Is Nonviolence Naive?  ...and other questions about Jesus’ most controversial teachings.

ONVIOLENCE* EVOKES IMAGES of well-known protests—Gandhi’s Salt March, Martin Luther King Jr.’s March on Washington—and conveniently flimsy stereotypes: anarchist hippies, utopian peaceniks, futile protesters. The reality is more complex.

Christian nonviolence adds the further complexity of a shockingly irregular king who was enthroned on a Roman cross. If secular nonviolence seems naive, Christian nonviolence is downright scandalous.

What counts as violence?

Violence is any action that undermines the dignity of another human being, whether direct, structural, or institutional. This can be emotional, psychological, spiritual, or physical abuse; actions that dehumanize the Other; forms of injustice, oppression, or marginalization; and war, genocide, mob violence, and armed insurrection. But violence is not the same as conflict. Conflict provides the space to air grievances and expose injustice; nonviolence entails ending conflict by eroding its causes without succumbing to the allure of violence. Nonviolence requires “the willingness to face conflict head on, to resolve it, and to make it a link in the chain of a new process,” explained Pope Francis.

Does nonviolence mean passive withdrawal from conflict?

Practitioners of nonviolence do not withdraw from conflict; they face it with courage and creativity. A call to alleviate injustice propels practitioners of nonviolence from the sidelines to active solidarity with and participation in the struggles for human dignity. This intentional involvement provides practitioners front-row engagement with injustice, oppression, and exploitation that undercuts any naïveté about the challenges our world faces.
Is it okay to punch a neo-Nazi?

NEO-NAZIS AND WHITE SUPREMACISTS are marching again, Countercultural responses are surprising and disrupting. Where do Christians stand? In April, Sojourners senior associate editor Rose Marie Berger launched this question on social media: Is it okay for a Christian to punch a Nazi? A lively conversation followed, eventually generating nearly 100 replies—and about as many different understandings (and misunderstandings) of Christian nonviolence. Excerpts from the conversation below are edited and used with permission. —The Editors

ROSE: Is it okay for a Christian to punch a Nazi? Discuss.

MAUREEN: Last time I checked it is not okay to punch anyone, no matter who you are. Right?

NATE: Yes. Pacifism doesn’t work against genocide. You have to have an opponent who can feel shame. Nazis call for the extirpation of our people and have proven they are willing to try and carry out. I’m ready when they come.

ROSE: Is pacifism the same as organized unarmed resistance?

NATE: In my head it has the same results against Nazis. Nazis are often effective ways to disorient the recipients of our violence directed at them? Did they not march to their deaths singing of those engaged in both may be similar, but motivations differ—whether one’s actions between enemy factions to encourage human-

CHUCK: And therefore? For the most part, the story of the cross is weakness and foolishness to secular society, but is the very power of God made manifest.

JASPER: My gut reaction is that Christian pacifism is relatively unconcerned with earthly outcomes. It’s a personal decision to par- ticipate in the suffering of Christ regardless of how effective that decision is against injustice, because to do so is ultimately to join in a greater sort of victory. Resisting the evil of violence is more important than resisting the evil about the world. Organized unarmed resistance takes its particular form because it believes it will be effective against injustice. Fidelity to Jesus’ love command and the biblical precedent of social justice is of primary impor-
tance, not necessarily compassion or suffering-with. The actions of those engaged in both may be similar, but motivations differ— not all nonviolent resisters are necessarily pacifists.

THEODOSIUS: So how did the early Christian act about the vio-

JAMES: Well, that argument has no force in secular society.

MAU: You need to look at what the gospel asks, and what war does. Dorothy Day observed: “The gospel asks that we feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome the homeless, visit the prisoner, and perform works of mercy. War does all the opposite. It makes my neighbor hungry, thirsty, homeless, a prisoner, and sick. The gospel asks us to take up our cross. War asks us to lay the cross of suffering on others.” Christian nonviolence relies on the promises of a God who under-

CHUCK: They were not. But without more context, the original ques-
tion is nigh impossible to answer. I generally think of it like this: Striking another is always sinful, but in some cases it might be the least sinful thing to do. But I’m thinking that we must remind our-

DEBBIE: In self-defense or defense of another? Yes!
Sojourners

interrupts them in the pursuit of those goals, that doesn’t mean they violence. It is violence with quantifiable goals. If punching a Nazi we punch a Nazi, then they win. Their gospel is violence, and when punched by someone else (I’m thinking of Charlottesville). But if

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get upset if some Nazi gets clocked. That’s not the sort of violence think there are probably better tactics. In terms of morality, I don’t

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THEODORSUS: No. You stand in the way and take what is being directed at the other person.

JOEY: Considering it from a position of nonviolence, I don’t even think it’s fair to call such acts “violence” when you consider the vast scope of violence of the dominant systems of oppression. Punching a Nazi does extremely little harm to that cause compared to the harm done by the ideologues they espouse. Therefore, even calling those acts “violence” is spitting in the face of people oppressed by white supremacy and patriarchy.

MARC: That’s just wrong, because the definition of the term is lost in the application. You can argue for punching Nazis, but not as nonviolence. It makes no sense. Nonviolence is about the means as ends, by definition.

JACKIE: Are you punching them while they are in the act of doing something awful? Or simply because they are a Nazi? I think that matters.

RYAN: If your right fist causes you to sin, cut it off. Then throw it at the Nazi. Then give them a left hook.

MARC: I’m personally more concerned with whether or not it is help-

ful to punch a Nazi at this point, not whether or not it is right or okay. I think the assumption that a Nazi-punch is effective or productive needs to be interrogated. Often it seems like a machismo release rather than tactically valuable, and the conversation gets stuck on the morality of violence vs. nonviolence rather than on tactical con-

siderations. Personally, I don’t think it is usually all that helpful. I think there are probably better tactics. In terms of morality, I don’t get upset if some Nazi gets clocked. That’s not the sort of violence that worries me. At the same time, I can’t imagine personally punch-

ing Nazis in any way that actually benefits my development as a whole person.

MARCIA: It’s okay to restrain them if they are punching some-

one else, to blockade them if they are intent on evil, to protect them when they rally, and to try for their conversion at all times. It is even okay to heal them and bind their wounds when they are punched by someone else (I’m thinking of Charlotteville). But when we punch a Nazi, then they win. Their gospel is violence, and when we embrace their method, then we abandon the nonviolent gospel of Jesus Christ, who tells us to love not just our neighbor but our enemies as well. Or, as Dorothy Day put it, “Love is the only solution.”

KORLA: So yes, their gospel is violence. But it is not an abstract violence. It is violence with quantifiable goals. If punching a Nazi interrupts them in the pursuit of those goals, that doesn’t mean they win.

wisdom rather than impulsiveness, maturity rather than bravado, courage rather than fear. Consider the OTPer (“resistance”) Movement in Serbia, that used street theater and other nonviolent tactics to over-

spread pamphlets and occupied a government building to pressure the Salvadoran government to release its political prisoners. Or CoMadres, the commis-
tee of mothers and relatives of those incarcerated during El Salvador’s civil war in 2000. Or the Catholic bishops in South Sudan who invited armed factions, opposition leaders, and government agents to dialogue in a neutral environment. Or CoMadres, the commit-
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CHRISTIAN NON-VIOLENCE IS HARD: THAT’S WHY WE NEED PRACTICE.

Jesus refused to confront evil in the world using evil methods.

Although our bodies seem to have an unavoidable physiological response to violence—children learn to fight, adults respond/react to threat in physiological ways—Christian nonviolence argues that the way we fight evil is just as important as the action itself.

What about when limited use of violence could save lives?

“War is impatience,” wrote theologian Stanley Hauerwas. “It’s too quick. Violence cannot be a strategy in quick solutions that produce unstable results, Christian nonviolence takes a long-term approach to the transformation of violent conflict. The so-called ‘collateral damage’ of military munitions—the unintended victims—are the same peo-

ple with whom practitioners of nonviolence engage to build peace and seek reconciliation. Whereas military intervention leaves in place for humaniza-
tion, Christian nonviolence agrees with the one who preached that none of God’s creation is beyond the reach of God’s love for us. Instead of nonviolence as a tool, Jesus exemplified creative nonviolent conflict resolution (as he did when he prevented the stoning of the adulteress in John 8:1-11) and forgiveness (as he did toward his own kill-
ers as he hung on the cross in Luke 23:34) en route to conquering through his resurrection that which vio-

lence produces, death.

Conflict transformation recognizes that the type of cycle we want depends on the type of fuel we use to prop-
et. Even if violence seems to “work”—that is, stop more violence with less violence, or prevent a larger body count with a smaller body count—this is always temporary. Violence cannot disrupt a cycle of violence. Instead, we aim to replace the cycle of violence with a cycle of nonviolence. Acting nonviolently dis-

rupts the cycle of violence. “Despite recent scholarship demonstrating the greater effectiveness of nonviolent

resistance,” wrote political scientist Molly Wallace, “when faced with a brutal or blatantly unjust oppo-
nent, many people are inclined to believe that only violence will bring about needed change or be able to protect themselves or their community.” Antia group who do not rule out engaging in violent confronta-
tions to fight fascism, are a contemporary example of this logic in action. In a neutrality. Not only does the presence of a “violent flank” in a nonviolent movement “provide necessary or further justification for government security forces to fire on protesters,” explained Wallace, but it further enforces the energy of “non-state groups, including neo-Nazis and white supremacists, mobilizing more recruits and ultimately increasing the vulnerability of anti-racist and anti-fascist activists and the marginalized and targeted communities whom they wish to defend.” Nonviolence not only removes opponents’ incentive, it initiates a new cycle of love, hope, compassion, selfless-

ness, mercy, empathy, and mutual altruism that renders violence incomprehensible and unattractive.

If Christian nonviolence leads to suffering, what hope can it give to those who are already suffering?

By choosing to accept suffering (1 Peter 2:21) rather than multiply the suffering of others, we follow the example of Jesus and refuse to engage in violence in order to match our capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering,” said Martin Luther King Jr. “We will meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will and we still will forgive.” Jesus refused to use evil methods to confront evil in the world. He had the option of calling on 12 legions of angels or allowing Peter to use a sword. Instead, Jesus exemplified nonviolent conflict resolution— the exclusivist “us vs. them” nar-

rative on which it depended. Jesus also rejected the idea of a militant Messiah who would crush the brutal oppression of the Roman Empire. Instead of using violence to fight evil, Jesus encour-

aged creative nonviolent conflict resolution (as he did when he prevented the stoning of the adulteress in John 8:1-11) and forgiveness (as he did toward his own kill-
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lence produces, death.

Instead of violence, we should recognize that the way we fight evil is just as important as the action itself. Instead of nonviolence as a tool, Jesus exemplified creative nonviolent conflict resolution (as he did when he prevented the stoning of the adulteress in John 8:1-11) and forgiveness (as he did toward his own killers as he hung on the cross in Luke 23:34) en route to conquering through his resurrection that which violence produces, death.

But we don’t mean we seek out suffering as a goal. Suffering is the by-product of a fallen, oppressive, violent world, when we choose to accept suffering, we participate in a form of dramatized truth-telling that

RANDALL: In self-defense, it is sometimes necessary to be proactive before a threat grows to the capacity to do you, your family, your community, or your nation harm. Therefore, although I am not a big fan of the antifa movement, I must admit that they have done a remarkable job at discouraging, bringing attention to, and making fools of Nazis and their rallies.

If our government fails to take the steps necessary to stop Nazi terrorism in the United States, fails to protect victims and targets of fascist “attacks,” the least people can do is punch them in the face and expose them as the racist cowards they are. However, actions must be well calculated to avoid escalation, and most of the emphasis needs to be on massive nonviolent actions, including the strategy of identifying and exposing Nazis and other members of racist, nationalist militias.

NATE: Nazis. The people who tried to exterminate my people. Nazis should be punched. I’m not for violence in many other cir-
cumstances. But history has taught violence is the only defense against specifically Nazis.

THEODORSUS: God creates all of us as true icons of Christ. That means that the person you would strike out at is in fact Christ him-

self. Now, stop your ego and discover the real truth of how others faced and fought the Nazis. Not by guns, but rather by prayer. And by acting as Christ.

SUSAN: I am increasingly compelled to consider how much my non-

violence values are a luxury of my white privilege.

DIANE: No. Would Jesus punch a Nazi? There are other ways to fight evil. Self-defense would allow a person to punch another, but that doesn’t really have anything to do with who the two people are.

KATE: I taught a class on just war theory and pacifism today and am finding this to be a fascinating thread. One interesting question is about the role of nonviolence in solidarity. Measuring U.S. (civilian) solidarity with the Sandinistas, for example, against solidarity with the second intifada. When, where, and why is nonviolence a prereq-

uire for solidarity, and where, when, and why is it not?

BILL: Was World War II a “just war”? Does nonviolent resistance only work against the “civilized” British or Americans, but not against Nazis? It’s only our failure to imagine and practice new nonviolent tactics in such situations that makes this question serious.

DAVID: It brings to mind the old question, “What would Jesus do?” Would Jesus punch a Nazi? If he accepted being tortured and exe-
cuted without violent resistance, what would compel him to react differently to 20th and 21st century oppressors?

PHIL: The correct question is, “Is it okay for a Christian to do nothing toward a Nazi?” This is an astronomically more important question.
exposes violence—much like the cross. Though we may choose to accept suffering in the interim, nonviolence is ultimately about undermining violence, relieving us of our own suffering that violence of others engenders.

This also means we cannot prescribe this suffering for others. Participation in nonviolent acceptance of suffering is a personal and often difficult choice that isn’t applicable in all circumstances, least of all in situations of domestic and sexual abuse that disproportionately affect women, even more so women of color.

“We must measure Christian ethics by the extent to which its rhetoric on violence is applicable to the circumstances of women’s lives,” wrote Christian ethicist Traci West. “This is the proper test of the viability and adequacy of its moral prescriptions.” West reframed nonviolent acceptance of suffering not as a masochistic approval of abuse but as a form of resistance against the violence that engenders this suffering. There is an important difference between the suffering of Christ on the cross and suffering of abuse. The former was a voluntary means of exposing collective humanity’s violence of such intensity that it actually killed God (John 10:18); the latter is involuntary, trapping the victim in a private cycle that enables injustice by keeping it hidden in a cloak of humiliation and shame. This is not nonviolence. Nonviolence is, according to West, part of “an ethic of resisting violence against women” through various means that subvert systems of dominance—especially publicly as a way to de-normalize this abuse and offer solidarity and courage to those facing abuse.

This all sounds... hard.

Christian nonviolence is hard, that’s why we need practice. We cultivate nonviolence not as a strategy to dust off in urgent circumstances or international crises, but as a way of life. Nonviolence is an antidote to the violence that infects our consciousness and souls. We need to practice it in everyday decisions, including interior and interpersonal struggles, our interactions with the environment, and our personal economic choices.

In all these actions, we try to recognize the image of God—the one who gives life and is life—in all human beings, whether we perceive them to be deserving of this or not. The word “deserve” does not belong in the vocabulary of a practitioner of nonviolence. Nonviolence undercuts the “us vs. them” dichotomy and refuses to distinguish between the culpable and the innocent. There are only those who are in need of more transformation, restoration, and healing than are others.

Rather than nonviolence and not death, the positive expression of Christian nonviolence is the perception of life that bubbles up among the many expressions of violence in our world so that death is eventually overwhelmed. And this sums up the entire Christian vocation: participating in life as a way to conquer death.

This is Christian nonviolence.

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Charlotteville, the Summer After

THERE IS NOTHING new under the sun, as the author of Ecclesiastes reminds us. In this, theologian Elsa Tamez said, we can “find solidarity in our discontent.”

I visited Charlotteville in May, nearly a year after the summer of hate.” I heard from young Christians who had been on the frontlines at Robert E. Lee Park (now called Emancipation Park). I listened, commenting and witnessing to the ongoing, traumatizing effects of last summer’s “Fascist lollapalooza,” as one University of Virginia professor put it.

Still reckoning with the memory of Aug. 12, one leader in his 20s shared how he had tried to be a nonviolent defender amid multiple “armed actors,” including the Ku Klux Klan, neo-Nazis, anti-fascists, and police. By the end of that day, state troopers were dead, one woman was murdered, dozens were injured, and the whole community was emotionally, spiritually wounded.

In small towns such as Charlotteville and more recently Coweta County, Ga., fascists are organizing cadres of white supremacists, neo-Confederates, neo-Nazis, and European identity movements. They are terrorizing small towns in America, especially those with liberal arts colleges. They are intentionally setting up young people in ideological cage fights and goading them to kill each other.

A CENTRAL PROBLEM for the writer of Ecclesiastes is that “nothing new” one remembers the former generations, and even those yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow them” (1:11). There is a loss of historical memory. “Collective amnesia means the death of a people,” wrote Tamez.

But to remember requires storytellers who will carry the stories and remember the details. At this year’s Freedom and Liberation Day gathering in Charlotteville, the community gathered to mark the day 153 years ago when Union troops marched into the city and liberated more than half the population.

In remarks at the event, Jalane Schmidt, who teaches religious studies at the University of Virginia, provided context for the Lee and Stonewall Jackson statues that were the frontlines last summer. Neither of those Confederate generals ever came to Charlotteville, except Stonewall Jackson, who came through in a coffin on the way to his burial in Lexington.” Schmidt said. “Let’s remember the legend and the decades of Lost Cause [pro-Confederate] textbooks... have manufactured memories that have quashed our knowledge of our own local history.” Legend focuses on Jackson as an unstoppable war hero. History brings us back to the fact that the brilliant military tactician for a decapacible cause was brought down by friendly fire, then succumbed to pneumonia a week later.

Ecclesiastes reminds us that everything has a season. We’re learning the stories of the founding circuit-riding pastor and the first parishioners who sat in its pews. Their worship banners are origami peace cranes and Black Lives Matter posters. Outside, they’ve planted a garden.

In Charlotteville, there is a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to plant and a time to uproot.

Resist wisely in the face of absurdity.”

Elsa Tamez

By Rose Marie Berger, a Sojourner senior associate editor, is a Catholic peace activist and poet.