heard that it is said . . . but I say unto you.*" These verses suggest that even though the nature of God never changes and cannot change, God does use different structures and different strategies as he accomplishes different objectives in this world.

In the university, there are many different sub-groups. Each one has different rules and guidelines. The Senate of the university is operated differently from a small admissions committee and both are run different from the way a lecturer supervises his or her classroom. Although all are under the sovereign control of the university, each sub-group has its own purpose and therefore, functions a bit different from the others.

In a similar way, God has created several different entities in this world, including the family, the nation, and the church. All of these have their own individual purposes and therefore, their own individual ways of doing things. The head of a nation may not treat his citizens like he would treat the members of his family. These differences are easily understood and acceptable in society.

When Jesus came into this world and created the new organization—the church, he created new guidelines that would govern that particular entity and the people associated with it. Interestingly one of the changes Jesus initiated was related to the issue of violence. In fact, three of the five sections where Jesus gave new instructions are related to violence.

- Matthew 5:21-22: “*You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that **anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment.** Again, anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.*”
- Matthew 5:38-39: “*You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, **Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.***”
- Matthew 5:43-48: “*You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: **Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,** that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? **Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.**”*

The following are two brief observations about violence from these passages:

Jesus removed from the individual the right and responsibility of personal justice.

The “*eye for an eye*” principle no longer applied to individuals. Interestingly, Jesus did not remove this principle from the world. Nations now have the responsibility for implementing justice. The Apostle Paul, expanding Jesus’ teaching on this issue, said, “*For he (the government) is God’s servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God’s servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer*” (Romans 13:4). Perhaps because it was going to be a voluntary entity, Jesus demanded higher standards of the individuals who would make up the church than those who made up the nation. And one of those issues was the issue of personal retaliation. It was tolerated in the nation but not in the church.

Jesus raised the standard related to violence from physical reactions to internal attitudes.

In the nation period, people were restricted from murder but in this new age, Jesus insisted that his followers should not be angry or hate or even slander others. Relationships were governed to some extent in the earlier period but in this new period, there should be love and harmony and peace between people and not hatred and bitterness and slander and anger and violence.

How well did Jesus observe his own teachings? When he was arrested and Peter tried to defend him with a sword, Jesus said to Peter, “*Put your sword back in its place*” (Matthew 26:52). At the end of a day filled with ridicule and torture, Jesus said, “*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing*” (Luke 23:34). There is no example of Jesus lashing out with angry words or deeds against those who treated him so harshly. Jesus indeed lived up to the standards of forgiveness and love and peace that he had taught.

Two possible exceptions have been noted by various individuals so I will address those issues as well.

Cleansing the Temple. While in Jerusalem, Jesus went into the temple, took ropes and made them into a whip and drove out the corrupt businessmen and money changers from the Temple (Matthew 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-17; John 2:14-17). Some would interpret this as violence. However, I do not believe this should be considered violence for several reasons.

- No property was destroyed (though some things were scattered) and no one was seriously injured or killed in this confrontation.
- The incident was designed as a display of Jesus' anger more than the actual punishment of law breakers. It was a visual sermon to his disciples and all who were in the Temple at that time of the sacredness of prayer and worship and it spoke volumes about the commercialization of the things of God.
- This incident was an example of corporeal punishment not capital punishment. The Old Testament allowed for corporeal punishment of both children as a part of the family (Proverbs 13:24; 22:15; 23:13-14) and adults as a part of the judicial system (Deuteronomy 25:2-4).
- Jesus was upholding the original laws related to the Temple and challenging the corrupt practices that were being tolerated by Jewish leaders.
- Jesus was doing what he was doing in the authority of his Father with whom he had intimate and immediate access.

In light of these observations, it is quite clear that this was not an example of violence in which the lives and property of people were destroyed.

Buying a Sword. The second issue was the time Jesus supposedly ordered his disciples to buy swords. During Jesus' last night on this earth, he discussed many things with his disciples. He introduced the ceremony of Holy Communion (Matthew 22:13-20); He warned about one who would betray him (22:21-23). He corrected the disciples as they were arguing over which would be the greatest in the kingdom (22:24-30). He warned Peter that he would betray him (22:31-34). He offered the disciples assurances that they were going to have all they needed after he was gone. He reminded them that when they went out on their earlier short term outreaches they lacked nothing even though they took no extra provisions (22:35). Jesus then explained to them that the guidelines for short-term projects were lifted. Before, they had been working in their own homeland among their own people. Now, they would be going internationally. They would now be allowed to take a purse and a bag and even a sword. In fact, Jesus said to them, "*But now if you have a purse (for money), take it, and also a bag (for extra clothing); and if you don't have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one*" (22:36). Note these facts about this incident:

The word for sword in this context was *machaira* which was a short sword or long knife that was used primarily as a weapon but also as a "common personal implement".⁷ The following are some observations about this incident:

- The primary focus of this statement was to encourage the disciples that in the future they would travel with their normal attire and equipment. It is likely that the typical

⁷ Custer, Stewart, *A Treasury of New Testament Synonyms*, (Bob Jones University Press, Greenville, SC. 1975), p.69

Jew, especially fishermen like several of the disciples carried small knives with them for their protection and their work.⁸ Jesus was actually saying to them that their training period was over and now things would return to normal. They would dress and travel as normal travelers would.

- Jesus was not encouraging the violent use of swords because when Peter declared that they already had “two swords”, Jesus declared, “*That is enough*” (2:28). Jesus obviously knew that the Jewish hierarchy as well as the Roman military would be arrayed against his followers in a few hours. Two swords would certainly not be enough to fight them in a military sense. So Jesus must have meant something else when referring to the swords.
- The fact that not more than three or four hours later, when Peter attempted to defend Jesus with a sword (22:49-50), he was rebuked by Jesus with the rather blunt words “*No more of this*” (22:51)⁹ It is quite amazing that Jesus concluded his long teaching session that day and in fact his entire three-year training program with his disciples with a rebuke about using a sword. This rebuke was reinforced by Jesus healing the man, thus undoing the trauma to his enemy that had been caused by his disciple.
- The fact that Jesus never retaliated or encouraged retaliation or the use of the sword either before or after this incident demonstrates that this statement was not given to encourage violence.
- The fact that nowhere in the book of Acts did any of the followers of Jesus use any kind of violence or even violent language against those who opposed them demonstrates that Jesus’ final teaching to them was well understood.

All of these facts taken together demonstrate that Jesus’ statement about buying a sword was not something to be taken literally. This was almost certainly a common Semitic figure of speech known as metonymy which is an idea that is used to refer to an associated idea. It can be a cause for an effect or *vice versa*.¹⁰ The statement about the sword was simply a warning to them to prepare for violence to be exercised against them.

Violence and Peace in the Acts of the Apostles

What the Old Testament and Jesus taught and practiced about violence continued to be practiced during the first 30 years of Christianity as reflected in the Acts of the Apostles.

The Acts of the Apostles provides a good snapshot of the early church, including several examples of violence propagated against the early Christians. Peter and John were the first to be arrested. They boldly proclaimed their allegiance to Jesus and were threatened by Jewish officials (Acts 4:21). Stephen was arrested and eventually killed by a mob. Shortly before he died, with the stones still raining down on his head, he said, “*Lord, do not hold this sin against them*” (Acts 7:60). Stephen certainly was following the example of his master.

Immediately after the stoning of Stephen, “*great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem*” but there was no retaliation and not even any slander or abuse heaped upon those who were persecuting them (Acts 9:1). The early Christians were indeed

⁸ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible*; See on Luke 22:38 where he says “The Galileans generally travelled with swords.” Taken from e-Sword collection.

⁹ The *English Standard Version* says “*No more of this.*” The *Good News Bible* says “*Enough of this.*” This was a rather strong statement of displeasure.

¹⁰ McCain, Danny and Craig Keener, *Understanding and Applying the Scriptures*, (Africa Christian Textbooks, Bukuru, 2008), p. 193.

following the teachings and example of Jesus. After James was executed, Peter was later arrested and beaten (Acts 12:2). He was miraculously released but again there was nothing but thanksgiving and prayer that came out of him or the church.¹¹

The Apostle Paul demonstrated that same kind of attitude toward violence. He accepted beatings and imprisonment with little complaint and no retaliation (Acts 16:22; 21:31-33; 2 Corinthians 6:5, 9; 11:25). Paul did, however, respond a bit different on two occasions. After being jailed and beaten publicly in Philippi, Paul refused to be released from prison until those responsible for his arrest and beating came and personally released him (Acts 16:36-39). Although there was no violence, Paul did insist through legal means that people who violated the law must be held responsible for their actions. Also when Paul heard about the threat on his life in Jerusalem, he reported the matter to the proper government officials and accepted state protection (Acts 22:12-21).

The bottom line is that for the first 30 years of church history, the church practiced responding to violence exactly like their master Jesus did.

- There was no retaliation.
- There was no acquisition of weapons.
- There was no angry denunciation of their oppressors.
- There was gentleness toward their “enemies” and a calm acceptance of persecution.

Violence and Peace in the Epistles

The epistles represent the final revelations found in the Bible. Epistles are basically informational letters that various apostles wrote to individuals and churches explaining what to believe and how to apply the teachings of Jesus and the earlier revelations. What did the apostles write about the issues of violence and peace in the epistles?

James is the first of the epistles to be written. This book was written by the brother of Jesus who later became the leader of the church at Jerusalem. James does not address the issue of violence and peace directly but he does make some key related points.

- ***Trials.*** 1:2-4: *Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.*
- ***Anger.*** 1:19-20: *Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.*
- ***Peace.*** 3:17-18: *But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.*
- ***Fighting.*** 4:1: *What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?*

¹¹ In the prayer associated with Peter's first imprisonment, the enemies were mentioned but the real focus of the prayer was for boldness for the believers. “Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness” (Acts 4:29).

James stresses the importance of being joyful in times of persecution and recognizing the positive side of what that produces in our lives. He also warns that followers of Jesus should not yield to anger because that does not promote God's righteousness. James also supports Jesus' teachings that his followers must be peace-loving and peacemakers whenever there is conflict because fighting and quarreling are not consistent with the work of God.

The Apostle Paul is the most prolific of the New Testament writers. He also addresses the issue of violence and peace. Perhaps Paul's most comprehensive discussion of the issue of conflict and peace is found in Romans 12:14-20:

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."

This passage makes several important points about those perceived to be enemies.

- The followers of Jesus will be persecuted but should respond with blessing.
- The followers of Jesus should not repay anyone evil for evil.
- The followers of Jesus should live at peace with all men, as much as it is possible.
- The followers of Jesus should not take revenge but allow God to bring justice.
- The followers of Jesus should feed and give drink to those considered to be enemies.

All of these instructions are logical outgrowths of the things Jesus taught.

Right at the end of his life, when Paul was in prison and about to face the executioner's sword, he wrote his final instructions and observations about the Christian faith. I have selected certain phrases from this last epistle that address violence related issues:

- **Suffering.** 1:8: *So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God.*
- **Pursuing Peace.** 2:22-23: *Flee the evil desires of youth, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart. Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels.*
- **Quarreling or Kindness.** 2:24: *And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful.*
- **Characteristics of the Last Day Evils.** 3:1-3: *But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good . . .*
- **The Lord's Deliverance.** 3:10-11: *You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings—what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them.*

- **Persecution.** 3:12 *Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. . .*

These passages, given right at the end of Paul's life, reinforce many things taught and practiced by Jesus and his first followers:

- Being a good Christian is consistent with imprisonment, suffering and persecution.
- Peace is one of the important things the Christian must pursue.
- Quarreling and being resentful are incompatible with the Christian faith.
- The last days will be characterized by lack of love, lack of forgiveness, lack of self-control, slander, brutality and the failure to love good things.

The book of Hebrews was written 30 to 40 years after Jesus departed from this world. It therefore reflects a second generation perception of what Jesus taught and practiced. It was also written after Christians had been experiencing discrimination and persecution for a number of years. The book of Hebrews was written to a group of Jewish Christians who apparently were facing various kinds of opposition and persecution. The writer then writes about the way that they are expected to respond.

Hebrews 12:14 makes a significant statement about peace: *"Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord."* This passage suggests that we are to live in peace. The word here is the word *eirene* which is the Greek equivalent of *shalom*, the comprehensive Hebrew word that described peace in all parts of life. Since these were Jews we can assume that peace was a concept that they understood very well. The following are three observations based upon this verse:

We must make every effort to live in peace. Peace should be a top priority for the Christian believer. The phrase *"make every effort"* is the word often translated "pursue." It was a word that was used of a wild animal like a lion pursuing its prey. Such animals use the greatest care in planning and enormous energy in pursuing and catching their prey. Animals do not pursue their prey casually or lazily. They do it with concentration and commitment because their very existence depends upon it. This is a lesson for those of us seeking peace.

We must make every effort to live at peace with all people. The word "all" implies that we are to be at peace with every person in the world, including Christians and non-Christians, people from our tribe or ethnic group and those from other tribes and other groups, those we are naturally drawn to and those we are repulsed by. As followers of Christ, we have a sacred duty to pursue peace with all people.

We must pursue peace and holiness. The Greek conjunction *kai* links two compatible and normally similar concepts. In this verse holiness is linked with peace. Holiness is a characteristic of God and thus is the ultimate goal of human beings. Leviticus 11:44 says, *"be holy, because I am holy."* The implication of this passage is that a part of our holiness is the ability to have total peace in our lives. To say this another way, our peace is inseparably connected to our holiness. It appears there can be little or no holiness without also experiencing peace. Both Christians and Muslims fulfill much of the demands of their faith in order to conform to the holiness of God. It is a strange application of our faith indeed when we spend enormous amounts of our time and energy pursuing holiness and then fail to also pursue peace that is so naturally linked with it.

Summary of New Testament Teachings about Violence and Peace

The following is a summary of the teaching about violence and peace in the Bible.

Because of the different structure and purposes of the nation of Israel and the church, Jesus initiated a deliberate and public shift away from violence and toward peace. This is consistent with the doctrine of progressive revelation. Jesus' teachings on the issues of violence and peace are like a supreme court ruling. All lower court decisions, early judicial rulings, prior legislation and previously acceptable practices that are contrary to the teachings of Jesus are null and void and all future teaching, practices and legislation must conform to his teachings. These teachings are the final authority on issues related to violence and peace.

Jesus' teachings and practices related to non-violence and peace are consistently taught and practiced by the apostles and the early church. The followers of Jesus practiced forgiveness towards those who initiated violence against them. They prayed for God to deliver them. They sometimes ran away or appealed to authorities for protection. They continued to model the spirit and letter of the example Jesus had provided.

There are no examples of Christians participating in violence in the New Testament era. In fact we do not even find any examples of Christians praying against those who abused them. The early followers of Jesus practiced what Jesus had taught them—that they were to love their neighbors as themselves, even if those neighbors were hostile or unloving.

Implications for Modern Christians

In light of these observations, what are the implications of these things for contemporary followers of Jesus?

Those who identify themselves as followers of Jesus should believe and practice what Jesus taught about violence and peace. We Christians do not have the right to decide which of Jesus' rules and principles we will observe and which we will ignore. This is what Jesus said about those who would follow him: *"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it"* (Matthew 16:24-25). The early disciples responded positively to this appeal. The people who followed the way of Jesus were first called "Christians" at Antioch (Acts 11:26) because they were imitators of Christ and promoters of what he taught and practiced.

Because of the consistent pattern of peace and the absence of violence associated with Jesus and his followers, Christian leaders should publicly and clearly renounce violence. Paul said to the young pastor Timothy, *"Command and teach these things"* (1 Timothy 4:11). It is the duty of Christian leaders to teach clearly the truths Jesus taught. There should be no confusion in our churches or among our members about what Jesus taught and practiced about violence and peace and what he expects of us. If we fail to teach our people the truth Jesus taught, in a time of stress, they will fall back to their traditional worldviews which, as we all know, practiced an "eye for an eye" philosophy. Our pastors and teachers must not be silent and they must not be ambiguous about violence and peace. They must sound the trumpet clearly to warn those who might otherwise do the wrong thing (Ezekiel 33:6-7).

Christians who have failed to follow the teachings and practices of Jesus related to violence and peace should repent. No one has ever followed the teachings of Jesus perfectly. The appropriate response to any deviation from what Jesus taught or practiced is confession and repentance. As far back as the time of Solomon, we were told: “*He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy*” (Proverbs 28:13). I believe that wherein we have failed to uphold the teachings of Jesus, we must confess to God and seek his forgiveness. I further believe that where we have misled our people either through wrong teachings, wrong actions or silence, we must acknowledge such shortcomings to our people and commit ourselves publicly to lead them in the right direction. In addition, I believe that where we have abused the rights of others, either individually or corporately, including those of another ethnic group or religion, we should seek their forgiveness and attempt reconciliation as much as possible.

The message of Jesus is unambiguous. It is a message of repentance for those who have strayed, reconciliation for those who have been estranged and love for all. If we are to be Christians, let us be followers of Jesus. If we are not willing to follow the teachings of Jesus, let us have the integrity to disassociate ourselves from the name “Christian.”

Conclusion

Those with only a causal understanding of the Bible often complain that the teachings of the Bible about violence are inconsistent and confusing. If one reads the Bible as if it were a theology textbook written by one person at one time period, that might be true. However, when one understands that the Bible is the progressive unfolding of the teachings and practices of God’s people in several different ages being applied in groups as different as a national body like Israel, an international entity like the church, and individuals like the Christian saints, these truths about violence become clear and provide a good basis for contemporary application.

In light of these progressively unfolding truths, I appeal to Christians to clearly and unambiguously identify with the teachings of Jesus about violence and peace and renounce all violence and bitterness and anger. Truly following Jesus’ teachings and practice about peace is not only the first step but the last step in restoring peace to Nigeria.

by Professor Danny McCain, professor of Biblical Theology,
Department of Religions and Philosophy, University of Jos.