Were the Early Christians Pacifists? Does It Matter?

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Among theologians writing in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, the characterization of the early Jesus movement as "pacifist" has taken on an almost axiomatic status. J. Denny Weaver's comments in *The Nonviolent Atonement* are representative of this consensus:

> Since the Roman empire of the first century did not recognize the reign of God or confess Jesus as Messiah, it is hardly surprising that the church differed from the empire. By the majority of accounts, one of the most easily perceived differences concerned the use of the sword. Whereas the empire had armies, and emperors consolidated their authority with military power, the early church rejected the use of the sword and was pacifist.[1]

Appeals to the pacifism and nonviolence of the early Christians are made by pastors, practitioners, and activists affiliated with Mennonite institutions in support of their work to oppose war, abortion, and capital punishment.[2] The assertion that early Christians refused to participate in the violence of the Roman Empire even under threat of persecution functions as both inspiration and ideal for many pacifists seeking to follow the way of Jesus today.[3] In Mennonite historiography, the conversion of the Emperor Constantine is often described as a "fall" to rival Eden, a crystallizing event within a process of a gradual decline from the primitive Church's initial espousal of nonviolence.[4] The narrative of decline from initial pacifism

[1] J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 81.

[2] See, for example, the blog of Darnell Barkman, Mennonite Church Canada Witness worker in the Philippines: darnellbarkman.com/the-early-church-on-killing/.

[3] "For 400 years nonviolent peace remained the mark of the Christian until a theologian named Augustine explained how war could be just and used to create peace." Fernando Enns and Annette Mosher, "Introduction," *in Just Peace: Ecumenical, Intercultural, and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Fernando Enns and Annette Mosher (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 1.

[4] "The progressive decay of the primitive Christian rejection of Caesar's wars had many causes that built up gradually, although the Constantinian transition was the weightiest." John

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to entanglement with political power has proven to be very attractive for Mennonite peace theologians, particularly as it enables casting 16th-century Anabaptists in the role of heroic re-discoverers of the "authentic" teachings and practices of the early Church.

As a Christian and a Mennonite, I am committed to following Jesus in his way of peace and, as such, consider myself a "pacifist." As a historian of the initial centuries of Christianity, however, I am unconvinced that the early Christians should be described as pacifist, in the sense that all Christians were opposed to participation in war and other forms of state violence.[5] Moreover, I am even less convinced that any Christian in the ancient world could be described as committed to the practice of "nonviolence," a concept that remains under-defined in current Mennonite discourse despite its ubiquity.[6] Literary and archaeological data for Christian participation in military and state violence have been analyzed repeatedly over the past century, with interpretation of the results typically aligning with the theological and ecclesial commitments of the interpreter.[7] A short paper is

Howard Yoder, *The War of the Lamb: The Ethics of Nonviolence and Peacemaking*, ed. Glen Stassen, Mark Thiessen Nation, and Matt Hamsher (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009), 45.

[5] I adopt here the definition of pacifism that Peter J. Leithart derives from his reading of John Howard Yoder's works. Leithart writes, "I am using [pacifism] in a loose sense not to denote a specific rationale for Christian opposition to war and violence but in reference to the simple fact of Christian opposition to violence and war. No matter what his reasons, a church father who condemns all Christian participation in war, or violent service to the state, is 'pacifist.'" Peter J. Leithart, *Defending Constantine: The Twilight of an Empire and the Dawn of Christendom* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 257.

[6] On early Christian "pacifism" and "nonviolence," John Howard Yoder writes: "The early Christians were not pacifist in the sense that, when called by the draft, they did not serve. There was no draft. They were not pacifist in the sense of asking Nero to call off the superpower struggle against the Parthians. Neither they nor Nero, not having read Locke or Rousseau, thought of Nero as being accountable to 'the people' in general or to Christians in particular. But they were nonviolent. They saw in the passion and death of their Lord the model of divine-human virtue to place over against other visions of human prospering. Doing without dominion was not for them a second-best alternative to glory; it was the way to participate in the victory of redemption." *The War of the Lamb*, 39. This definition of nonviolence is problematic, as it reduces nonviolence to the refusal of "dominion" in a political sense. Early Christian texts are ambivalent about the ethics of violence used by the Christian "dominus" within the household and the church.

[7] See C.J. Cadoux, *The Early Christian Attitude to War* (London: Headley Bros., 1919); Roland

unfortunately not the place for yet another full analysis of this data. Rather, this paper will focus on the second question in its title: Does it matter if the early church was pacifist? Specifically: What do pacifist Christians gain if there was a period in history during which Christians were united in their opposition to war and state violence? What, if anything, would we Mennonites lose if we were to acknowledge that early Christian attitudes to the Roman empire always included varying degrees of negotiation, accommodation, and assimilation—not only resistance?[8] What if we were to discover that Christians have always had diverse responses to the challenge of living in a complicated and broken world as followers of Jesus, responses that have included participation in violence?

Does it matter whether the early Christians were pacifists? On the one hand, yes. It matters that we try to tell the story of the early Church as accurately as possible. While I am aware of the pitfalls of claims to "objectivity" in the writing of history, events do occur in time, and, although no reading can ever be entirely objective, the evidence of those events that survives ought to receive as fair an interpretation as possible. In the introduction to *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution*, John Howard Yoder argues for this. "We are working in the realm of historical theology, and in the first instance, ours is a descriptive task," he contends. "Christians have taken many attitudes to war, peace, and revolution. We need to study and

Bainton, "The Early Church At War," *Harvard Theological Review* 39 (1946): 75-92; Jean-Michel Hornus, *It is Not Lawful forMe to Fight: Early Christian Attitudes Toward War, Violence, and the State*, trans. Alan Kreider (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980); John Helgeland, Robert J. Daly, and J. Patout Burns, *Christians and the Military: The Early Experience* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985); John Shean, *Soldiering for God: Christianity and the Roman Army* (Leiden: Brill, 2010); George Kalantzis, *Caesar and the Lamb: Early Christian Attitudes on War and Military Service* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012); Despina Iosif, *Early Christian Attitudes to War, Violence and Military Service* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2013).

[8] Although prompted by a consideration of Josephus, Daniel Boyarin's comments are also *apropos* of Christians in the Roman Empire: "There was no time in which the Romans were writing" when "elaborate strategic adjustments were not being made by themselves and their subjects…. Every person and group has to ask themselves: To what extent do we want and need to collaborate or to resist the Powers That Be? To what extent, and at what cost, can we resist? If we wanted to, could we actually withdraw or flee from, hide from those powers? If so, how and to where?" Carlin Barton and Daniel Boyarin, *Imagine No Religion: How Modern Abstractions Hide Ancient Realities* (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 2016), 179.

interpret each in its own historical context, for its own sake, and as historians of Christian thought, objectively. The task of reading a story objectively is not without problems, but at the outset we will seek to be historians and not apologetes."[9]

Thus I am troubled by the apologetic tenor found in pacifist Christian accounts of the early Church, not least among those written by Yoder himself. John Helgeland makes a pointed but correct objection when he notes that pacifist scholars tend to support their arguments by assembling anthologies of snippets of early writings rather than by dealing with whole works, to say nothing of whole *corpora*, produced by early Christian writers.[10] This cut-and-paste method, employed in recent volumes, including Michael G. Long's *Christian Peace and Nonviolence: A Documentary History*[11] and Ronald J. Sider's *The Early Church on Killing: A Comprehensive Sourcebook on War, Abortion, and Capital Punishment,*[12] enable the editors to expose readers only to the texts most congenial to their own arguments. In their hodgepodge presentation, these volumes result in both decontextualization and distortion of the debates in the early church over military participation and the ethics of violent conduct.

To take one example, consider the variety of uses to which Tertullian's treatise *On the Military Crown* (*De Corona Militis*) has been put. Written in the North African city of Carthage in the first decade of the 3rd century, this treatise is cited frequently in investigations of early Christian pacifism[13]—and with good reason, as it is the earliest surviving treatise penned by a Christian to deal at length with the propriety of Christian

[9] John Howard Yoder, *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace and Revolution*, ed. Theodore J. Koontz and Andy Alexis-Baker (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009), 19.

[10] John Helgeland, "Christians and the Roman Army from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* 2.23.1 (1979): 754-56.

[11] Michael G. Long, ed., *Christian Peace and Nonviolence: A Documentary History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011).

[12] Ronald J. Sider, *The Early Church on Killing: A Comprehensive Sourcebook on War, Abortion, and Capital Punishment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012).

[13] Tertullian's text is considered by Anabaptist/Mennonite scholars in Sider, *The Early Church on Killing,* 58-62, and A. James Reimer, *Christians and War: A Brief History of the Church's Teachings and Practices* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010). It is discussed by several contributors to *Constantine Revisited: Leithart, Yoder, and the Constantinian Debate*, ed. John D. Roth (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2013).

military participation. Tertullian is spurred to write by a recent controversy caused by a soldier whose Christianity motivated him to refuse a *donative*, a laurel crown offered him as part of a military ceremony, on the grounds that to do so would be idolatrous. The soldier was subsequently executed for his obstinacy in refusing the honor. Tertullian reports that observers, some of them Christian, considered his refusal to be rash, unnecessary, and displaying excessive zeal for martyrdom.

Over the course of 15 chapters, Tertullian uses this case to argue that it is better to face martyrdom than to wear a crown, even though wearing crowns is never explicitly rejected in the Christian scriptures. Mennonite readers devote most of their attention to chapter 11, where Tertullian sets out, as part of his larger investigation on crown wearing, to "inquire, whether warfare is proper at all for Christians." He answers the question with a resounding "no." He asks, "Shall it be held lawful to make an occupation of the sword, when the Lord proclaims that he who uses the sword shall perish by the sword? And shall the son of peace take part in the battle when it does not become him even to sue at law? And shall he apply the chain, and the prison, and the torture, and the punishment, who is not the avenger even of his own wrongs?"[14] On the basis of this denunciation of Christian participation in military and other state violence, *On the Military Crown* is frequently included in collections of pacifist writings of the early church, and has been read as expressing the church's official rejection of military participation.[15]

However, this same treatise is also cited by scholars such as Despina Iosif [16] and Peter Leithart[17] to support the claim that military participation was not unusual for 2nd-century Christians. They point out that Tertullian's intended addressees were fellow Christians, those who felt there was no contradiction between military service and proper piety. Moreover, Tertullian himself admits that the man who refused the laurel wreath had, until that fateful decision, lived unproblematically as both a soldier and a

[14] Tertullian, *De Corona* 11. Translations of *De Corona* are based on those of S. Thelwall in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* 3, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885).

[15] Long, *Christian Peace and Nonviolence*, 21-22; Kalantzis, *Caesar and the Lamb,* 120-26.

[16] Iosif, *Early Christian Attitudes to War, Violence and Military Service*, 67-70.

[17] Leithart, *Defending Constantine,* 263.

Christian. Nor was he the only Christian in his company.[18] *On the Military Crown* therefore may credibly be read as indicating active disagreement and lack of consensus among the Christians of Tertullian's Carthage on the legitimacy of participation in the military.

Pacifist scholar Alan Kreider acknowledges the intra-Christian debate pervading the pages of *On the Military Crown*, but he silences Tertullian's opponents by arguing that they must have been lay believers, while "the leading theologian in the province, Tertullian, articulated the position of the church to correct them."[19] Mark Thiessen Nation makes the same move, describing Tertullian's opponents as "marginal unnamed figures" and as "unnamed individuals who taught and practiced things that were contrary to the teaching of the Church."[20] But Kreider and Thiessen Nation both presume too much; no evidence suggests that Tertullian spoke as the "official voice" of the African church.

From his own lifetime onwards, Tertullian's relationship with other Christians was testy. The earliest source referring to him as a priest is Jerome, writing more than a century after the fact, but this claim has been convincingly refuted by T.D. Barnes.[21] Nor is it clear that Tertullian's opponents were lay people. They were more likely ordained church leaders, with Tertullian functioning as a gadfly. His own characterization of his opponents at the outset of *De Corona* suggests as much:

> It is plain that they have rejected the prophecies of the Holy Spirit; they are also proposing the refusal of martyrdom. So they murmur that a peace so good and long is endangered for them. Nor do I doubt that some are already turning their back on the

[18] "A certain one of the soldiers approached—one who was more of a soldier of God (*dei miles*), more constant than the rest of his [Christian] brothers (*constantior fratribus*)—who assumed that they could serve two masters—his head alone uncovered, the useless crown in his hand. And by this discipline he was known as a Christian and he shone forth." Tertullian, *De Corona* 1.1.

[19] Alan Kreider, "Converted but not Baptized," in *Constantine Revisited*, 40.

[20] Mark Thiessen Nation, "Against Christianity and For Constantine: One Heresy or Two?," in *Constantine Revisited*, 75-76. That Tertullian refuses to name his opponent says nothing about his "marginality" within the Carthaginian Christian community.

[21] Jerome, *On the Lives of Illustrious Men* 53.4; T.D. Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971; 1985), 11, 117-20.

> Scriptures, are packing their bags, are armed for flight from city to city; for that is all of the gospel they care to remember. I have come to know their pastors (*pastores*) too: in peace, lions; in the fight, deer.[22]

Tertullian describes his opponents as rejecting "the prophecies of the Holy Spirit," by which he likely refers to the prophesies of Montanus, the controversial church leader from Phrygia whose teaching would later be condemned as the heresy of Montanism. In other words, Tertullian's opponents on the propriety of Christian military participation appear to be "orthodox" Christians, while Tertullian aligned himself with a party that became condemned as heretical.[23]

Before we Mennonites rush to rally behind Tertullian as the spokesman of the "authentic" or "official" Christian position, we should extend our consideration beyond *De Corona* to the rest of his writings. While we may nod in agreement with his full-throated rejection of military participation, his positions on other issues, including the position of women in the Christian community, ought to give us pause. The same Tertullian who penned "the Lord, in disarming Peter, ungirded the sword-belt of every soldier"[24] also famously wrote of every woman,

> And do you not know that you are an Eve? God's sentence hangs still over all your sex and His punishment weighs down upon you. You are the devil's entryway; you are the unsealer of that tree; you are the first deserter of the divine law; you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image, man. Because of your deed—namely, death—even the Son of God had to die![25]

Consider also Tertullian's gleeful expectation of the post-mortem punishments in store not only for Roman government officials but also for other non-Christians, including philosophers and performers of Roman entertainments:

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[22] Tertullian, *De Corona* 1.5.
[23] Eusebius (ca. 260-340 CE) describes the Montanist "heresy" in his *Church History* 5.18.
[24] Tertullian, *On Idolatry* 19.
[25] Tertullian, *On the Apparel of Women* 1.1.2.

> What sight shall wake my wonder, what my laughter, my joy, my exaltation?—as I see all those kings, those great kings, unwelcomed in heaven, along with Jove, along with those who told of their ascent, groaning in the depths of darkness! And the magistrates who persecuted the name of Jesus liquefying in fiercer flames than they kindled in their rage against Christians!—those sages too, the philosophers blushing before their disciples as they blaze together, the disciples whom they taught that god was concerned with nothing, that men have no souls at all, or that what souls they have shall never return to their former bodies! . . . And there will be tragic actors to be heard, more vocal in their own tragedy; and the players to be seen, lither of limb by far in the fire; and then the charioteer to watch, red all over in the wheel of flame; and next the athletes to be gazed upon, not in their gymnasiums but hurled in the fire . . . these, in some sort, are ours, pictured in the imagination of the spirit by faith . . . I believe things of greater joy than the circus, the theater, the amphitheater, or any stadium.[26]

If we insist that Tertullian speaks as the church's official voice on matters

[26] Tertullian, *De Spectaculis* 30. Translation by Carlin Barton in Barton and Boyarin, *Imagine No Religion*, 68. Barton attributes Tertullian's rejection of military service not to a benevolent love for enemies but to a totalitarian utopianism: "In the separatist or insurrectionary framework of his thought, Tertullian's Christians both swear and hope together, forming exactly a *coniuratio* and a *conspiratio* that he hopes will result in the replacement of the Roman Empire with one of its own—in which the cult of the king-god will be all-embracing and saturate every aspect of the safe and eternal life. The *sacramentum* (oath) of the *miles dei* (soldier of god) was a competing and more extreme version, an inversion and a rejection of the oaths of loyalty to the Emperor and his ministers, with their offices, honors, and symbols of power.... The *dei miles*, the soldier of God who "disburdened" himself of the vestments of the Roman *miles sacratus*, was Tertullian's model of the Christian breaking his ties with the powerful forces of 'this age' and defining a simplified, purified, more homogenous self. The desire to strip down, to purge oneself of divided and conflicting—and so disabling—obligations, loyalties, and desires attracted those who longed for an energized and clarified vision of one's self in the world. Freed from complexity, guilt and confusion could be washed away.... In this framework of Tertullian's thought, he spurns the 'quibbling,' the *cavillatio* in which the Christians who served in the armed forces of the Roman emperor must inevitably have engaged." Barton, *Imagine No Religion*, 80-81.

of military participation, what kind of authoritative status must we give his opinions on the role of women in the church, or to his joy at the thought of the torture of his enemies? Why on the issue of military participation are Mennonites so quick to pronounce the (supposed) position of the clergy to be the only legitimate Christian position, effectively silencing the laity? Why are we willing to dismiss the voices of "marginal," "unnamed" Christians?

This kind of selective reading of early Christian ethics and practices is what prompts me to ask, What would we as pacifist Christians lose if we were to concede that there was no pacifist consensus in the centuries prior to Constantine? What if the Christians of the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd centuries struggled—and often failed—just as much as we do to know how to follow Jesus in difficult and ever-changing circumstances, and this without the benefit of an authoritative canon of scriptures or an established ecclesiastical hierarchy? What do we gain by reading the story of the church in the 2nd and 3rd centuries as a slow decline from an initial pacifist purity that culminates in selling out the church to the empire?

To admit that the authentic Christian tradition, and not only an anomalous, fallen "Constantinian" Christianity, has been used to provoke and justify violent behavior is uncomfortable. Perhaps we are reassured by John Howard Yoder's insistence that "it is possible to renew the entire Christian gospel by overcoming the Constantinian mistake. It has been done."[27] But I fear this reassurance is misplaced. The church has always struggled to grasp—let alone to live into—"the entire Christian gospel," in the centuries before and after the rise of Constantine the Great.

In a recent contribution to *Granta* magazine, Miriam Toews reflects on the violence experienced by her family in their Mennonite community—violence that, she contends, grew out of the community's pacifist practices and convictions. "Pacifism and non-conflict, core tenets of the Mennonite faith," she writes, "may in fact be sources of violence and conflict, all the more damaging because unacknowledged or denied." Toews draws particular attention to shunning, which she describes as "murder without killing," a practice that "creates deep-seated wells of rage that find no release."[28] She

[27] Yoder, *The War of the Lamb*, 51.

[28] Miriam Toews, "Peace Shall Destroy Many," *Granta,* no. 137 (November 2016), granta.com/peace-shall-destroy-many/. Toews explores these themes more fully in her novels *A*

also identifies a toxic combination of authoritarianism and valorization of suffering within her community that resulted in repressing emotions and suppressing conflicts, often tragically. "War is hell, it's true," she says. "*Shouldn't be exposed* is another hell. *Shouldn't be exposed* stifles and silences and violates. *Shouldn't be exposed* refuses and ignores and shames. *Shouldn't be exposed* shields bullies and tyrants. I have seen it in my own life."

The works of novelists such as Toews and Rudy Wiebe challenge Mennonites to reconsider the ways in which the stories we tell about ourselves may prevent us from recognizing violence in our midst. Similarly, Mennonite narratives identifying Christian violence as a specifically "Constantinian" problem can blind us to discourses of legitimate violence voiced in early Christian texts, discourses that continue serving to legitimize violence within Mennonite communities. While it is not difficult to find early texts that repudiate killing in various circumstances,[29] I know of none that repudiates non-lethal violence. This is partially the result of semantics; the English word "violence," wide-ranging and nebulous as it is, does not have a one-for-one equivalent in either Latin or Greek. The words translated as "violent" in the *New International Version* of Matthew 11:12 and of Acts 2:2, 21:35, 24:7, and 27:41 are forms of the Greek word *bia.* Used in the New Testament to describe people, crowds, winds, and waves, *bia* can carry connotations of violence, strength, and force, depending on the context. Similarly, the Latin word *vis* primarily means strength, power, force, or potency, but can also mean both "violence" and "virtue." Even the Latin word *violentia* can mean "vehemence" or "ferocity" rather than "violence."

What we more often find in many early Christian texts is a renunciation not of violence *per se* but of anger. Unlike violence, anger is an emotion, or, to use the terminology native to antiquity, a "passion." The Platonic and Stoic philosophical systems prominent in the first centuries of the Common Era understood bad behavior to be the result of the passions, associated with the desire for bodily pleasures, usurping the sound judgment

Complicated Kindness (New York: Counterpoint, 2004) and *All My Puny Sorrows* (Toronto: Albert A. Knopf, 2014).

[29] These instances are collected in Sider's *The Early Church on Killing*. Note that the title of this book is not "The Early Church on Violence," limiting the book's scope only to Christian reflections on lethal violence and avoiding altogether the question of whether the early Church promoted nonviolence.

of right reason. Many extant early Christian texts demonstrate the influence of this line of thinking.[30] They understand Jesus to have taught his disciples to free themselves of their passions in order to achieve a virtuous life. We find this idea expressed in early texts like *Didache* 3.2: "Do not be quick-tempered, for anger leads to murder,"[31] as well as the *Epistle to Diognetus* 16: "About being long-suffering and servants to all and free of anger, this is what Jesus said: 'To him that smites you on one cheek turn the other as well.'"[32]

Using this logic, Christians could—and did—justify committing acts of violence, so long as they acted not out of anger but out of a loving desire to correct. In fact, the use of force was thought necessary in the exercise of discipline. At least this is what the churchman Origen assumes in a homily he preached to the Christians who gathered daily in Caesarea Maritima around the year 240:

> It is necessary that you a sinner, attended by God, taste something more bitter so that once disciplined, you may be saved. And just as when you, punishing a slave or a son, you do not want simply to torment him, rather your goal is to convert him by pains, so God, too, disciplines by the pains from sufferings those who have not been converted to the Word, who have not been cured.[33]

This is a quotation from a man who is often counted among the Christian pacifists and about whom Michael Long claims "it is remarkably clear that

[30] The integration of Stoic and Middle Platonic ethics with Biblical theology pre-dates the life of Jesus, as is clearly attested in the writings of Philo, the Jewish philosopher and exegete who lived and worked in Alexandria, ca. 20BCE-50CE. Numerous studies have traced the influence of Stoic and Platonic thought in particular on the New Testament authors, especially Paul. See *Stoicism in Early Christianity*, ed. Tuomas Rasimus, Troels Engberg-Pedersen, and Ismo Dunderberg (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010).

[31] *The Didache* is widely considered the earliest extant church order, incorporating traditions that may date to the first century and pre-date the canonical gospels. See Kurt Niederwimmer, *The Didache: A Commentary,* Hermeneia 82 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).

[32] *The Epistle to Diognetus* is an anonymous apologetic text usually dated to the 2nd century CE. See Clayton N. Jefford, ed., *The Epistle to Diognetus (with the Fragment of Quadratus): Introduction, Text, and Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013).

[33] Origen, *Homily on Jeremiah,* 12. The full homily repays a close reading. See Origen, *Homilies on Jeremiah and 1 Kings 28,* trans. John Clark Smith (Washington, DC: The Catholic Univ. of America Press, 2010).

he encouraged a life of non-violence for Christians."[34] Although Origen does indeed criticize Christian participation in military violence, he shows no hesitation in admitting the necessity of violence, even lethal violence, in the exercise of corrective discipline.[35] His position is not idiosyncratic; rather, his analogy derives its efficacy from his congregation's unquestioning acceptance of corporal punishment to discipline and reform misbehaving persons of lower social status. In a provocative study of Christian violence in late antiquity (i.e., roughly the period between 200 and 800 CE,) Michael Gaddis suggests that Christians shared dominant Roman attitudes toward disciplinary violence:

> Certainly the norms of late Roman secular society allowed for many situations in which physical violence was thought to be entirely appropriate. A certain degree of (usually) nonlethal violence helped to enforce asymmetrical power relationships. Those in authority were expected to use disciplinary beating to control the behavior of those under their command. Masters could beat their slaves or servants, teachers their students, fathers their children. This 'normal' violence helped to define the structure of Roman social relations. . . . Where did one draw the line between deadly violence and corrective discipline? Scriptural injunctions such as Jesus' words to Peter—"sheathe your sword" because "those who live by the sword shall die by it"—left much room for ambiguity. Did it forbid all violence, or did it refer specifically to 'bloodshed" by the sword? As opposing parties in the Donatist controversy traded accusations back and forth, some said that it was not 'violence' to beat or to club—so

[34] Long, *Christian Peace and Nonviolence*, 24.

[35] Origen argues for the necessity of capital punishment later in *Hom. Jer.* 12.5: "Let us suppose that it is the appointed task for a judge to create peace and prepare matters beneficial for the people under him. Let there approach a youthful murderer who projects himself to seem personable and good. Let a mother approach who presents reasons for pity to the judge, that he might take mercy on her old age. Let the wife of this worthless man plead with him to be merciful; let his children who surround him cry out in need. In light of these things, what is fitting for the common good: to show mercy or not to show mercy upon this man? If he is shown mercy, he will repeat the same crimes. If he is not shown mercy, he will die, but the common good will be better off."

long as blades were not used and blood was not shed.[36]

Does it matter if the early Christians were pacifists? I have argued that it matters that we tell the story of the early Church as honestly as possible. Moreover, I contend that a more critical study of the "pacifism" of early Christians may help us to think more clearly about the blind spots in our own purported "nonviolence." I suggest that we have something to gain from letting go of our ideal of the early church as pure and untainted prior to falling into an alliance with the state and its violence. By identifying the Constantinian shift as a decisive breaking point in the history of the early church, we minimize the ways in which the potential for violence in all human relationships has continually plagued Christians from the first century to the present day. The normativity of coercive domestic and disciplinary violence in Christian communities prior to Constantine should prompt us to question the narrative of a nonviolent early Christianity that was fundamentally transformed in its attitude to violence through an alliance with the state. By letting go of an idealized image of a golden age that never was, Mennonite pacifist Christians may be better equipped to name, acknowledge, and overcome temptations to violence in all its forms.[37]

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[36] Michael Gaddis, *There is No Crime for Those Who Have Christ: Religious Violence in the Christian Roman Empire* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1999), 141, 144.

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