

Introduction

The intent of this paper is to survey the attitudes of the early (pre-Constantinian) church towards violence, military service, and martyrdom and bring them into dialogue with contemporary US-American evangelical views and practices. I will examine this both in terms of the more passive and prohibitive critiques of culture and the more “active” affirmation of the merits of martyrdom. In doing so, I hope to show that the church had not only the *negative/passive* witness of refusing to engage in violent acts, but also the *positive/active* witness of being willing to accept and even embrace violence done to themselves – in a way that is less pathological than it sounds – in imitation of their cruciform king.

As a long-time believer in nonviolence, I must admit that I was surprised to see the overwhelming evidence in favor of this position in the early church. Of course, I knew that there has always been precedent for this belief throughout history, all the way back to the first century. That much, at least, I had learned from John Howard Yoder.¹ What surprised me was the wealth of quotes from patristics that spoke in no uncertain terms on the topic. My hope is that by doing this research and sharing it with those who are interested I might further reinforce and open opportunities to share my own Anabaptist inclinations with those in my generation who are burnt out, tired, and disillusioned with *status quo* evangelicalism *ad nauseam*. I remain an evangelical, despite my qualms with the stereotypes, because they are my people and I love them dearly – to misquote Luther, “Here I stand, and I can do no other.” But I do believe we have much to learn from the early church. For example, Jonathan Gorry notes that church fathers such as Tertullian, Origen, and Lactantius, who will each be featured in this paper, called for “pacifying forms of

¹ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

social engagement.”² Given the divisive and polarized political unrest among evangelicals today, such responses “can serve as useful antecedents for the regeneration of 21st century Christian critiques of state sovereignty.”³ My prayer is that this paper shed a little light on those antecedents, thus lending credence to modern iterations of Christian nonviolence by demonstrating how in touch they are with the roots of the faith.

I have done my best to avoid irresponsible eisegesis in this paper. However, all history is interpreted, a truth which is magnified exponentially when attempting to do theological work. When the time comes for debate, all theologians “appeal to some ‘myth of Christian origins’ for a particular polemical purpose.”⁴ These “myths” are simply the result of the natural process of interpreting and ideologizing a historical narrative – whether it be the founding fathers, the Protestant Reformers, the church in the book of Acts, or some combination of these and others. With that in mind, I find Alexander Sider’s warning both insightful and timely, “History as theology, then, like most theological endeavors, is a risky enterprise, liable to produce self-deception, parochialism, and a false sense of innocence unless it is engaged carefully.”⁵ I have tried to remain cautious of these pitfalls in my research here; and although my professor thinks I should have cut this paragraph completely, I will freely confess that I am not a professional historian. Still, I have done my best to offer a faithful analysis of the evidence.

The Early Church on Violence

² Jonathan Gorry, “Swords into Ploughshares?: Ante-Nicene Christianity and the Ethics of Political Violence,” *Religion Compass* 5, no. 12 (December 2011): 769, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8171.2011.00324.x>.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ J Alexander Sider, “Constantine and Myths of the Fall of the Church: An Anabaptist View,” *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 85, no. 4 (October 2011): 639.

⁵ Sider, 632.

The early church fathers had a remarkably unified stance on the inappropriateness of engaging in violence as a disciple of Christ. It is difficult to find any disagreement here; one gets the impression that it was so painfully obvious and commonly accepted that there was little need to present a thorough case for it. In fact, the nonviolence of Christians was frequently appealed to as part of other cases being made – namely, the early apologies (that is, treatises defending Christians character, practices, and faith to the pagan world) by Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and others.⁶ In most cases, verbiage from the Sermon on the Mount – such as cheek-turning, going the extra mile, and nonresistance – is used to describe and explain this remarkable phenomenon. A prime example, though only one of many, comes from Athenagoras, an apologist of the early second century, who uses language directly from Matthew 5:39-40 to describe this reality,

For we have learned, not only not to return blow for blow, nor to go to law with those who plunder and rob us, but to those who smite us on one side of the face to offer the other side also, and to those who take away our coat to give likewise our cloak.

[Christians are] those, to whom it even is not lawful, when they are struck, not to offer themselves for more blows, nor when defamed not to bless: for it is not enough to be just (and justice is to return like for like), but it is incumbent on us to be good and patient of evil.⁷

Words like this may come as a slap in the face – to which some of us may be disinclined to turn the other cheek! – to those for whom gun ownership, capital punishment, and military spending are entirely congruous with their faith. Not very long ago, one of the most recognizable representatives of the “religious right” stood in a massive auditorium filled with students during a chapel service at the largest private university in the nation (sadly my own *alma mater*) and implored them to take advantage of the school’s free gun safety course and obtain their

⁶ See for example Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 14 and 39; Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 110; Tertullian, *Apologeticus* 37.

⁷ Athenagoras, *Legatio pro Christianis* 1.3 and 34.3.

concealed carry permits to “teach them [shooters or terrorists] a lesson” and “end those Muslims before they walked in.”⁸ All of this could scarcely find a starker contrast than what is expressed in these words of Lactantius, arguably the first systematic theologian in history, around the dawn of the fourth century,

When God forbids us to kill, He not only prohibits us from open violence, which is not even allowed by the public laws, but He warns us against the commission of those things that are esteemed lawful among men. Thus it will be neither law-full for a just man to engage in warfare, since his warfare is justice itself, nor to accuse any one of a capital charge, because it makes no difference whether you put a man to death by word, or rather by the sword, since it is the act of putting to death itself which is prohibited. Therefore, with regard to this precept of God, there ought to be no exception at all; but that it is always unlawful to put to death a man.⁹

Both demographics, the early church and its contemporary evangelical iteration, have claimed to place the highest priority on the authority of Scripture and the centrality of Jesus. The former adhered – or at least appealed – to a strict and thoroughgoing application of the Sermon; yet the latter, for all their talk of literal interpretations, seems quite comfortable spiritualizing cheek-turning, coat-giving, cross-bearing, and second-miling, not unlike the existentialists they so often criticize. Both agree that we live within a new covenant, yet while evangelicals frequently refer to Old Testament narratives such as the Israelite conquest to defend their positions, Tertullian believed that the new law given in Christ clearly supersedes the old – again appealing to the Sermon on the Mount – in this area.¹⁰ “For him,” Stephen Gero says, “the

⁸ Sarah Pulliam Bailey, “Jerry Falwell Jr.: ‘If More Good People Had Concealed-Carry Permits, Then We Could End Those’ Islamist Terrorists,” *Washington Post*, December 5, 2015, sec. Acts of Faith, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/12/05/liberty-university-president-if-more-good-people-had-concealed-guns-we-could-end-those-muslims/>.

⁹ Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, 6.20.

¹⁰ Tertullian, *Adversus Iudaeos* 10.

bellicosity of the old dispensation is no longer normative.”¹¹ Rather, what was normative were the words of Christ and his response to violence, both against him and in an effort to protect him, such as in the garden of Gethsemane the night before Jesus’ crucifixion. Although Peter took up his sidearm to protect his rabbi, Jesus sharply rebuked him (Mt 26:52, Jn 18:11) and demanded that he put the sword away. If there were ever a case to be made for concealed carry to defend the innocent, Gethsemane would be it! And yet Tertullian posits, “In disarming Peter, [the Lord] disarmed every soldier.”¹²

The Early Church on Military Service

Indeed, it was not only violence in the private sector that was forbidden, but also all bloodshed in service of the Roman army, the first-century equivalent of the American military-industrial complex. Again, the contrast is stark. It took the early church fathers nearly three and a half centuries after Christ to even begin using language like making the “concession” that soldiers who have killed in battle “*only* abstain from communion for three years [emphasis added].”¹³ Yet it is not uncommon in the United States today for churches to fly flags, have Veteran’s Day services, and even apply Biblical language of sacrifice and laying down lives to lavishly praise current or retired soldiers within their congregations. I have seen all of these myself, and despite my love for the Body of Christ, the cognitive dissonance has been painful and sickening.

Given what we have already seen, the early Church’s opposition to military service should come as no surprise; and yet it frequently does to those whose faith has been cultivated

¹¹ Stephen Gero, “Miles Gloriosus: The Christian and Military Service According to Tertullian,” *Church History* 39, no. 3 (September 1970): 286.

¹² Tertullian, *de Idolatria* 19.3

¹³ Basil of Caesarea, *Epistle* 188.13.

and inculturated in the context of the US-American Empire. Justin Martyr, who in the mid-second century was one of the earliest apologists to address the issue, cites Isaiah's prophecy in which swords are beaten to plowshares and spears to pruning hooks (Isa 2:3) as being fulfilled in the Church.¹⁴ Rather than relegating this passage to the future and consummated Kingdom, the early Church saw it in the light of an inaugurated eschatology – though the term may be anachronistic, it captures the heart of what they were about: there is no king but Jesus, his Kingdom is (at least in one sense) at hand in his church, and he demands – and deserves – our unwavering allegiance. In the same place in his *Apology*, Justin demonstrates this conviction by paralleling commitment to Christ to that of service in the Roman legion, only as having infinitely higher merit. If Rome's many soldiers have taken oaths and are willing to sacrifice their lives, families, and homes in service, "it were verily ridiculous," says Justin, if Christians "should not endure all things in order to obtain what we desire from him who is able to grant it."¹⁵ Given the immediate context of Isaiah's swords-to-plowshares prophecy, this is no tacit nod of affirmation to military service. Rather, it is an example of military service being used as a foil for Christian discipleship.

For centuries, Christendom in various iterations has named pacifism as a fringe ideology worthy of disdain – at best – or even persecution at times, yet Alan Kreider writes confidently that when the debate regarding military service first appeared within the church, it was the *conservatives* who were "committed to Christ's inspired legislation, who ruled out all participation in the military," and the minority of *progressives* who advocated for the possibility

¹⁴ Justin Martyr, *1 Apology* 39 and *Dialogue with Trypho* 110.

¹⁵ Justin Martyr, *1 Apology* 39.

of Christian enlistment.¹⁶ The author of the *Apostolic Tradition*, traditionally thought to be Hippolytus but more likely a third-century compilation, states that military men must neither execute nor take oaths, that military governors must resign their posts or be rejected from the church, and, most dramatically, that “the catechumen or faithful who wants to become a soldier is to be rejected, for he has despised God.”¹⁷ It appears that for early Christians, the default question was “how could a Christian be a soldier?” and not “how could a Christian dodge the draft?”

As with any historical study, there is a risk of proof-texting the evidence and making overconfident and generalized statements. Patrick Barber offers the helpful reminder that “we *do* have enough evidence to argue that there was *not* a universally shared Christian opinion of military participation. However, the weight of evidence points toward a rejection [emphasis added].”¹⁸ Thus, although we cannot speak with certainty of a universal dogma (and even if we could, to do so would be anachronistic), nonviolence seems to be the *de facto* position of the early Church. In the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* entry for Πόλεμος (‘war’) one reads, “There is no evidence, nor does it anywhere appear, that a baptized Christian was prepared for military participation in a war or for military service generally.”¹⁹ We must avoid making a categorical statement based on an argument from silence, particularly given the lack of any centralized magisterium in the early Church; what we observe is that the voices we *can* hear

¹⁶ Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 118.

¹⁷ Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition* 16:9-11.

¹⁸ Patrick G Barber, “Christian Views of Military Participation Prior to the Reign of Constantine,” *Restoration Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (2011): 101.

¹⁹ Bauernfeind, “Πόλεμος,” TDNT, 6.515

seem to take the stance of nonviolence as a given rather than a disputable matter. We will turn now to just one of those voices.

Tertullian on Military Service and Martyrdom

Around the dawn of the third century, Tertullian, known as the father of Western theology, was the first to address the issue of military service thoroughly. Louis Swift says we might call him “the first articulate spokesman for pacifism in the Christian Church.”²⁰ His works are an interesting study because they are not, at first glance, entirely consistent. His earlier thoughts in *Apologeticus* defend Christians as being not miscreants but ethical and productive members of society. Though they have received criticism for not participating in the civic *cultus*, he elaborates on how they are indeed contributors to society: they share the marketplace, taverns, and other public arenas and, surprisingly, they even serve faithfully in the army!²¹ I confess that when I first came across that sentence while reading through Tertullian’s works, I wished I hadn’t found it at all. Had I found something to dismantle my whole thesis embedded in the writings of a man whom I thought was one of its clearest supporters? Similarly, in the aforementioned TDNT article on war, I was disappointed when I read the very next sentence, which clarifies that “the situation was different when a man who was already a serving soldier became a Christian. No one suggested to him that he should try to leave the service, just as no one suggested that a Christian slave should seek freedom from his pagan master.”²² What are we

²⁰ Louis J. Swift, *Early Fathers on War and Military Service* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1984), 38.

²¹ Tertullian, *Apologeticus* 42. Kreider postulates that Tertullian’s use of *militare* rather than the more violent *bellare* for “service” here may mean that Christian military service was maintained while refusing to fight or kill (Kreider, *op. cit.*, 97). This would be entirely plausible given the wide range of policing and peacekeeping activities of the Roman legions. Gero gives a more thorough exposition of this proposal (Gero, *op. cit.*, 292).

²² Bauernfeind, “Πόλεμος,” TDNT, 6.515

to do with this startling evidence? A good starting point is to examine the context of Tertullian's other writings.

In one of his later works, *de Corona*, Tertullian gives a comprehensive treatment of the issue and concludes that it is absolutely prohibited for Christians to serve in the military. Similarly, in the more explicitly named *de Idolatria* he is equally unequivocal about the issue.²³ He gives three reasons for the prohibition on military service: first, military oaths broke baptismal vows, for believers cannot serve two masters; second, to be a soldier was to take part in idolatry; third, taking the sword meant willingness to do violence, a direct violation of Christ's very clear commands.²⁴ Again, in disarming Peter, Christ disarmed all. However, it is a different case for those who are already soldiers when they convert. Following this, he cites the centurions in the Gospels who came to John the Baptist at the Jordan as well as those who were lauded by Jesus himself.²⁵ Yet even here Tertullian remains adamant that soldiers who convert and do not desert must refrain from violence and idolatrous cultic services, even if this results in their martyrdom.²⁶ In this case, Tertullian is consistent with what has already been made clear: there is no justification for followers of Christ to enlist in the military.

I propose that the more ambiguous statement in *Apologeticus* is easily explained in that the audience, unlike *de Corona*, was not Christian disciples looking for instruction but rather pagan leaders looking for excuses for persecution. In the former work, Tertullian is demonstrating that Christians are not violent or dangerous in an effort to prevent oppression. To read this as making a case to justify Christian military service seems irresponsible. For this

²³ Tertullian, *de Idolatria* 19.

²⁴ Tertullian, *de Corona* 11 and *de Idolatria* 19:3.

²⁵ Tertullian, *de Corona* 11.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

reason, I believe that Jonathan Gorry overstates the case when he claims, “The ‘early’ Tertullian thus tacitly condones soldiering and by implication legitimizes *realpolitik* and the coercive power of the state.”²⁷

It may be that Tertullian’s views developed from a more affirmative to a more prohibitive view of military service. Even if this were the case, I do not believe it dismantles my position in the way I feared when I first read the passage in *Apologeticus*. If there was change over time, the progression was in the direction of greater stringency rather than permissiveness. Because this parallels my own development of belief as I have sought to imitate Christ, I find it equally compelling. This possible progression of belief might also be linked to the historical events of the time. After a period of great civil unrest, the new emperor Septimius Severus started on the trajectory of increasing not only military honor, but incentivization and wages for soldiers. This policy was also followed by his successors, the Severans. In the approximately fifteen years between *Apologeticus* and the later works, “the pro-military policy of the Severi already had such great success that even baptized Christians were joining the army.”²⁸ Stephen Gero submits that this change in circumstances is linked to Tertullian’s more explicit nonviolence later in his life.

Perhaps Tertullian’s views did develop over time; perhaps he did indeed have fewer reservations about Christian military service earlier on. Yet from all the evidence, this would have been almost a non-issue; von Campenhausen writes, “For little enclaves of a fairly humble status in the peaceful interior of a well-ordered empire, where there was practically no

²⁷ Gorry, “Swords into Ploughshares?,” 766.

²⁸ Gero, “Miles Gloriosus,” 291.

conscription, it was easy to avoid anything to do with the army.”²⁹ Thus, perhaps his views were entirely consistent and only became more pointed when he was confronted with the emergence of a previously unthinkable possibility: members of his own flock enlisting in the army. If this is the case, “Tertullian is one of the earliest literary witnesses for this momentous development,”³⁰ and we must take his argument into account regardless of where we land on the issue in today’s world. For there are really only two views that might be taken here. The first is to align with Eusebius, renowned church historian, Constantinian apologist, and pioneer of Christendom, who first proposed the idea of two paths that Christians might choose. “The one is above nature,” that is, a life of celibacy, poverty, asceticism, and conveniently, nonviolence. This first path, “the perfect form of the Christian life,” is contrasted with the more realistic and accessible, “more humble, more human” path of marriage, childbearing, and again conveniently, service in government and military. These are given “a kind of secondary grade of piety,” such that even Eusebius, for all his equivocation, shows a firm belief in the superiority of the practices – including nonviolence – in the first path.³¹ In Eusebius we have the beginnings of a divide between clergy and laity that will include not only titles or roles but also ethics. In contrast, the other possible view is to stand with Tertullian, a man who, even in his early work, emphatically believed that “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.”³²

The Early Church and Martyrdom

Now it is evident that no one can terrify or subdue us who have believed in Jesus over all the world. For it is plain that, though beheaded, and crucified, and thrown to wild beasts, and chains, and fire, and all other kinds of torture, we do not give up our confession; but the more such things happen, the more do others and in larger numbers become faithful,

²⁹ Hans Von Campenhausen, *Tradition and Life in the Church* (HarperCollins Distribution Services, 1968), 161–62.

³⁰ Gero, “Miles Gloriosus,” 285.

³¹ Eusebius, *Proof of the Gospel* 1.8.

³² Tertullian, *Apologeticus* 50.

*and worshippers of God through the name of Jesus. For just as if one should cut away the fruit-bearing parts of a vine, it grows up again, and yields other branches flourishing and fruitful; even so the same thing happens with us. For the vine planted by God and Christ the Saviour is His people.*³³

From very early on, the Church presented a unified front on the merits of martyrdom. In fact, it is often given sacramental language. Origen,³⁴ Cyprian,³⁵ and even Tertullian³⁶ each and in various ways discuss martyrdom as a “second baptism.” Viewed as one of the highest callings of God, to be willingly embraced although not eagerly sought, martyrdom was *the* expression of a faithfully cruciform Christology as well as *the* greatest witness – need we be reminded that this is the literal meaning of the word? – to the power of Christ within his disciples. Although at times talk of martyrdom could veer off course into treating it as virtuous and desirable in itself in ways reminiscent of extreme asceticism, most viewed it as a faithful witness and, like Tertullian, would agree that it was for *edification*. Origen wrote, “Let us, then, lay our [lives] down, not shall I say for [Jesus, who laid his down for us], but for ourselves - *for those who shall be built up [edified] by our martyrdom.*”³⁷

This was the way of patience, *patientia*, of those living in the eschatological tension of expectation – the return of Christ the King to set all things right. Until that day, they would patiently endure all suffering, knowing that if there is no resurrection, we are of all people most to be pitied (1 Cor 15:19). Patience was a key virtue for the early church. This is noteworthy considering that it was not particularly praised in the pagan world; patience was seen as the quality of the powerless, the outcasts, those who had neither freedom nor power to do anything

³³ Justin Martyr, *Trypho* 110.

³⁴ Origen, *Commentary on Matthew* 16.6 and *Exhortation to Martyrdom* 30.

³⁵ Cyprian, *The Treatises of Cyprian* 11.

³⁶ Tertullian, *The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* 21 and *An Address to the Martyrs*.

³⁷ Origen, *An Exhortation to Martyrdom* 41.

but the *status quo*.³⁸ The Greek word here, *hupomone*, is a favorite among the early Church. It is perseverance as much as anything, “with which the Christian contends against the various hindrances, persecutions, and temptations that befall him in his conflict with the inward and outward world. . . . The man *hupomenei* [has patience/perseveres] who, under a great siege of trials, bears up and does not lose heart or courage.”³⁹

Patience was especially important for Tertullian; he was the first to write an entire treatise on it. He contrasts *patientia* with violence, “Now, nothing undertaken through impatience can be transacted without violence, and everything done with violence has either met with no success or has collapsed or has plunged to its own destruction.”⁴⁰ For him, violence is not only unsuccessful, it is self-destructive. The entropic nature of violence, which can never bring change, is contrasted with not only nonviolence, but *patientia/hupomone*.

But can patience bring change? Can acceptance of a non-violent martyr’s fate change the world? If we embrace the temptation to consequentialist ethics so prevalent in our post-Enlightenment world, then no, it cannot. There is no making sense of martyrdom from a utilitarian perspective. Perhaps that is the point Peter was trying to make to Jesus. Perhaps that is what motivated him to draw the sword that fateful night in Gethsemane. Surely the ends justified the means! But on both of those occasions he was sharply rebuked, and in the former he was even called an adversary, an accuser, a Satan. Jesus was casting a different vision than Peter had ever conceived of. It is in light of this vision that Justin Martyr could affirm that

³⁸ Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, 20.

³⁹ R. C. Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* (Baker Books, 2000), 140–41.

⁴⁰ Tertullian, *Patientia* 10.8

patience/perseverance really *does* bring change, “By our *hupomone* and meekness [Christians] will draw all men from shame and evil desires”⁴¹

Conclusion

In this short paper, I have provided a broad selection of materials to demonstrate that the attitude of the early (pre-Constantinian) church was consistently non-violent and opposed to military service. In addition, a more in-depth investigation of Tertullian’s extensive writings provided an opportunity to see his consistency – or development – as well as explore the complex issue of converts who were already serving as soldiers. Finally, a brief examination of early views of martyrdom showed the contrast between patience/perseverance/*hupomone* and violent resistance.

The ethics of the early church were Christological, and as such, they were cruciform. Their martyrology originated not from pragmatics, but from the *imitatio* Christi. Indeed, the imitation of Christ, first mentioned in our introductory paragraph, is a central concept for Christian nonviolence; from our Christology flows our discipleship. Nonviolence is not merely a Christian mandate found in the New Testament teachings. It flows from the cruciformity of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and it was sustained by their eschatology. The tension of the Kingdom of God as both already *and* not-yet made possible a vision of discipleship measured by neither efficiency nor effectiveness, but only faithfulness. This vision also informed (and was informed

⁴¹ Justin Martyr, *1 Apology* 16:3-4.

by) their soteriology – they were saved and called to be faithful to Christ, the Suffering Servant, the crucified savior, the lion of Judah, the lamb that was slain, the coming King. If Patrick Henry had been a church father, he might have said, “Give me liberty *and* give me death.” In other words, “Just give me Jesus.”

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