



The Controversy, Part Two

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 feet. 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 writing of our wrongs as we eat and as we drink. <end>

Introduction

Kevin Wiebe: You're listening to The Armchair Anabaptist. This is episode number two, *The Controversy, Part Two*. I'm Kevin Wiebe.

Jesse Penner: And I'm Jesse Penner and we are your hosts. We're going to be jumping into this idea once again, of the controversy that can surround pacifism.

On our first episode, we had the chance to talk about why this is such a controversial topic. We chatted with people about what makes this controversial, why it's a hot button issue in the church, and why it's important for us to be talking about it. Today we continue those conversations by looking at, what are some of the challenges that we face as a Christian community, as we seek to engage with this idea of peace.

KW: Once again, we have an excellent panel of guests that we will be speaking to about this very important topic. There is Betty Pries, Brian Zahnd, Dr. Layton Friesen - last time we just said Layton Friesen. Layton was the Conference Pastor for the Evangelical Mennonite Conference; he was at the time of the interview. That familiarity, I suppose, left us a little bit less professional, perhaps, than we should have been with our friend Layton, sorry Layton. Dr. Layton Friesen, who is also now the Academic Dean at Steinbach Bible College, and we'll also be hearing from Dr. Terry Hiebert, who is the president of Steinbach Bible College. And also, we had a chance to talk to Dr. Ronald J. Sider prior to his passing last year. So that's our panel of guests that we will be hearing from today.

JP: We're going to start off by listening to Betty Pries. Betty is the founder of a mediation company called Credence and Co. and the author of *The Space Between Us*. She's also an instructor in the conflict management program at Conrad Grebel University College. We asked Betty: what are some of the biggest challenges in living out this idea of loving our enemies, what makes this so difficult for us to actually do?

The Question: What makes loving our enemies so difficult for us to do?

Betty Pries: What makes this hard for us to do, I think, is that in fact so many of us do not love ourselves. We hate the other because we see something in the other that reminds us of ourselves. In fact, we know that the more we dislike something in ourselves, the more that we will find that source of our dislike in the other person. And I encounter so many Christians who have a deep, deep-seated distaste for themselves. If we're really honest with ourselves, so many people across the world, including people of faith, have a deep-seated distaste for themselves. I think when we look at this this deep-seated distaste for ourselves, we all have this need to be loved and we all have a need to belong, and so what we end up doing, is we fill our deep longing to be loved by purchasing new things, by taking exotic holidays, chasing new experiences, rather than really settling in with ourselves and discovering that we are beautiful, beautiful and broken.

I'm thinking about a podcast I was listening to where the person described sort of a spiritual leader coming up to a person, and said, "You are deeply beloved, exactly as you are. And there's room for improvement, right?" Both of these things are both true at the very same time, and so because we have such a hard time loving ourselves, there's not a lot of space left to love the other, and so there's something about this dynamic of distaste for ourselves. We know we have this distaste. It's partly because we make all these assumptions: I have this distaste for myself, I feel badly about myself, therefore others must feel badly about me, therefore, they're bad people and I push my distaste for myself onto the others and make them responsible for my distaste for myself. And so if we really want to love our neighbours, we do need to love ourselves. These two things are one love.

In the gospels that we have this passage - what's the greatest commandment, to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself. If you look at the grammatical construction of this passage, it is to love your neighbour as though the neighbour is oneself, and to love God, is to love one's neighbour as if the neighbour is oneself. These three - love for God, love for neighbour, love for self - it is one love. We can't pick and choose; if you want to do one and not the other two it's not going to work. If you want to do this one and not these other two, it's not going to work. We have to find a way of leaning into this one, great love. It's one love and it has multiple faces, multiple expressions for self, for neighbour, for God. I think if we could do that, we would find ourselves able to love our neighbours more effectively.

KW: Brian Zahnd is the founding pastor of Word of Life Church in St. Joseph, MO, and he's the author of 10 books. His most recent book is *When Everything's On Fire*. We asked Pastor Brian what makes this thing about loving our enemies so very difficult for us to actually do? Why is this such a difficult thing practically? You know it's all well and good to talk about it in theory, but on the ground when we're living it out, why is this so hard?

Brian Zahnd: Well, because we live in a world that is completely arranged around what I would describe as an axis of power enforced by violence. So consider this. This is the story that that is given to us in the Bible to help understand our origins.

In the beginning God creates heaven and earth, animals, pinnacle of God's creation is beings in his own image. Adam and Eve. Adam from the adamah. Adam means humankind. Adam, from Adamah, means soil, so human from the humus. And eva, Eva means life.

Humankind and life they have two children, Cain and Abel. Cain is a tiller of the soil. Abel is a hunter, he's a hunter gatherer. Cain is harnessing agriculture. Abel is following the flocks. Anthropologists tell us that with the rise of agriculture, there was a fundamental change and now land could be owned and necessarily for agriculture - you have fences and borders and boundaries.

Anthropology tells us that the early agriculturists came into a lot of conflict with the traditional hunter-gatherers, the more nomadic life, and so we have a story of conflict between Cain and Abel. What happens? Cain kills Abel. First, he lies to himself about it. Then he lies to God about it. The question is,

“where is your brother?” And he said, “how would I know? Am I my brother’s keeper? Am I supposed to take care of him?” I hope we know the answer to that question by now, but he lies to himself and God about it. And then what happens? There’s a mark put on him, but it’s a mark of, essentially, mercy, because he’s exiled, moving further away from Eden, but he says “my punishment’s too great, people will take vengeance on me” and God says, “no, I put a mark on you and whoever kills you, their vengeance will be sevenfold.” And what does he do? He moves east of Eden and what does he do – he founds the first city.

What’s the message here?

Our civilizations come from the idea that we get by lying to ourselves and telling ourselves that our brother is not really our brother. Our brother is other, our other is enemy and they have to be killed. We have to go to war against them. We just have to and that’s the foundation for our society.

And then it gets exponentially worse. Seven generations later you have this guy named Lamech, who says “I have killed a man for wounding me, I’ve slain a young man for striking me. If Cain’s vengeance is sevenfold, then Lamech’s vengeance is seventy times seven.”

I think everybody’s used to hearing seventy times seven associated with Jesus and forgiveness in the gospels, but the first seventy times seven is in Genesis and it has to do with vengeance.

And so lethal violence employed against the other that we call enemy is the very foundation of our society. It’s just how it’s arranged, and this is why Abraham’s looking for a city whose builder and architect is gone. He’s looking for something that’s other and he only sees it from afar, but he rejoices to see it because he sees the coming of Christ.

In Christ, instead of the world being organized around an axis of power enforced by violence, Christ gives us the alternative in his cross, which is the axis of love expressed in forgiveness that re-founds the world. But it means that suddenly we have to rethink everything that we’ve ever assumed about how society is to be organized, and that’s a very demanding call. So, it’s hard.

This is one of the problems with some of the atonement theories that want to reduce the atonement to one thing, and the cross to one thing, and then we say, “oh, you know Jesus had to just, you know, die for our sins so that God could get the wherewithal to forgive us.” I think that’s a poor interpretation, but even if you wanted to say that, the problem is like “okay, done.” I know what the cross is about. The cross is many things, including where the world is re-founded around an axis of love expressing forgiveness instead of what has been the long, long history of human civilization of organizing our societies around power enforced by violence.

JP: Dr. Layton Friesen is the Academic Dean at Steinbach Bible College. He’s also the author of *Secular Nonviolence and the Theo-drama of Peace*. We asked him the same question: what are some of the challenges that come when we’re trying to live out this life of nonviolence?

Dr. Layton Friesen: Can a person really love their enemies without having the spirit of Jesus inside of them? Without pentecostal power, can a person carry out this part of Jesus’s life? And I think this is why the church has had such a terribly difficult time with Jesus’s teachings around violence. It’s really fascinating to go through church history and see all the multiple ways in which the church has sort of dodged this, has evaded this from one side or another. You look at the time of Constantine, you look at the Middle Ages when this was sort of allocated to the elite - the monks and the nuns and the priests, those were the people who were still called to obey this, the rest of the society couldn’t. I think even our secular age where we’ve kind of watered this down and we’ve reduced it to bullying or antidiscrimination or whatever and we’ve said, you can do this with some good education and some good psychology and whatever; you can become a nonviolent person. I mean, that’s a reduction of Jesus’s message, really, it’s cutting off everything to do with his relationship to the Father, everything to do with the Holy Spirit and just saying you know, with some good moral reform, you can become a nonviolent person.

So there’s all kinds of ways in which the church has kind of evaded the full, beautiful message of Jesus’ teachings on nonviolence, which were very directly related to his relationship to the Father. I think the

challenge that we have is simply holding on to an ethic, holding on to a way of living that often seems impossible. We can't actually understand how it's supposed to work, and yet not evading it. I think that's the temptation, is when we see something that we can't do or that we can't quite figure out how we're going to get there, it seems like too high of an ethic or it seems impossible, we find all kinds of ways of saying, "well, Jesus couldn't have meant that" or "it was meant for someone else" or "it was meant for the future Kingdom of God," or "if Jesus had known he was going to take 2000 years to come back, he would have given us something more practical."

I mean, these are all different ways in which the church has tried to evade this; that I don't think we can do. We need to keep this very difficult ethic in mind, we need to keep it before us, even if we can't obey it, even if it seems impossible and that's a challenge because we only want commands we can obey. It's really the gut human instinct is to say, "if I can't reach this on my own power, then clearly we need to get a different set of rules," and that's just not how this works. Jesus is a really tough fit in the kingdom of this world, and we're always going to struggle with this. But I think we have to keep struggling with it because Jesus leads us on and he empowers us bit by bit in learning how to do this by the power of the Holy Spirit.

JP: As we discussed this, we ended up talking about John 21 and the reunion of Jesus and Peter in this sort of reinstatement that Jesus does with Peter at the end of the book of John.

I recognized as we were discussing that it's sort of a unique thing that Jesus does here. Rather than call him to a sort of traditional repentance or call him out for his betrayal earlier or talk about how he'd failed or how he needed to improve in his character, Jesus simply asks the question, "Peter, do you love me?" As we thought about this in the context of loving our enemies and how we could follow Jesus' call into a new sort of Kingdom and ethic, this is what Layton had to say.

LF: Jesus gives us the whole curriculum, I mean, you've got grades one to 12. There are some things that we'll be able to do fairly soon in our Christian life, there's certain things that will be able to do in Grade four, there's certain things that we'll do in grade eight, grade nine, 12, maybe there's some things that will only learn when we get to university, right? But that's the nature of the Christian faith, that there is enough in the example in the teaching of Jesus to give us challenges right to the very end of our life and maybe loving our enemies is actually one of those kind of advanced things that we're going to start working on right away, it's not like it's delayed, you start working on some of this stuff, but it's only going to going to come later on, actually, when we perfect it.

We have seen people in our own lives and in our own churches who have done this, that have done remarkable things in terms of loving their enemies and it is actually possible, but it is hard. There's no question about that.

KW: Dr. Ronald J. Sider was the founder and President Emeritus of Evangelicals for Social Action and was the Distinguished Professor of Theology, Holistic Ministry and Public Policy at Palmer Theological Seminary. He was the author of numerous books, including *The Early Church on Killing* and the best-selling book *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*.

Dr. Sider passed away last year, but prior to his passing we had a chance to talk to him about this topic of peace and nonviolence and we also asked him the question, why is this teaching about nonviolence so difficult to live out? What makes this so hard?

Dr. Ronald J. Sider: Well, I think at a personal human level, it's not instinctively what we do. We instinctively resist, fight back protect ourselves, it's not the normal human emotion that comes out. But beyond that you only have to take a fairly quick look through history or look at just the newspapers today and you see that bullies do awful things. Hitler and Stalin and Pol Pot and now Putin, and in the short run, it seems that simply loving that enemy is not enough to stop the person from doing awful things.

I started out my book *If Jesus is Lord* by saying "I get the just war tradition." There are awful people in history, and it looks like the only way to stop them is to fight them and kill, but that's where my book *Nonviolent Action* comes in. In that book, I tell story after story after story of how Christians and others

have resisted evil non-violently and successfully. Dr. King, Gandhi, the overthrow of Marcos in the Philippines. Again and again and again a nonviolent stance, in fact, has been successful.

In fact, a couple of scholars did a study, it was published a few years ago, and they compared over 300 instances of violent and nonviolent resistance to evil and attempts to work for justice, and they discovered that the nonviolent campaigns were about twice as likely to succeed as the violent campaigns, so there is an alternative to violence, but it's costly. On the surface it seems like it's not gonna work so I understand why people struggle with it.

JP: One of the things that struck me as we had the opportunity to listen to these various guests speak about this, is the fact that an issue like nonviolence, an issue like learning to love our enemies, can't be something that we simply make a decision on in a moment and then it's changed for us. It's actually a part of a redemptive transformational journey that we're called to go on it as a church. It's not intuitive or easy, but it is a step-by-step thing that we're called to grow in as we live our Christian lives.

KW: Yeah, I think that's a really helpful perspective. I mean, it's certainly been that way for me in my life. As I mentioned in our last episode, I was not always someone who embraced the pacifist position. I would have been just passionately against it at an earlier time in my life. I would have thought it was ridiculous, completely nonsensical, and that's actually one of the reasons why I have such an appreciation for some of Dr. Sider's work, especially his book *Nonviolent Action* that he referenced in this interview, because while some of it's counterintuitive, some of the stuff about nonviolence is actually effective.

It's not that it is ineffective, it just doesn't feel like it will work. It feels like we're just rolling over and not doing anything, but actually, nonviolent resistance to evil is remarkably effective, twice as effective as violent resistance to evil, and it has been demonstrated, it has been tried. It's not that it hasn't been tried - it has been tried. It is costly though. It does have a cost to it and that is also demonstrated in his work. But interestingly, when there have been nonviolent campaigns, the amount of bloodshed is actually less, but it's not on both sides, it's just that it's all one sided. The overall bloodshed is less, but it's only on the side of those who are willing to die, but not willing to kill.

JP: Let me know if this analogy lands, but you think about professional athletes that have to relearn the way to do something. They work some sort of a physical trainer or something because the natural way they want to move isn't actually the most effective way to achieve what they're looking for in a sport. And there is this sense in which we have this built-in muscle memory that we have to sort of relearn. We're sitting down with someone and we're talking, when we look at Scripture and the teachings of Jesus, what it's doing is teaching us a new way to live that doesn't feel natural, but just like an athlete has to figure out new ways to move their body that don't at first feel natural but are actually going to lead to greater results, we have to relearn ways of doing things. And it's not an easy process, but it is an important one.

KW: I think that's a helpful analogy. I was a basketball player in high school and I remember when I had to relearn how to take a jump shot and at first it felt really awkward to do that, but in the end, my shot improved greatly as a result of that, but that early stages it felt completely unnatural to me to do it. It's a helpful analogy I think because, especially with the way the data bears out in the long run, while it doesn't feel natural, it is actually more effective, even though it seems counterintuitive in it. But even more than that, I think there's a piece of it, even if it wasn't effective, the question would be "God is asking this of us, and is effectiveness, in a worldly sense, the most important thing or is faithfulness the most important thing?"

JP: Right, I think that's important, that effectiveness isn't the ultimate metric here that we're using to determine whether this is something that we do. We're seeking to be faithful to Jesus and that came through in the answers that we got.

I had the chance to connect with Dr. Terry Hiebert. He is the Interim President at Steinbach Bible College, and he gave a bit of a tour through scripture starting in the Old Testament looking at this idea of nonviolence or enemy love and how it plays out in Scripture.

Dr. Terry Hiebert: I've been reading through the Old Testament lately and I've been getting really depressed by the amount of revenge. There's this great story of this guy who is insulting David and David's men say to him, "so should we dispatch him for you?" And he says "no, no, no. Maybe he's got something to say" And then this fellow, on a later trip, David makes this trip up north and this guy actually follows David all the way up north and he's throwing stones at the entourage going north. And again, David's men say "so, should we dispatch him for you?" "No, no, maybe he's God's voice." You think "oh, David, hey, you're loving your enemy," and then at the end of David's life he basically gives his final instructions and he says, "by the way, make sure that you kill this guy."

It's these vicious cycles of retaliation that are just so universal and even a man after God's own heart in many ways falls prey to that and so do we.

I'm sure the temptation is overpowering, even now, when you've got these brutal and unjust atrocities that are happening in the world today and there's this temptation to say "we've got to do something about this" and have revenge. And often revenge takes on this kind of quasi justice kind of conversation as well, that I have to look righteous in my revenge right? But Jesus sees through that.

JP: As we continued our conversation, President Terry focused in on the sermon on the mount.

TH: It's interesting to note that in Matthew 5: 31, Jesus says, "I say to you not to retaliate by evil means or not to retaliate evil for evil," and there in one translation the whole idea there is by evil means, and it's so easy to retaliate using evil means. I mean kids do that in our homes all the time. "Well, they did that to me. I'm gonna keep them too or do those kinds of things." But Jesus clearly makes that added twist - you can respond to evil.

And of course, Jesus believes that we should resist evil. In fact, he resisted evil in the temple, he described the Pharisees as being greedy. He resists Satan, I mean, he does a lot of resisting of evil. Even his death on the cross is the ultimate resistance of evil, and he does so in nonviolent way, which is about the hardest way to do that, because there's so much injustice, so many things that don't make sense. You say, "Jesus of all people, you should be resisting and revenging this."

JP: President Terry also recognized that it wasn't just about Jesus, that as the early church got started and writers like Paul wrestled with this, they came back to Jesus' teaching on nonviolence and expanded it.

TH: Paul says the same thing, don't repeat evil for evil, never avenge yourselves. Obviously, Jesus' example wasn't quite enough for the Roman Christians. So, in Romans 12 he has to remind them again and he says the same things that Jesus says, "never avenge yourself. If your enemy is hungry, feed them, if they're thirsty, give them something to drink. Do not overcome evil by evil means," exactly what Jesus says, "but overcome evil with good," and you find that elsewhere in the New Testament as well.

It's resisting this vicious cycle of repaying evil with greater evil. Then Jesus continues on, and it basically says, "you can't just, by means of force or by of sheer willpower say I'm going to resist evil. There has to be a greater purpose or a greater value." Stassen calls this the transforming initiative. [Glen Stassen, Just Peacemaking] It's like here are some practices that if you start small... and I think that's where maybe I've come to. You know what, I don't know what to do sometimes with world issues and the wars that are going around the world and some of the great violence, the things that are happening.

But what I'm discovering, at least in my life, is to start with small transforming practices, habits, initiatives, and that's what Stassen says that the Sermon on the Mount is all about. It's starting with patterns of manageable, small steps that you make so that if and when you do get into the more difficult situations or the crisis situations, that you have practiced these ways of peace for so long that loving your enemy - you've been doing it in small ways already in the past, that here's just another way to creatively love that enemy.

It's like building up your muscles to respond in a way that that loving the enemy becomes a more natural way of responding.

JP: Nonviolence or enemy love or pacifism or peacekeeping. This is the sort of thing that has a lot of terms, and those terms carry a fair bit of baggage with them. It can actually make the discussion around these ideas a little bit complicated.

As we closed out our conversation, President Terry talked a bit about the words that he chooses to use when talking about nonviolence and enemy love.

TH: I prefer not to use nonresistance. It's been a very good Anabaptist word over the years and it was used a lot in previous generations, but I find that non resistance has too much misunderstanding. Exactly what I was saying, "do not resist the evildoer."

Years ago, that that would have given the impression that you don't resist, you just kind of turn the other way or you avoid or you run away or you do something like that, but I found that I liked what Stassen talks about, he says "it's do not resist the evil doer by evil means." And so that resistance is still something we need to do. We should be resisting evil, "put on the full armor of God," all that kind of stuff, but it's not by evil means.

JP: What I really valued about that discussion with President Terry is the opportunity that we had to sort of take a step back and view this thing scripturally from 30,000 feet and understand how nonviolence and enemy love isn't something that takes place in a couple of isolated verses. Rather, it is a part of the story of what God is doing in the world from Genesis through to Revelation, and in the Gospels, in the Epistles, in the prophets - we see this echoed throughout the entire narrative of scripture, and that's so significant to understand. It's a big part of what God is doing in the world.

KW: One of the things I appreciated about his insights was that note near the end about nonresistance, and that term in particular, because it always bothered me where people would say, "don't resist an evil person" or in some translations of the of the Bible where it would say it in those terms, but where he distinguishes that Jesus actually did resist evil, and we're supposed to resist evil, but we don't resist evil by evil means. There is a certain amount of understanding that goes into that and having a proper translation of the scriptures to get to that place. That was something I used to wrestle with, and so in him, explaining that it was just one of those touchy places for me that took me a very long time to get to that place of understanding that when we say nonresistance, it's not that we don't resist evil, it's that we don't resist evil by evil means. For me that's something I just really appreciated about what he said.

JP: Right, this picture of the cross not as a passive thing, but actually the ultimate resistance of evil in laying down your life in that way.

KW: Our feature song today is by a group called Poor Bishop Hooper and they are a group that has been singing through the Psalms and so this is their song Psalm 37. Some of the lyrics at the beginning of the song say, "if I delight in you, it is your promise. My every hearts desire will be accomplished. If I commit all I have to you, your justice will shine, your justice will shine. If I stay within your holy presence no matter what the world has I wait patient. If I commit all I have to you I know you'll delight, I know you'll delight."

I just really appreciate the lyrics which are based on Psalm 37 and how it's this reminder that we delight ourselves in the Lord. We stay close to the Lord and in this discussion about peace, about nonviolence, that's really what matters - seeking faithfulness to the Lord above all. Above what is expedient in an earthly sense, and that if we are seeking the Lord first and foremost, that we can trust that the Lord's gonna work things out in the end, and that we are committing whatever we have to him, our behavior, our lives, our well-being, and that if we are staying with him that everything is going to be alright in the end and so this is the song by Poor Bishop Hooper, Psalm 37.

Psalm 37, Poor Bishop Hooper

If I delight in You, it is Your promise

My every heart's desire will be accomplished

If I commit all I have to You
Your justice will shine, Your justice will shine

If I stay still within Your holy presence
No matter what the world has, I wait patient
If I commit all I have to You
I know You'll delight, I know You'll delight

And my inheritance will be perfect and unending
My inheritance will be beneath Your watchful eye
There's nothing that can take it, no hour can decay it
Forever, forever and a day

If my steps are taken and established
And You are pleased with everywhere I put them
Though I fall, I won't be overwhelmed
For You hold my hand, You hold my hand

Once I was young, and now I am an old man
Ne'er have I seen a righteous one forsaken
For my children never begged for bread
But gave and gave again
Gave and gave again
Gave and gave again

Closing

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A special thanks to our guests who have joined us today - Betty Pries, Brian Zahnd, Dr. Terry Hiebert and Dr. Layton Friesen. 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 Jones Hill and our feature song today was the song Psalm 37 by Poor Bishop Hooper.

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 is 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 as we continue our journey looking at the life of peace and what Jesus said this all had to do with being children of God.

*Edited for clarity.