

"The Christian in Conflict"
July 8, 1990

Text: *"But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also..."*

When the popular and famous Confederate General Stonewall Jackson died, a curious legend began to circulate about a lunatic in an insane asylum who mourned the general's death. Said the man of Jackson, *"Oh, what a battle must have been raging in heaven, when the Archangel of the Lord needed the services of Stonewall Jackson!"* Though one may chuckle at such a statement with its imagery of heavenly conflict, we need look no further than the Old Testament document of Daniel chapter 10. Here the prophet Daniel prays for a vision from the Lord which will tell the fate of Israel. The Lord hears his request on the very first day of his prayer and sends a messenger angel to Daniel. But the prophet does not receive the vision from the Lord for twenty-one days. If the Lord heard Daniel's request and replied at once to his call, then why did the messenger take three weeks to deliver the vision? The angel's reply, *"The angel prince of the kingdom of Persia opposed me for twenty-one days."*

The concept of spiritual conflict or warfare is an uncomfortable thought for many Christians. We have been raised on the story of Jesus' birth and the naming of him as *"Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace"* (Isaiah 9:6). In passage after passage we discover and cling to phrases such as *"Love your neighbor as yourself...Love your enemies...hate what is evil and do that which is good."* With all these truths uttered it seems impossible for one to be a Christian and still stand up to the kind of conflicts many of us face daily. After all, we live in a world which is increasingly teaching us to take on a Rambo philosophy. That is, shoot first and ask questions later. I am worried that our children will have less ability to cope with conflict in the future other than by means of violence. We are not teaching them to think intelligently about conflict. Persons today are more likely to avoid or eliminate conflict instead of dealing with it in a responsible way.

What can also be confusing are passages in the bible which seem to contradict many of the central teachings which place love, peace, and harmony above all. In Isaiah we are told to beat our swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks. But in Joel chapter 3 we find, *"Beat your plowshares into swords and your pruning hooks into spears; let the weak say, 'I am a warrior.'"* In the Gospels we read about Jesus *"...making a whip of cords, he drove them all...out of the temple"* (John 2:15). In another passage he told his disciples, as he was nearing his hour of death, to prepare for the coming conflict. *"And him who has no*

sword sell his mantle and buy one" (Luke 22:36). This last passage especially has confused scholars and lay people alike to this very day. Not really what one expects from the loving shepherd; the prince of peace.

Walter Wink, a modern biblical scholar and noted pacifist, gave the bible lecture at the National Association meeting last summer. Personally, I am far from being the kind of pacifist Dr. Wink is, but find many of his ideas intriguing and workable in our world today. The passage read for this morning is bothersome to many Christians and has been to me for years until I heard Walter Wink talk last year. For most people, some form of revulsion creeps into the soul when they think they have to be wimpy and turn the other cheek or give the cloak away with the coat. Say nothing of an average free-thinking, independent, person who would revolt at being forced to walk a mile with someone else's pack and balk at the idea of giving their oppressor a cheerful second mile.

But we do not read the Gospel with first century eyes and Walter Wink is able to clarify for us the mystery behind Jesus' words. First of all, in ancient times, to strike a man with the palm of a hand was, as it is today, very insulting. According to Arab culture it was only proper to hit with the left hand, because the right hand was too important to partake in distasteful work. So, if a man were to slap the face of another man standing in front of him he would have to do it with his left hand slapping the right cheek in order for it all to be culturally correct. Are you with me so far? If the offended man, that is the man who was slapped, turned the other cheek (the left cheek) the only way to hit him with the socially correct left hand would be to backhand him. I forgot to mention to you that backhanding a man for any reason was punishable by at least a months wages. Jesus isn't telling us to be slapped around and submissive as so many people believe. He's telling us to use intelligence, not violence, and force the opposition to think about the consequences of their behavior against us. *"Hit me again if you wish, but at the cost of a months wages."*

When a man took another man to court and sued him for his coat he was really suing him for his undergarment of which he had more than one. No one could sue another for their cloak, the colorful outer garment, because most people only had one and they were expensive and essential to desert survival. Jesus told his followers to give the man not only the coat, but the cloak as well, thus rendering themselves naked in the court room. Is this an attempt by Jesus to get us to become nice people who are patsies in an often not so nice world? No. Again, he leads his followers into conflict using unusual means. According to Arab customs, the one who would be shamed the most would be the plaintiff. Imagine standing there receiving another person's undergarments for payment and they proceed to give away the whole show by handing over their cloak. I know what I would say. *"Whoa, put that stuff back on, here take it all back, I don't want*

to see you naked!" In Jesus' day, to be the cause of another person's nakedness was a very shameful offense punishable, of course, by the up turned noses of ones neighbors and friends. I think we could identify with that.

Finally, Roman law permitted soldiers to force any civilian in a foreign land to carry their pack for them up to the distance of one mile. If this mile were exceeded, the soldier would be subjected to military court and receive twenty lashes or more and possible loss of rank. So what is Jesus telling his followers when he says, *"...if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles."* He is saying, in essence, *"If they don't want to get in trouble, then they won't subject us to their oppressive ways."* Can you imagine the look on a Roman soldier's face when the guy he impressed into service for one mile continues on for the second mile?

What is Jesus telling his followers about conflict? First of all, in this uncertain and anxious world, it will be inevitable for Christians who are truly expressing their faith to meet with resistance. This I can guarantee. For as long as Christians express their love for God and belief in Jesus Christ as the head of the church, there will be those who are threatened by this ideal and persecute us. In their attempts to remove the Christian thorn from their side they will block the will of God much as the angel prince of the kingdom of Persia blocked God's messenger angel to Daniel. Jesus tells us, as well, that we don't have to be wimps and fall down at the first sight of trouble. He prepared his disciples and is continually preparing us to wage spiritual warfare against the powers of this world which temporarily block God's will from happening and keep individuals from experiencing the full measure of God's Kingdom here on earth.

There is a misguided movement in many mainline Protestant traditions today which is trying to eradicate what they call militant hymns. Among the top three are the ones specifically chosen for today; *"The Battle Hymn of the Republic"*, *"Stand Up Stand Up For Jesus"*, and *"Onward Christian Soldiers"*. *"These hymns speak of warfare and fighting,"* they say. *"They are not in line with the Christian quest for peace."* But even Walter Wink, pacifist and activist, disagrees. He believes, and I agree, that Christians need these hymns just as Christians need an understanding of military discipline and stamina in order to wage the conflict in this modern age.

Our ability to bring victory over the powers of drugs in our culture, alcoholism in our homes, crime in our streets, homeless in our alleys, racism in our society, disease in our lives, hunger in our world, poverty in our cities, strife in our hearts, and anxiety in our minds, will come from the kind of courage we are given as faithful people who are not afraid to face the conflict and win. And when we do come, as Christian warriors, to

meet the threats of this world we do not bring guns and bombs and bullets. We bring peace and healing and comfort and positive solutions to people's problems. It is not easy, it is difficult. It is so tough, because of the prolific spread of evil in our world today, we will want to quit, give up, let the world take it's own miserable course. But God has, so to speak, put us in the front lines of this activity for the advancement of his Kingdom here on earth.

In the spring of 1863 the U.S. Army of the Potomac faced the Confederate army of Virginia at the town of Fredricksburg for the second time in six months. The first time they met at Fredricksburg was a disaster for the Union troops. This time they were a feigning action while the main army attacked further west in the wilderness. But things were going badly in the wilderness and the Federal forces at Fredricksburg were needed to salvage the campaign. The fastest way to rescue the day was to capture Marye's Heights where they so dismally lost months before. Due to the urgent situation in the west the men of the Fifth Wisconsin regiment were given this order by Col. Thomas S. Allen later to become Wisconsin Secretary of State. *"When the order 'forward' is given, you will start at double quick. You will not fire a gun. You will not stop until you get the order to halt. You will never get that order."* In the first assault they won the heights. It is my fervent belief that we each, as Christians, have been given an order similar to the one given the Union Troops at Fredricksburg. In my own words, the order to us sounds like this. *"You will move forward your entire life in search of the holy and the ideal of the divine against all conflict. You will not stop until you get the order to halt. You will never get that order."*

We cannot afford to be the generation that fails God in his holy endeavor. If we do, then we will suffer as will our children until God finds a people who will carry his word of truth into the world. Now is the time for Christians and the church to stand up to the strife before us and not wither away at the first sign of conflict. In this way we and the world outside our doors participate fully in the hope of God's Kingdom present in our midst. Amen.