

The Christian View of War

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“He does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.” *Romans 13:4*

On March 9, 2003, former President Jimmy Carter published an editorial in the *New York Times* condemning the American invasion of Iraq. Carter argued that this was not a just war. Clear alternatives to war did exist, he said, and the United States lacked the proper authority for its stated aim of imposing a regime change in Iraq. Moreover, he charged that the violence inflicted would be out of all proportion to any harm our nation has suffered from Iraq and that a great number of civilian casualties would be likely. Carter thus stated that it was “an almost universal conviction of religious leaders” that the American invasion did not constitute a just war, writing off conservative evangelical dissenters as being wrongly “influenced by their commitment to Israel based on eschatological... theology.”

I have not conducted a scientific poll, but among the great number of Evangelical Christians I know something a very high percentge of them came to the opposite conclusion than the one offered by former President Carter. They, and I, would argue that war was the only credible option left, and that Iraq’s support of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction posed a grave threat to American security. We would point out that American forces went to every extreme to minimize enemy casualties and damage to property, and especially to safeguard the lives of civilians. Obviously, Carter did not ask me or the religious leaders I know, because our “almost universal conviction” was exactly opposite to his.

This shows that when it comes to Christian views of war, and other matters of national policy, one’s assessment probably has more to do with whether he is a Democrat or a Republican, whether he watches CNN or

FOX News, than with whether he claims to be a Christian. “What a shame that Christians cannot be agreed!” Carter must lament as he considers his conservative brothers and sisters, still holding as we do to a view of the Bible he and his group of “almost universal religious leaders” long ago evolved beyond. “What a shame,” we evangelicals respond, “that liberals dare to call themselves Christians while spouting the views of the liberal media!”

A far greater shame, in my view, would be for Christians to limit our reflection on war to the realm of political debate, failing to reflect biblically on this important matter. Most of us will never give a political speech or write an op-ed piece for the New York Times, pontificating on the justice of this or that political event. But as Christians we will talk with people around us. We will shape the experience of wartime for our children. And we will come before God in the secret place of prayer. Those of us who preach and pastor churches will lead prayer meetings and give biblical instruction on such matters as the recent victorious war. Therefore, in this time of war we should reflect in the light of God’s Word. In presenting a Christian view of war, I will consider five headings: the necessity of war, the purpose of war, the justice of war, the glory in war, and finally the end of war.

THE NECESSITY OF WAR

First, let us ask, Are wars necessary? And by implication, Is it necessary for Christians to serve in the armed forces? The vast majority of people today, including Christians, would surely answer that wars are not only evil and destructive but also unnecessary. Especially, the pacifists cry out, “We don’t have to fight wars!”

But the perspective revealed in the Bible takes the other position, namely, that wars are necessary in this present evil world. Not that war is desirable – for it is not – but that war is necessary. J. Douma summarizes: “Surely the Bible is not pacifist. Numerous wars were fought at God’s command or with His approval (Num. 21:14; Dt. 20:16-18; Rev. 19:11, and more), so that we can hardly characterize war with the generalization that it is *sin*.”¹ This does not make war an activity that we should consider normal; we should never look upon times of war as “the good old days,”

¹ J. Douma, *The Ten Commandments* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1996), 239.

although for a number of reasons we often do. Douma states, “War is an abnormal business... Although Scripture presents no prohibition against waging war, the Bible does make clear that war and bloodshed must never be accepted as normal phenomena (Josh. 1:13; Isa. 2:2-4; Mic. 4:1-5). King David was not allowed to build a temple for God because he had waged war and had shed blood.”²

For all the suffering and hardship it inflicts, war is necessary because of the existence of evil in this world and because of the Christian duty to stand in opposition to evil, especially in its most organized forms. The fact is that we live in a world that Paul characterized as “Following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience- 3 among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind” (Eph. 2:2-3). Christians ought not look at footage of the Nazi rallies prior to World War II and ask, “How does this happen?” If we read our Bibles, we know how this happens. It happens the same way Adam and Eve happened to eat the forbidden fruit in the garden: it happens because there are evil spiritual powers at work in this world. Now that man is fallen into the totally depraved state of sin, war happens because, as Paul also said of mankind, “Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known” (Rom. 3:15-17). I know as well as you do what it is to stand before the television watching blood-thirsty mobs crying out for mass murder and to ask, “How can people be like this?” But the very fact that I am astonished reveals that my mind has not yet been sufficiently transformed by God’s Word. In the world described by the Bible, nations will need to defend themselves from violence from their neighbor, and especially righteous nations will need to arm themselves to oppose wicked nations.

A reply may be given to this. The pacifist will say, “I agree with your description of the world but not with the remedy. Jesus has told us to respond to the power of evil by demonstrating the power of love. We ought not to fight evil people but allow them to subject us as an opportunity for us to witness the gospel.” William Barclay takes this position, acknowledging that a peaceful nation that refuses to defend itself is almost certain to be conquered. He then muses, “There will develop at once a quite different kind of warfare – an ideological warfare, a war

² Ibid., 239-240.

between two sets of ideas... Such a warfare can in the last analysis only be decided by seeing which of the two ideologies, creeds, religions, ways of life provides the fullest, the most satisfactory life and the best people."³

We should wonder if Barclay would have held this view if the Nazis had been permitted to achieve their aims of domination. But the best question to ask is whether or not this is the remedy that the Bible proposes that nations and societies undertake in response to the threat of evil. The answer is that it is not. When Jesus was sending his disciples to labor for his sake in the world, he told them, "Let the one who has no sword sell his cloak and buy one" (Lk. 22:36). And, to cite the verse that provides the theme for this conference, Paul flatly informs us that the civil government must bear the sword on God's behalf to establish justice and punish evil (Rom. 13:4).

To admit that war is necessary is the same as to admit that a father is duty bound to defend his children. Were the pacifist ideal consistently applied it would call for a father to stand by while his little son or daughter was physically assault – a monstrous proposition. It is no less monstrous to propose that a civil leader entrusted with the care of the general population should stand by and allow them to suffer violence. C. S. Lewis called for Christians to embrace Jesus' mandate for non-retaliation. But he added:

Insofar as the only relevant facts in the case are an injury to me by my neighbour and a desire on my part to retaliate, then I hold that Christianity command the absolute mortification of that desire. No quarter whatever is given to the voice within us which says, 'He's done it to me, so I'll do it to him.' But the moment you introduce other factors, of course, the problem is altered. Does anyone suppose that Our Lord's hearers understood Him to mean that if a homicidal maniac, attempting to murder a third party, tried to knock me out of the way, I must stand aside and let him get his victim? I at any rate think it impossible they could have so understood Him.⁴

³ William Barclay, *The Ten Commandments*, 81.

⁴ C. S. Lewis, "Why I Am Not a Pacifist," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: MacMillon, 1975), 50.

To deny the necessity of war in a world like ours is to deny our duty to be our neighbor's keeper and to fail to love our neighbors as we ought to love ourselves. It denigrates the impulse of protection of life enshrined in the sixth commandment and sunders the covenantal bonds of mutual responsibility on which society depends. This is why when Boniface was contemplating leaving the army to enter a monastery at the time when the barbarians were attacking Rome, St. Augustine wrote to tell him that his Christian duty could be better served in the military than in the clergy.

THE PURPOSE OF WAR

When we then consider the purpose of war, we find this embedded in the reality of war's necessity. If war is necessary to oppose and overthrow evil in this world, especially when that evil marches under force of arms, then the purpose of war must be to promote life and peace. If it be observed that this proposes a cruel irony – that war is the way of peace – the irony is no less than that found in God's command to Noah, "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed" (Gen. 9:6).

God has not given the civil authority the sword in order to extend his own nation's power, or to act out one nation's hatred against another, or to ensure a sufficient and economical supply of oil. War is not necessary as a way of shaping public opinion prior to elections nor as a program for perpetuating manly virility in succeeding generations. This last proposal is one that has often been advanced as a purpose for war. Francis Bacon, for instance, wrote that war provides exercise to a nation's character in the same way that physical exertion does to the body. He wrote, "No body can be healthy without exercise, neither natural body nor politic: and certainly to a kingdom or estate a just and honourable war is the true exercise."⁵ The fact that this rationale was later espoused by Adolf Hitler is no recommendation.

Instead, the true purpose of war is expressed by Douma: "The goal of war must always be peace, and any program of armament must be pursued in the context of preserving peace."⁶ This is why the bare fact that war involves killing does not argue against war itself. C. S. Lewis wrote, "The doctrine that war is always a greater evil seems to imply a materialist

⁵ Cited from Barclay, 72.

⁶ Douma, 240.

ethic, a belief that death and pain are the greatest evils. But I do not think they are. I think the suppression of a higher religion by a lower, or even a higher secular culture by a lower, a much greater evil.”⁷

This reminds us that God is glorified in war only when war serves his cause of life and peace. Psalm 29:11 connects the blessing of armed might with its intended blessing of peace: “May the LORD give strength to his people! May the LORD bless his people with peace!” God commands, “Turn away from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it” (Ps. 34:14). St. Augustine therefore wrote, “War is waged in order to win peace. Hence, even in warfare, be a peacemaker that you may by conquering your assailants, bring them over to the advantages of peace... Let it be necessity, not your desire, which slays the foe in fight.”⁸

Let us admit that this is a grave challenge to the warrior. The passions of war are not those that in themselves promote peace; we must therefore supply our passions from a source outside of war, namely, from God and his Word. If the warrant for war lies in the sixth commandment’s mandate of the sanctity of life, then the ends of war must be consistent with a commitment to the sanctify of life, along with its dignity and blessing. Moreover, the manner in which a nation wages war must be calculated, so far as possible, to minimize the loss of life and to cultivate a post-war peace.

I have the privilege of stemming from a military family. My father served in the Army for 30 years, fighting in the Vietnam War, and my grandfather served on active duty for forty years, serving in both World Wars and in other conflicts. My great-grandfather served as a cavalry scout in the American West and was present at both Little Big Horn and Wounded Knee. I am the short-timer, having served in the ranks only 13 years. God has blessed me with two sons, and I hope that they, too, will serve God by taking their places in the ranks of our nations men-at-arms. I was talking about this to my oldest son, and I made the comment to him that it is the glory of American war-making that the enemies we vanquish in war have usually become our closest allies and friends after the war. In the heartland of America there are German enclaves that began with prisoners-of-war in the Second World War who did not want to return home after their time of imprisonment in America. America wages war

⁷ C. S. Lewis, “Why I Am Not a Pacifist,” 43.

⁸ Augustine, *Letters to Boniface*, Letter 189.

with the aim not of domination but of mutual peace and prosperity. And the way America wages war is designed to promote those very ends. Surely this is one of the reasons why God has blessed our arms so singularly during the 230 years of our existence as a nation.

It is for this reason that I have been so horrified at the recent rhetoric surrounding the idea of the torture of captives in our present war against terrorism. I know very well that isolated incidents of torture have always taken place in war. I also admit that I do not know the details of what has taken place in our present war. I do know that many public figures, some of them high government officials, have suggested that the dangers of our situation warrant the use of torture. This violates the nobility that has been embedded in our military tradition and can only signal the advanced barbarity that has grown in our society. Moreover, a nation that tortures its captives has forgotten the aim of peace. Torture creates multi-generational enemies; it fosters hatred and it violates the image of God with which the most hardened terrorist has been born. If America is to continue to wage war in a manner that is biblically defensible, we must repent of even the suggestion that we ought to practice torture as part of our way of war.

But there is a related purpose to war, namely, just retribution. People don't like to think this way today. To execute a guilty murderer or to wage a war of punishment is thought to be contrary to pursuing the ends of peace. But the Bible specifically note just retribution as a purpose for which the state is given the sword. Paul says that rulers are to be a terror to bad conduct and are to be feared by those who do evil. "He is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer" (Rom. 13:3-4). Peter teaches that rulers are sent by God "to punish those who do evil" (1 Pet. 2:14). The idea of just retribution is intrinsic to God's own system of justice; therefore to refuse to wage war in just retribution for evils "demands a code of morals, which... would entail grave censure upon God himself, and give ground for an indictment of the methods of his government of the universe."⁹ Just as war is necessary to protect against evil, war is also necessary to punish evil so as to promote life and peace. Calvin drew a direct analogy between the criminal punishment of offenders within the state and the military punishment of offending nations: "Whether it be a king who does it on a big scale, or a

⁹ W. B. Patterson, cited in Barclay, 71.

scoundrel who does it on a small scale, he is equally to be regarded and punished as a robber... The slaying of the authors of an unjust war is an execution, the judge is God, and the fighting men who defend the right are merely God's instruments."¹⁰ Throughout the books of Joshua, Judges, and Samuel, this is precisely the Bible's perspective on the use of armed might to strike down wicked oppressors

THE JUSTICE OF WAR

Let me consider the standards of just war briefly, since they are so limbed in what we have already considered. It follows that a war is to have godly purposes, then it must be waged in a righteous manner. What are the standards by which Christians assess the justness of a war?

St. Augustine is generally attributed with outlining the main contours of just war theory that have prevailed in Christian thought. First, he addressed the issue of motive: war must be waged for the right reasons, namely, an ultimate desire for peace both by protecting against evil-doers and to punish them. Augustine wrote, "It is wrong to doubt that war is righteous when it is undertaken in obedience to God, to overawe or crush or master human arrogance."¹¹ This means that, in general, wars of conquest are not just, despite the various rationale provided.

Moreover, war must be conducted under rightful authority. It is not just anyone who can launch a war, but only the rightful civil magistrates appointed under God's providence. This is often a serious issue in wars of revolution and rebellion, which require a demonstration that a new and just authority has been established in the place of one made illegitimate by neglect or abuse.

War ought to be waged with a reasonable opportunity for success, and the violence involved must be proportional to the injury suffered. These are categories in which there will often be disagreement. For instance, many will cite the use of atom bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki as singular abuses in the latter category. Yet the reason those bombs were dropped was to quickly end a war that threatened a long and even bloodier climax. Furthermore, just war theory demands that every effort be made to avoid

¹⁰ John Calvin, cited in Barclay, 69.

¹¹ St. Augustine, *Against Faustus*.

civilian casualties. This does not mean that civilian lives are worth more than those in uniform. But it does argue that in a just war, violent force will be applied as closely as possible to those who threaten violent force, so that civilian casualties are avoided as much as possible. We see the difficulties of this, however, on television almost every night. But in Iraq and especially in Lebanon, just invaders wrestle against enemies who deliberately employ civilians as shields and against a media that delights to present pictures of every civilian casualty as an indictment against the policies of war.

The rules of just war are not always cut-and-dried, and there will always be some debate about how well a particular situation fits with just-war theory. An example is the debate over our nation's present war in Iraq. But Christians will find these to be helpful guidelines for considering future conflicts. What are our motives? Are there feasible alternatives? Is the cause worth the risk and the damage? We should never assume that might equals right; indeed, Christians should be among the first not only to support our government but also to exhort it in the cause of justice, especially in war.

THE GLORY IN WAR

Having considered the necessity, purpose, and justice of war, a Christian appraisal ought also to consider the idea of glory in war.

Those are two words regularly associated: war and glory. On Veterans Day, small towns across America hold parades featuring medal-bedecked veterans who bask in the glory of their armed exploits. Is this right? Does this promote wrongful violence?

Let me argue that while war itself is not glorious, it is indeed the arena in which much of the glory of the image of God in mankind is displayed and rightly celebrated. The Christian general Robert E. Lee is reported to have remarked on the bloody field of Fredericksburg, "It is good that war is so terrible; otherwise we should love it too much." That was a frank and understandable statement, rightly observing the irony of virtue and love so often displayed amidst scenes of carnage.

Let me approach this from a personal standpoint. There is a photograph in my office of my grandfather, Major General James H. Phillips, receiving the Distinguished Service Cross from General George S. Patton, Jr., on the field of Bastogne. He received this decoration, our nation's second highest

medal for valor, for having helped lead the American breakthrough into the German flank during the Battle of the Bulge. He received a second Distinguished Service Cross for his actions in the capture of the Remagen Bridge. In addition to these, he received numerous impressive foreign decorations during that war and also during the Greek insurrection.

I was not alive at that time, so I only knew my grandfather in retirement. He was a kind and generous man, and a loving grandfather who I remember with love. But those medals, along with his stars, loomed large in his reputation and in the glory of his service to our nation. In truth, they represented the achievement born of significant virtue and an exceptional character. But they also served the cause of a carnal vanity that glorified man and not God. On his gravestone at West Point, you will find engraved his name, his stars, a long list of those decorations, and the symbol of the Masonic Order. But you will not find a cross. As a Christian, the insignias of earthly glory that once so impressed me and fueled my family pride now serve as a source of grief over the vanity of earthly glitter that deprived this fine man of the only glory that is true and that endures.

There is glory in war – it is the glory of the virtue that leads soldiers to sacrifice themselves to things that are just and true. The glory found in war is celebrated by the great war song of Jesus' mother, Mary, also known as the Magnificat. Perceiving victory in the great battle through the birth of her Savior Son, Mary sang:

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. For he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever (Lk. 1:46-55).

Here, Almighty God is celebrated for his triumph in cosmic holy war. But notice that God is glorified not merely in his might, but in what his might has done. He has regarded the humble and poor. He has achieved great things for those in need. He has stood up to the proud hearts who would exalt their strength over the weak, throwing down their thrones and establishing justice in their place. He has confronted the evil order and turned it back. He has acted with strength in mercy, and in faithfulness to his covenantal bonds.

These are the elements of the only real glory in war. True glory in war consists not in what is destroyed but in what is preserved, not in battles that are won but in the righteousness upheld by those battles, not in the riches that are taken but in the wealth that is bestowed, and not in the number of casualties inflicted but in the life that is defended. The glory we should seek in war is that of devotion to duty in a righteous cause so that a godly legacy may be preserved for those who will follow. These are the things that God cares about, and the reality is that war, for all its horrors, is a fitting arena in which they may be offered in faithful service to God, so that he may be glorified by our good and valorous deeds.

THE END OF WAR

In short, war finds its only true purpose not in death but in the lives and in the life that are defended and advanced. Just war is necessary because of sin and because of the sanctity of life enshrined by the sixth commandment. Therefore, even in war – indeed, especially in war – Christians must always be aiming for life. What a challenge this is when the instruments of war are mainly agents of death – bullets, bombs, mines and bayonettes! The Civil War James B. McPherson cried out, “If to be a soldier is to lose my humanity, I do not want to be a soldier.” Therefore, to be a Christian soldier, one must cultivate his God-honoring humanity – his care for life, his refusal to exult in death, his restraint in the use of force, and a faith in God that can stand up to the rigors of passion and fear.

A good gauge of our hearts is our attitude towards the idea of war’s end. Speaking frankly, during my years in the Army – years which preceded my conversion to faith in Christ – I longed for war. My heart rejoiced at the stirring up of likely conflicts. I wanted to be there where the action was, all for no other reason than that the cause of my own earthly glory could be advanced. When deployed, I often longed for home – for a soft

bed, a clean bathroom, a cold beer and a hot pizza – but I never longed for war to end.

Soldiers with such an attitude have much for which to rejoice. For by the force of arms, an end to war will never be achieved. In one war the seeds of the next are generally sown. Jesus agreed, telling his disciples that the age to come would be characterized by “wars and rumors of wars” (Mt. 24:6).

War is necessary, so let those called devote themselves to study battle and train for war. War can be just, so let those who fight for just causes take satisfaction in their cause. War can be an arena in which much true glory – as well as false – can be gained and displayed. But according to the Bible, the end of wars will one day come. Do we rejoice in this prospect? Even as we devote ourselves to war-making, do our hearts yearn for the garden and the plow? Let warriors above all guard the wellspring of their hearts, training them by faith for the end of war when Jesus returns, and let their battles be fought and won in service to the end of war he will someday bring.

The prophet Joel spoke words fitting for our present evil age: “Proclaim this among the nations: Consecrate for war; stir up the mighty men. Let all the men of war draw near; let them come up. Beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears; let the weak say, ‘I am a warrior.’” (Jo. 3:9-10). But the point of that passage was to summon for judgment all those who trust in the sword and whose delight is in the sharpness of the blade. The Christian soldier must cultivate a different heart, by the plow of God’s Word and the power of God’s Spirit. The Christian who fights for life in this world looks forward to life in the world to come in which fighting shall have ceased.

The prophet Isaiah gave us a glimpse of a great day to come when war shall have ceased because sin shall have been expelled from a world renewed by the light of God. He wrote, “They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore” (Isa. 2:4). Especially when we train for war, let us learn to practice peace. For that is the end for which all just war serves. And as we practice war – for we must in this present evil age – let us look to our reward not in what the sword can win us, but in the day when the sword shall be reforged as a

plowshare, and when out of the warring nations a new humanity in Christ will be joined in bonds of brotherhood for a peace that will never end.