

THE CHRISTIAN AND WAR

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Answering the question, "Should a Christian be a member of the military?" is the best way to elaborate on "The Christian and War." On the positive side, the military emphasizes the importance of moral character for its leaders. On the negative side, the military is a profession in which killing may be a part of one's responsibility. Four possible positions to take regarding this difficult issue are nonresistance, Christian pacificism, just war, and preventive war. Also at stake is the Christian responsibility to submit to governmental authority as indicated in Romans 13:1-7 and 1 Peter 2:13-17. New Testament analogies comparing responsibilities of Christian living with being a good soldier seem to point to the legitimacy of Christians being part of the military endeavor of their country. That plus other factors support a Christian's being involved in military service. Yet the conscience of each Christian must prevail in making this difficult decision about the issue, "Should a Christian be a member of the military?"

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Introduction

The issue of war and Christian involvement in military service is so extensive that it is necessary to limit the scope of this study of "The Christian and War." Its literature dates from the earliest years of church history,¹ with a history too vast even to be summarized here. Obviously, biblical exegesis and Scripture rightly interpreted must inform any resolution of the issues. Therefore, at least to look at what the Bible has to say about the topic is imperative. A focus on one basic

¹An excellent compendium of key discussions in the past is to be found in Arthur F. Holmes, ed., *War and Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975). The volume includes declarations of pagan philosophers as well as leaders in Christendom (Plato, Cicero, Athenagoras, Tertullian, Origen, Lactantius, Ambrose, Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Erasmus, Menno Simons, Francisco Suarez, Hugo Grotius, John Locke, Immanuel Kant, G. W. F. Hegel, Lyman Abbott, Reinhold Niebuhr, Robert Drinan, and Paul Ramsey). Cf. Roland H. Bainton, *Christian Attitudes Toward War and Peace: A Historical Survey and Critical Re-evaluation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1960). See also Adolf Harnack, *Militia Christi: The Christian Religion and the Military in the First Three Centuries*, trans. by David McInnes Gracie (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), a work first published in German in 1905.

question is the best approach: "Should a Christian be a member of the military?"

Since the question deals with "a Christian," the emphasis should be upon what the NT has to say about the matter. However, the question itself did not originate with the Christian church. Indeed, the issue predates the Christian era. Even in OT times believers faced the problem of involvement in war. Certainly Abraham had given some consideration to the issue prior to commencing armed action against Chedorlaomer's coalition of kings (Genesis 14). He engaged the kings in battle in order to free his nephew Lot and his family.² Since both testaments are the inspired Word of God and "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness,"³ a consideration of the teaching of the whole of Scripture on this issue is in order. "If Christians are to have clear attitudes towards war, they must first come to some understanding of the subject in the Bible, including the Old Testament."⁴ However, in order to keep within the length restraints of this article, the study will limit itself to what is revealed in the NT. The OT has much to say about war, but it is not often directly pertinent to the specific question upon which this study will focus.

Military service is a brotherhood of sorts because a fighting unit must be as one if it is to succeed under fire. It is a strange brotherhood since, in the passing of time, even enemies will regard themselves as having a bond forged in the horror of battle. That is why American and Japanese veterans can meet at Corregidor or Iwo Jima and British, American, and German veterans congregate on the beaches of Normandy fifty years after the fact and shed tears together for departed comrades in arms. Such a brotherhood, however, is not the supreme brotherhood that believers enter through the gospel of Christ.

Military service involves keeping faith with a vision for a nation's freedom and greatness. Nothing less than total commitment is required of a soldier. *Semper fi* is more than a motto for the United States Marine Corps, it must be a way of life—and death. Without total commitment, a man or woman cannot serve as a good soldier in any army.

It is the modern military that finds new slogans that emphasize personal development and individual potential. "Be all that you can be" does not focus on

²Cf. Robert A. Morey, *When Is It Right to Fight?* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1985) 23-25. In regard to the example of Abraham in Genesis 14, Lot and his family were not descendants of Abraham, therefore the action cannot be legitimized by appealing to the Abrahamic Covenant. Likewise, for those who would point to the uniqueness of Israel's situation in the OT with regard to war, Genesis 14 was prior to Israel's existence.

³Second Timothy 3:16—all Scripture quotations are from the NASB unless noted otherwise.

⁴Peter C. Craigie, *The Problem of War in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 16. This volume provides an outstanding study of the issue in the OT in order to encourage a resolution to the problem of Christian involvement in militarism and war.

selfless commitment to one's nation. Such a trend is not unlike the transition experienced in churches that offer a need-based ministry rather than upholding selfless commitment to the Word of God and the cause of Christ.

This push for personal development is associated with a renewed emphasis upon core values and ethics in the military. Every member of the United States Army carries a laminated card entitled "Army Values." On it are the following words:

Loyalty: Bear true faith and allegiance to the U.S. Constitution, the Army, your unit, and other soldiers.

Duty: Fulfill your obligations.

Respect: Treat people as they should be treated.

Selfless-Service: Put the welfare of the nation, the Army, and your subordinates before your own.

Honor: Live up to all the Army values.

Integrity: Do what's right, legally and morally.

Personal Courage: Face fear, danger, or adversity (Physical or Moral).⁵

Both of my sons serve in the American military. Nathan is now a major in the Army and Timothy is a captain in the Marine Corps. Both have made it clear that moral character is vital to proper military leadership and that values-training in the current military is something that committed Christian officers are uniquely qualified to teach. General John A. Wickham, a past Army Chief of Staff, wrote about the importance of moral character for military leaders. He noted that "one does not develop character in the heat of battle or a moment of crisis. Character grows out of the steady application of moral values and ethical behavior in one's life."⁶ The Christian home and Bible-teaching churches are the best institutions for producing individuals with high moral values and consistent ethical behavior.

If moral character were the only issue, Christians would find military service a simple decision. However, the challenge is far more complicated than that. A number of arguments for a Christian to stay out of the military are as follows:

- The military is a profession in which killing people may be a part of the job description.
- The military can be a very worldly environment in which Christians can face all kinds of temptations. . . .
- Jesus said to love your enemies. . . . In contrast, the military is about hitting the

⁵Headquarters, Department of the Army, "Army Values," <http://www.hqda.army.mil/ocsa/values.htm> (30 Jan. 2000).

⁶John A. Wickham, Jr., "Leading—A Commentary," *Army Organizational Effectiveness Journal* 1 (1985):6.

enemy before he hits you.⁷

Some of the hard things about being a Christian in the military include:

- Family separation during deployments can make it tough on the family.
- Family separation can be a source of temptation. . . .
- It's hard to be an evangelical witness on the job. . . .
- There is a lot of peer pressure to drink alcohol, curse, and party "on the town" in places of ill repute.
- You have to be politically correct. . . .
- I might have to kill someone someday. . . .⁸

War is violent and terrible. During the American Civil War in 1862, Confederate troops held a low ridge called Marye's Heights near Fredericksburg, Virginia. Union troops sent to assault Marye's Heights had to cross exposed ground. Wave after wave of Union troops charged but were cut down before they could reach the Confederate lines. Over 12,000 were slain. Watching the battle, Gen. Robert E. Lee turned to Gen. James Longstreet, whose men were holding Marye's Heights, "It is well that war is so terrible; else we would grow too fond of it."⁹ Any man, woman, or child who has experienced the horrors of war firsthand knows how awful the toll of war can be. That toll is perhaps the strongest argument (outside Scripture itself) for devoting time to an examination of the Christian's involvement in the military.

The violence of military conflict creates a natural tension with the normally peaceful nature of Christian living. One must not forget the significance of non-violence in Christian character and behavior, but must remember the following biblical truths:

1. Non-violence is preferable to violence (cf. Rom 12:17-21).
2. Non-violence is more consistent with Christian morals (cf. Matt 5:9, 38-48; 1 Tim

⁷Nathan Bedford Forrest, a Confederate general, was reminiscing with Gen. John Hunt Morgan about their exploits in Tennessee and Kentucky in the summer of 1862. Morgan wanted to know how Forrest had captured the garrison and stores at Murfreesboro in spite of federal forces filling the surrounding countryside. Forrest replied, "I just took the short cut and got there first with the most men." His answer has been enshrined as "I got there fustest with the mostest." Cf. Clifton Fadiman, ed., *The Little, Brown Book of Anecdotes* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1985) 214. Forrest's statement aptly describes the nature of military engagement and the concept of preemptive strike.

⁸Capt. Timothy Edward Barrick, personal communication, 7 Feb 2000. The downing of Iran Air 655 by the USS Vincennes on July 3, 1988, is an illustration of the final point made by Capt. Barrick. In the midst of a firefight with Iranian gunboats, the Vincennes mistook the civilian airliner for an attacking military aircraft and shot it down with surface-to-air missiles taking the lives of 290 civilians from six nations.

⁹Fadiman, ed., *The Little, Brown Book of Anecdotes* 348.

3:3).

However, the Scriptures themselves do not allow the believer to seek peace at any price (cf. John 2:13-17; Acts 23:1-10; 1 Cor 4:19-21; Gal 2:5-14; Eph 5:11; 2 John 9-11; 3 John 9-10). Granted, the situations to which Scripture passages refer are non-military in nature. However, there is a line to be drawn when standing up to the forces of evil. There are occasions in the course of Christian life when there cannot be peace—when it would be unchristian to compromise or to fail to act unpeaceably toward someone. Sometimes Christians shun confrontation while using Christian love, compassion, and mercy as an excuse. That can result in direct disobedience to Scripture—as in the matter of exercising church discipline against a sinning brother or sister in Christ.

Francis Schaeffer declared that “to refuse to do what I can for those under the power of oppressors is nothing less than a failure of Christian love. It is to refuse to love my neighbor as myself.”¹⁰ He went on to say that was why he was not a pacifist: “Pacifism in this poor world in which we live—this lost world—means that we desert the people who need our greatest help.”¹¹ Peace at any price is never right, whether it is in the realm of spiritual warfare, church discipline, or government.

Does a posture in defense of truth and morality include military action? Christian apologists have offered four major views in the search of answers to this question.

Four Views

Nonresistance. The title chosen for this view reflects the words of Matthew 5:39: “Do not resist him who is evil.”¹² However, although physical force may not be employed to resist evil, spiritual means may be enlisted to combat evil (cf. Luke 6:27-36; Rom 12:21; 2 Cor 10:3-4; 2 Tim 2:1-2; Jas 4:7; 1 Pet 5:8-9). In this view the Christian is dedicated to the work of the gospel as his/her highest priority as a citizen of a heavenly kingdom. One may pray for peace and must support the government, but must never be involved in any action that takes the life of another human being. If the unbelieving government needs to fight a war to fulfill its obligations to defend its citizens, let it do so, but no Christian should be an active

¹⁰Francis A. Schaeffer, “The Secular Humanist World View Versus the Christian World View and Biblical Perspectives on Military Preparedness,” in Francis Schaeffer, Vladimír Bukovsky, and James Hitchcock, *Who Is for Peace?* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983) 23.

¹¹Ibid. Schaeffer uses the illustration of the obligation of Christian love to stop (by any means necessary) a big man from beating a tiny tot to death, if one were to come upon such atrocious conduct (23-24).

¹²Matt 5:39 is best interpreted as a reference to personal interaction with other individuals in daily conduct, not interaction between armies or governments in a time of war.

member of combat troops.¹³ Christians holding this viewpoint ought to request non-combatant status when fulfilling a military obligation.¹⁴

Christian pacifism.¹⁵ The basic philosophy undergirding the nonresistance view is also foundational to the Christian pacifist viewpoint. The key difference is that the Christian pacifist will not serve in the military in any role. Whereas the nonresistance adherent may serve in a non-combatant role, the Christian pacifist must be a conscientious objector.¹⁶ Views that tend to pacifism rest upon texts in the Sermon on the Mount (cf. Matt 5:9, 21-26, 38-48). This viewpoint also relies on the Scriptural background of Matthew 5:21 in Exodus 20:13/Deuteronomy 5:17.¹⁷ The Christian pacifist believes that Christians are called upon to counteract this world's warlike tendencies by promoting the spiritual love and peace which Christ exemplified.

Just war. Adherents to the just war viewpoint have sought to establish guidelines to ensure the exercise of the military option in a just fashion. Those

¹³Cf. Keith B. Payne and Karl I. Payne, *A Just Defense: The Use of Force, Nuclear Weapons & Our Conscience* (Portland, Ore.: Multnomah, 1987) 39, 47-49; Herman A. Hoyt, "Nonresistance," in *War: Four Christian Views*, ed. Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1981) 29-57.

¹⁴Serving in a non-combatant role does not guarantee that an individual will be safe. On March 1, 1967, during the 1st Cavalry Division's Operation Pershing, Specialist 4th Class Jerry Duane Byers was killed by an armor piercing round at Binh Duong, South Vietnam. Jerry was one of my closest friends. He held the nonresistance viewpoint and requested assignment as a medic. War claimed his life at the tender age of 20. This journal article is dedicated to his memory.

¹⁵Cf. Richard McSorley, *New Testament Basis of Peacemaking*, 3rd rev. ed. (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald, 1985). McSorley discusses five principles demonstrating that war is incompatible with NT teachings. He also offers responses to nine different NT texts employed by advocates of the just war position. In this same volume he also answers sixteen objections to the Christian pacifist position.

¹⁶Payne and Payne, *A Just Defense* 61-74; Myron S. Augsburger, "Christian Pacifism," in *War: Four Christian Views* 81-97. If the government views refusal to serve in the military as a criminal act (as in a time of war), the consistent Christian pacifist would accept whatever punishment the government should deem appropriate—cf. Everett F. Harrison, "Romans," in vol. 10 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1976) 137.

¹⁷The sixth commandment does not refer to either war or capital punishment (cf. Gen 9:5, 6).. Primarily, the command prohibits any member of the covenant community of Israel from committing murder. The same covenant law contained instruction regarding war (Deuteronomy 20). Cf. Craigie, *The Problem of War in the Old Testament* 55-63. Obviously, neither the divine Giver of the revelation nor the Spirit-led recorder of that revelation thought that the two passages were in need of reconciliation. It is equally obvious from Matthew 5:21 that the principle of the sixth commandment has a divine intention beyond just the Israelite community under Mosaic Law. If there were any question about that intent, one merely has to read the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37).

criteria include the following:¹⁸

1. A just cause is basically defensive in posture, not aggressive.
2. The intent must also be just—the objectives must be peace and the protection of innocent lives.
3. War must be a matter of last resort when all attempts at reconciliation or peaceful resolution are exhausted.
4. A just war must be accompanied by a formal declaration by a properly constituted and authorized body.
5. The objectives must be limited. Unconditional surrender or total destruction are unjust means.¹⁹
6. Military action must be proportionate both in the weaponry employed and the troops deployed.
7. Non-combatants must be protected and military operations must demonstrate the highest possible degree of discrimination.
8. Without a reasonable hope for success, no military action should be launched.²⁰

Although the just war position may seem fairly straightforward, it is, in reality, a very complex matter. Consider the possible combinations and interrelationships of the factors: (1) unjust cause and just means; (2) just cause and unjust means; (3) unjust cause and unjust means; and, (4) just cause and just means. Remember, too, that all of these possible combinations apply to at least two different sides in the

¹⁸Payne and Payne, *A Just Defense* 41-43; Arthur F. Holmes, "The Just War," in *War: Four Christian Views* 117-35. Cf. also Holmes, ed., *War and Christian Ethics* 4-5. These criteria are not recognized equally by all just war advocates. Leroy Walters, *Five Classic Just-War Theories* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms, 1971), argues that the position is not monolithic—each theory presents its own list of criteria or conditions. Some people would argue that nations tend to apply these criteria as post facto justification—see Reuven Firestone, review of *War and Its Discontents: Pacifism and Quietism in the Abrahamic Traditions*, ed. by J. Patout Burns, *Journal of Jewish Studies* 50/1 (Spring 1999):178.

¹⁹This particular point can be debated. If a military power is bent on genocide or characteristically acts with conspicuous and determined inhumanity, unconditional surrender might be the very best way to conclude a war by which that power is to be defeated. The moral problem of *haram* (sometimes having reference to total destruction) in the OT has been discussed in detail by Charles Sherlock in *The God Who Fights: The War Tradition in Holy Scripture*, vol. 6 in *Rutherford Studies in Contemporary Theology* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House/Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 1993) 97-104.

²⁰Realistically, the utilitarian estimate of the possibility of a successful war is what governs whether or not states engage in warfare. It is not usually a question of should a nation go to war, but a knowledge of the ability to wage war successfully, that is the deciding factor. Rarely do nations inferior in might and power initiate a war with an 'evil' aggressor, simply to prove the justness of their cause" (Capt. Nathan Daniel Barrick, personal communication, Nov 19, 1997). The criterion of success must not carry over into personal conduct. Christians should be willing to lose their lives in an attempt to save someone else's life even if the possibility for success is far less than the potential for failure (cf. John 15:13).

conflict: friend and foe.²¹ How should each of the criteria apply to each side in the conflict? “Since human beings of a mind and will are involved on both sides of a conflict, it is often hard to determine what is the just cause in asserting or shunning a ‘just’ hegemony.”²² War is never simple. It is always complex. It is not a black-and-white matter, nor even gray—if anything, it is blood red.

Preventive war. This view is an extension of the just war position. It supports preemptive action or first-strike options (even with nuclear weapons, when necessary) if an enemy’s aggression is thought to be imminent and unavoidable. Preventive war adherents also advocate the use of military force to recover territory unjustly seized by an aggressor.²³ Indeed, such aggressors may be struck without warning while they are residing in their conquered territory in apparent peace.

Governmental Authority in the New Testament

Just war advocates normally base their position on passages revealing the divine origin and approval of government and its functions. Romans 13:1-7 is the cornerstone of this viewpoint. Consider a question in regard to this important text: May Christians wield the government’s biblical sword? The apostle Paul represents the government as a divinely constituted authority (vv. 1, 2).

It was to Paul a matter of little importance whether the Roman emperor was appointed by the senate, the army, or the people; whether the assumption of the imperial authority by Caesar was just or unjust, or whether his successors had a legitimate claim to the throne or not. It was his object to lay down the simple principle, that magistrates are to be obeyed.²⁴

Even though the civil and military assets of the Roman Empire would be employed to slaughter Christians, the Holy Spirit directed the apostle to instruct believers in Rome to submit to the Roman government. Even though the emperors of Rome lived profligate lives steeped in immorality and debauchery, their authority was legitimate. Every believer was to submit to that authority unless the demands of that govern-

²¹The writer is indebted to Steve Watkins (a former Navy Seal) for these observations regarding the complexities inherent in the just war position (personal communication, Oct 27, 1999). Watkins also suggested that guerrilla tactics, infiltration by means of special operations, and insurgency compound the difficulties involved in the discussion.

²²Barrick, personal communication, Nov 19, 1997.

²³Payne and Payne, *A Just Defense* 57-58; Harold O. J. Brown, “The Crusade or Preventive War,” in *War: Four Christian Views* 153-68.

²⁴Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (reprint of 1886 ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 407.

ment directly contradicted divine command (cf. Acts 5:29). All other “resistance is a violation of God’s law and meets with judgment.”²⁵ According to Everett Harrison, the seeming contradiction of Romans 13:1-2 and Acts 5:29 might be handled in two different ways: (1) assume that the apostle merely presents the norm stripped of any possible biblical exception²⁶ and (2) apply the principle of Romans 8:28, trusting that God eventually will “bring good out of apparent evil.”²⁷

The text is also explicit on the role of God-ordained governmental authority: the sword is to be employed in avenging²⁸ wrong (vv. 3, 4). As John Murray explains,

The sword is so frequently associated with death as the instrument of execution (cf. Matt. 26:52; Luke 21:24; Acts 12:2; 16:27; Heb. 11:34, 37; Rev. 13:10) that to exclude its use for this purpose in this instance would be so arbitrary as to bear upon its face prejudice contrary to the evidence.²⁹

Government cannot be passive nor can it avoid actions that might involve the taking of life in order to accomplish its Scriptural mandate. “The Biblical state protects against tyranny from within (crime) and tyranny from without (invasion).”³⁰ Interestingly, this fact is recognized by all four major views concerning Christian involvement in the military. For some, however, the Christian must not take part in any avenging action, although they would allow non-Christians in the government to do so.

Subjection to governmental authority is not just to avoid punishment for civil disobedience. Subjection is a matter of maintaining a good conscience with

²⁵John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols. in 1, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968) 2:149.

²⁶“The way is then open to justify revolution in cases where rights are denied and liberties taken away, making life intolerable for freedom-loving men and women, since the state has ceased to fulfill its God-appointed function. However, Christians will not as a church lead in revolution, but only as citizens of the commonwealth. At the very least, under circumstances involving a collapse of justice, the Christian community is obliged to voice its criticism of the state’s failure, pointing out the deviation from the divinely ordained pattern. Subjection to the state is not to be confused with unthinking, blind, docile conformity” (Harrison, “Romans” 138).

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸*Avenge* is a better translation to employ since it “is generally used in the sense of achieving justice, whereas *revenge* . . . stresses retaliation” (William Morris, ed., *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979] 91).

²⁹Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* 2:152-53.

³⁰P. Andrew Sandlin, “War, the Bible, and the State,” *Chalcedon Report* 4/8 (May 2000):3.

regard to one's obligation to God (v. 5).³¹ This involves active monetary support for the government by all legitimate forms of taxation (v. 6). Not even the Christian pacifist is given the option of refusing to support the government financially in its military actions.³² Whether the Christian is on the front lines of battle pulling the trigger or serving as a non-combatant or remaining at home as a conscientious objector, each must pay the taxes for that war. By those taxes, every Christian is a participant in that war and the killing that takes place in its progress. An interesting fact is that the very taxes that Paul exhorted the Roman Christians to pay eventually financed Paul's own execution.

Paul was not the first to experience this irony. Christ Himself ordered the payment of taxes to Caesar and was put to death by Roman soldiers paid by those taxes. Historically, the church has carefully defined a balance of duty for Christians in these matters. Augustine's statement is representative:

So if anyone thinks that because he is a Christian he does not have to pay taxes or tribute nor show the proper respect to the authorities who take care of these things, he is in very great error. Likewise, if anyone thinks that he ought to submit to the point where he accepts that someone who is his superior in temporal affairs should have authority even over his faith, he falls into an even greater error. But the balance which the Lord himself prescribed is to be maintained: Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's but unto God the things which are God's (Mt 22:21).³³

First Peter 2:13-17 lends support to the submission so carefully delineated in Romans 13:1-7. Peter states quite clearly that such submission is the will of God (1 Pet 2:15). The one who rebels in this area rebels against God. Although this study focuses upon the matter of military service, recognition that the role of the civil police in society is also a function of the avenging arm of government is relevant.

³¹Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* 2:154.

³²Does the Pauline position contradict the rallying cry of the American Revolution that decried British taxation? Many of the American colonists had fled religious persecution in Europe. They committed themselves to freedom of religion and freedom from tyranny. Taxation without representation was but one aspect of the problem; excessive taxation was also a problem. The British crown's taxes were considered a threat to the welfare of the colonists. The vast distances that separated the colonies from the British government hindered good communication to such an extent that a local, independent government was deemed necessary. Whether or not the American Revolution was contrary to Scripture, modern Christians cannot appeal to its example for avoiding taxation since the two situations are very different. For more detailed attention to the complexities involved in Christian involvement in the Revolutionary War, see Alan Johnson, "The Bible and War in America: An Historical Survey," *JETS* 28/2 (June 1985):172-74.

³³P. F. Landes, ed., *Augustine on Romans*, SBL Texts and Translations 23, Early Christian Literature Series 6 (Chico, Calif.: Scholars, 1982) 41-43. Cf. also Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 406.

If a Christian must avoid military service, neither must that Christian be a police officer. Christian pacifists sometimes attempt to distinguish between police action and military action, allowing the former while denying the legitimacy of the latter.³⁴

Does the NT give any examples of Christians acting as officers of government who bear the responsibility of wielding the avenging sword of Romans 13:4? Are they approved or disapproved? Were converts required to resign from such positions when they entered the early church? Consider the following:

- Cornelius was a centurion, a military officer of high rank in a battalion of Roman fighting men (Acts 10:1). Although he was a soldier on active duty, he is described as “devout” (εὐσεβής, *eusebēs*, v. 2), a term that, at the least, describes a man of high moral character and piety. He became a convert to Christ and was baptized publicly (v. 48). The Scripture is silent about his status from that point on.
- Sergius Paulus was a proconsul in the Roman government in Cyprus (13:7). A proconsul’s (a Roman provincial governor) authority included ordering the execution of criminals and deploying Roman troops in battle when needed.³⁵ He became a believer (v. 12). The Bible gives no record of any resignation from his office upon becoming a Christian.
- Erastus (Rom 16:23) was an active city treasurer even after his conversion. As a government officer he managed the funds that would be utilized in the execution of criminals and the payment of police. As an active official, he could be called upon to wield the Roman sword of authority both figuratively and literally.
- Zenas (Titus 3:13) was an active Christian lawyer. In the Roman system of the courts, he played a role in the application of the avenging sword—the application of capital punishment.

Somewhat related to the matter of Christians bearing a sword is the instruction Jesus gave to His disciples for taking prudent measures for self-protection in Luke 22:36. Although it might seem at odds with His teaching in Matthew 26:52, it should be obvious that the two are not mutually exclusive. Luke 22:36 “more likely indicates, not a reversal of normal rules for the church’s mission, but an exception in a time of crisis (cf. ‘but now,’ *alla nyn*). Jesus is not being ironic but

³⁴McSorley, *New Testament Basis of Peacemaking* 22-23. Cf. Loraine Boettner, *The Christian Attitude Toward War*, 3rd ed. (Phillipsburg, N. J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1985) 45-47.

³⁵These proconsular powers can be compared to the lesser powers of a procurator like Pontius Pilate who employed Roman troops in the slaughter of Galileans (Luke 13:1) and the crucifixion of Jesus and the two thieves (Matt 27:1-38). Cf. F. F. Bruce, “Palestine, Administration of (Roman),” *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 5:97-98; John F. Hall, “Procurator,” *ibid.*, 5:473-74.

thoroughly serious.”³⁶ In regard to this passage, Loraine Boettner declared, “If we lived under such conditions we would have occasion to become much better acquainted with weapons than we now are.”³⁷

On the basis of the Gospels and the teachings of Jesus, a number of arguments supporting the believer’s participation in the military are the following:³⁸

- Jesus’s approval of a king who waged war against wicked people (Matt 21:33-41).
- After Peter cut off the ear of the servant of the high priest (John 18:11), Jesus did not tell him to rid himself of his sword, merely to resheath it—for future use?
- In John 18:36 Jesus stated that it would have been proper for His disciples to defend His kingdom with swords if it had been an earthly kingdom.

New Testament Analogy

Throughout the Bible the Holy Spirit led the writers in the choice of legitimate metaphors for describing both the character of God and the character of the believer. It is axiomatic that inherently evil vocations or activities are not employed for such descriptions. The simile of the thief (1 Thess 5:4; 2 Pet 3:10; Rev 3:3; 16:15) in eschatological judgment is not an exception to this principle. The text does not say that the Lord *is* a thief, only that He will come *as* a thief comes (viz., unexpectedly). The metaphor of a thief is reserved for one who is anti-Christ (cf. John 10:1, 10).

The metaphor of warfare, armor, and the soldier himself is common throughout the NT. The Christian puts on the armor of God (Eph 6:10-20). Each believer is to be a “good soldier” (2 Tim 2:3-4). Believers are to be active participants in waging spiritual warfare (2 Cor 10:1-6). If being a soldier was as inherently wicked as being a prostitute, a thief, or a murderer, the Holy Spirit would not have permitted the writers of the NT to employ that metaphor.

It is hardly conceivable that the Scriptures should present the Christian life under a symbolism having to do so distinctly with soldiering and warfare and at the same time

³⁶Walter L. Liefeld, “Luke,” in vol. 8 of *EBC*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 1029. For a contrary view, cf. Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951) 570-71: “They will henceforth, with all their strength and energy, have to find their own way through a hostile world. They must, the Saviour declares in a striking figure, as His followers in the struggle of life, be just as determined and whole-hearted as a fighting man who gives up everything, even his garment, as long as he only possesses a sword to continue the struggle with.” *Ibid.*, 572: “There is no doubt (in the light of Jesus’ whole teaching and life) that the Lord intended them in a figurative sense.” See also F. Godet, *A Commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke*, trans. M. D. Cusin, Clark’s Foreign Theological Library, 4th Series, 46 (reprint; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957) 2:302, and, McSorley, *New Testament Basis of Peacemaking* 39-43.

³⁷Boettner, *The Christian Attitude Toward War* 24.

³⁸For a fuller listing of such potential arguments, see Morey, *When Is It Right to Fight?* 39-42.

repudiate the reality for which that symbolism stands as always and everywhere wrong.³⁹

In addition, that Christ Himself will engage in actual, blood-shedding, life-taking warfare when He returns to set up His kingdom (Rev 19:11-21) is significant. He cannot be the Righteous One, the Holy One, if war is inherently evil and the combatant's role satanic. When He comes, the Lord will instruct His people to engage in that future warfare (cf. Obad 15-21). Would He demand His people to commit sin? Of course not! Therefore, warfare cannot be inherently sinful.

Christians in Military Service

Why should a Christian serve in the military?⁴⁰ Are there any positive points to be advanced for such service? Soldiers at war are serving in a situation that can only be described spiritually as desperate. Men occupy a position where death is a real possibility for them to experience—a horrible and agonizing death by violent means. Such men are in desperate need of the gospel and the ministry of Christians. War itself creates an atmosphere of destruction and inhumanity. Violent deeds may bring out the very worst of the sinful nature's traits. Christians may need to stand in the gap in order to maintain decency, order, and just action.

Such a thing as a just war may also occur. World War II could very well make the claim of being a just war.⁴¹ Doubtless, there are others and will be others. War is the result of sin (cf. Jas 4:1-2), but war itself is not necessarily sin. "The one who takes original sin seriously knows that life is lived on a descending escalator and that it is a tough job even to stand still."⁴² It becomes all too clear to any sound theological thinking that the rejection of the employment of force might be a recipe for anarchy or tyranny attended by multiplied suffering and death for many innocent people. That is why all four major views of Christian involvement in war uphold the right of a state to maintain a standing army and to order it onto the field of battle. The issue is the degree of individual Christian involvement. "All violence is caused by sin, but not all violence is necessarily sinful—it may even be the occasion of virtue when it calls for courage and self-sacrifice."⁴³ In short, the need is for men

³⁹Boettner, *The Christian Attitude Toward War* 33.

⁴⁰Origen (ca. A.D. 185-254) offered this question rhetorically from a slightly different perspective: "Do not those who are priests at certain shrines, and those who attend on certain gods, as you account them, keep their hands free from blood, that they may with hands unstained and free from human blood offer the appointed sacrifices to your gods; and even when war is upon you, you never enlist the priests in the army" ("The Soldier's Chaplet," in *War and the Christian Conscience: From Augustine to Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. by Albert Marrin [Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1971] 33-34).

⁴¹T. E. Wilder, "American Empire and Christian Silence," *Chalcedon Report* 4/8 (May 2000):10.

⁴²John W. Wenham, *The Goodness of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1974) 98.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 99.

who will stand for God and for His Word in the world—including in the military among soldiers who need the gospel.

The Christian's Conscience

Certain principles of Christian action apply even to considering participation in the military. Each believer is accountable to God (cf. Acts 5:29). No believer can leave this decision to someone else. Each Christian has liberty to determine the will of God for his or her life (cf. Romans 14). Part of that determination must take into account the dual citizenship of the Christian as being *in the world* while not being *of the world* (cf. John 15:19; 17:11).⁴⁴

Consider the matter of prayer. Do Christians pray that the Lord Jesus will return soon? In point of fact, we are praying that

the whole pitiless machinery of war may go forward to bring, if possible, a speedy conclusion. It is mangled bodies, tortured minds, orphaned children that we are concerned with. There will be unstable children growing up to be parents of unstable homes, till the third and fourth generation, as a result of our war.⁴⁵

Do Christians pray for the deliverance of Christians from persecution in places like China, the Sudan, and Pakistan? Do Christians pray for the release of the missionaries held hostage in Colombia? What will be the outcome if those prayers are answered by God? Christ eventually will come to judge those who have rejected Him and the gospel concerning Him. God may choose, in the meantime, to utilize war in China, the Sudan, or Pakistan to accomplish the deliverance of His people from persecution. The answer to these prayers may be war. Do believers know what they are praying? Any who have prayed these prayers cannot claim to have hands free of blood just because they have refused to be a soldier in their nation's military.

Christians should not too hastily claim the role of "peacemaker" (Matt 5:9). Such a role is not necessarily antagonistic to the role of a warrior. Christ's employment of the Greek term (εἰρηνοποιός, *eirēnopoios*) is the only Scriptural occurrence. Outside Scripture it is found only as a description of Caesar who

⁴⁴The example of William Penn illustrates one direction in which a believer might be led: "Among the people influenced by [George] Fox's teachings was William Penn. The son of a distinguished admiral, Penn used to wear a sword as a reminder of his own and his family's martial tradition. As he came further under the spell of the Quaker doctrine of nonviolence, he began to doubt whether it was appropriate for him to wear such an ornament. He sought Fox's counsel. 'Wear thy sword as long as thou canst,' was the Quaker leader's advice. A few weeks later when Fox met Penn, he asked him with a smile, 'Where is thy sword?' Replied Penn, 'I wore it as long as I could'" (Fadiman, ed., *The Little, Brown Book of Anecdotes* 217). Penn's decision regarding participation in the military did not remove him from government service or from the payment of taxes in support of the military.

⁴⁵Wenham, *The Goodness of God* 166.

wielded the sword of military might to produce the *pax Romana*.⁴⁶ A true peacemaker will not make peace at any price nor will he or she shun the employment of legitimate force to produce that peace.

Conclusion

The issue is not one that can be decided quickly nor easily. No believer dare take the matter lightly. It is a difficult matter that involves the conscience of believers and perhaps even their Christian liberty. Note John the Baptist's response to the soldiers who inquired what they should do as works that would appropriately result from repentance:

And some soldiers were questioning him, saying, "And *what about us*, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "*Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse anyone falsely, and be content with your wages.*"⁴⁷

They were not told to resign from their vocation as soldiers, but to be content in that position with the wages it paid. Their behavior was to be just and honest—even while remaining soldiers. They were not instructed to resign, the life of a soldier not being viewed as inimical to true repentance. Ultimately, however, John's instruction must be recognized as a pre-Christian declaration. Also, it was directed at those already in the military, not to those who might consider joining. These tensions have been recognized since the earliest centuries of the Christian church.⁴⁸ The passage is offered here as a catalyst for further study. Has its teaching been revoked or revised by Christ or the apostles? What are its logical and theological implications in the context of all the rest of Scripture's teachings on this subject?

The issue of war might be ignored for a time, but every individual must, at some time, come to grips with it personally. Peter Craigie described his encounter with the issue in the following way:

When I was a theological student, I worried about the "holy war" problem in the OT and sought the advice of a professor for further reading. He recommended one or two commentaries and von Rad's *Der heilige Krieg im alten Israel* ("The Holy War in Ancient Israel"). I went off to study and found a mass of material of linguistic, historical, and cultural interest. But I found nothing which spoke to my problem, the theological anxiety I had about the identification of God with war. One cannot generalize from a single experience, yet I have met a large number of clergy since that time who

⁴⁶Cf. H. Beck and C. Brown, "Peace," *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. by Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976) 2:776-77.

⁴⁷Luke 3:14 [emphasis added].

⁴⁸Cf. Harnack, *Militia Christi* 70-71.

experienced the same problem in their theological training.⁴⁹

It is up to each believer to go to the Word of God in order to study this issue for himself/herself. Each believer's good conscience is at stake in the decision. It is the opinion of this writer that the just war viewpoint offers the greatest consistency with the overall view of both the OT and the NT. Such a viewpoint ought not to be imposed on any individual believer, however. Perhaps the Scripture's silence about any resignation from military service by converted soldiers on active duty is but an indication that the matter falls in the realm of freedom of conscience rather than the realm of absolute morality. That is the best answer to the question, "Should a Christian be a member of the military?"

⁴⁹Craigie, *The Problem of War in the Old Testament* 106.