

Mandela and fighting evil

By [David Heim](#)

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Though Nelson Mandela reportedly was guarded about his own religious convictions, he maintained close ties to church leaders and was deeply shaped [by his Methodist education](#). When he talked of forgiving his jailers, called for racial enemies to live in peace, and in words and deeds opened up the path to national reconciliation, the echoes of the gospel were unmistakable.

Yet it should also be remembered that Mandela at one time embraced the use of violence as part of the resistance to apartheid. He was a leader of the armed wing of the African National Congress when he was arrested in the early 1960s. He favored nonviolent protest in principle, but not when such protest was itself outlawed and met only with brutal oppression.

This fact does not in any way diminish Mandela's astonishing work as a peacemaker. It simply reminds us that his own life as a peacemaker was morally complex. The horrific oppression of apartheid presented Mandela and his colleagues with difficult moral and strategic decisions. Like Bonhoeffer, Mandela put his life on the line for the decision he made, and as South African [theologian John de Gruchy](#) remarked, such efforts deserve respect, "even if . . . we do not agree with them."

It is a measure of Mandela's own integrity that, having once seen no way forward except through violence, he seized the opportunity of negotiation when it finally emerged.