

The Christian Attitude Toward War

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THE CHRISTIAN ATTITUDE TOWARD WAR

Introduction

Throughout history, Christians have been concerned about what their attitude should be toward war. A great number of conflicting views have existed. The purpose of this paper is to examine these views, and to compare them with the Scriptures.

Views About War

A whole continuum of views concerning the Christian and war exist, but they may be divided into three main groups.

All Wars: "The Patriotic or Holy War"

In this view, the "elite" nation or group assumes that what is best for them (politically or religiously) is best for the world. They resort to any means necessary to force their interests or "cause" upon others.

This view fails to realize that international situations are not always easy to evaluate in terms of right and wrong (such as, "We are right and you are wrong"). Although patriotism and devotion to God may not be wrong, they can be quite misused. History gives us many examples of people who justified their policies, even using the Scriptures to do so, yet who later turned out to be wrong--false prophets, who were molded by the views of their culture.

Some Wars: The "Just War"

This view states that certain wars are justified, whereas others are not. Ideally, the justification of any certain war would be impartially decided (as if by a disinterested party). Some limit this justification to a "last resort" war for protection of one's own country; others to the protection of any country being overrun by a "less worthy" country. Most say the fighting should be done in a spirit of love--not with pure hatred of the enemy, but with the realization that justice must be achieved.

Those with this view must exercise caution. One's emotions may be strong, and it may often be difficult to determine what is justice. It is easy to compromise this view if one's conscience becomes desensitized. Even worse, this view can deteriorate to the point that a person may justify any type of brutal

behavior pattern against the enemy. The greatest criticism of this view is the fact that each side invariably finds justification of its own position. Even people who claim to be Christians tend to "justify" their own government's war efforts, regardless of the circumstances.

No Wars: Non-resistance or Pacifism

This view is generally characterized by a refusal to take human life under most (or all) circumstances, but may occur in a number of forms.

Some hold views very close to the "just war" position. They may say that *most* wars are wrong, or that *all* of a certain type of war is wrong (such as nuclear war). Others hold a stricter pacifistic view, often tied to religious beliefs. Groups such as the Quakers and Mennonites refuse to destroy human life under any circumstances, because they regard life as sacred--as something good in each person, that ought not to be destroyed. Others, such as the Brethren, allow war on the part of civil governments (which for the most part are not Christian) but say that Christians are to cooperate in various "nonviolent" ways only. Some consider pacifism to be merely an "ideal" which most people cannot live up to, while others try to make it the basis for the actions of all of society. Many would probably allow for some type of non-violent resistance, yet some would be against any type of resistance at all.

If taken to an extreme, a pacifist may be guilty of not opposing tyranny, and of hindering the establishment of justice. If he makes concessions to an aggressor, he may be encouraging him to make more demands. Many say that if a whole nation took this view, God would miraculously protect them in a time of war, but it is more probable that they would die waiting for deliverance. The greatest fault of those who try to press this view upon society is that they forget man's basic problem (a sin nature) and try to reform him--without bringing him to repentance and salvation.

A Historical Overview The Church Down Through the Centuries

The Pre-Christian Period

In most pre-Christian countries (excluding perhaps the Assyrians) peace was the ideal. Yet there were other things considered more valuable than peace--justice, freedom, honor, material possessions, national existence--which, if threatened, provided a justification for war. Some people, such as the Hebrews, fought religious wars which were justified by the command of their God (or god). Pacifism was extremely rare.

The Early Christian Period

Outside of the New Testament, there is no record of Christians being in the military, until about 180 A. D., and very little is written about the subject. Many scholars believe this absence was due to a pacifistic position among the early Christians. But if not, it could have resulted from either being disqualified by the government, or from convictions against certain practices that *accompanied* military service (rather than the military service itself).

During this period, the Roman army was comprised of professionally trained men, almost always volunteers, who served both as the military and as the police force. Jews and slaves were exempt, and rarely was it necessary to use conscription. Consequently, most of the early Christians never had to face the issue of military service.

After 200 A.D., more and more Christians were entering military service, and much was written about the subject, the majority of writers condemning participation.

Constantine and the Middle Ages

When the church (as an institution) and the state began to unite, views changed drastically. Participation of Christians in war was urged, and by the year 416, non-Christians were forbidden to serve in the army.

During the middle ages, the institutional church not only gave its approval to the feudal system (essentially a system of perpetual war); but it encouraged and backed cruel and bloody crusades (or "Holy Wars") against the Moslems and sects considered heretical. Yet various efforts were also made by some, to limit and regulate wars. The "just war" concept was developed. There also were various small groups of pacifists during this period.

The Reformation Period

All three war views were held by the various reformers. Luther held to a "just war" view, limiting the reason a war could be fought. Calvin justified certain types of war, using the Old Testament as his authority, but some of his followers took this view to an extreme and waged exceedingly cruel religious wars. Quakers, Mennonites, and certain Anabaptists held pacifist views, believing it was impossible to live according to the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount, while fighting in a war.

It might be noted that *few* voices protested the cruel, bloody Indian wars in South America, and the less severe ones in North America, during this period.

The Modern Period

By the 18th century, religious wars were considered repulsive, but the churches generally supported the war efforts of various revolutions, such as the American Revolution. In the 19th century, there was a period of relative peace, yet during various wars (such as the Civil War) the churches sided with their respective governments. During the first World War, the churches on each side strongly supported their own governments, but afterward they developed a very optimistic pacifistic attitude, especially in the United States and England. During the Second World War, these churches supported the war, but with reluctance and no enthusiasm. After that, another wave of pacifism--often uneasy because of political situations--swept through most of the Western churches.

Today, probably all three views could be found in the church. However, the majority would tend to hold to either the "just war" or the pacifistic perspectives--or somewhere between.

The Teachings of Scripture

Preliminary Considerations

Before examining the Scriptural data, it is necessary to make some preliminary observations. First, God does not change; nor do his moral commands change. In Old Testament times, there were certain moral rules present. (Moral absolutes-- right and wrong--existed even before sin entered the world.) In the New Testament, these moral absolutes were not changed or diminished. It is true that the *ceremonial* laws were fulfilled in what Christ did on the cross, and so are no longer necessary. But the *moral* laws, in contrast, were expounded upon--rather than nullified. Thus we have a greater amount of revelation on ethical matters, than did the people who lived during the Old Testament era.

We must also note that God does *not* have a "double-standard"--one set of rules for the unbeliever and one set for the believer. He has an absolute standard for *all*, and will judge each person by that standard, in accordance with the amount of revelation he has received (Luke 12:48; Romans 2:14-15).

The Scriptures contain *all* that is needed for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:2-3), either by direct statement or by inference. Although there is no systematic treatment on war, much can be learned about the subject. At the same time, care must be made to avoid ungrounded speculations--which are so often made about such a subject.

The Old Testament Record

In the Old Testament, there is an emphasis on the need for people to promote and maintain justice--often with a focus on the duties of the authorities, or on the people as a group (or nation). There is also an emphasis on *God* working among people (as a group)--especially the nation Israel. God often rewarded righteousness with material blessings and peace, and wickedness with unfavorable circumstances and punishment (which could include war).

Along this line, therefore, we read about God commanding Israel to go to war, in order to destroy various wicked nations that surrounded them. This command wasn't given because of a dislike that may have grown-up between Israel and those other nations; rather those nations had become so morally depraved, that they would have had a devastating effect on Israel, if not destroyed. (Israel did *not* totally obey God, and this very thing happened to them. In the end, God had to use war to punish *Israel*, because, as a nation, they turned away from him and rejected his moral absolutes.)

Contrary to the opinions of some, the Old Testament does not portray God as one who liked to wage war. There is an ongoing theme of patience and grace (*undeserved* kindness). It was only as a "last resort," when the moral depravity of a nation became so great that it was "irreversible," that God allowed it to be destroyed. At that point, God would have had to deny *his own* righteous and just character, in order to allow them to continue in their ways.

We need to be careful in how we apply Old Testament principles to modern situations, for some may have a more direct application to the nation Israel (because of promises God made specifically to them). Even so, we may still develop a number of principles about war, from the Old Testament. For instance, God may use war as divine retribution or judgment upon sin, and to bring people to repentance. He may use it to perfect those who belong to him, and to teach them to seek refuge in him. He may also use war to vindicate his sovereignty.

The sixth commandment stresses the sanctity of life, and prohibits murder. Some try to use this command as a prohibition against killing under *any* circumstances. However, the Hebrew word focuses specifically on *murder*--and most English translations will state it that way. Also, we must remember that this same God also instituted capital punishment (death) for those who violate this commandment (Genesis 9:6; and various passages throughout the law). There is no reason to *invent* a contradiction between two of God's commands!

The Sermon on the Mount

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus corrects the wrong understanding which had arisen over how the moral law is to be applied. He does not destroy or change the law. Instead, he upholds it, and he confronts the people with its true intent.

It should be noted that, in this passage, Jesus' focus is on *personal* conduct. He is *not* instructing people on how *civil* government should be run! What he says should not be interpreted in a manner that *forces* such a contradiction!

When Jesus says, "Don't resist an evil person" (Matthew 5:39), he is not advocating a pacifistic stance on war. In this passage, he is correcting an abuse of the moral law as given in the Old Testament. The command, "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth" (Matthew 5:38; a quote from Deuteronomy 19:21 and elsewhere), was given for the *public* administration of justice, but had been distorted into a rationale for *personal* revenge. Jesus stresses, in this whole passage, that we should exercise forbearance when wronged, and not vengeful passion or resentment. When Jesus says, "Love your enemies" (Matthew 5:44), he does not set aside justice. Rather, he is telling us to reflect the character of "our Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:45). [Though the topic is not directly addressed in the Sermon on the Mount, even civil government is to reflect God's character, when it is administering justice. To refuse to administer justice would be a denial of one aspect of God's character.]

Paul also stresses this same concept when he says, "Do not repay anyone evil for evil," "Do not seek revenge," and "Overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:17-21). He is focusing on personal conduct. In the next chapter, he changes his focus to civil government--and there he says that the government *does* have the right to use the sword, *as God's servant, sent to punish those who do wrong* (Romans 13:4).

The Life and Sayings of Jesus

Many point to Jesus' life as an example of pacifism, but a close look at the Scriptures shows this to be without grounds. It is correct to say that Christ came to save men, but it must not be forgotten that unsaved men face future judgment by him. Some claim that Jesus' refusal to bow down to Satan in order to be given all the kingdoms of the world (Matthew 4:8-10) implies his rejection of the methods necessary for conquering the world (including *any* type of force, up to and including war), but this is ungrounded speculation. It cannot be ignored that Christ *did* use force, such as when he drove the money-changers from the temple area.

Various sayings of Jesus have been used to support both pacifistic and *non*-pacifistic positions, but these passages usually do not deal with the issue. For instance, when Jesus said, "Whoever wants to save his life will lose it and whoever loses his life for me will find it" (Matthew 16:25, and elsewhere), he was referring to the cost of discipleship, not the legitimacy of warfare. When he said, "All those who take the sword will perish by the sword" (Matthew 26:52), he was not condemning the use of the sword for defense of one's nation. (Previously he had told this same group to buy swords, possibly for self-defense. Luke 22:36.) When Jesus predicted "wars and rumors of wars" (Matthew 24: 6-7), he was merely stating a fact and not giving his approval of warfare.

The Christian Life

The Christian life does not necessitate a pacifistic view. When Paul says, "We do not war according to the flesh," and "The weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh" (2 Corinthians 10:3-4), he is describing a spiritual warfare against the powers of darkness. Peter tells us to imitate Christ's example (1 Peter 2:18-24), but he is referring to unjustly suffering for doing what is good. Neither passage deals with the issue of warfare against other nations.

The Christian is to encourage peace to whatever extent it is possible (Romans 12:18). Yet the Christian's peace can exist under *any* condition and does not necessitate non-resistance in war.

Church and State

Governments may often be corrupt, but God has given them authority to punish evil and to promote good (Romans 13:3). We are commanded to pay taxes and to obey our government--unless our obedience would be in direct violation of one of God's commands. (God does *not* give governments authority to encourage sin.)

Because there is no direct command for the Christian to go to war, some have built a system based on a distorted view of the separation of church and state. Each, they would claim, belongs to a different kingdom--the church to the kingdom of light and the state to the kingdom of darkness. Each kingdom has a different method of defense: the church, spiritual; the state, physical. They would go on to argue that, since the Christian's warfare is *spiritual* and not *physical* (based on a faulty interpretation of 2 Corinthians 10:3-4), we should focus our attention on the use of *spiritual* means to do good, and refrain from joining the state (which they view as the "kingdom of darkness") to fight *physical* warfare.

Indeed, this is a great confusion in the definitions of "spiritual" and "physical" (or "temporal"). The church and state are not moral opposites. The Christian lives both in the spiritual kingdom of God and under the God-ordained government. He is responsible to obey both. (Only when the government commands him to do something that goes directly against God, is he to disobey the government, in favor of what God commands. And this disobedience would be limited to that specific command that opposed God.)

Soldiers and Warfare

Military terms are used several times in the New Testament to illustrate the Christian life. We are told to "Put on the armor of God" (Ephesians 6:11) and to "Fight the good fight of faith" (1 Timothy 6:12). As a "soldier of Jesus Christ" (2 Timothy 2:3), we are "more than conquerors" (Romans 8:37). This manner of speech is appropriate, for there truly is a spiritual war in process. Although this symbolization does not speak

on the subject of physical warfare, it might be inferred that, if war were sinful in and of itself, the symbolization might not have been used.

Soldiers are frequently mentioned in the New Testament, but *never* condemned for their occupation, even when they became Christians. (See, for example, Cornelius in Acts 10, and the Philippian jailor in Acts 16.) When soldiers asked John the Baptizer what they should do, he did *not* tell them to resign--and to claim that any of these soldiers resigned their commissions is completely unwarranted.

Discussion

Which View Best Fits the Biblical Data?

People who claim to be "Christian" have taken every possible position on the topic of warfare. It is obvious that many wars have been morally wrong. Yet there have been some who, in complete disregard to the Scriptures, have held murderous campaigns against everybody they considered to be heretical or pagan. Others have gone the opposite way, claiming that war is *always* wrong for the believer. Not only is there no genuine scriptural basis for such a position, but their unwillingness to confront evil has often given indirect encouragement to those who were committing great atrocities against the innocent. The fact that Scripture does *not* condemn involvement in warfare should not be lightly set aside.

When we take into consideration all the Biblical evidence, we would have to conclude that the most scriptural view about warfare would be a "just war" view. But before we could consider a war to be "just," we would need to consider many factors, such as what the Scriptures say, the circumstances surrounding the war, the moral condition of our own country, and the effects of *either* choice on one's own life and on others. Of these factors, the Scriptures are the most important, for they are *God's Word* on the matter, and they must impact the way we interpret *all* other factors. Without a humble submission to the Word of God, accompanied by the "fear of the Lord" (Job 28:28; Psalm 111:10; and throughout the Proverbs), it is not even possible to have the wisdom that is necessary, in order to accurately assess the "justness" of a war.

A nation (or religious institution) that does not submit to the Word of God loses the basis for understanding whether or not a war is "just." Many so-called "just wars" of the past have really been "patriotic or holy wars" under a different name. Those fighting in them were often little interested in the true scriptural principles, but merely twisted them to fit their own purposes. We ought to learn from such instances and beware--or we may end up being guilty of the same type of error. We must never forget that God's Word must be the foundation for determining the "justness" of *everything* we do, as well as the motives behind what we do.

Difficulties With Such a View

Even when a person is a genuine disciple (follower) of Jesus, evaluating the "justness" of a war won't always be easy. Trying to sort-out the issues can be very difficult. There are often *many* reasons that a nation may choose to go to war, some legitimate and some not. If we, as a nation, have committed serious injustices against another nation (or group), there may even be legitimate reasons for them to go to war against *us*.

Sometimes the *best* options will no longer be available, because of wrong decisions *already* made. At that point, the decision may be nothing more than trying to determine which choice will have the fewest long-term negative effects. The resulting complexity of the issue may leave people who have the *same* love for God choosing *opposite* positions. For that matter, there may be so many conflicting issues, that a person finds it difficult to reach *any* position.

Some people may criticize the "just war" view, because of difficulties such as have just been mentioned. Indeed, it would be much easier to simply claim that *all* wars or *no* wars are just! But the problem isn't the view; rather it is the people. It is the nation or people who are unwilling to deal with their *own* sins, before they consider going to war, to deal with the sins of *others*.

God instituted government for the purpose of administering justice. A government that focuses on the injustice of others, while at the same time ignoring its own injustices, is abhorrent to God. When this happens, the "justness" of their cause becomes blurred with injustice--making it increasingly difficult to evaluate whether or not the war is justified. Under such a condition, national (and personal) repentance is the only *good* choice--and the only legitimate *first* choice, as far as God is concerned. It is when a nation is willing to *first* deal with its own sins, that the difficulties in evaluating the "justness" of its war cause diminishes. Of course, with repentance, there might be such changes in the nation's interaction with other nations, that reconciliation (rather than war) might become a real possibility!

Our Response to War, When it Occurs

How should we, as individuals, respond when there *is* a war? At that point, it's too late to argue whether or not it is a "just" war. Even those who are pacifists, or who believe that the war is unjust, must admit that it is occurring, in spite of their desires to the contrary.

In every way, we must live as disciples (followers) of Jesus. We must follow his example, and the examples of the apostles. We must *live* the love we claim is in us. We must have a desire to see justice (as defined by God) established, and injustice removed from the land--not only in matters related to the war, but in *all* areas of life. If injustices are present in the land, we must continue to oppose them, not closing our eyes to them for the sake of the "war cause." We must also have a spirit of humility, and of forgiveness, having an awareness of our own past sins, and of our own need for forgiveness. We must pray for our friends (including

the soldiers), *as well as for our enemies*. We must pray for the salvation of many--for without salvation, even *peace* has no long-term (eternal) value.

People tend to ignore the fact that some issues are much more serious than whether we have peace or war. The very fact that war exists is a reflection of a deeper issue. As long as sin exists in the world, and people reject the God of the Bible (or at least disregard what he says), there will be wars. When religious institutions *claim* to be "Christian," but do not follow the ways of Jesus, there will be wars. It is only when people on *both* sides of the conflict humble themselves and *submit* to the God of the Bible, that wars will cease--and that, according to Scripture, will not occur until after the *final* war, when Jesus Christ himself will be the victor (Revelation 19:11-21).

Ultimately, we must trust God for the outcome--not just in the issue of who wins, but in regard to the long-term effects of the war. We must trust God, even if the outcome of the war is bad, from our point of view. Our view of life is very limited (and normally influenced by what surrounds us), but God sees the entire picture. Ultimately, he will accomplish his purposes--which extend far beyond our own lifetimes and what we can see.

Whatever the outcome, we must guard our own conduct, and make sure that we continue to be "salt" and "light" in a dark and corrupt world (Matthew 5:13-16). We must commit our lives to God, and remember that the day of justice will come. On that day, *all* people--saved and unsaved--will acknowledge that Jesus is Lord, and that his ways are right (Philippians 2:9-11).

For those who know and love God, he has promised to use *all* things, whether good or bad, to accomplish good in our lives. And even though circumstances may be difficult right now (especially if the war is occurring in *our own* neighborhood), we can rest assured that our hope for the eternal future is guaranteed. In the end, we will praise God for the way he has used *all* things in our lives, to accomplish good.

On the other hand, there is *no* long-term good for the person who does *not* submit to God. Ultimately, it will not matter whether he dies in war, or lives to an old age. Even if he has an entire lifetime of peace, it will have no long-term value for him, if the day comes, when Jesus has to say to him, "Depart from me." Pray that many will turn to God and be saved.

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Scripture quotations are my paraphrase or common to many translations
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