

Eighteen

*What it means
to become a
Christian
conscientious
objector*



William L. Elster, Ph.D.

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Introduction

The Catalyst for this Booklet

After the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, students in the Christian high school where I teach held an impromptu meeting to discuss the possibility of a prolonged war and the reinstatement of the military draft. Since many of the students who attended that meeting expressed the view that as Christians they felt that they could not participate in the war, they asked what could they do to stay out of the armed services if the draft started again. On finding out that they could request to be classified as a conscientious objector (C.O.)—a person who for religious or moral principles refuses to bear arms or serve in the military—they were relieved. But when they heard that they had to be able to persuade their local draft board—in writing—how their religious beliefs shaped their antiwar convictions, they looked stunned. Why?

These students, even though they had years of religious training from church and school under their belts, felt unprepared to explain why they believed that it was wrong for a Christian to participate in war. In fact, when asked how many of them had ever heard a religious teacher or priest or minister explain why Christians should not fight in wars, not a single hand went up.

A Time to Act

This was a defining moment for me.

From the time I was eighteen years old, I have been a pacifist Christian. That is, I believed that as a follower of Jesus, who taught his disciples to love their enemies, I could never participate in wars. Seeing my students' predicament, I decided right then and there to write something that explains what it means to be a pacifist Christian.

This booklet is the outcome of that decision. It introduces young people—and all other interested persons—to some of Jesus' core teachings against participating in war and of the necessity of loving one's enemies.

Why Eighteen?

Arriving at the age of eighteen is viewed by most societies as a rite of passage—

- Celebrations are often held to commemorate the day when a person achieves the legal status of an adult.

- In many countries eighteen-year-olds are allowed to vote, make legal contracts, and run for political office.
- Eighteen-year-olds can marry, start their own families, work a job, or even start a business.
- Along with these privileges come some civic responsibilities, such as paying taxes and answering a summons for jury duty.

And for some, it will mean appearing before a draft board.

If the military draft ever reappears, the young people who have read these pages will be able to confidently present their arguments on why they refuse to participate in wars or serve in the military. All of the scripture passages studied in this booklet are from the 18th chapters of the New Testament's Gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John. This simplifies the task of recalling where these scripture passages are found in the Bible.

Even if there is no draft in the future, this booklet at least will help its readers better understand these scriptures and be able to explain to anyone why Christians should live as pacifists and conscientious objectors.

Matthew 18: Mercy, Mercy, Mercy

Matthew 18 begins with a short but instructive story. It reveals that Jesus' priorities and way of thinking were significantly different from most people, including his own disciples.

On the Road

For years, twelve disciples traveled and ministered with Jesus throughout Palestine. On several occasions, Jesus sent these disciples out on their own preaching tours. After returning from one journey, these men argued among themselves over which one of them had become the greatest. Because no one would back down from their claim, they finally asked Jesus to weigh in and declare whom he thought was the greatest. Jesus replied:

“Who gets the highest rank in God’s kingdom?” For an answer Jesus called over a child, whom he stood in the middle of the room, and said, “I’m telling you, once and for all, that unless you return to square one and start over like children, you’re not even going to get a look at the kingdom, let alone get in. Whoever becomes simple and elemental again, like this child, will rank high in God’s kingdom.”

Matthew 18:1-4

Each disciple claimed to be tight with Jesus. Each one expected that he would be declared the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. But Jesus wasn't going to put up with any of that. By randomly pulling a child out of the crowd, Jesus made it clear that unless each disciple changed his way of thinking—unless they checked their arrogant attitudes at the door—and began to listen and learn with the attitude of a child, *none of them would be able to enter God’s kingdom.*

Our Way or God’s Way?

Two thousand years later, Jesus' disciples still need to be reminded to listen and learn as children. Reading the Gospels, it becomes clear that Jesus didn't come to put his stamp of approval on the same old way of thinking. He came to show us God's way. He came to establish the *New Covenant*, which would once and for all bring salvation to those who live by faith in God.

But all those who enter into this *New Covenant* relationship and receive God's grace must be ready to give up their old styles of living and thinking. God's ways are not the same as our ways.

Just how different are God's ways and thoughts from ours? The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant provides a clear example. Jesus told this parable after

one of the twelve, Peter, asked how many times was he expected to forgive someone who kept sinning against him.

For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made.

So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.

But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe."

Then his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place.

Then the lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all the debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?" And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.

Matthew 18:23-35 (NRSV)

Which Is It—Justice or Mercy?

The lesson of this parable was not lost on any of those who heard it. They understood, first of all, that God exercises absolute power in the heavenly kingdom just as earthly kings enjoy total power within their worldly kingdoms. God, who alone is sovereign, will decide who will be allowed into the kingdom and who will be shut out. Secondly, they were honest enough to admit that their sins were of such magnitude that, come judgment day, they too would not pass inspection.

But the Good News—for all of us—is that the basis God uses to decide who's in and who's not is *mercy and not justice*. If God used justice, the kingdom of heaven would be totally vacant. But because of God's *mercy* and willingness to forgive all of our sins, the possibility of salvation has been granted to all of us.

Once a woman or man accepts God's mercy, can they then refuse to show mercy—and exact justice—against those who are in debt to them? Conventional wisdom would say that we have that right, that we are entitled to demand justice in this world. But doesn't Jesus' Parable of the Unforgiving Servant say otherwise? Apparently it does. God's ways are not our ways. If you want to receive God's mercy, you will have to show mercy to others.

Forgive Our Enemies?

Does this passage tie into our topic of Christians and wars? Obviously, the parable is not just referring to financial matters and the crimes of embezzlers, tax cheats, and people with delinquent bank loans. It refers to every sin that humans have ever committed against God and others. Certainly, these include the sins of doing violence to and going to war against others.

The teachings of Jesus are the total opposite of what the world teaches, which is to demand satisfaction of all wrongs committed against us and to kill those who attack us. Jesus taught that we must show the same love and mercy to our enemies that he has shown to us.

- How can we, who received God's mercy even while we were enemies of God, later turn around and refuse to show mercy toward our enemies by making war against them?
- When Christians decide to go to battle and kill their enemies in war—even for what appears to be a “just” cause—aren't they demanding “justice” rather than mercy?
- Can someone whose life was spared as a result of Jesus offering his own life on the cross instead of theirs then turn around and take the life of his or her enemy?
- And if we pray that God forgive our sins *as we forgive others* who sin against us, what answer should we expect from God if we later thrust a bayonet into the hearts of our enemies or bomb their cities?

This parable in Matthew 18 shows that such actions oppose the will of God. Although going to war may have been permissible in the Old Testament, Jesus' teaching now shows that according to the New Covenant such practices will bring forth the anger and judgment of God.

By showing mercy toward our enemies and not attempting to kill them in wars, we can be sure that God's mercy will continually be shown to us. We can be sure that no matter what happens on this earth, we will have a place within God's kingdom.

What Did the Early Christians Do?

The early Christians willingly allowed themselves to be beaten and put to death. They prayed that God show mercy on those who violently assaulted them and proved to be their enemies. Most people thought that their position was foolish. But God's ways are spiritually wise and powerful. The Apostle Paul, who once went to great lengths to persecute Christians, eventually became a Christian himself. He was moved by both the power of God's mercy and by the witness of the Christians' pacifist temperament.

This is why when he began to be persecuted for converting to Christianity, he never insisted that his persecutors be "brought to justice" and punished. Fully aware that Christian warfare was not against other people but against spiritual forces of evil, he instead showed love and mercy to his enemies and counseled the Christian churches through his letters to not answer evil for evil, but instead overcome evil with good.

Even today in the twenty-first century, this is the sign of real spiritual maturity—that we love one another, including our enemies, the same way that God loves us. This is why Christians should not take part in war.

Luke 18: Hope—Lost and Found

In Luke 18, Jesus taught his disciples they should always pray and never give up hope. He stressed this point because he knew all too well that the injustices of the world could be overwhelming at times and cause some to lose their faith in God. Here's how Jesus taught that lesson—

There was once a judge in some city who never gave God a thought and cared nothing for people. A widow in that city kept after him: "My rights are being violated. Protect me!"

He never gave her the time of day. But after this went on and on he said to himself, "I care nothing what God thinks, even less what people think. But because this widow won't quit badgering me, I'd better do something and see that she gets justice—otherwise I'm going to end up beaten black-and-blue by her pounding."

Then the Master said, "Do you hear what the judge, corrupt as he is, is saying? So what makes you think God won't step in and work justice for his chosen people, who continue to cry out for help? Won't he stick up for them? I assure you, he will."

Luke 18: 2-8

Evil in the World

So, what does this scripture passage have to do with the message of peace? It turns out that the ability to persevere in hope is crucial for those who decide to follow the pacifist teachings of Jesus.

Evil is a constant presence in this world. Despite the fact that Jesus overcame the spiritual forces of evil once and for all through his death and resurrection, *Christians still have to confront evil every day.* Most times, evil reveals itself as a temptation to think, say, or do something hurtful or wrong. But sometimes evil appears as a physical danger, such as an assault by a thug or an invading military force.

During those times when evil threatens us and/or the well being of those who are dear to us, it's difficult to believe that we peacemakers are truly "blessed." And to pray for those who hurt us—and not return evil for evil—seems almost impossible if not downright unreasonable. During those times, unless we maintain our hope in God's words and keep in mind that in the end the victory belongs to God, it's easy to just give up and walk away from our pacifist beliefs. And instead of trying to live as peacemakers when evil threatens us, it starts to seem logical—or just plain common sense—to start fighting back, returning evil for evil, and, if necessary, even killing those people who threaten our lives.

The Peril of Losing Hope

Have Christian peacemakers ever lost their hope in Jesus' gospel of peace? It happened in the United States and Western Europe during the 1930s. Shortly after World War I, a large number of Christian pastors and theologians—disgusted with the horrors and barbarity of war that many of them had witnessed firsthand—became pacifist Christians. But as the forces of fascism, Nazism, and militarism steadily increased in Europe and Asia, the ranks of these pacifist Christians shrank. Former pacifists began to express the view that these evil regimes had to be defeated by military force. By the time World War II rolled around, not many pastors or theologians continued to advocate the pacifist Christian position.

Hope Lost

Yet we shouldn't be too hard on those Christian leaders who lost hope in Jesus' message of peace during the 1930s. Two thousand years earlier, the first disciples—those who heard the words of Jesus with their own ears and saw his miraculous acts with their own eyes—suffered a momentary lapse of hope in the power of peacemaking. On the night before Jesus was put to death, the disciples were worried. They knew that Jesus' recent teachings and actions in Jerusalem had angered the religious leaders. They understood that these same leaders were looking for an opportunity to take Jesus out. Although they had seen Jesus sidestep danger before, the disciples still took extra precautions. They made sure to tell no one where they were eating or sleeping while they stayed in Jerusalem. They were watching their backs.

So you can imagine their shock when a band of soldiers entered the garden of Gethsemane and suddenly grabbed and arrested Jesus! As the reality sank in that Jesus wasn't going to be able to escape, Peter apparently lost hope in the teaching that love was the correct way to respond to evil. He pulled out the sword that he had brought with him and wounded one of the guards who was arresting Jesus. He was about to swing the sword at another guard when Jesus ordered him to put away his weapon.

Hope Found

Jesus stopped Peter from fighting against his enemies. He knew that Peter's actions were motivated more by fear and anger than by his devotion to Jesus. He wanted Peter to realize that relying on military power was useless. Instead he should place his hope in God's power.

Peter did stop fighting, but his hope in God was gone. He and the other disciples ran and hid in fear. Peter did not recover his hope until Easter Sunday. That's when he saw the empty grave and, later on, Jesus alive and resurrected—

raised from the dead! From that time on, Peter never again placed his hope in the power of the sword but only in the words of his resurrected lord, Jesus.

Years later, when a new generation of Christians started going through tough times under the Romans, Peter wrote a letter to encourage and instruct these young believers. With total confidence in the power of God's word, he told them to consider themselves genuinely blessed whenever they suffered persecution for their faith. Rather than be frightened by the Roman attacks, he exhorted them to boldly share with everyone—even their enemies—their hope in Jesus that gives them strength and power. Peter, who learned the hard way the moral of Jesus' parable, now counseled others on the need to keep on praying and never lose hope in God's power.

It is not too late for us to take to heart the same lesson Peter learned from Jesus and apply it to the conflicts we face today, both individually and as a nation: Christians can put their faith in the power of God and refuse to take part in war.

John 18: A Different Kind of Kingdom

Chapter 18 of the Gospel of John picks up the story of the arrest of Jesus and carries it forward to his arraignment before the high priest and Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea. In recalling this point in Jesus' life, Christians usually remember that Jesus stood silently at these hearings as his accusers shouted their charges against him.

Yet it's important to keep in mind that when he was questioned by Pontius Pilate, Jesus spoke plainly to him—not with parables as he often did when preaching to the crowds or even to his own disciples—but frankly and openly. What he said to Pilate explains a great deal about why his earliest followers were pacifists.

Answering the Judge

After he was arrested and questioned by some of the chief priests and elders of the Jewish people, Jesus then was brought before Pontius Pilate. In those days Pilate, as the Roman governor, also served as a judge. The religious leaders waited outside the governor's mansion so that Pilate would have to come out to them. They didn't want to make themselves "unclean" by entering a non-Jewish person's home since they planned on celebrating the Passover feast the next day.

Pilate heard the charges brought against Jesus—

- he taught others not to pay taxes to Caesar and
- he called himself a king.

When Pilate realized that these religious leaders wanted Jesus put to death, he decided to do a little questioning on his own.

Pilate went back into the palace and called for Jesus. He said, "Are you the 'King of the Jews'?"

Jesus answered, "Are you saying this on your own, or did others tell you about me?"

Pilate said, "Do I look like a Jew? Your people and your high priests turned you over to me. What did you do?"

"My kingdom," said Jesus, "doesn't consist of what you see around you. If it did, my followers would fight so that I wouldn't be handed over to the Jews. But I am not that kind of king, not the world's kind of king."

Then Pilate said, "So, are you a king or not?"

Jesus answered, "You tell me. Because I am King, I was born and entered the world so that I could witness to the truth. Everyone who cares for truth, who has any feeling for the truth, recognizes my voice."

John 18:33-37

Speaking the Truth

Jesus opened up to Pilate and told him things he'd kept hidden from the crowds that followed him all the years of his public ministry. Here's what he told Pilate—

1. He, Jesus, was indeed a king: the Messiah that the Jews had so long waited to see, and
2. He was born in order to take his rightful place on the throne and lead the people of God.

The people of that day held beliefs about the Messiah that were just not true. They believed that this person would command an army and kick all of the nonbelievers out of Palestine. They couldn't have been more wrong!

Jesus rules over a *spiritual* kingdom, the kingdom of heaven. If he'd come to rule over a worldly kingdom, then his followers would have started an uprising to free him from the hands of those who were trying to kill him. But they didn't take up arms because *his kingdom is not of this world*.

A Spiritual Kingdom

The earliest Christians kept this teaching in mind. Whether they lived inside or outside of the Roman Empire, they realized that they were first of all citizens of a *spiritual* kingdom. And as spiritual citizens, they refused to take part in the wars of this world, even if the cause seemed just or right.

Think about it—what greater cause ever existed than to stop the wrongful killing of the one person who never did anything wrong against anyone else? A fight to protect the most innocent person in the world would seem to be the most right and just thing to do. But Jesus said that those who believe in him do not fight on his behalf because *his kingdom is not of this world*.

Citizens and Ambassadors

As citizens of the spiritual kingdom, the early Christians understood that while they were living in the world they were not of the world. It's the same with Jesus—he was not of the world. In fact, the Apostle Paul explained later on that if we believe in Christ, then we are new people.


Paul then said that in this world that we are called to be "ambassadors for Christ." Why? Because now we are a part of what Paul called a "ministry

of reconciliation.” We act as peacemakers, bringing others back into a relationship with God, through the New Covenant of Christ. As ambassadors for the kingdom of heaven, Christians do not take part in the wars and battles of this world. They try to reconcile—make peace between—the warring parties, first to God and then towards each other. At all times, but especially during periods of wars and revolutions, the role of Christians is to act as ambassadors of God and to be peacemakers.

Jesus' commandment to all Christians living in this world is to love each other; just as he has loved us. This is why Christians should not take part in war.

About the Author

William L. Elster, M.Div., Ph.D. has professed pacifism from the time he committed his life to Jesus at the age of seventeen. He is a high school and university educator whose essay "The New Law of Christ and Early Christian Pacifism" was published in *Essays on War and Peace: The Bible and the Early Church*, ed. W. M. Swartley (Elkhart, Indiana: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1986). In 1999, Elster wrote, "Fighting the Higher Battle: The Life and Times of Dr. Henry Hitt Crane," a dissertation on one of American Methodism's foremost pacifist leaders of the twentieth century. In July 2001 he founded Pacifist Christian Ministries, an organization that is committed to reestablishing the pacifist teachings of Jesus within the Church. He currently serves as the organization's executive director.



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