

A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE ON WAR

By Denver Cheddie

No one ever really wins in war. All parties involved suffer immeasurable losses. So it has been said, and history has verified this. But how different would history have been had Hitler and others been allowed to go unchecked? What precedent would that have set for future racist dictators? How should Christians view war?

Christian Schools of Thought Concerning War

1. Holy War. These people believe that war is a duty to God. Proponents of this view included the Crusaders, who attempted to force others into Christianity. They claim that in Matt. 10:34-39 Jesus condoned such violence, when He claimed to bring a sword, not peace. In context however, Jesus was teaching that as followers of Him, we would be the objects of persecution and hatred, but we must be willing to sacrifice our lives for Him. **He never taught us to kill for Him but to die for Him.** The apostles, early Christians and church fathers were totally against violence and never physically resisted their persecutors. Unfortunately Holy War extremists have given Christianity a bad name. Many secularists continue to brandish Christianity as a violent religion because of the past abuses of this minority group, whom most believers today would not even categorize as true Christians.

2. **Pacifism.** These represent the other extreme in the Christian spectrum. Using scriptures like Matt. 5:39, they believe we should never resist evil, but always turn the other cheek. It is important to note that Jesus did not say to turn a blind eye. Furthermore, pacifists misunderstand one of the fundamental differences between the OT and the NT. In the OT God addressed nations rather than individuals. The reverse is the case in the NT. Jesus' command to never retaliate applies to individuals, not nations. Again this group is a minority.

3. **Non-Violent Resistance.** These differ from pacifists in that they allow for non co-operation and non-physical resistance to authority. They are the types to march in protest of military action, perhaps protest in other ways. The same arguments against pacifism applies here.

4. **Just War.** These believe that war is morally permissible under certain circumstances.

Personal, National and International Crimes

It is common to hear ignorant people quote the 6th Commandment, "Thou shall not kill" to argue against war. These are people who know nothing about the Bible except a few convenient scripture verses, and who still think that the 10 Commandments are it's core teaching. "Thou shall not kill" is a command given to individuals. The same Bible commands governments and

relevant authorities to execute (kill) those guilty of breaking the law. There is a time to kill (Eccl. 3:3) and a people who have been authorized by God to “kill”. That has not changed in the NT. We are still forbidden to retaliate to personal offenses and to shed innocent blood (Rom. 13:9). Governments still have the right to execute law breakers (Rom. 13:4).

A major difference between the OT and NT is that Jesus completely removed personal vengeance from the realm of the individual (Matt. 5:38-42). Paul restated that teaching in Rom. 12:17-21. There was room for personal vengeance in the OT. In Num. 35, Moses instructed the building of six “cities of refuge”. In the event an individual killed another by accident (manslaughter), the “killer” must then flee to one of those cities of refuge to await trial. There he would be protected from the “avenger of blood”. If he dared to venture outside of that city and the avenger of blood found him, the avenger would be free to kill him without the guilt of murder (Num. 35:27). Jesus seems to have taken away that right from Christians. Personal vengeance now belongs to Godⁱⁱⁱ (Rom. 12:19).

However at a national and international level, God has left it up to governments and the relevant authorities to carry out justice (Rom. 13:4, 5). Human governments are agents of God’s punishment and vengeance. Punishment for international crimes fall under their jurisdiction. A government is responsible to deal with lawlessness at a national level and by extension, international coalitions (e.g. the UN) are to deal with lawlessness at an international level. This is where war comes in. Regarding national and international crimes, the principles of the OT have never been revoked.

Reasons God Commanded War in the OT^[iii]

1. **The Land of Palestine.** This aspect of war is unique to the Middle East. God promised Abraham the land of Palestine, much of which were at the time occupied by the descendants of Joktan (Gen. 10:26-30), a descendant of Noah's son, Shem. Joktan is the forefather of many Arab tribes, particularly in Arabia. Some Arab tribes, particularly in Northern Africa, trace their ancestry to Ishmael, Abraham's son. God promised to make great nations of both sons of Abraham, Isaac (Gen. 22:18; 26:3; 28:13) and Ishmael (Gen. 21:18). This is the basis of the war which officially began in Joshua and continues to this very day – Israel vs. the rest of the Middle East. It is only in the final war (Armageddon) will Jesus personally return to end the Middle East madness and the Arab threat forever, and in so doing, fulfill his 4000 year old promise to Abraham and Israel. It is to be noted that God never promised to make America a great nation or to keep her great. They are not even mentioned in Bible prophecy or the book of Revelation, unless of course one were to read them into prophecy. History is bigger than America. They would be well advised not to over-interfere in the land dispute between Israel and Palestine.

2. **Self Defense.** Prior to entering the Promised Land, Israel engaged in a handful of battles, four of which were in self defense. The Amalekites (Ex. 17:8-16), Arad (Num. 21:1-3), the Amorites (Num. 21:21-32) and Bashan (Num. 21:33-35) all attacked Israel in the wilderness. Israel were

forced to fight back and defend herself. Only a fool would allow his people to be attacked and not defend. Only a fool would allow his family to be raped and plundered without raising a finger. Such a person is worse than an infidel^[iii]. In Judges 12, Jephthah defended his family and household from Ephraimite extremists. Vengeance for personal offenses belong to God, but it is a man's right to defend his family and place of abode.

3. **Vengeance.** In Num. 31:1-12, God commanded Israel to take vengeance upon the Midianites. This was apparently because under the counsel of Balaam, Balak sent the Midianite women to seduce the Israelite men, thus bringing the curse of God upon Israel (Num. 25:1-9 cf. Rev. 2:14). Balaam realized he could not curse Israel whom God had blessed, and Balak realized he could not overpower them by physical might. So they came up with a plan to get Israel to bring a curse upon themselves. I would categorize this vengeance attack as a form of proactive self defense. They needed to prevent the Midianites and the other nations from doing this again.

4. **Just Cause.** In Gen. 14 there was a war among various kings. Abraham chose not to meddle until the war began to affect his nephew, Lot (vs. 12). He was captured by the enemies of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham gathered his men, and fought on behalf of the king of Sodom (an evil nation) to rescue Lot. This became a just cause for Abraham. The scope of "just cause" is vast. I believe that Desert Storm (1991) was a just cause because helpless Kuwaitis were being massacred. It may have also been a case of proactive self defense. I do not believe that the

second Iraq war (Desert Shield, I think) was a just cause. It was a war based on lies and woefully inadequate intelligence on the part of the US.

Conditions for War Today

Applying the principles of both Testaments today, we can arrive at the following.

1. **War as a Last Resort.** In Gen. 26:17-22 Isaac had a conflict with the herdsmen of Gerar over the ownership of certain wells. He chose not to fight, but to just move to another location until there was no more conflict. If this could always be achieved, the world would be a very peaceful place. I believe war should only be considered after diplomatic talks have failed, and military action remains the only remaining alternative.
2. **Target Offenders Only.** God commanded Israel to kill every man, woman, child and beast when taking possession of the Promised Land. There was a specific reason for this. God knew that had they left any trace of the enemy intact, it would eventually become a snare to them to entice them to follow pagan gods (Judges 2:3). This could be called the lesser of two evils – to kill them rather than allow them to seduce God’s people. In the NT of course, the presence of the ungodly is not a snare to Christians, but an opportunity for evangelism. Thus for wars today to be

effective, civilian life should be protected as much as possible, otherwise we would have fallen into the same sin as the offenders.

3. **Costs Should be Weighed.** Prov. 20:18 urges us to seek proper counsel and guidance in waging war. Jesus taught that it was wise to count the costs before going out to war (Luke 14:31-33). This is necessary to determine if the desired mission could be accomplished by military action, if it is worth accomplishing and what the possible losses would be. President GW Bush should have read Luke 14 before launching his personal crusade against Saddam Hussein.

4. **The Church Should Leave it to the Relevant Authorities.** There is no such thing as a Christian holy war. For that matter there is no such thing as a Christian nation^[iv]. War does not involve the church. Jesus never teaches us to fight against other religions in a physical way. The Crusaders and the Catholics of the Dark Ages were wrong. I re-emphasize that war concerns governments and nations, not churches. When the church gets too involved in war and politics, what you end up with are people like Pat Robertson. He averred that the US should undertake a covert operation to take out Hugo Chavez (president of Venezuela) without waging war against his country. After the ensuing media frenzy, he clarified his statement. By "take out", he did not mean "kill", but "kidnap". He actually thought he was making things better.

Conclusion

War is never ideal. According to Isa. 2:4, the ideal means of settling disputes is through wise counsel and dialog. Unfortunately that same verse teaches that only when Jesus sets up his physical kingdom on earth to rule over the nations will such peace reign among people. Between now and then, as long as sinful man is allowed to govern certain parts of the earth, abuse is inevitable. Such abuse must be dealt with by those who are capable of doing so. I believe God holds them accountable for that.

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^[ii] Although God claimed the right to vengeance in Deut. 32:35, this verse speaks of Him reserving the right to vengeance on Israel's enemies, not personal offenders against individuals.

^[iii] Note that not every war was sanctioned by God. Some were carried out apart from Him.

^[iiii] I am speaking of those who refuse to defend their families for "religious reasons", not those who were overpowered by their attackers.

^[iv] There are not Christian states in the same way that there are Islamic states. Some countries however try to build their laws on Christian principles, and this is very noble. But Christianity is an individual matter. Many would like to call USA a Christian nation, but it is questionable whether a country that tolerates gays, practices abortion, and forbids prayer in public schools could be considered that. The church may or may not support the nation in its bid for war. Some may object to the church supporting war on the basis that if we are perceived to be a Christian nation, our chances of ever evangelizing the "enemy" would diminish. But how could we gain a moral advantage to witness to a Kuwaiti if we had it in our power to help them and did nothing? The Church's job is to pray for peaceable living and for God to be glorified in all things. It should keep at its focus evangelism of the lost, and not vengeance.