

FIGHTING FIRE WITH WATER

by Richard Taylor and Ron Sider

We are, in early 1983, in the midst of a very rapid and large shift in human consciousness regarding questions of war and peace. As recently as 1980, one of the main preoccupations of the peace movement was how to inform and arouse the public about the dangers of nuclear war. Given the current front-page stories on the nuclear issue, it is hard to remember that the 1970s saw very little public discussion of the nuclear peril. Very few church bodies or religious leaders were speaking out. No mass movement was addressing itself to stopping the arms race.

Now the concern is so widespread that one commentator estimates that the peace and anti-nuclear movements have involved a greater number of people from a wider variety of backgrounds in more countries than any other issue of our century. In the United States more than 11 million citizens have voted in favor of a nuclear freeze. And the largest demonstration in U.S. history addressed itself to disarmament on June 12, 1982, in New York City.

Hundreds of thousands of Europeans have demonstrated for the same cause. Millions of people around the world are deeply concerned and are becoming active in disarmament advocacy. Religious leaders have come out so strongly that *U.S. News and World Report* describes them as “the key force behind the American anti-war crusade.” This burst of interest and activity has come about in less than three years.

These millions of newly involved peace advocates are looking for practical answers as to how the world can back away from the nuclear abyss. If they find meaningful answers and creative ways to act, they will stay involved and will draw in others. Their involvement in the nuclear freeze movement shows the power of a creative idea to involve people in meaningful, large-scale peace action.

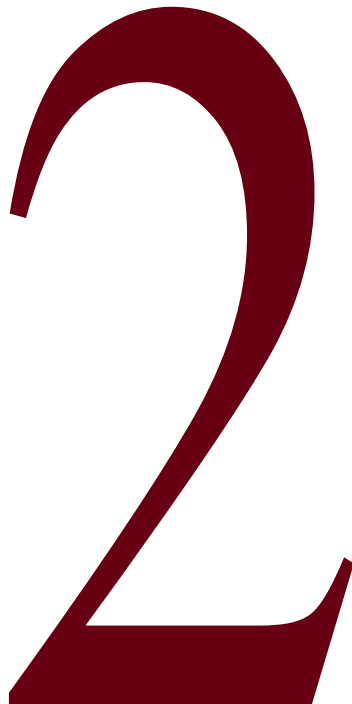
But what are the next steps? If the freeze is achieved, what then? If it is rejected, what do we do? What are the long-range steps that will move humanity away from self-obliteration and toward real peace?

So far our no to nuclear weapons has been loud and clear. We have condemned reliance on nuclear arms as idolatrous and suicidal. We have called the production, possession, and willingness to use nuclear weapons one of the chief manifestations of human sinfulness and rebellion against God in our age.

But this no is only half a message, half an answer. It tells people what to be against, but not what to be for. It says that defense through nuclear weapons must be rejected as immoral, but it does not tell us whether defense through some other means is viable. It condemns deterrence through nuclear terror, but it does not say whether there are alternative, acceptable ways to deter aggression.

At a peace retreat sponsored by Sojourners, a participant said, “I hear you saying, ‘Put your security in God, not the bomb.’ That’s great. But it doesn’t really tell me what to do. What does the God-truster do when Russia invades Afghanistan?”

This comment expresses the dilemma felt by many sincere people who have become involved in anti-nuclear activities. On the one hand, they agree that nuclear weapons are an abomination and must be abolished. On the other hand, they worry about how the peace movement would cope with aggression. What if some hostile, totalitarian power threatened to invade the United States or some other country? What would peace advocates do? It is not enough of an answer to say, “Trust in God, not the bomb,” since this does not tell the questioners how they are to express that trust



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in the concrete situation of invasion or occupation.

The Pentagon and other military establishments have a clear answer: “We must defend ourselves through military means.” As long as the peace movement does not have its own answer that is an alternative to the military’s answer, people will continue to trust military means, even if they have moral qualms about them; their support for disarmament will be weak and vacillating.

Nor can people’s concerns about aggression be brushed aside as naive or based solely on government propaganda. Whatever we may think of the “Soviet threat,” it is true that powerful nations regularly try to impose their will on others through military force. As Christians we know that “wars and rumors of wars” will persist and that “nation will rise up against nation” until Christ returns (Matthew 24:6-7).

Political science and biblical faith both attest to the world’s conflicts and power struggles. History gives countless examples (including current ones) of one state attempting to extend its influence by threatening or invading another. Tyranny and despotism are far from dead. It is not inconceivable that a totalitarian government—a new Hitler perhaps—might try to impose its will on the world.

JUST AS THE commitment to justice carries Christians into struggles to defend the rights of the poor and the oppressed, so our commitment to justice should express itself in strong resistance to aggression, invasion, or occupation. We are under a biblical mandate not only to be peacemakers, but also to “seek justice, correct oppression, defend the fatherless, plead for the widow” (Isaiah 1:17).

Christians are called to be reconcilers, but also to actively resist injustice, evil, and oppression. The oppression that Isaiah calls us to correct certainly includes the oppression that an invading totalitarian regime would try to impose on the people of an invaded country. The fatherless we are called to defend certainly includes all those vulnerable people that an expanding despotism would try to crush.

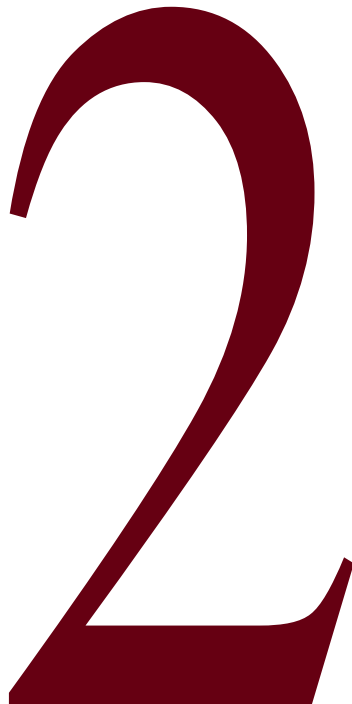
But how can Christians engage in this resistance while living in obedient faith to the one who commands us to love our enemies?

A provocative answer comes to us from those who were closest to Jesus—the Christians of the early church. We often forget that Christianity grew up in a region occupied by a foreign invader that used fierce military power to enforce its rule. It was in territory that had been conquered and placed under the brutal heel of imperial Rome in 63 B.C. that Jesus instructed his disciples to love their enemies and turn the other cheek.

During the centuries of persecution, Christians were crucified, torn to pieces by dogs, set afire to illuminate Nero’s ghastly circuses. Imprisonment, torture, and execution were common measures used by the Caesars in their attempts to bring Christianity to heel. Early Christians, therefore, had to respond to the tyranny and oppression of totalitarian rulers.

These Christians engaged in active resistance and struggle against what they saw as evil. When Rome passed decrees that violated Christian conscience, church members responded with protest and noncooperation. Cecil John Cadoux writes in his book *The Early Church and the World*: “One Christian tore down the first edict of persecution posted up by Diocletianus; another fearlessly seized the governor’s hand as he was in the act of sacrificing and exhorted him to abandon his error; another strode forward in open court and rebuked the judge for his ruthless sentences. A Christian woman, dragged to the altar and commanded to sacrifice upon it, kicked it over.”

Though early Christian leaders would be considered pacifists, they were far from passive in their response to persecution. They poured forth a torrent of protest, defiance, and censure against the persecutors and their decrees. But unlike those who



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choose a military response to oppression, they acted without violence and with a willingness to endure suffering for their faith. St. Chrysostom, a church leader of the fourth century, summarized the balance between resistance and nonviolent suffering when he said: “What, then, ought we not to resist an evil? Indeed we ought; but not by retaliation. Christ hath commanded us to give up ourselves to suffering wrongfully, for thus we shall prevail over evil. For one fire is not quenched by another fire, but fire by water.”

The early Christians did not simply refuse to kill their enemies. As Justinus said, “We pray for our enemies and try to persuade those who hate us unjustly.” And as St. Cyprian said to his persecutors, “It is not lawful for us to hate, and so we please God more when we render no requital for injury.... We repay your hatred with kindness.”

This total commitment to the way of Christ, combined with the gospel message, had enormous power. Christianity began as the faith of a tiny minority whose founder was executed by a repressive state. Yet in time it not only overcame its persecutors but also won the professed allegiance of much of the empire’s population.

As with the early church, our commitment to justice should make us speak and act clearly against tyranny’s injustices. But our commitment to the love of Christ invites us to find concrete ways to love our enemies and to reach them with the powerful, saving message of the gospel.

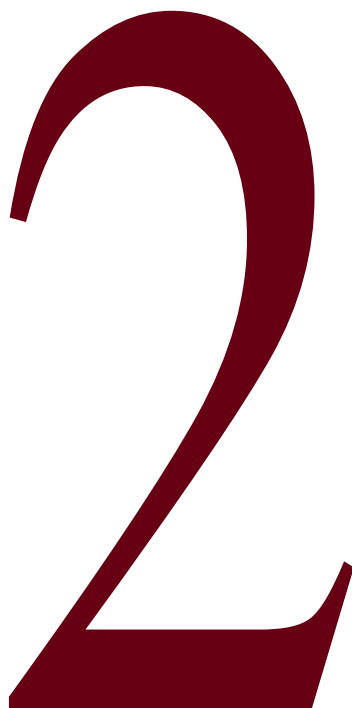
THROUGHOUT HISTORY CAN be found many cases of groups—and even several instances of whole nations—that confronted and overcame ruthless tyranny by non-violent means similar to those of the early church. Christians often played a key role in the resistance. One of the most interesting cases is Hungary’s battle against Austrian rule in the mid-1800s. After crushing a Hungarian military uprising in 1849, Austria put Hungary under martial law, divided it into military districts, suppressed its parliament, and repealed its constitution. Militarily defeated, Hungary seemed to have no alternative but to submit to foreign rule.

Both political and religious leaders, however, united in a non-military strategy of absolute resistance. Hungarian citizens refused to recognize Austrian rule. They treated Austrian officials as “illegal persons.” They would not follow Austrian decrees, and instead continued to abide by their own constitution and laws. Ferencz Deak, a Hungarian jurist and leader of the resistance, said: “We can hold our own against armed force. If suffering be necessary, suffer with dignity.”

The Protestant church spearheaded the resistance. When Austrians tried to prevent church councils from meeting, the councils met in full force. When the Austrians demanded that a decree be read from every pulpit, every minister refused. Many were arrested as a result. Police broke up church meetings only to find that huge crowds would gather wherever a church leader spoke in defiance of Austrian rule. To show solidarity with arrested church leaders, students dressed in black held silent demonstrations. Those ministers not arrested carried on with church affairs as if Austrian decrees did not exist.

Austria finally was forced to reopen the Hungarian parliament and restore its constitution. Hungary won complete internal independence and equal partnership with Austria and prevented all of Austria’s attempts to destroy the autonomy of its churches.

It is often asked whether such nonviolent tactics would work against the brutal and demonic policies of one such as Adolf Hitler. Whether something “works,” of course, is not the basic criterion of Christian action. A Christian’s first concern must be to be obedient to the Lord, even if this leads to suffering, death, and apparent failure. However, an assertive nonviolent stance was often effective even in the face of



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schemes as satanic as Hitler's.

In Bulgaria in the early 1940s, for example, Bishop Kiril told authorities that if they attempted to deport Bulgarian Jews to concentration camps, he would lead a campaign of civil disobedience, including personally lying down on the railroad tracks in front of the deportation trains.

Thousands of Jews and non-Jews resisted all collaboration with Nazi decrees. They marched in mass street demonstrations and sent floods of letters and telegrams to authorities protesting all anti-Jewish measures. Bulgarian clergy hid Jews and accepted large numbers of Jewish "converts," making clear that this was a trick to escape the Nazis, and that they would not consider these vows binding. These and other non-military measures saved all of Bulgaria's Jewish citizens from the Nazi death camps.

Similar nonviolent resistance in Norway prevented Vidkun Quisling, Hitler's representative, from imposing a fascist "corporative state" on the country. The Norwegian Evangelical Church, a state church that embraced 97 percent of the population, was overwhelmingly committed to the resistance to fascism. Its bishops published a declaration saying: "As the time came for Luther, so it has come for us to follow our convictions and to uphold the righteousness of the Church as opposed to the injustice of the State.... God himself stands opposed to tyranny through the power of His Word and His Spirit. Woe to us if we here do not obey God rather than [humans]."

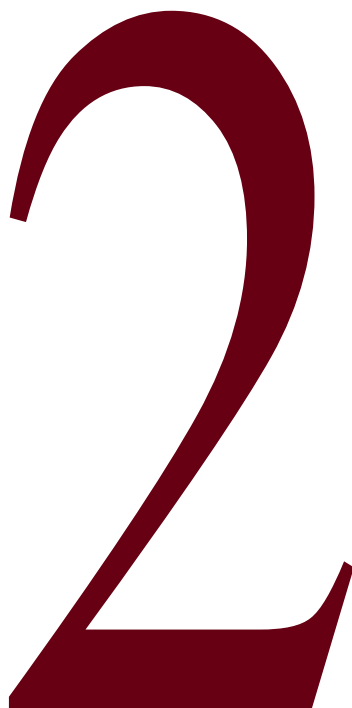
When Roman Catholic Bishop Mangers issued a supporting statement, he was summoned to Gestapo headquarters, threatened, and ordered to withdraw his signature. "You can take my head, but not my signature," was his firm reply. Norwegians did not give in, even when resisters were imprisoned, tortured, and sent to death camps.

In the face of this staunch resistance from almost every sector of Norwegian society, Hitler himself finally ordered Quisling to give up the whole plan for a corporative state.

Although always a minority movement, similar nonviolent resistance to Hitler took place in many parts of Europe, with Christians often being key actors. Danes, led by their deeply Christian king, saved 93 percent of their Jewish population in a dramatic nonviolent rescue action. Adolf Eichmann, head of the Nazi office for extermination of Jews, admitted that "the action against the Jews of Denmark has been a failure." Finland saved all but four of its Jewish citizens from the Nazi death camps. Finland's foreign minister told Heinrich Himmler, chief of Hitler's dreaded SS security police: "Finland is a decent nation. We would rather perish together with the Jews. We will not surrender the Jews."

In the Netherlands, clergy issued strong pastoral letters against the Nazis. Citizens gathered in large protest demonstrations and went on strikes. In France, Pastor Andre Trocme, a strong pacifist, made his whole town of Le Chambon a center for hiding Jews and smuggling them to Switzerland. Students at Trocme's school handed a fascist official a letter saying: "We have learned that in Paris Jews are herded into the stadium and then deported. After that, all trace of them is lost. This, in our Christian eyes, is unbearable. Even though such may be the law in northern France, we will not obey it if applied here in southern France. No matter what the government does, we will hide Jews."

Most non-Jews in Europe failed to speak or act against Hitler's genocide. Those who did resist paid a heavy price in imprisonment, torture, and death. Yet their actions saved tens of thousands of Jewish lives. They did not submit to Nazi rule, yet they fought nonviolently. They refute the notion that only military means are effective in defending people and their values against the very worst form of outside tyranny.



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During World War II, 40 million people died on battlefields using military weapons against Nazism. What if 40 million people had been willing to give their lives in a nonviolent struggle, using the defiant but non-military methods of a Bishop Kiril?

A LITERATURE OF nonviolent resistance to tyranny is growing that catalogs and analyzes non-military campaigns in many parts of the world and in many periods of history. These include Germany's non-military resistance to invasion by France and Belgium in 1923, successful Latin American campaigns to overthrow dictatorships by nonviolent means, and the Indian independence movement against British occupation, led by Mohandas Gandhi.

These historical examples point to a power to resist evil and oppression that does not rely on the ability to kill and injure. They suggest that it may be possible to defend cherished values in a way consistent with both the prophets' call to justice and Christ's call to love our enemies.

Today millions of newly involved peace advocates are asking: How can we get rid of nuclear weapons while defending precious values against tyranny's onslaught? How can we disarm militarily, but also stand up against the evil, injustice, and oppression that an invading totalitarian power would bring?

Our answer might be: Yes, we must resist tyranny, but only with the means taught by Jesus and exemplified in his life, death, and resurrection. Yes, we must stand up against evil and oppression, but with the self-sacrifice of a Bishop Kiril, who was willing to lay down on the railroad tracks to prevent Nazi deportation of Jews, and with the love for enemies of St. Cyprian, who said that because we are Christians it is not lawful for us to hate.

Those who are attracted to this approach can begin to work for it concretely. We can talk to people about it. We can encourage research into the largely neglected history of nonviolent resistance. We can form groups that use nonviolent means to attack existing social injustices and participate in nonviolent demonstrations to oppose specific military programs (such as the Trident submarine and the MX missile), while educating the public about an alternative means of defending precious values.

If a nonviolent approach to aggression were ever adopted on a large scale, its participants would certainly experience suffering and sacrifice. But such are also the requirements of military means, as any battlefield will attest. And "defense" through nuclear weapons has the potential to make us mass murderers, extinguishers of all life, and ravagers of God's precious creation.

Perhaps the main question for Christians looking at any system of defense is not, will it work with 100 percent certainty? The questions are rather: Does it offer a realistic possibility of success? And, if defeat comes, can it be a "defeat" such as the one Jesus suffered on the cross?

Defense through nuclear weapons cannot give an affirmative answer. Defense through assertive nonviolent resistance can. And nonviolent resistance knows that even defeat, if it is the defeat of the cross, is the dynamic out of which resurrection comes. ■

Richard Taylor and Ronald Sider are the co-authors of Nuclear Holocaust and Christian Hope (InterVarsity Press, 1982). This article appeared in the April 1983 issue of Sojourners magazine.

