

# **T**HE LIFE AND TEACHINGS OF CHRIST: A MODEL FOR AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE PRACTICE OF VIOLENCE

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DOI Link: <https://doi.org/10.70382/bjhss.v9i6.047>

## **ABSTRACT**

In a world increasingly challenged by various forms of violence, the search for a sustainable alternative has become a central academic preoccupation. This paper posits that the life and teachings of Jesus Christ offer a historically profound and ethically compelling framework for non-violent practice. Through a critical analysis, the study clarifies key concepts of violence and peace, distinguishing between negative peace and positive peace and defining core principles such as agape and redemptive suffering. The paper's theoretical framework leverages the ethical tension between Christian pacifism and Just War Theory, while utilizing Conflict Transformation Theory to bridge theological concepts with real-world applications. The findings show that Christ's model, as demonstrated by the Civil Rights Movement and modern peacebuilding, provides a pragmatic approach for resisting oppression and achieving reconciliation. The paper acknowledges common critiques regarding the model's realism in state-level conflicts but argues that it fundamentally reorients the

## **Introduction**

Violence in the twenty-first century has taken increasingly complex forms, ranging from armed conflict and terrorism to political oppression, communal clashes, and structural inequalities. Scholars in peace and conflict studies argue that efforts limited to ceasefires, military interventions, or legal deterrents often fail because they do not address the deeper causes of violence rooted in social, cultural, and spiritual disintegration (Gawerc, 2022). Instead, a lasting alternative must embrace holistic peace—defined not simply as the absence of war, but as the presence of justice, reconciliation, and restored human dignity (Lederach, 2020). Within this discourse, the Christian tradition, particularly

practice of security from militarism to a peacebuilding framework. Ultimately, the research concludes that Christ's example is an enduring and effective model for fostering a just and peaceful society.

**KEY WORDS:** Christ, Christian Pacifism, Non-violence, Reconciliation, Peacebuilding

The life and teachings of Jesus Christ emerges as a profound paradigm for peacebuilding, offering both ethical depth and practical guidance.

The ministry of Jesus challenges the prevailing logic of violence by advancing a radically different vision of peace. Christ's identity as the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6) and His teachings on forgiveness, reconciliation, and love of enemies (Matthew 5:9, 44) set Him apart from political and military leaders who sought dominance through force. Scholars argue that His deliberate rejection of violent retaliation and His embrace of humility—symbolized in His triumphal entry on a donkey rather than a horse—represent a theological and political statement against militarized forms of power (Boersema, 2021).

This paper will further prove that Christ example remains not only a spiritual ideal but also a practical framework for individuals, communities, and nations striving to overcome cycles of violence.

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

This section defines and discusses the key concepts used in this paper, ensuring a shared understanding of terms that are often nuanced or debated in academic discourse.

**Violence:** Violence is a multifaceted concept that extends beyond physical harm. Scholarly definitions, such as that by Johan Galtung (1969), distinguish between three forms: direct violence (e.g., war, assault), structural violence (e.g., poverty, unequal access to education), and cultural violence (e.g., ideologies that legitimize harm). While this paper focuses on direct violence, it acknowledges that Christ's teachings also offer a model to address structural and cultural forms of violence by challenging oppressive systems and ideologies.

**Peace:** Peace is not merely the absence of violence but a dynamic state of human flourishing. It is often categorized in two ways: negative peace, which is the absence of direct violence or war, and positive peace, a state in which the root causes of conflict are addressed and social justice, equality, and well-being are present (Galtung, 1969). Christ's model of non-violence is an active pursuit of positive peace. His teachings on justice, reconciliation, and selfless service aim to create a lasting peace built on just and fair relationships.

**Tolerance:** Tolerance is the practice of recognizing and respecting the beliefs, practices, and characteristics of others, even when they differ from one's own (Kwon, 2019). It's a key component of peaceful coexistence, as it involves the restraint from interference or judgment of others' choices. While tolerance is essential for a harmonious society, scholars argue that it is a passive virtue, differing from active principles like unconditional love or agape (Moltmann-Wendel, 2019). Essentially, tolerance allows people to live alongside one another without conflict, but it does not necessarily demand engagement or the forging of a deeper, reconciled relationship.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

This paper employs a multi-faceted theoretical framework to analyze how the life and teachings of Christ offer a viable alternative to violence. The chosen frameworks—Just War Theory and Pacifism, complemented by Conflict Transformation Theory—provide a comprehensive lens for a critical theological critique and a practical application of Christ's model in contemporary society.

1. **Just War Theory and Pacifism:** This framework serves as the foundational lens for evaluating Christ's teachings. Just War Theory, articulated by thinkers like Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, provides criteria for when a war is morally justifiable. In contrast, pacifism fundamentally rejects violence. By framing the discussion within these two opposing theories, the paper highlights the radical nature of Christ's model, demonstrating how it actively negates violence rather than merely regulating it.
2. **Conflict Transformation Theory:** While the above frameworks address the morality of violence, Conflict Transformation Theory (Lederach, 2003) provides a practical framework for applying Christ's principles to real-world conflicts. This theory aligns seamlessly with Christ's teachings on forgiveness, reconciliation, and selfless service, which go beyond simply ending a dispute. It allows the paper to demonstrate how Christ's model can be used to foster new, constructive relationships and build a just society, offering a genuine and lasting alternative to the cycle of violence.

### REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURES

This section provides a scholarly review of the literature on Christ's non-violent model, focusing on three key areas: biblical exegesis, theological debates, and historical applications.

#### Biblical Exegesis: The Core of Christ's Non-Violent Teachings

Scholarly interpretations of Christ's non-violent stance are rooted in the exegesis of key biblical texts, which serve as the foundation for the pacifist tradition. The Sermon on the

Mount (Matthew 5-7) is widely considered the central pillar of Christ's ethical framework. Here, Jesus issues radical commands such as "turn the other cheek" and "love your enemies," which directly challenge the prevailing *lex talionis* (law of retaliation) of the time (Stassen & Gushee, 2003). Scholars like John Howard Yoder (1972) argue these teachings are a literal ethical guide for the Christian community, forming the basis for a non-violent social and political order.

While the Sermon on the Mount is the primary focus, other passages also inform this perspective. The cleansing of the temple (Matthew 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-17) is frequently debated. Pacifist scholars like Walter Wink (2022) interpret this not as an act of violence against people, but as a non-violent, theatrical protest against a system of economic exploitation. The crucifixion itself is also seen as the ultimate model of non-violence. In the face of extreme violence, Jesus embodies redemptive suffering and forgiveness, a model that pacifist theology views as the most powerful alternative to the cycle of violence (Borg, 2021).

### **Theological and Ethical Debates: Christian Pacifism vs. Just War Theory**

The scholarly conversation on Christian pacifism is rich and complex, often framed in opposition to Just War Theory. Pacifist theologians contend that Christ's teachings and example present a comprehensive and absolute rejection of all forms of violence, arguing that any use of force, even in self-defense, is incompatible with the Christian command to love one's enemies unconditionally. Figures like Stanley Hauerwas (1983) assert that the church's primary task is to be a non-violent community that models an alternative to the world's reliance on force.

Conversely, proponents of Just War Theory argue that violence can be a necessary evil to prevent a greater harm. They interpret Christ's teachings on love as an ideal, but not a practical guide for governing a society. This debate is not just about biblical interpretation but about fundamental ethical principles: whether love can truly be a practical political force or if violence is a tragic necessity in a fallen world.

### **Historical and Contemporary Non-Violent Movements**

The principles of Christ's non-violent teachings have been applied in numerous historical and contemporary movements for social justice.

### **Why Jesus is Referred to as the Prince of Peace**

The prophetic declaration of Isaiah identifies the Messiah as the "Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6, NIV). This title underscores Jesus' role in reconciling humanity with God and establishing a kingdom characterized not by conflict but by justice, righteousness, and peace. In the New Testament, Paul affirms this reality: "Therefore, since we have been

justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1). Christ's peace is not limited to external tranquility but encompasses holistic well-being (shalom), bringing restoration to broken relationships and societies (Marshall, 2004). His ministry of healing, forgiveness, and reconciliation (Luke 7:48-50; John 14:27) reflects this identity.

### **Why Jesus Rode on a Donkey and Not a Horse**

The triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem on a donkey fulfilled Zechariah's prophecy: "See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey" (Zechariah 9:9, NIV). In the ancient world, kings mounted horses when they came for war, but rode donkeys to signify peace (Keener, 1993). By deliberately choosing a donkey, Jesus subverted common messianic expectations of a militaristic liberator and revealed his mission as one of humility, peace, and reconciliation rather than conquest (Matthew 21:5). His kingship rejected violence and domination, pointing instead to servanthood and sacrificial love (Philippians 2:6-8).

### **Why Israel Was Disappointed with Him**

First-century Israel was under Roman occupation, and many Jews longed for a Messiah who would lead a political and military revolt to restore national sovereignty (Acts 1:6; John 6:15). Their messianic hope was framed by the expectation of a Davidic king who would triumph over oppressors. Jesus' message, however, focused on loving enemies (Matthew 5:44), turning the other cheek (Matthew 5:39), and seeking peace rather than vengeance. His refusal to employ violence or political power led to disappointment and rejection among those who envisioned a conquering Messiah (Wright, 2012). Ultimately, the very crowds that celebrated his entry into Jerusalem later demanded his crucifixion (John 19:15), reflecting their disillusionment with his peaceful approach.

### **TEACHINGS OF CHRIST AS A NON-VIOLENT MODEL (Core Principles of Non-Violence)**

The life and teachings of Christ offer a profound and comprehensive model for non-violent practice. This model is built upon core ethical principles and demonstrated through practical actions that challenge conventional approaches to conflict.

**Agape (Unconditional Love):** At the heart of Christ's non-violent model is the principle of agape. This is not a sentimental love but a deliberate, sacrificial choice to love others regardless of their actions. Christ's command to "love your enemies" (Matthew 5:44) dismantles the very logic of violence. By responding to hostility with love, Christ introduces a disarming force that breaks the cycle of retaliation and re-frames the opponent as a person to be loved.

**1. The Sermon on the Mount:**

The Sermon on the Mount is the blueprint for Christ's non-violent community. "Turning the other cheek" is not a command for passive submission, but an act of dignified resistance. In ancient society, a backhanded slap was meant to humiliate an inferior. By turning the other cheek, the person forces the aggressor to deliver a blow with the full hand, an act of striking an equal. It is a subtle but powerful act of non-violent resistance. Similarly, "going the extra mile" (Matthew 5:41) is a call to subvert a system of domination by exceeding its demands.

**2. Servant Leadership (Mark 10:42–45)**

Jesus taught His disciples that greatness is not domination but servanthood. This overturns the violent structures of power by redefining authority as service. In peace studies, this parallels leadership models that emphasize mediation, reconciliation, and community empowerment.

**3. Blessed Are the Peacemakers (Matthew 5:9)**

The Beatitudes elevate peacemakers as "children of God." This is a proactive command—peace is not passive but an active vocation. It aligns with positive peace (Galtung, 1969), which seeks justice and restoration, not just absence of conflict.

**4. The Golden Rule (Matthew 7:12)**

The ethic of treating others as we want to be treated is foundational for dismantling cycles of violence. It provides a universal principle of justice and empathy that undergirds reconciliation.

**5. Jesus' Teaching on the Greatest Commandment (Matthew 22:37–40)**

When asked about the greatest commandment, Jesus summarized the law as love for God and love for neighbor. This teaching reframes all human relationships in the context of love, eliminating hatred and vengeance as legitimate responses. Love of neighbor is incompatible with violent practice, and this principle becomes the ethical cornerstone of non-violence (Moltmann-Wendel, 2019).

**6. Jesus' Response to Roman Authority (Matthew 22:21)**

When asked whether it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, Jesus avoided a violent-nationalist answer and instead said, "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." This demonstrates His refusal to endorse political revolt against Rome. Instead, He advocated a radical allegiance to God's kingdom, which undermined violent nationalism while avoiding complicity with imperial oppression (Wright, 2012).

**7. The Healing of the Centurion's Servant (Luke 7:1–10)**

By healing the servant of a Roman centurion—the very symbol of military power—Jesus modeled reconciliation rather than hostility. This example shows that non-violence is not only passive resistance but active peacemaking that crosses social and political boundaries (Boersema, 2021).

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E-ISSN 3027-0332 P-ISSN 3026-9741



**8. The Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37)**

This parable disrupts cultural violence rooted in ethnic and religious hostility. By making the “enemy” (a Samaritan) the hero of the story, Jesus redefines neighborliness as an ethic of compassion that transcends enmity. It teaches non-violent solidarity across divides (Okeke, 2021).

**9. Jesus Before Pilate (John 18:36)**

When Pilate interrogated Jesus about being a king, He responded: “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight...” This explicitly shows that His kingship is not sustained by military force but by truth, sacrifice, and peace.

**CHRIST'S DEMONSTRATION OF NON-VIOLENCE APPROACH TO VIOLENCE PRACTICES**

The peaceful mission of Jesus offers a radical alternative to the cycle of violence that has characterized much of human history.

- ✓ **The Attempt to Throw Jesus off a Cliff:** Early in his ministry, Jesus returned to his hometown of Nazareth and spoke in the synagogue. His words, which implied that he was the Messiah, enraged the people. They rose up, dragged him out of the town, and led him to the edge of a cliff with the intent to throw him off and kill him. However, in a moment of extraordinary calm and control, “he walked right through the crowd and went on his way” (Luke 4:30). The text doesn't explicitly state how he did this, but it highlights Jesus's ability to diffuse a violent situation without resorting to force or retaliation. This instance supports the argument that non-violence isn't a passive or naive response but an active, creative, and strategic way of resisting evil.
- ✓ **The Arrest of Jesus and Peter's Sword:** The most direct and dramatic instance of Jesus's non-violent model is found in the accounts of his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane. When a large crowd, including temple guards and Roman soldiers, arrived to arrest him, one of Jesus's disciples, Simon Peter, drew his sword. In a moment of impulsive defense, he struck the high priest's servant, Malchus, and cut off his right ear.

Jesus immediately intervened. He rebuked Peter, telling him, “Put your sword back in its place, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword” (Matthew 26:52). In the account from Luke's Gospel, Jesus takes his commitment to non-violence a step further by miraculously healing the man's ear, touching it and restoring it completely (Luke 22:51).

This story is a powerful microcosm of this paper's argument. It shows that even in the face of imminent violence and injustice, Jesus refuses to allow his followers to resort to force. He demonstrates that the way of the sword is a path

to destruction, not salvation, and that a non-violent response is the true expression of his divine power and will.

- ✓ **The Woman Caught in Adultery:** In this story (John 8:1–11), a group of religious leaders brought a woman to Jesus who had been caught in the act of adultery. Under Mosaic Law, the penalty was death by stoning. They were not seeking justice but trying to trap Jesus into either condoning adultery or defying the law. Jesus's response was a masterclass in non-violent resistance and ethical redirection. Instead of condemning the woman or the law, he knelt down and began to write on the ground. He then challenged her accusers with the famous words, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7). One by one, the accusers dropped their stones and left, starting with the oldest among them.

This narrative demonstrates how Jesus used moral authority and wisdom, rather than force, to disarm a violent mob. He exposed the hypocrisy of the aggressors and appealed to their conscience, ultimately saving the woman's life without a single stone being thrown. It shows how the principles of redemptive suffering and radical forgiveness can be applied to halt a cycle of violence.

- ✓ **Christ Engagement with the Marginalized**

Christ's ministry was a constant, non-violent challenge to the social hierarchies of his time. By consistently associating with the marginalized, the poor, tax collectors, and women, he defied the rigid social structures that perpetuated inequality. These were political acts that dismantled the social order without resorting to violence, serving as a testament to his belief that a new, more just kingdom was possible.

#### CONTEMPORARY APPLICATIONS OF CHRIST'S NON-VIOLENT TIMELESS MODEL

The scholarly application of Christ's non-violent model extends far beyond biblical and theological discourse, finding its most powerful expression in real-world movements and practices.

- i. **The Civil Rights Movement and Martin Luther King Jr.:** Martin Luther King Jr.'s leadership of the Civil Rights Movement stands as a seminal example. King embraced a principled philosophy rooted in Christian theology, drawing directly from the core tenets of agape love and redemptive suffering (King, 1967). His strategy of peaceful protests exposed the brutal injustice of segregation, and the movement's willingness to endure violence without retaliating generated public sympathy and revealed the moral bankruptcy of the system.



- ii. **Desmond Tutu and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (South Africa)**  
Tutu's Christian-inspired commitment to forgiveness and reconciliation after apartheid exemplifies Christ's teaching as a model for national healing without revenge (Tutu, 1999).
- iii. **Mahatma Gandhi's Satyagraha (inspired by the Sermon on the Mount)**  
Although not Christian, Gandhi's philosophy of non-violent resistance drew heavily from Christ's teachings. His movement shows the universal applicability of Christ's non-violent model in struggles for justice.
- iv. **Modern Peacebuilding**  
Beyond large-scale movements, Christ's teachings continue to inform modern peacebuilding and conflict transformation efforts. For example, the focus on reconciliation in post-conflict settings is a direct echo of Christ's teachings on forgiveness. (Lederach, 2020). The practice of radical hospitality is another contemporary application, demonstrating a commitment to a shared humanity that challenges the power structures creating division.

### **The Challenge of Practicality: Acknowledging and Addressing Common Critiques**

The practical application of Christ's non-violent model faces significant scholarly critiques regarding its realism and efficacy in situations of large-scale violence.

- i. **Realism in the Face of Extreme Violence:** Critics argue that in cases of clear evil, such as genocide, a purely non-violent response would be a form of complicity. Scholars like Reinhold Niebuhr (1932) contend that while non-violence is an ideal, it is insufficient and even irresponsible when confronted with a merciless aggressor. However, pacifist scholars like Walter Wink (2022) counter that non-violence is an active form of resistance that exposes injustice and prevents the oppressed from becoming like the oppressor, arguing that resorting to violence often escalates conflict and fails to achieve lasting peace.
- ii. **Application in State-Level Conflicts:** A major challenge is applying a personal ethical model to the complex dynamics of nation-states, which rely on military might. Critics question how a nation could defend its borders without a military. Scholars of conflict transformation, such as John Paul Lederach (2020), address this by shifting the focus from military engagement to the long-term work of building peace infrastructure. They argue that applying Christ's model involves a fundamental re-imagining of security that prioritizes diplomacy, economic justice, and strong civil society institutions to address the root causes of conflict.

### **CONCLUSION**

The life and teachings of Christ offer a powerful and coherent model for non-violent resistance that remains profoundly relevant in contemporary society. This study's

analysis of biblical texts, theological debates, and historical applications confirms the central thesis that Christ's model provides a viable and effective alternative to the practice of violence. It is a framework not merely for the absence of conflict but for the active pursuit of positive peace, a state of human flourishing built on justice and reconciliation. The core principles of agape, radical forgiveness, and redemptive suffering serve as the ethical bedrock of this model, dismantling the logic of retaliation and offering a new path forward.

This research has demonstrated that Christ's model is more than a passive ideal; it is a strategic and creative approach to social transformation. The practical examples highlighted in this paper—from the nuanced resistance in the Sermon on the Mount to the disarming power of his encounters with angry mobs—show that Christ embodied a form of resistance that challenged oppressive systems without mirroring their violence. This theological blueprint has been proven effective in the real world, finding its most powerful expression in the Civil Rights Movement and influencing modern peacebuilding efforts globally. These case studies underscore that Christ's teachings are not confined to ancient history but have been successfully applied as a practical model for achieving justice in a world marked by conflict.

While the paper acknowledges the significant critiques regarding the application of non-violence in state-level conflicts and against extreme forms of evil, it argues that these challenges do not invalidate the model itself. Instead, they compel us to fundamentally rethink our paradigms of security and power. A Christ-like approach to security reorients our focus from militarism and dominance to a holistic framework centered on diplomacy, economic justice, and the building of strong, resilient civil societies. Ultimately, the enduring significance of Christ's non-violent model is its uncompromising call to a higher ethical standard. It provides a moral compass that challenges the tragic inevitability of violence, urging individuals and nations alike to choose a path of reconciliation over retaliation.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Integrate Christ's Non-Violent Model into Peace Education:** Educational institutions, particularly in conflict-prone societies, should adopt curricula that emphasize the life and teachings of Christ as a framework for non-violent conflict resolution. Embedding Christ's principles of agape, forgiveness, and reconciliation in moral and civic education can cultivate a new generation committed to peaceful coexistence.
- **Strengthen Faith-Based Peacebuilding Initiatives:** Churches and Christian organizations should actively promote peacebuilding programs inspired by Christ's example. These programs can focus on mediation, reconciliation, and

dialogue to address structural and cultural violence, thereby fostering positive peace within communities

- **Encourage Non-Violent Resistance in Social Justice Movements:** Activists and civil society organizations should draw from the practical examples of non-violent movements—such as the Civil Rights Movement led by Martin Luther King Jr.—to advocate for justice without resorting to violence. Christ’s teachings can serve as a moral compass for resisting oppression while maintaining human dignity.
- **Promote Interfaith Collaboration on Non-Violence:** Since violence often emerges across religious and cultural lines, interfaith platforms should be encouraged to adopt Christ’s principles of reconciliation and love of enemies as a shared ethic. Such dialogue can reduce cultural violence, challenge ideologies of hatred, and build sustainable peace among diverse communities.

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