



The Line in the Sand

Opening

What if our theology could get up from our armchairs and move into our world? That would be something worth paying attention to. This is The Armchair Anabaptist podcast.

<intro song> Lay your guns down, down on the floor. There ain't no good in those guns anymore. Take my hand and let me kiss your cheek. Let our friendship be sweet. <end>

"Because Mennonites have usually found that the way to faithfulness is to separate from others and eventually if only I am here, then at least I'll agree with myself."

"And I don't think that we can say we love someone and then shoot them. It doesn't make sense."

"I always tell folks that, 'Look at - if you're in a debate and winning the debate becomes more important than reflecting love towards the person you're debating, then do the Kingdom of God a great service and shut up.'"

"How do we encourage people to see nonviolence as something more than a position about war?"

"Because we're not just sitting around doing podcasts and theology, we're actually trying to live our lives as Christians."

<song> This is a reckoning between you and me. The righting of all wrongs as we eat and as we drink. <end>

Introduction

Kevin Wiebe: You're listening to The Armchair Anabaptist. This is episode #15 that we are calling The Line in the Sand. I'm Kevin Wiebe.

Jesse Penner: And I'm Jesse Penner and we are your hosts. We are looking at exactly that, where is the line on these issues? What should a Christian do or not do in response to Jesus' call to love our enemies? We're also going to take a look at how we can treat and think about and be in relationship with those who think that that line is in a different place than we've drawn it.

KW: Kneecaps, Jesse. Can't shoot higher than the kneecaps.

JP: OK, end of episode. Covered it. Forget the guests.

KW: Good thing we have some really smart guests to talk to us about where that line actually is. We'll be talking to Dr. Greg Boyd, to Pastor Cyndy Warkentin and before his passing we also had a chance to talk to Dr. Ronald Sider.

JP: We start off with Dr. Ronald Sider, who was the founder and President Emeritus of Evangelicals for Social Action. He was distinguished Professor of Theology, Holistic Ministry and Public Policy at Palmer Theological Seminary and was the author of numerous books including the Early Church on Killing, If Jesus is Lord, and Nonviolent Action. We asked Dr. Sider this question. Where is the line?

Where is the line?

Dr. Ronald J. Sider: One thing I want to say is, that it intrigues me that in the fourth and fifth centuries, the Christian thinkers were moving from: we have to love our enemies to we engage in war, and Saint Augustine, probably the greatest theologian of the Christian Church, in I think the early fifth century was asked by a Christian in the army, is this OK? And he said yes. And he laid out some of the criteria that have become part of the just war tradition and interestingly he felt he had to start with Jesus' statement that we're supposed to love our enemy.

But he said that can just be an internal action, not an external action, so you can love them while you're killing them. I don't think that works, but it's interesting that even one of the great persons articulating the just war tradition felt that he had to cling to Jesus' statement that we all love our enemies.

The other thing I want to say is that there are not just two positions on war and killing in the church. One is the pacifist. Second is the just war. But in practice, there has been the crusade, where the church actually endorses violent killing and urged Christians in, I think it was the 12th century, to go on crusades and kill the Muslims in the Holy Land. And at another level there's the kind of popular nationalism, that as soon as one's government announces that this is the national enemy, we're gonna fight a war, most people, including most Christians, just endorse that nationalism out of a kind of unthinking patriotism.

The just war tradition says that's wrong. It says there are a bunch of criteria for deciding whether a war is just or not. And it must be declared. It must have a righteous intent of restoring peace. You dare not kill civilians and so on. And I think it's true that pacifism and just war Christians are closer to each other than what's been the typical popular expression of the church, namely a crusade or a kind of unthinking nationalism. No, I still don't agree with the just war, but at its best, it's insisting on very careful criteria for saying when it would be just to go to war.

KW: Pastor Cyndy Warkentin is the EMC pastor of Saturday Night Church in Landmark, Manitoba and we asked her this question as well. When we're talking about peace and non-

violence and the call of Jesus to love our enemies and in response to different conflicts, where is the line? How far can a Christian go? What can a Christian do or not do? Where is that line? This is what Pastor Cyndy had to say.

Cyndy Warkentin: Well, I think that this question actually needs to be answered in each person's heart and in their personal relationship long before we get to the discussion of armed conflict. Because I don't think I can stand in front of my congregation and preach against war and then be in a feud with my neighbour or with my family members or personal relationships. I can't dismiss someone else for having a different idea than I do and think that they have less worth than I do because they don't agree with me. I'm called to love them and to treat them with respect regardless of how they treat me. And so it has to start within me. If I'm claiming a peace position, it has to start with me. That then moves out into all of my relationships, I hope.

I think that if I believe in loving and living at peace with all people, then I'm compelled to address conflict in ways that lead to resolution and even if that means, oh, this is hard, giving up my right, my need to be right on a certain issue and I might not change my heartfelt conviction on a particular issue. But I still have to be willing to be humble for the sake of relationship. And so cramming my "rightness" down other people's throats never feels loving to friends or to enemies, and so where's the line? I think that line starts right in my heart. And so each relationship that I have needs to be peaceful.

It's not OK to say I don't agree with war, but then to go and slap my neighbour and it's not OK to feel like it's OK to shoot someone who's coming to steal gas, as happened to that farmer in Saskatchewan. That's not acceptable. Those are cross-blinds in my opinion but so is conflict. I mean, we've seen so much conflict with COVID and that has bothered me because I think we need to, as Christians, we need to stand in that gap of drawing sides together, not causing more polarization and more antagonism.

KW: A number of years ago I had the chance to hear Dr. Sider speak in Oakville and one of the things that he talked about there about this line in the sand was in a question and answer session following his lecture. He was being peppered with all kinds of questions about, well, would you do this in response to this or would you do this in response to this and all of these questions came in and it became very, very clear that he did not believe that the line should be crossed of killing an enemy. That of course became a controversial kind of buzz in the room and he was challenged on this by a number of people. Well, what about in this situation or that situation? And one of the things that he talked about was he said "I am a Christian and I know where I'm going when I'm gone. But if someone is going to be a violent aggressor, I don't know that they're a Christian because they wouldn't be behaving like one, but if I would kill them, it would take away their chance for salvation."

And that is the problem with things like capital punishment, even, or any response that takes someone's life is that it takes away any chance for repentance, it takes away a chance for them to change their fate for eternity. It takes away a chance for them to come to know Jesus and that, I think is a valuable perspective to also add to this conversation about where is the line in

the sand. Are we going to do something and cross a line that will change someone's fate for eternity? Something that's unchangeable, something we can't take back, and that's a powerful thing to think about as we have this conversation.

JP: Another thing I appreciated about the responses here is how, as we've been doing throughout this podcast, they drew us back to Jesus. Dr. Sider talked about a few different options. He acknowledged there were more than two options. Sometimes we like to characterize this question as simply a pacifist position against a just war position. But he said there's more going on here, and in fact, when you start to stack up some of the other options, including a militant nationalism, sort of a war machine that is driven by the church, things like the crusade, the just war position doesn't fall that far away from pacifism, and he was fairly generous towards that.

But what he recognized and what I think is so significant is that no matter where that line is drawn, no matter where each of us sort of ends up on this and as Pastor Cyndy talked about, this is something that we each have to process on our own, in our own hearts, regardless of where that line is, the primary focus must be Jesus. That should be where we are drawing this from, from his life and his teachings, from his death and resurrection, that forms a model for us and how we respond to violence. So that needs to be the starting place for where we draw our line.

KW: And if we can't draw our line from Jesus, then, are we drawing it in the right place?

When we had a chance to speak to Dr. Sider, we asked him this question. How do we treat those who draw their line in a different place than we do? This is what he had to say.

How do we treat those who draw their line in a different place than we do?

RS: The first thing I want to say is that I have no doubt that there are committed Christians who think that a just war position is the right position. I disagree with them, but I certainly want to accept the fact that they genuinely believe that and that they love Jesus, and they're also committed Christians, so we need structures that let us work together with those people; councils and churches, for example, do that. At the same time, one always has to ask is this disagreement, between Christians or among Christians, is this important enough to have separate denominations. Or is it not that important and can we say, well, I don't agree with you, but we'll be brothers and sisters in the same local congregation and the same denomination? I think some things are important enough to say we have to have separate denominations.

Liberal theology, which abandoned or wasn't sure about the deity of Christ and the bodily resurrection, was an important enough issue to say we had to divide and have separate denominations. I'm not willing to say that the liberal Christian; I can't say they can't use the word Christian, but they do understand themselves to be Christian, but I think they're wrong at a very important point and I can't be part of that kind of denomination.

I asked myself what things in the modern context are like that and I think that the issue of killing is one of those issues. Jesus - true God and true man, said explicitly, "love your enemies." I don't see how we can really love our enemies and kill them at the same time. I don't see how we can preach the gospel and invite them to come to Christ and be killing them at the same time. So I think we need separate denominations that take different stances on this.

I'm disappointed when some Mennonites have congregations that say, well, we'll have just war people and we'll have pacifists, that's fine. I don't think that's the way to go. I think we need to say as Mennonites we will not kill. But we'll certainly have other kinds of connections, National Council of Churches or in the US more recently Christian churches together. Protestants and Catholics. Pentecostals. Mennonites are involved in that. That's good and important. But we can do that without abandoning our beliefs that Jesus said we're not supposed to kill, and that means we can't fight with guns and tanks and nuclear weapons.

JP: We asked Pastor Cyndy this same question. How should we think about and treat others who think the line is at a different place than where we have drawn it? Here are her thoughts.

CW: We need to humble ourselves to listen and to be curious about someone else's perspective. And I think it's really important that even though we feel, I feel like I'm on the right track in terms of where that line is for myself, that I also recognize that I still have more to learn. I haven't arrived. I want to continue to learn throughout my lifetime. I want to be open to what the Holy Spirit wants me to learn and the way that I am to interact with others, and I believe that is through being curious. By asking good questions and hoping that that will open the door to thoughtful conversation, and being able to offer why I hold the peace position that I do, while also being curious about where they're coming from and why they think as they do. And that my aim isn't to pull the rug out from under them, make them feel stupid in any way demean them, but to be genuinely curious about where they're coming from and to ask good questions.

But I also think that being combative about it rather defeats the purpose of my peace position, doesn't it? But that's the thing then. Well, no, I'm right and you're wrong. My peace position is correct. Yours is obviously out to lunch and so I'm going to now beat it into you why you're wrong and you're. Right. Well, how is that peaceful? Right. How is that being considerate? How is that offering grace and mercy and love to someone? It just it really isn't.

And like I said before, I think in our polarized society, if Christ followers aren't standing in the gap and we're finding some middle ground to reach out to people on every side then we're failing in our calling. We're supposed to look different. We're not supposed to look far right or far left or whatever, however you want to define those things, right? We're supposed to be unique and I don't think that looks loud and obvious for most of us. I think it means just faithfully reflecting the love and grace of Jesus to each person that we encounter. And that's and that's our calling. And it's really easy to say and it's really hard to do.

JP: As the conversation continued with Pastor Cyndy, we talked about how maybe the last three years have made people within churches less charitable to those they perceive as being on the other side of their lines.

CW: And so there is this massive gap of misunderstanding that occurred and it was really easy to fall into leaning on one way or the other. And so I know for myself it takes that conscious effort to say no, this person is not defined by their opinion. I know them to be a kind, loving, responsible person who has some different ideas on this issue than I do. And so to continually be reminding myself of that and seeing them through those eyes instead of this one issue. And I don't want anybody defining me by one issue because I'm more than one issue as we all are.

JP: Dr. Greg Boyd is pastor at Woodland Hills Church in St. Paul, MN, and he's the author of numerous books including the Crucifixion of the Warrior God. In our conversation with Dr. Boyd, we talked about these same issues. How is it that we think about and treat people who draw those lines in different places than we do?

Dr. Greg Boyd: You know the Bible tells us who believe that Paul says that love believes all things and hopes for the best, believes the best and so the first thing I'd say is that since we're called to love everybody, regardless of what their opinions are, whether they agree with us or not, that we're called respect them and believe the best about them and to assume that they're sincere in what they're teaching. But even if they're not sincere, and if we think that they have ulterior motives, they're just trying to avoid the truth, our job is still to love them.

Our job is never to judge people, to never look down on them. For every person we see, we have to agree with God that they were worth Jesus dying for. I always tell folks in my congregation that unless someone has invited you in on their life in a kind of covenant relationship to hold them accountable, to walk out the Kingdom life together, and we all need that, we all need a community that we give permission to speak into our lives; walking in the Kingdom is not a solo effort. It's a community effort. So we all need community. But unless you are invited in to have an opinion about someone's life, I teach people that you're only allowed one opinion and that is that the one thing you know about them is Jesus Christ crucified.

That's what Paul said in First Corinthians 2:2 he said, I've resolved to know nothing about you guys except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And that assumes that everything you need to know about somebody is found in Jesus Christ crucified. That means that you know that A) they are sinners, and you're a sinner because Jesus had to be crucified for them. But B) you know that despite the fact that they are a sinner, they are loved with a perfect love and they have unsurpassable worth because Jesus was willing to pay an unsurpassable price for them.

And so our job is to agree with God about that. Wherever they draw a line, however they understand the Christian walk, or if they are anti-Christ and they can't stand Christ or the Christian, whatever, our job is to love them as much as possible. It's to respect them because you believe the best and hope for the best in them. And then our job is, as I've said before, you know to walk in love the way we're called to walk is to walk in humility, and that impels to

esteem the others' interest above your own, it's to look up to people, never look down on people and if there's any judgment that needs to be happening, that's God's business, so we're supposed to leave all judgment to God in order that we can live in love as Christ loved us and gave his life for us.

And then I would say that if the relationship is appropriate, where you're having a discussion that then, in love, share why you believe what you believe. That's appropriate. I wouldn't go up to somebody who disagrees with me and just butt my nose into their business and say hey. But if it's loving, love is never rude, and so if it's appropriate, it's not rude, you're having a discussion, then sure why you believe what you believe and listen to why they believe why they believe and make sure that you're doing it all in love. First Corinthians 16:14, Paul says, "whatever you do, do it in love." And so that includes discussing controversial topics. I always tell folks that if you're in a debate and winning the debate becomes more important than reflecting love towards the person you're debating, then do the Kingdom of God a great service and shut up. Because you can win the argument that you're losing, because loving is more important than being right. Live and love as Christ loved us. That's how you respond to people who don't see things the way I see.

KW: Sometimes when we are in conversation with people who take a different stance than we do, those conversations can be difficult as we may try to persuade them of our own beliefs. Dr. Boyd also addressed how to do this well.

GB: Well, the main evangelism, whether we're talking to about nonbelievers or other believers who just see things differently than us, the main evangelism is with our life. We actually speak much louder than words, so we're to be demonstrating this countercultural alternative Kingdom, the way of nonviolence. And then when we do have a discussion and an opportunity opens up, I think we all should be prepared to give a defence of our beliefs, the reason for our hope says in 2 Peter and so you just calmly, lovingly, respectfully share why you believe what you believe and then listen. It's always going to be dialogical. Love doesn't monopolize, it dialogues.

KW: I really appreciated some of Dr. Boyd's thoughts and how he talked about actions speaking louder than words. And as we're talking about the life of peace, so often, at least in some of the Mennonite communities I've been a part of, we will talk about the life of peace and then fail to consistently live it out in our lives. There's a lot of division and hatred and not a lot of loving one another going on, and that's not always the case. There's still been a lot of love within the Mennonite communities I've been a part of, but when we have failed, then that's certainly not consistent with this kind of teaching about loving our enemies and when we have theological enemies or ideological enemies, then we're not always very loving towards them. As has been mentioned other times that Mennonites divide into smaller and smaller groups, you know, that's kind of been a historic reality. Instead of just living it out, and that's where any kind of theology is really the most profound when it is consistently lived out, not only talked about when we walk the talk and not only talk the talk.

JP: Right. This question is the question that brought out that response from Greg Boyd that you have heard in our intro for so many episodes leading up to this, which is this recognition that if winning the debate becomes more important than loving our enemies we've gotten something horribly twisted, and so in the end, I feel like a broken record, a little bit coming back to this, but I think it's a good place to come back to over and over again in the end, what's most important is love, right? When we are thinking about these debates and when we are thinking about how we engage with people who think differently than us, and when we're thinking about how we draw lines and where we draw lines and why we draw lines and what the lines are, all of this needs to be centred on the love that Jesus has showed for us through his death on the cross and his resurrection and how that love is now lived out in our own lives because he has called us to go and show the world, and sometimes a little bit harder, others in the church that same love.

KW: Our feature song today is With Melting Heart and Weeping Eyes by Red Mountain Music.

With Melting Heart and Weeping Eyes – Red Mountain Music

With melting heart and weeping eyes,
My guilty soul for mercy cries;
What shall I do, or whither flee,
To rid the vengeance due of me?
To rid the vengeance due of me?

Till late I saw no danger nigh,
I lived at ease nor feared to die;
Wrapped up in self-conceit and pride,
"I shall have peace at last, " I cried.
"I shall have peace at last, " I cried.

But when great God thy light divine,
Had shone on this dark soul of mine,
Then I beheld with trembling awe,
The terrors of Thy holy law.
The terrors of Thy holy law.

Should vengeance still my soul pursue,
Death and destruction are my due;
Yet mercy can my guilt forgive,
And bid this dying sinner live.
And bid this dying sinner live.

Does not Thy sacred word proclaim,
Salvation free in Jesus' name?
To him I look and humbly cry,

"Lord, save a wretch condemned to die!"

"Lord, save this wretch condemned to die!"

"Lord, save this wretch condemned to die!"

Closing

The Armchair Anabaptist is a Theodidaktos podcast and Theodidaktos is a publication of the Evangelical Mennonite Conference.

You can check us out online at www.thearmchairanabaptist.ca and find us on iTunes, Spotify, and wherever podcasts are found.

A special thanks to our guests who have joined us today. That was Dr. Greg Boyd and Pastor Cyndy Warkentin. We were also honored to be able to interview Dr. Ronald J. Sider in April of 2022, just a few months before his passing and what you heard of him today was from that interview.

Our intro song is First Communion by Dane Joneshill and our feature song today was With Melting Heart and Weeping Eyes by Red Mountain Music.

Our executive producer is Erica Fehr, our producer and audio engineer is Kevin Wiebe and our administrative assistant and wizard of all things web related is Ruth Block. I'm Kevin Wiebe.

And I'm Jesse Penner and we have been your hosts for The Armchair Anabaptist. We certainly hope that what you have heard today will do more than stay as merely food for thought, but that it can help inspire each of us to get up out of the comfort of our armchairs and translate into living more like Jesus.

Join us next time for our season finale as we continue our journey looking at the life of peace and how the Bible might just challenge us to be more creative than to simply resort to violence, but rather creatively do things that might just have the power to subvert injustice and restore people's dignity. That's next time on The Armchair Anabaptist.

*Edited for clarity.