"The Third Way"

One of the most misunderstood passages in all of the Bible is Jesus' teaching about turning the other cheek. The passage runs this way: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist one who is evil. If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also. And if anyone takes you to court and sues you for your outer garment, give your undergarment as well. If one of the occupation troops forces you to carry his pack one mile, carry it two."

This passage has generally been understood by people as teaching non-resistance. Do not resist one who is evil has been taken to mean simply let them run all over you. Give up all concern for your own justice. If they hit you on one cheek, turn the other and let them batter you there too, which has been bad advice for battered women. As far as the soldier forcing you to take his pack an extra mile, well are you doing that voluntarily? It has become a platitude meaning extend yourself.

Jesus could not have meant those kinds of things. He resisted evil with every fiber of His being. There is not a single instance in which Jesus does not resist evil when He encounters it. The problem begins right there with the word resist. The Greek term is antistenai. Anti is familiar to us in English still, "against," "Anti"-Defamation League. Stenai means to stand. So, "stand against." Resist is not a mistranslation so much as an undertranslation. What has been overlooked is the degree to which antistenai is used in the Old Testament in the vast majority of cases as a technical term for warfare. To "stand against" refers to the marching of the two armies up against each other until they actually collide with one another and the battle ensues. That is called "taking a stand."

Ephesians 6:13 says, "Therefore put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand (antistenai) in that evil day and having done all to stand (stenai)."

The image there is not of a punch drunk boxer somehow managing to stay on his feet even though he is being pummeled by his adversary. It is to keep on fighting. Don't retreat. Don't give up. Don't turn your back and flee but stay in there and fight to the bitter end.

When Jesus says, "Do not resist one who is evil," there is something stronger than simply resist. It's do not resist violently. Jesus is indicating do not resist evil on its own terms. Don't let your opponent dictate the terms of your opposition. If I have a hoe and my opponent has a rifle, I am obviously going to have to get a rifle in order to fight on equal terms, but then my opponent gets a machine gun, so I have to get a machine gun. You have a spiral of violence that is unending.
Jesus is trying to break that spiral of violence. Don't resist one who is evil probably means something like, don't turn into the very thing you hate. Don't become what you oppose. The earliest translation of this is probably in a version of Romans 12 where Paul says, "Do not return evil for evil."

Jesus gives three examples of what He means by not returning evil for evil. The first of these is, "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also." Imagine if I were your assailant and I were to strike a blow with my right fist at your face, which cheek would it land on? It would be the left. It is the wrong cheek in terms of the text we are looking at. Jesus says, "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek..." I could hit you on the right cheek if I used a left hook, but that would be impossible in Semitic society because the left hand was used only for unclean tasks. You couldn't even gesture with your left hand in public. The only way I could hit you on the right cheek would be with the back of the hand.

Now the back of the hand is not a blow intended to injure. It is a symbolic blow. It is intended to put you back where you belong. It is always from a position of power or superiority. The back of the hand was given by a master to a slave or by a husband to a wife or by a parent to a child or a Roman to a Jew in that period. What Jesus is saying is in effect, "When someone tries to humiliate you and put you down, back into your social location which is inferior to that person, and turn your other cheek."

Now in the process of turning in that direction, if you turned your head to the right, I could no longer backhand you. Your nose is now in the way. Furthermore, you can't backhand someone twice. It's like telling a joke a second time. If it doesn't work the first time, it has failed. By turning the other cheek, you are defiantly saying to the master, "I refuse to be humiliated by you any longer. I am a human being just like you. I am a child of God. You can't put me down even if you have me killed." This is clearly no way to avoid trouble. The master might have you flogged within an inch of your life, but he will never be able to assert that you have no dignity.

The second instance Jesus gives is, "If anyone takes you to court and sues you for your outer garment, give your undergarment as well." The situation here is dealing with collateral for a loan. If a person was trying to get a loan, normally they would use animals or land as collateral for the loan but the very poorest of the poor, according to Deuteronomy 24:10-13, could hock their outer garment. It was the long robe that they used to sleep in at night and used as an overcoat by day. The creditor had to return this garment every night but could come get it every morning and thus harass the debtor and hopefully get him to repay.

Jesus' audience is made up of debtors -- "If anyone takes you to court..." He is talking to the very people who know they are going to be dragged into court for indebtedness and they know also that the law is on the side of the wealthy. They are never going to win a case. So Jesus says to them, "Okay, you are not going to win the case. So take the law and with jujitsu-like finesse, throw it into a point of absurdity. When your creditor sues you for your outer garment, give your undergarment as well."

They didn't have underwear in those days. That meant taking off the only stitch of clothing you had left on you and standing nude, naked, in court. As the story of Jonah reminds us, nakedness was not only taboo in Israel. The shame of nakedness fell not on the person who was naked, but on the person who observed their nakedness. The creditor is being put in the position of being shamed by the nakedness of the debtor. Imagine the debtor leaving the courtroom, walking out in the street and all of his friends coming and seeing him in his all-togethers and saying, "What happened to you?"

He says, "That creditor has got all my clothes," and starts walking down to his house. People are coming out of bazaars and alleys, "What happened? What happened?" Everyone is talking about it and chattering and falling in behind him, fifty-hundred people marching down in this little demonstration toward his house. You can imagine it is going to be some time in that village before any creditor takes anybody else to court.
What Jesus is showing us in these two examples so far is that you don't have to wait for a utopian revolution to come along before you can start living humanly. You can begin living humanly now under the conditions of the old order. The kingdom of God is breaking into the myths of these people now, the moment they begin living the life of the future, the kingdom of God.

Jesus' third example is "If one of the occupation troops forces you to carry his pack one mile, carry it two." Now these packs weighed 65 to 85 pounds, not counting weapons. These soldiers had to move quickly to get to the borders where trouble had broken out. The military law made it permissible for a soldier to grab a civilian and force the civilian to carry the pack, but only one mile. There were mile markers on every Roman road. If -- and this is the part we have left out -- the civilian were forced to carry the pack more than one mile, the soldier was in infraction of military code, and military code was always more strictly enforced than civilian. So Jesus is saying, "All right. The next time the soldier forces you to carry his pack, cooperate. Carry it and then when you come to the mile marker, keep going."

The soldier suddenly finds himself in a position he has never been in before. He has always known before exactly what you would do. You would mutter and you would complain, but you would carry it. As soon as the mile marker came, you would drop it. Suddenly, this person is carrying the pack on. The soldier doesn't know why, but he also knows that he is in infraction of military law and if his centurion finds out about this, he is in deep trouble. Jesus is teaching these people how to take the initiative away from their oppressors and within the situation of that old order, find a new way of being.

It is interesting that Gandhi said, "Everyone in the world knows that Jesus and His teaching is non-violent, except Christians." What Jesus is articulating here is a way of living in the world without violence, a way of overcoming domination in all of its forms by using a way that will not create new forms of violence. In the past, we have thought we had only two choices, either resist evil or don't resist evil. Jesus seemed to be saying, "Don't resist evil," and, therefore, non-resistance seemed to be the only alternative. Be supine, submit, surrender, flee, give up. It seems as if Jesus were asking us to be a doormat for God, to give up all concern for our own justice as well as the justice of others. Now we see in this passage interpreted in a new light, Jesus is not calling on people to be non-resistant. He is calling on them to resist, yes, but to resist in a way that is not injurious or harmful to the other person.

In just the last few year, non-violence has emerged in a way that no one ever dreamed it could emerge in this world. In 1989 alone, there were thirteen nations that underwent non-violent revolutions. All of them successful except one, China. That year 1.7 billion people were engaged in national non-violent revolutions. That is a third of humanity. If you throw in all of the other non-violent revolutions in all the other nations in this century, you get the astonishing figure of 3.34 billion people involved in non-violent revolutions. That is two-thirds of the human race. No one can ever again say that non-violence doesn't work. It has been working like crazy. It is time the Christian churches got involved in this revolution because what is happening in the world is that the world itself is discovering the truth of Jesus' teaching, and here we come in the church, bringing up the rear.

This is the most exciting time a person could imagine to be alive. The gospel has never been more relevant. The world has never been more ready.

Interview with Walter Wink

Interviewed by Lydia Talbot

Lydia Talbot: Walter, in your message earlier, the scriptural message to us to "turn the other cheek," that you say has been so misperceived, is clearly the opposite attitude of the Manichaen mind-set that seems to have guided American foreign policy for decades. What do you think Jesus Christ would say to President Clinton's military advisors these days about Bosnia, Somalia and all of the trouble spots over
Walter Wink: Oh, my! Well, I don't know what He would say. I think what we would have to say ourselves is that the problem of using violence always turns you into the very thing you hate. We want so badly to oppose the palpable and flagrant evil of Bosnia and Somalia. Yet when we go in shooting and killing, etc., we find ourselves imperceptibly sucked into the very kinds of behavior we went in deplored. We find ourselves trying to get Aidid and operating as a death squad chasing him down. Before long, we are going to find ourselves engaged in ethnic cleansing. I have already heard a congressman speaking of the people of Somalia as infidels although they are God-believing Moslems. Pretty soon we dehumanize the enemy and we turn into the very thing we are opposing.

Talbot: Doesn't this raise the question though, what constitutes a just war?

Wink: I think nothing constitutes a just war. There is no such thing as the possibility of war being carried out justly. I think it is an important statistic that in the wars that have been fought since 1500, on an average half of the casualties have been civilians. There is no justification in theology or even in just war theory for casualty rates that high for civilians. The just war criteria of civilian immunity from warfare was intended to mean no civilians should be killed in warfare. Now we can't have war without killing massive numbers of civilians.

Talbot: Yet, most of the conflicts worldwide are characterized by religion that is a defining component in the conflict. What about religionists these days, and the internecine warfare that is apparent among and between religions of the world?

Wink: We are in a very difficult historical period. We have, as it were, turned the corner in international warfare, I think. We may find ourselves regretting these words. Already 90% of the world conflicts that are going on at this moment are intranational, within a country. It is hard to believe that Western Europe might go to war against itself in the foreseeable future. It may be that humanity has found ways of diminishing the danger of international warfare. Now just for the first time, we are facing up to the problem of having to try to help countries stop their own internal warfares. The United Nation's Charter is expressly forbidden to do that and so we are just now beginning to try to explore the possibility of the international community intervening in those kinds of situations. We honestly don't know what to do.

Talbot: Walter, you have children and any parent these days, I suspect, is concerned about the quality of life for the next generation. How do you suppose young people today, who are force-fed a menu of materialistic, be number one, win-lose kinds of messages by the commercial media, will be prepared to carry on the ministry of peace-making tomorrow?

Wink: Well, the degree of young people's involvement in issues of war and peace vary according to what is happening in their own lives, of course. I do feel that we need to be as hopeful as possible in the situations we are faced with now. We have to be clear that violence is not the problem. The problem is domination -- the domination of women by men and the rich dominating the poor. All of these kinds of domination are the source of violence. As we begin to change our minds about the legitimacy of domination, I think there will be a major change in the nature of international conflict.

For that reason, I am very disturbed by the violence that we get on video and movies, especially in the kinds of movies children can take into their own homes. It seems that we are saturating ourselves in a kind of violence and legitimating domination at the very point in human history where we have a chance to make some major inroads against domination.

Talbot: Walter, you are a United Methodist minister. Your credentials are voluminous -- the articles that you have written; the books you have written; the trilogy on power. What led you down this path to focus so intensely on the issue of peacemaking?
Wink: I have been concerned about issues of justice for a long time. I was involved in the Civil Rights Movement and the Anti-War Movement, etc. I guess I always had this one little qualification that if all else fails, you can use violence then. Be non-violent until the last minute. A friend of mine characterizes this as not non-violence, it is not yet violent.

I went to South Africa thinking that this would be the acid test of whether or not violence is ever justifiable. I came back from South African persuaded for the first time in my life that violence is never justifiable, that the only thing that would work in South Africa is non-violence. I think history is proving that to be the case.

Talbot: You and your wife conduct workshops around the country, faith-centered, in these themes. In our final moment, what would you suggest to people sitting at home who would like to be able to embrace social issues with the body, mind and spirit approach?

Wink: I think the issue that concerns me most is the ending of domination in all of its forms.

Talbot: Thank you very much, Walter Wink. That's good advice.