The Biblical Basis of Nonresistance

We live in a strife-torn world. We have no choice in the matter. From north to south and from east to west, the blight of strife is everywhere. The practice of nonresistance presupposes that the saint finds himself in a strife-torn world.

Nonresistance was not needed in the Garden of Eden. Neither will there be any occasion for it in heaven. But at this stage of history, we live in a fallen world, inhabited by many people who do not know the way of peace (Romans 3:17).

The Origin and Spread of Strife

Genesis 3 tells us of the spoiling of a congenial relationship; let us call it man's first quarrel with God. Genesis 4 follows very closely with the story of man's first quarrel with man. Before Cain killed Abel, however, his father, Adam, had started the habit of blaming someone else. He blamed his wife after he had committed with her the first act of disobedience to God. From the sequence of those happenings, we learn that strife between man and man is the inevitable result of an impaired relationship between man and God.

After the Fall, it did not take long for the fighting spirit to become deeply embedded in fallen human nature. If a man wants his way in preference to God's way (Isaiah 53:6), he will likewise want his way in preference to his neighbor's way. A world in which each person wants his own selfish way is bound to generate a great deal of interpersonal and intergroup conflict. Even large-scale wars have selfishness as their underlying source. The prevalence of this conflict in society has necessitated God's call to His people to be nonresistant in the midst of a strife-torn world.

Restraining Measures Introduced

Following the Flood, lest the earth be quickly filled with violence again (Genesis 6:13), God introduced restraining measures. Noah was told, "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man" (Genesis 9:6). Possibly this was the point at which God implemented the principle of civil government. Clearly, this announcement was designed to deter crime. The offender was not to go free as Cain seemingly did.

The note at the conclusion of this announcement highlights the sanctity of human life: "For in the image of God made he man." This is God's call to stop and consider: "That person on whom you are tempted to inflict harm is My workmanship and bears My image."

After calling to Himself a covenant people, God gave them laws. Some of these were civil in nature, for God knew the degree to which they remained a carnally-minded people, given to strife. In the Ten Commandments, murder was forbidden (Exodus 20:13). Furthermore, personal retaliation was prohibited, and legal retaliation was restricted to a just and equivalent injury (Leviticus 24:20).
The Envisioned Ideal

The spiritual restoration of man has always been God's ultimate purpose. God's ideal, in terms of human relations, is depicted in the words of Isaiah 11:9: "They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain." However, the full realization of this goal needed to wait until the arrival of a new stage in God's plan. Therefore, the Old Testament was an era during which God depended heavily upon outwardly imposed restrictive measures. And since today most people still choose to remain in their unregenerate state, the need for restrictive laws continues.

How Does This Relate to You?

In a very direct way. Unavoidable consequences are attached to living in this kind of world. Like everyone else, you will at times be taken advantage of, mistreated, and falsely accused. At some time or other, you will likely become the object of someone's jealousy or hatred.

Furthermore, if you are a Christian, that fact alone will bring upon you additional suffering. For in the degree to which you live a blameless life, you will be a source of irritation to the ungodly people around you. Jesus forewarned His followers that this would be their normal lot. "If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you" (John 15:18).

Where Do We Learn How to Respond to Such Treatment?

"Is there any word from the Lord?" (Jeremiah 37:17). There is, positively! From the lips of holy men of God has repeatedly come this claim: "Thus saith the Lord . . ." Under the prompting of God, this spoken word became the written Word.

This process, known as divine revelation, was progressive in nature. As "holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost" (2 Peter 1:21), more and more of God's plan and will for man became known. Hebrews 1:1 highlights the culmination of this process: "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son." During Christ's ministry, the rate of divine revelation accelerated as never before.

But still the process was not complete. Before His return to heaven, Jesus told His followers, "I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now" (John 16:12). When He came back to earth on the day of Pentecost in the Person of the Holy Spirit, He began to teach them these "many things." Under His direction, the New Testament Scriptures came into being. This explains why Paul could make the claim recorded in 1 Corinthians 14:37: "The things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord."

We now have our answer to the question in focus. The Bible is the highest and final authority by which Christians live. Therein every sincere seeker can learn how God wants him to respond to those who commit wrongs against him.

A Common Mistake

The normal place to start reading a book is at its beginning. The Bible begins with the Old Testament. Sometimes those who want to find the answer to a question get stalled in the Old Testament. The Old
Testament, no less than the New Testament, does constitute a part of the divinely inspired Word. However, much of it was designed to be temporary and preparatory in nature.

Since, as has been shown, God revealed His will for man gradually, it is not surprising to find in Old Testament times, even among the people of God, a lower ethical standard than what God requires now. Another reason for this difference lies in the unique characteristic of the Old Testament people of God. For reasons known best to God, He assigned to Israel the functions of both church and state. Accordingly, God supplied her with regulations to maintain law and order and to curb violence. Even capital punishment was to be administered for some crimes (Exodus 21). Further, Israel was God's agent to punish wicked nations. Unfortunately, this exception is built upon by many to justify participation in warfare today.

Early Appearances of Nonresistance

As already indicated, God sanctioned the use of coercive measures under specified circumstances during the Old Testament era. However, we must not allow this detail to distort the total picture. Even before the giving of the Law, the light of divine revelation was sufficiently bright to allow men to perceive that peaceable personal relationships were God's ideal.

Rather than becoming involved in a quarrel, Abram contented himself with the less-than-best choice of land (Genesis 13). Rather than striving for the wells his servants had dug, Isaac allowed the herdsmen of Gerar to take them from him (Genesis 26). Rather than taking revenge on his brothers for their mistreatment, Joseph chose to forgive them (Genesis 45). In their responses to those who wronged them, these Old Testament saints chose the way of peace.

In the Old Testament, strands of peace and nonresistance were woven into the Law and were held forth as the prescribed way for an Israelite to respond. (See Exodus 23:4.) According to Leviticus 19:18, loving one's neighbor as himself was mandatory. And in Proverbs 25:21, 22, the call for nonresisting love is so clear that a New Testament writer used it to strengthen his appeal to New Testament saints for nonresistant behavior. (See Romans 12:20.)

So then, what shall we conclude? Was nonresistance taught and practiced during the Old Testament era? Within certain limits, it definitely was. But for reasons already noted, it was not their total way of life.

Nonresistance Becomes a Rule Without Exception

This change was one of the many changes associated with the inauguration of the New Covenant. Arrangements that were preparatory and temporary in God's reckoning became outdated as His plan unfolded into its next stage.

Jesus announced this transition in the following significant passage: "Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: but I say unto you, That ye resist not evil" (Matthew 5:38, 39).

Because Christ not only brought the Word of God but also was Himself the Word personified, He could thus speak with an authority obvious to all. He identified Himself as the Lawgiver of the New Covenant.
In effect, He was saying that from now on it is going to be different for the people of God. There can be no more participation in war. Neither can there be any involvement in punishing evildoers and maintaining justice. These functions are incompatible with the role to which His New Covenant people are assigned. They are also incompatible with His higher-than-ever standard of Christian morality.

The Label Nonresistance

The passage in Matthew 5:39 is the source of the term nonresistance. It accurately reflects the meaning of our Lord's words that we are to "resist not evil." Jesus' following words clarify that the evil in focus is evil treatment. Like most nonresistance passages, this one needs very little interpretation; the meaning is obvious. Under no condition should we retaliate or in any way strike back at one who mistreats us.

Does This Prohibit Every Form of Resistance?

As shown in the following verses, the resistance prohibited is the kind to which the worldly man resorts. Spiritual resistance, the kind that saints must exercise to survive spiritually, is nowhere forbidden and, on the contrary, is expressly commanded (James 4:7). "We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against... spiritual wickedness in high places" (Ephesians 6:12). "The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds" (2 Corinthians 10:4). These Scripture verses reflect an often overlooked fact. In the most important battle of all (while their worldly neighbors remain passive), nonresistant Christians wage an intense warfare. Those who charge the nonresistant Christian with being a passive parasite are usually blind to the important contributions he makes to the preservation of society.

But It Sounds So Negative

Popular opinion today is anti-negative. In many minds, positive thinking is almost equated with Christianity. The poorly instructed saint, influenced by this mentality, may hesitate to accept any teaching that carries a negative label. Nonresistance is that kind of label.

But do not be intimidated by public opinion. When He gave the Ten Commandments, God Himself employed a whole list of negatives. Christian behavior cannot be fully defined without employing some negatives. A person is a Christian not only by virtue of what he does but also by virtue of what he does not do. Nonresistance singles out one thing the true Christian does not do. When he is wronged, he does not in any way fight back.

Nonresistance Illustrated

To further explain the spirit of nonresistance, our Lord related four simple illustrations: "Whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away" (Matthew 5:39–42). These four responses reflect a similar spirit. Rather than retaliate, the nonresistant person patiently endures insult and even injury. When taken advantage of, he remains very gracious. If imposed upon, he goes beyond what is demanded of him. The fighting spirit is completely absent, and in its place is openhanded generosity. By using these illustrations, our Lord has drawn the portrait of a beautiful, nonresistant personality.
The Active Side of Nonresistance

To poorly informed people, the nonresistant person is viewed as a liability to society. Being thus misunderstood is part of the Christian's experience of bearing the reproach of Christ (Hebrews 13:13). Commonly overlooked is the fact that nonresistance is only part of the package of love. Nonresistance is love absorbing the wrongdoing of others.

But this love that God sheds abroad in the hearts of His regenerated children (Romans 5:5) is expressed in other ways. Because of love, the true child of God is able and required to do good, as opposed to evil. "Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you" (Matthew 5:43, 44).

Even while the Christian absorbs mistreatment, he is to aggressively do good. This is possible and, in a sense, natural because agape love expresses itself in both ways—passively and actively, in nonresistance and in assistance.

Being Nonresistant Identifies a Person as a Child of God

After dwelling on the active aspects of nonresistance, our Lord introduced a further reason for choosing this way of life. Structure-wise, the verse that follows begins in the middle of an unfinished sentence. However, subject-wise, it forms a unit of its own. "That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matthew 5:45).

Our claim to be His children ought to be verified by an actual likeness to Him. Our nonresistant love should be expressed in the ways outlined in verse 44 for this reason: so "that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven." The remainder of the verse suggests that more often than not, God is good to all, irrespective of how they treat Him. Doing likewise identifies a person as His child.

Being Nonresistant Identifies a Person as a Follower of Christ

Those who look with disfavor upon nonresistance are hard-pressed to reconcile their stance with the nonresistance of Jesus. The one perfect life that was ever lived revealed time after time that our Lord was consistently nonresistant. How can anyone ignore His example and still claim to be His follower?

"For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously" (1 Peter 2:21–23). In this passage, the nonresistant aspects of His life are expressly singled out for us to pattern after.

Nonresistance Is the Way of the Cross in Human Relations

The typical worldling is quick to protect his supposed rights and to employ physical force or the arm of the law to keep others in their place. He views giving in or allowing oneself to be mistreated by others as a symptom of weakness. In contrast, the Christian follows the example of his Lord and chooses the way of the cross in human relations, rather than inflicting suffering on others. Paul chided the Corinthians
because they employed the law against each other when they ought to have rather suffered themselves to be defrauded (1 Corinthians 6:7). When the apostles were beaten, they "rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name" (Acts 5:41).

In Hebrews 10:34, we read of Christians who "took joyfully the spoiling of [their] goods." These soldiers of the cross demonstrated fortitude of the highest order. Only by being nonresistant can a Christian be consistent, for whoever really loves his neighbor as himself will not in any way harm him.

Being Nonresistant Identifies a Person With the Kingdom of Christ

Colossians 1:13 says that saints have been delivered from the power of darkness and have been translated into the kingdom of God's dear Son. Every living person belongs to one of these two kingdoms, either the kingdom of darkness or the kingdom of Christ.

This two-kingdom concept appears also in Romans 13:1–7. In that passage, the pronouns he and they are employed to designate an officer of the state; the pronouns thee and ye are employed to identify the saints to whom the passage is addressed. The agent of the state "beareth... the sword," for "he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil" (Romans 13:4). Obviously, he cannot fill that role and also be consistently nonresistant. Nevertheless, Christians recognize that the civil officer is serving as an agent of God to administer justice in a society of evildoers.

Although we cannot serve as government agents, we ought not to be antigovernment in attitude. Our Anabaptist forefathers correctly asserted that the state is ordained of God outside the perfection of Christ. By making that assertion, they were acknowledging that the ethic of love and nonresistance is for Christians, not for the state.

In the following statement, our Lord spoke of the two kingdoms and the stark contrast between them: "My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence" (John 18:36). Notice that the significant difference is the employment or nonemployment of violence. Every man must choose to identify with one or the other kingdom, for they are not sufficiently compatible to allow identity with both.

Nonresistance Allows God to Retain His Prerogative

As early as the time of Moses, God disclosed His prerogative: "To me belongeth vengeance, and recompence" (Deuteronomy 32:35). Centuries later, Paul the apostle, grounded his appeal for nonresistant living on this unchanging fact. "Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men. If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord" (Romans 12:17–19). In the light of this declaration, the wrongness of personal retaliation stands out in bold relief.

Nonresistance Is the Paradox That Promotes Peace

Being negative in name, nonresistance is nevertheless positive in expression. The above-quoted passage is followed by this note: "Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good"
(Romans 12:20, 21). Exercising nonresistant love holds the best prospect of turning an enemy into a friend. In the withholding of physical force, there is an unleashing of spiritual force.

Nonresistance—coupled with assistance, motivated by love, and practiced in the Name of Christ—is the greatest peacemaking power on earth. In a world of violence, nonapologetic nonresistance is still the Bible way. And because it is the Bible way, it is the best way.

—Merle Ruth