

0. Self-introduction

The topic of this impulse is not a purely academic one. For me it is even a very personal one. Therefore, I would like to introduce myself in a little more detail than is usually the case.

My father was born on August 1, 1917, the third anniversary of the beginning of the Great War, which was later called World War and still later World War I because there was or had been a second one in the meantime. Because his birthday fell at the beginning of the fourth year of the war, my father was given the middle name Wilhelm, after Kaiser Wilhelm II, who had brought us this war.

My father attended a humanistic grammar school, learned Greek and Hebrew and wanted to study theology after school. Nothing came of it, because after the Reich Labor Service he was drafted into the Wehrmacht, which he did not leave again until the end of the Second World War. After the war, as a former captain in the Wehrmacht, he was not allowed to study in the GDR and in the meantime he had to support a family.

I grew up in Lutherstadt Wittenberg and then refused military service with weapons in the GDR and served as a construction soldier in the National People's Army - the only, but still existing legal possibility in the GDR to refuse military service. As a construction soldier, I helped to build the Mukran ferry port on the Baltic Sea, which the Soviet Union wanted to use as an alternative supply line instead of Poland, which had become unsafe. I justified my refusal of military service objection with biblical arguments at that time (probably not at a very high level) and studied theology after my military service. As a theologian, I am in a sense a collateral damage of the First and Second World War. Theologically and politically, the church peace movement in the GDR had a strong influence on me. The church peace movement, with its primacy of nonviolence, was partly responsible for the fact that the peaceful revolution of 1989 was just that: peaceful. It is very difficult to shoot at people with candles in their hands.

1. the biblical peace testimony

Not all biblical texts are equally important. Martin Luther coined the beautiful phrase "Was Christum treibet" (The phrase "Was Christum treibet" is difficult to translate. Maybe: What deals with Christ or What advances Christ) as a criterion of distinction. The commandment "Thou love your neighbor as yourself/for he is like you" (Lev 19:18) is undoubtedly one of the central commandments of the Jewish-Christian tradition.

Anyone who studies theology must be able to say in his or her sleep where the commandment to love one's neighbor is found, at least just before taking the exam in biblical studies. But will he or she also know which commandment follows it? Leviticus 19:19: "Do not let two kinds mate among your livestock, and do not sow your field with two kinds of seed, and do not put on a garment woven of two kinds of thread" (Lev 19:19).

The commandment to love one's neighbor is unquestionably more important than the commandment, "Do not let two kinds mate among your cattle, and do not sow your field with two kinds of seed, and do not put on a garment woven of two kinds of thread" (Lev 19:19)- although the latter immediately follows the commandment to love one's neighbor in Lev 19. In its biblical context in the Book of Leviticus, "love your neighbor" initially means little more than "be kind to your neighbors" and only gains a higher status in the Jewish interpretive tradition, including that of Jesus, which culminates in the double commandment to love (Mark 12:28-34), which the theologians of the early church also consistently adopted.

The triad of liberation (liberation, not "freedom"!), justice and peace is one of the central biblical themes, the red threads that run through the whole of Scripture. In this context, biblical shalom is always more than the mere absence of war; rather, it includes the divine promise of a comprehensive state of salvation (which includes, for example, justice). One might think of the prophetic promises in Isa 2 and Micah 4 that the "swords will be forged into plowshares and the spears into pruning hooks, and they will learn war no more," or the (as yet unfulfilled) vision of the pilgrimage of the nations in Isa 60. Peace is not to be had without justice, justice not without peace, as Psalm 85 promises:

¹⁰ Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.

¹¹ Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,
and righteousness will look down from the sky.

¹² The Lord will give what is good,
and our land will yield its increase.

¹³ Righteousness will go before him,
and will make a path for his steps.

Peace in the biblical sense includes justice and cannot be had without justice. A "peace" without justice is merely the absence of war or a kind of social cease-fire. The absence of war, though worth much in some circumstances, is not yet biblical shalom.

For Christians, the radical, lived ethic of Jesus is central. It is expressed in the beatitude of the peacemakers (literally: *eirēnopoioi*) in Mt 5:9. It is equally expressed in demands such as these: If anyone strikes you on your right cheek, offer him the other also (Mt 5:39); And if anyone compels you to go one mile, go with him two (Mt 5:41). The latter demand, by the way, is a very concrete instruction for dealing with the military: every Roman soldier, member of the occupying power of that time, had the right to compel a resident of the occupied country to carry his baggage one Roman mile (= 1.5 km). Jesus' strategy here is not so much an act of silent acquiescence as a strategy of ironic overbidding, which puts the counterpart in the wrong and is supposed to make him think. However, it presupposes a minimum set of common values or a basic stock of valid law that is not questioned by any side.

Jesus' radical peace ethic includes the interpretation of the Old Testament prohibition against killing in Mt 5:21f: You have heard that it was said to the ancients (Ex 20:13; 21:12), "You shall not kill"; but whoever kills shall be guilty of judgment. But I say unto you: He that is angry with his brother is guilty of judgment; but he that saith to his brother, Thou good-for-nothing! is guilty of the high council; but whoever says, "You fool," is guilty of hellish fire. The interpretation finally leads to the unconditional priority of reconciliation. Finally, the climax and strongest impulse of Jesus' ethic of peace is the demand to love one's enemies, with which the first chapter of the Sermon on the Mount concludes (Mt 5:43ff):

⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,⁴⁵ so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

To love your enemies is the ideal of Christian perfection. It is, to speak with Bertolt Brecht, "the simple that is difficult to do". Therefore, the history of the church and theology can also be ironically described as an attempt to escape from the Sermon on the Mount. "You can't do politics with the Sermon on the Mount" has said former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, possibly taking up a Bismarck quote. But with what then? Practical politics must take into account given circumstances (including power relations) and interests, but can that be the last word? "Those who have visions should go to the doctor", another quote by Helmut Schmidt. This is funny but not really wise, basically it describes quite accurately, even if involuntarily, the dilemma of modern Western politics.

What is really radical about Jesus' peace ethic is not that he taught it, but that he lived it. He offers his cheek even in interrogation, is tortured, humiliated and dies on the cross. Finally, at the very end of the Bible, there is first the vision of the fall of the ruling empire (this is the penultimate). As the last follows then the vision of a 1000-year kingdom of peace, which even gets along without church, because God himself dwells with the people (Rev 21:21).

Christians are not at liberty to simply refrain from such peace ethics, certainly not if they see themselves as evangelical, and thus their actions as faithful to Scripture and in accordance with Scripture (*sola scriptura*). They have to respond to the demands and challenges of Jesus. And they must do this first of all without regard to political conditions and political enforceability. A church without an ecclesial peace witness is not a church - whatever this may look like.

Intermediate Thesis:

- Church, when speaking about war and peace, violence and non-violence, should first and foremost speak as church –
- from a theologically reflected position, without anticipatory political considerations.
- Such a position is then inevitably political itself and, in the best case, generates debate.

So much for the red threads of biblical peace theology.

Of course, we also find quite different texts in the Bible, such as national-religious agitation, which does not even shy away from violence against "the others" in the Book of Nehemiah, unfortunately literarily one of the best biblical books ever. In the Book of Joshua we find flawless war propaganda:

Jos 10:5-14

⁵ Then the five kings of the Amorites ... gathered their forces, and went up with all their armies and camped against Gibeon, and made war against it.

...

⁷ So Joshua went up from Gilgal, he and all the fighting force with him, all the mighty warriors.

⁸ The LORD said to Joshua, "Do not fear them, for I have handed them over to you; not one of them shall stand before you." ⁹ So Joshua came upon them suddenly, having marched up all night from Gilgal. ¹⁰ And the LORD threw them into a panic before Israel, who inflicted a great slaughter on them at Gibeon, chased them by the way of the ascent of Beth-horon, and struck them down as far as Azekah and Makkedah. ¹¹ As they fled before Israel, while they were going down the slope of Beth-horon, the LORD threw down huge stones from heaven on them as far as Azekah, and they died; there were more who died because of the hailstones than the Israelites killed with the sword.

¹² On the day when the LORD gave the Amorites over to the Israelites, Joshua spoke to the LORD; and he said in the sight of Israel, "Sun, stand still at Gibeon, and Moon, in the valley of Aijalon."
¹³ And the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, until the nation took vengeance on their enemies. ... The sun stopped in midheaven, and did not hurry to set for about a whole day. ¹⁴ There has been no day like it before or since, when the LORD heeded a human voice; for the LORD fought for Israel.

This is religiously based war propaganda from the good old days when the greatness of a victory was measured in the number of enemies killed. It is of little help that the exegetes of the Hebrew Bible teach us that Assyrian war propaganda was used here, and it is of little comfort that history did not turn out that way. It is rather a fantasy of the afflicted. At least there is a small theological correction within the propaganda text: God kills more enemies than the Israelites themselves. At the same time, there is hardly a greater fantasy of omnipotence than that God listens to the word of a man: Sun stand still!

Also the apocalypse of John occasionally feasts on the death of the rulers of this world, as only oppressed people can do, who are up to their neck in water - or the knife of an overpowering state power:

Rev 19:17-21

¹⁷ Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly in midheaven, "Come, gather for the great supper of God, ¹⁸ to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of the mighty, the flesh of horses and their riders—flesh of all, both free and slave, both small and great." ¹⁹ Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered to make war against the rider on the horse and against his army. ²⁰ And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who had performed in its presence the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur. ²¹ And the rest were killed by the sword of the rider on the horse, the sword that came from his mouth; and all the birds were gorged with their flesh.

But back to Jesus' ethic of peace.

The radical nature of Jesus' peace ethic is at first remarkably consistently maintained and practically interpreted in the early church. This changes only with the Constantinian revolution, in the wake of which Christianity becomes the state religion and church and state power begin to go hand in hand, which is largely maintained to this day.

The Apocalypse of John was right in its vision of the fall of the Roman Empire, but it took much longer than expected for that to happen. Only with the Constantinian turn, i.e. with the rise of Christianity first (313 A.D.) to the tolerated and then (380 A.D.) under Emperor Theodosius - to the state religion, also the cross becomes a Christian symbol, i.e. a state killing instrument, moreover a particularly cruel one. Until then, the cross appeared only occasionally in pagan graffiti to mock Christians. Among Christians, the depiction of Jesus as the Good Shepherd was common until then. Admittedly, Christians rightly perceived the Constantinian turning point as a liberation, because only a short time before they had had to endure the worst persecutions under Emperor Diocletian. As the balance of power changed, so did the conditions of oppression.

In 385 A.D., five years after Christianity had become the state religion, the first heretic, Priscillian of Avila, was executed in Trier. He was the leader of an ecclesiastical, spirit-oriented,

ascetic renewal movement, accused by the scheming and corrupt bishops Hydatius of Emeritia and (Saint) Rufus of Metz, condemned by Emperor Magnus Maximus.

2. Jesus' Peace Ethics: Testimonies of the Early Church

In one of the oldest church ordinances, the 2nd century *Traditio apostolica* (also called Hippolytus' church ordinance), soldiers are strictly forbidden to kill and the incompatibility of Christian baptism and the soldier's profession is emphasized.

Traditio apostolica 16

If a soldier is in the service of the secular authorities, he must not kill a human being. If ordered to do so, he shall not carry out the thing, nor shall he take an oath. But if he does not want to, he shall be rejected. Whoever holds the power of the sword or the administration of a city, whoever wears the purple, resign or be rejected. If a candidate for baptism or a believer wants to become a soldier, reject him, because he has despised God (... quia contempserunt deum).

In the marginal areas of the Roman Empire, the view of military service as contempt for God persisted beyond the Constantinian turn. In the *Testamentum domini nostri*, a Syriac church order from the second half of the 5th century, it says quite similarly:

Teach the soldier or official not to oppress anyone, not to kill, not to steal, not to be enraged, and not to be carried away against anyone. ... But if they desire to receive baptism in the name of the Lord, let them give up their military service or their position of authority. If an applicant for baptism or a believer wants to become a soldier, let him change his mind or let him be rejected. For with this intention, he has offended God, forsaken the way of the spirit, taken pleasure in the things of the flesh, and mocked the faith.

Even those who agree with Luther and *Confessio Augustana* Article 16 that a soldier can also be in a blessed state must at least ask themselves whether the baptism of a soldier on war duty does not come dangerously close to exploiting an existential emergency. Many a conscientious prison chaplain does not baptize in prison, but, if the will and prerequisite still exist, only after release from prison.

At the end of the second century, Tertullian, the first major theologian to write in Latin, in a writing significantly titled "On Idolatry," asks about the agreement of Christians to be baptized.

"On Idolatry," questions the reconciliation of Christianity and military service. His strident rejection is rooted in Jesus' absolute peacefulness, not in the danger of having to participate in the imperial cult (he virtually skips this argument, as a matter of course, in the first paragraph):

de idolatria 19

The question now is whether Christians may turn to the soldiery, whether military persons may be admitted to Christianity, and whether the service of the commoners and all the lower batches, which need not sacrifice and have nothing to do with judgments of life and death, can be reconciled with the faith. ... It is true that Moses also, if we want to engage in jokes, carried a staff, Aaron a clasp, John girded himself with a strap. Joshua stood at the head of a host, and the people made war. But how will he, from whom the Lord has taken away the sword, make war, even be a soldier in time of war without a sword? Even if soldiers came to

John and accepted the guideline for their conduct, even if a centurion became a believer, the Lord, by disarming Peter (John 19:11), unbuckled the sword of every soldier. No garb that is an accessory of illicit acts is considered permissible among us.

Tertullian alludes in the second paragraph to John the Baptist's sermon on repentance (Luke 3:14: Then the soldiers also asked him, saying: What then shall we do? And he said to them: Do violence or wrong to no one, and be content with your pay!). Then Tertullian concludes from the lesser to the greater: if John was already able to give instructions to soldiers, then through Jesus all the more every military service has become impossible.

Origen, the greatest Christian theologian before Augustine, in the 3rd century, in his debate with the pagan philosopher Celsus, also has to face arguments that could have been taken directly from one of the examinations of conscience that used to be common in the Federal Republic of Germany in a recruiting office. The level of the argument has not risen in the last 1700 years:

Origen, *Contra Celsum* VIII, 68

(Argument of Celsus:) "For if all acted as you do, nothing will prevent him (the emperor) from remaining alone and solitary, but the rule on earth will fall to the most lawless and savage barbarians, and that neither of your worship of God nor of true wisdom among men will any longer remain a tidings."

(Against this Origen argues:)

'For if,' as Celsus says, 'all acted thus' as we do, then of course 'the barbarians' who have turned to the word of God will also be quite lawful and sane. Then also all other worship of God will be abolished, but the Christian will have 'alone' the rule; this will once therefore rule 'alone', because the Christian doctrine wins more and more souls.

A generation later, at the beginning of the 4th century and shortly before the Milan agreement between Constantine and Licinius, which led to the Constantinian turn, Lactance not only argues for the incompatibility of Christianity and military service, but also extends the Christian prohibition of killing to the death penalty in an argument that seems tremendously modern:

Lactance, *divinae institutiones* VI, 20,15-17

When God forbids killing, he does not only forbid us to commit robbery, which is not allowed even by the civil law. But he also warns us not to commit things that are considered lawful among men. It is not possible for a man whose service consists in the exercise of justice to perform military service in the usual way, nor is it possible to accuse anyone of a crime that entails the death penalty. For it makes no difference whether one kills with the word or with the sword, since the fact of killing itself is forbidden. This means, then, that there is no exception whatsoever to this injunction of God. It is always forbidden to kill a human being, because God wanted man to be an inviolable living being.

Lactance also precisely analyzes the connection between war and economic interests:

divinae institutiones VI, 6,18-24

For in what else do the "benefits of the fatherland" lie than in harming another state or territory? The truth is that it is a matter of extending one's own borders by taking others' lands

by force, of increasing the power of the state, and of seeking to increase its revenues-all things that cannot be called virtues, but, on the contrary, only the destruction of every virtue. For concord among men in society, innocence, and respect for the property of one's neighbor are the first to disappear. Then justice itself disappears, for it cannot watch the human race being torn to pieces. Everywhere, where the weapons have gained validity, justice is extinguished and banished. (...)

How could the man be just who does evil, whose heart is filled with hatred, who plunders and murders? And yet all these things are done by those who pretend to serve their fatherland.

The later Bishop Cyprian of Carthage (d. 258) had already summed up the perversion of state war ideology in an outspoken letter to his childhood friend Donatus:

Cyprian of Carthage, ad Donatum 6

The whole earth is dripping with mutual bloodshed; and if an individual commits murder, it is a crime; but bravery is called it if the murder is done in the name of the state. Innocence is not the reason that secures impunity for outrage, but the greatness of cruelty.

In Cyprian, this description serves primarily to depict the depravity of the pagan world. With the Constantinian turn and the triumph of Christianity, the perspective then gradually changes. Lactance writes a biography of Emperor Constantine in the early 4th century. The invention of the legend of the "Thebaï Legion" in the 5th century about a Roman legion allegedly consisting of Christians, whose members are said to have suffered martyrdom in the 3rd century, serves precisely to ideologically anchor a Christian military service already in pre-Constantinian times. In truth, however, the example of Jesus and the stricter interpretation of the prohibition of killing apply with astonishing consistency until the Constantinian turn. Christian churches are free to recall these traditions at any time.

3. The current peace ethics of the Protestant Church in Germany

After Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine, some senior clergy in the Protestant Church were quick to call for a rethinking of the Protestant ethic of peace. This demand is rather silly for three reasons.

First, perhaps one should first wait for the end of this war, analyze it thoroughly, and then reconsider ethics.

Second, this demand could just as easily have been made in light of the brutal war waged by Saudi Arabia and its allies in Yemen (with German weapons, by the way). But that did not happen.

Thirdly, the protestant peace ethic has been deficient for a long time and it did not need a war in Europe to come to this conclusion.

I would therefore like to conclude by taking a look at the last peace memorandum of the Protestant Church in Germany from 2007.

I usually read announcements of the Protestant Church in Germany from the back - it says who worked on the text, so you quickly know what to expect.

The Chamber for Public Responsibility of the EKD, which is responsible for the Peace Memorandum, naturally includes full-time staff from the regional churches and the EKD. Furthermore, we find representatives of all parties of the democratic spectrum, who are politically responsible for the war operations of the Bundeswehr in recent years, including the Kosovo mission, which is against international law, as well as the continuously increasing German arms exports for years. Finally, the list names Klaus Wittmann, Rome, who is is

General Klaus Wittmann, Director at the NATO College in Rome. On the other hand, no one within German Protestantism who deals with peace issues on a full-time basis was invited to contribute to the peace memorandum. Consequently, in the peace memorandum conscientious objection is only discussed under the aspect of the individual decision of conscience (§62), which is explicitly defended as such. The peace memorandum does not address the substantive impetus that comes from conscientious objection; rather, conscientious objectors are advised to recognize

"that there are others who, in the service of this order, ensure that situations do not arise in which the law is without enforcement power" (§61).

Downright perfidious is the following sentence:

"Moreover, conscientious objectors should lend credibility and emphasis to their commitment to peace by assuming civilian service."

So pacifists are supposed to prove their seriousness, non-pacifists apparently do not need to do so.

What annoys me most about the EKD peace memorandum, as an East German Christian socialized in the church peace movement of the GDR, is its complete ignorance of the peace-ethical insights gained under difficult conditions in the Protestant churches in the GDR, especially in the 1980s. They play no role in the actual text of the memorandum, which, for example, explicitly refers to its predecessor, the EKD peace memorandum of 1981.

However, they are mentioned, namely in the foreword by EKD Council President Bishop Wolfgang Huber, which precedes the memorandum:

"In the churches of the GDR, the formation of peace-ethical judgment found expression especially in the Decade of Peace, in the great effectiveness of the sign 'Swords to Plowshares,' and in the courageous rejection of the spirit, logic, and practice of deterrence." (p. 7)

These experiences and insights bundled in this one sentence are then immediately disavowed, namely in the following sentence:

"Since then, the world political situation has changed fundamentally." (ibid.)

The same could of course be said about Jesus and the biblical peace testimony. By the way: since 1530, since the Confessio Augustana stated in Article 16 that also the "soldier can be in a blessed state", there has never been a war with German participation that a German Protestant church leadership would have classified in advance or in the course as not lawful. Where the red line of the Protestant Church is, one does not learn from the memorandum. The foreword of the former chairman of the council gets another irritation, which cannot be meditated enough:

"Wherever possible, memoranda should express a consensus based on Christian responsibility, carefully considered and formulated on behalf of the whole society." (p. 8)

The reader stands perplexed before this claim and asks himself: What is this? First of all, the question arises as to where the authors - as representatives of a group of society which, by the most generous reckoning, represents at most one third of society - take the courage (or

the foolhardiness) to appear with such a claim. On the other hand - and very fundamentally - the question arises whether it is the task of the church at all to formulate a social consensus. In other words, theologically: How does the promise to be "salt of the earth" and "light of the world" (Mt 5:13-14) relate to the effort to please the God of this eon (2Cor 4:4)? How does the assumed representation of the whole society relate to the representation of Christ into which we are called?

I renew my thesis from before:

- Church, when speaking about war and peace, violence and non-violence, should first and foremost speak as church –
- from a theologically reflected position, without anticipatory political considerations.
- Such a position is then inevitably political itself and, in the best case, generates debate.

Among the positive aspects of the memorandum, which nevertheless have their pitfalls, are the following:

Non-violent methods of conflict resolution are given clear priority, and the crucial role of civilian development strategies for lasting peace is emphasized.

Nuclear deterrence is rejected in principle: "From the point of view of Protestant peace ethics, the threat of nuclear weapons can no longer be regarded today as a means of legitimate self-defense" (§ 162, emphasis in the original, in a departure from the Heidelberg Theses of 1959). In a separate subchapter, the memorandum emphasizes the Christian mandate for peace education. The memorandum expressly emphasizes that "participation in military service ... includes ... the willingness to harm and kill people" (§ 56).

The ecumenical horizon that occasionally appears is gratifying, even if a joint peace memorandum of the two large churches in Germany would seem desirable. The memorandum emphasizes that "for none of the great world religions ... a necessary ... connection between religion and violence" (§ 31). The connection between Christianity and violence, however, is reflected primarily as history, i.e., as the past, not as a present problem.

"However, where Christians *have acted otherwise in the course of their history, they have erred and become guilty of God and man.*" (§45, emphasis mine)

Violence perpetrated by Christians is by no means only a problem of the past, but also a contemporary one, and not only since the former KGB officer Gundyayev, aka Cyril I, declared murdering soldiers practically to be saints.

Human history in biblical perspective begins, after the expulsion from paradise, with fratricide. What Russia is doing to Ukraine right now is fratricide in an almost exemplary way. The killing of a Russian soldier, whether he is in the war voluntarily or was forced by his state, is, not on the same level of course, also fratricide, because a Russian soldier is also a human being and not an orc.