

THE ETHICS OF WAR

Among those who call themselves Christians, arguments concerning the appropriateness of war have been offered on a variety of bases. These may include church history, perceived utility, pursuit of justice, liberation of the oppressed, and sanctity of life, among others. For the evangelical Christian, however, the discussion must begin with Scripture. This is not to say that Scripture is clear on all ethical matters or that Scripture does not at times point to conclusions that are similar to those that begin at different starting points, but it is to say that for the evangelical Scripture provides the preeminent determinant of Christian behavior, and thus the beginning place for an ethic of war.

The Old Testament Witness

The Old Testament tells us that war is within the possibility of God. It is a part of his history with the people of God. God commands war (1 Sam 15:3), provides the terms for war (Deu 20:1-15), trains God-fearers for battle (2 Sam 22:35, 38), is with those who go to war (Jos 6:24-27), speaks through his prophets to call for war (Jud 4:6-7), foresees war as a part of God-honoring obedience (Lev 26:3-7), and moves godly leaders to prepare God's people for war (Neh 4:14). This does not mean that God is only about war (Jos 7) or that he ordains all war (Num 14:41-43), but it does indicate that when we look at God in Old Testament history we must conclude he is one who acts on the premise that "there is a time for war" (Ecc 3:8).¹ Such a conclusion is significant because if we agree that God never changes, then we must also accept that within God there still exists the possibility that he may call his people to be engaged

¹ Some like Sider and Taylor downplay the Old Testament record of war arguing that it is God who fought the battles and not Israel and that God desired faith not brawn; see Ron J. Sider and Richard K. Taylor, "Jesus and Violence: Some Critical Objections," *Readings in Christian Ethics*, Vol. 2, David C. Clark and Robert V. Rakestraw, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 512-513. While indeed God sought faith on the part of his people this does not lessen the fact that God ordained war as an appropriate means of faith, just as he has approved a whole host of actions as possible expressions of faith (see Hebrews 11). If we say that God wasn't about war, only about faith, does that mean we may also say that God is not about generosity and self-sacrifice because these too are only intermediaries of the faith God cares about?

in violence—unless, of course, God has declared that the time for war is complete and is no longer a part of God’s plan for his people.

The Old Testament provides us with the farthest look back at God, but it also helps provide us with a forward look at the history he plans to yet unfold. Among other things, this ‘eschatological history’ is one of peace. Looking forward God says, “Justice will dwell in the desert, the fruit of righteousness will be peace,” and “people will live in peaceful dwelling places in secure homes” (Isa 32:16-18). “People will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks” and “nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore” (Isa 2:4; Mic 4:3). Thus, while it is recognized that the Old Testament paints for us a picture of God-ordained war and conflict, it must also be seen as giving hope that the blood-stained way of the past will one day cease.

The New Testament Witness

If the Old Testament tells us that war was a part of God’s plan and that his people were to enter into it as he led, but also says that one day there will be no more war, one must ask where we stand today. Are we still in an age when war may be pursued by the God-fearer or has the age of war expired such that those who trust in the Lord are to reflect the peace that God will one day bring about? As the New Testament stands in the time between the picture of Old Testament historical war and Old Testament eschatological peace, it is there that we must turn to answer this question. It would be best if we could find a number of New Testament passages that directly address the propriety of war, but none such exist. Thus, my starting place will be the words and work of Jesus to see if in them there is a pattern that speaks to the question of war. For the sake of brevity, I will look at two particular instances in Jesus’ life. First, the Sermon on the Mount and, secondly, his death on the cross.

In establishing an ethic of war, there has been perhaps no more discussed passage than the Sermon on the Mount, and understandably so, as in it Jesus seems to set forth an ethic of

non-violence, and even non-resistance. He calls 'blessed' those who are poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the merciful, the peacemakers, and those who are insulted and persecuted (Mat 5:3-12). In addition, he provides six antitheses ("You have heard that it was said...But I tell you...") that appear to signal a significant paradigm shift for the followers of God. This shift suggests an undermining of the Law's applicability regarding the punishment of offenders,² especially when considering Jesus dismissal of the 'eye for an eye' ethic (Mat 5:38-42) and his call to love one's enemies (Mat 5:43-44). Even if one does not agree that the Sermon on the Mount excludes all pursuits of justice using violence, one must admit that at the very least Jesus is setting forth an ethic that does not require the administration of "on the spot justice" at every offense, and calls the follower of Christ to voluntarily give of oneself for the sake of the offender.

Much has also been said about how a Christian's stance on war should be shaped by reflection on the cross. In Jesus' crucifixion, we have a supreme example of one who chose not to resist his own unjust death. "When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats" (1 Pet 2:23a). Although afforded divine power sufficient to overthrow those who would kill him, Jesus did not exercise that power, but instead "entrusted himself to him who judges justly" (1 Pet 2:23b)³ and acted in the interest of both God and humankind (Php 2:3-8). For many, such an example is determinative and sets forth an ethic of the cross that breaks the cycle of violence⁴ and requires that the New Testament be read in a way that makes the non-retaliatory response of Jesus to the cross normative for the Christian community.⁵

² Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996), 325.

³ U.S. Catholic Bishops, "The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response" *Just War Theory*, Jean Bethke Elshtain, ed. (Washington Sq., NY: New York Univ. Press, 1992), 85-86.

⁴ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 291-294.

⁵ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 337-338.

Questions Regarding New Testament Teaching

In using the Sermon on the Mount and Jesus' response to the cross to shape a Christian ethic of war, several questions arise. First, we must ask if Jesus' words and behavior are normative in the sense that they are to be imitated in all instances or simply to be the default response for the Christian in most situations. The former conclusion would require that Jesus himself as well as leaders of the early church live up to all of Jesus' words in the strictest sense and at every turn. Otherwise they must be viewed, at least on some level, as circumstantial. As Jesus did not mourn at all times, or always act in ways that could be construed as peacemaking, there is reason to believe that Jesus spoke not of a non-bending code of behavior but of an attitude that should counter what was prevalent at the time. This would explain why Jesus' almost defenseless actions during his trial stand in contrast to the vibrant defense taken by the Paul when he stood before Felix, Festus, and Agrippa (Acts 24-26), as well as why Jesus himself could impact an entire community's sense of security through the violent destruction of swine (Mat 8:3-34). This is not to say in any sense that Jesus' teaching or behavior gives war a stamp of approval, but it is to say that there is reason to question whether a pacifist position can be derived purely from the Sermon on the Mount.

Secondly, we must ask if the Sermon on the Mount is a trumping of the Mosaic Law such that the violent activity called for in the Old Testament should be a thing of the past. No doubt, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is contrasting his position with that of the Law, but is his juxtaposition relative to his audience's perception of the Law or the Law as it really stands in its entirety? It would seem that the former is more likely. When asked later which is the greatest commandment in the Law, Jesus did not rebuff the question as if the Law had been wholly trumped by some new ethic, but instead offered the answer, "Love God and love your neighbor," stating that all the Law and the Prophets (which invariably includes the OT war passages) hang on these two commandments (Mat 22:34-40). Based on this latter response of

Jesus, it would appear reasonable to conclude that Jesus' comments on the Sermon on the Mount were meant to move people back to the center of the Law as opposed to negate it all together. Of course, this observation does not condone war, but it does suggest that arguing against war based on the idea that the Law has been wholly replaced is not well grounded.

Third, we should ask if the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount and the ethic of the cross are to be applied to governmental authorities or only to individuals acting without judicial authority. At first glance, this question might give the impression that one is seeking for a loophole whereby the teaching of Scripture is restricted to a particular social arena so as to exonerate behavior by some segment of the population. But while this is a possibility, there are Scriptural reasons for posing such a question. Both in Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2 we see distinct calls of submission to governing authorities with an explanation that those in power have every right as 'agents of wrath' to punish and induce terror among wrongdoers, and to do so even with the 'sword' (Rom 13:1-5; 1 Pet 2:13-17). Considering that Paul and Peter were both subject to Roman authorities who continually sanctioned war and enlisted people in their armies, it would seem rather careless on the apostles' part to pen letters calling for submission to such authorities without providing an out for war, if indeed participation in war was always improper for the Christian. Furthermore, since military personnel were certainly a part of the believing ranks (Mat 8:5-13; Mrk 15:39; Luk 3:14-15; Acts 10:1-11:18), it seems rather odd that they are never called to denounce their service, either directly ("Go and sin no more") or through letters to the church in general. No one dismisses the fact that war and violence has tremendous consequences, and if it were a sin whether or not it was done under submission to the state, one wonders why it is not directly addressed when the seemingly less consequential sins of gossip, boasting, drunkenness, coarse language, etc., are brought to the surface (Rom 1:29,30; 1 Cor 6:10; Eph 5:4). Thus, it is Scripture itself that gives reason to ask the question

raised here, and even considerable grounding for the distinction between state and non-state action.

Fourth, when considering the ethic of the cross and applying it to the act of war we should ask if a view of the cross should include the human pursuit of justice. Those who take a pacifist stance often do so by looking to the non-retaliatory, self-sacrifice that was exhibited by Jesus on the cross. But is there more to the cross than a self-sacrifice that does not violently pursue justice? The answer would appear to be yes, if one sees the cross not just from the perspective of the Son, but also from that of the Father. Undoubtedly God was an active participant in the happenings of the cross. He planned it and called his Son to it, and he did so in order to see our sins forgiven according to His own rule of justice—“Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Heb 11:22). In other words, the Father’s economy of justice as exhibited on the cross required that life—human life—be taken.⁶ Should then the cross speak not only of self-sacrifice, but also of the pursuit of justice? The answer to this question rests on whether one sees God as the only rightful dispenser of life-taking justice or whether God has delegated that role in part to human agents. Those who support the latter view refer to verses such as Genesis 9:6, Exodus 21:14, Joshua 7:25, and 2 Kings 2:23-24 wherein God-fearers are given permission to take life or are actually pictured doing so. In addition, they lean on verses like Romans 13:4 which explicitly states that recognized civic authorities are agents of wrath appointed by God and have the right to apply the sword to wrongdoers. Those who support the former view note that the New Testament illustrations of life-taking judgment are always completed by the hand of God (Acts 5:1-11; 1 Cor 11:30; Rev 6:5-6). They also point to verses like Romans 12:19, which states: “Do not take revenge my friends, but leave room for

⁶ Other instances of God taking human life as a judgment on sin can be found in Numbers 21:4-6; Acts 5:1-11, and 1 Corinthians 11:30, among others.

God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay, says the Lord.'"⁷ The biblical support for both sides is compelling, and, at the very least, suggests that if an ethic of the cross should include the concept of justice, it should balance any consideration of violence with the value of non-retaliatory, self-sacrifice.

Settling on a Biblical Ethic of War

No doubt considerable more time and space could be given to a review of other Scriptural passages that might have bearing on a biblical ethic of war, but those that have been addressed here are among the most commonly referred to and the most telling. But just what does Scripture tell us? The Old Testament gives significant evidence that God ordained war in history past and that he will see to a day when war will no longer exist. The question that was asked was this: Are we still in an age when war may be entered into by the God-fearer or has the age of war expired such that those who trust in the Lord are to reflect the peace that God will one day bring about? The New Testament seems to answer 'yes' and 'yes'. It most certainly calls believers to pursue peace as much as it is up to them (Romans 12:18), and it also gives no support of war for personal gain, preservation of excessive lifestyles, or ethnic cleansing. At the same time, however, it does not appear to close the door altogether on war by civil authorities who are acting in the pursuit of justice. This said, I offer the following conclusions regarding a biblical ethic of war.

- 1) The ethic of the cross must speak loudly to the way we conduct ourselves both individually and as members of national entities and should prevent us from entering into war for selfish means or without a substantial willingness to endure hardship brought on by others.

⁷ It should be noted that this verse is far from conclusive, not only because it speaks of revenge (not necessarily non-revengeful disbursement of justice), but also because it quotes an Old Testament verse which places it in the same context wherein God allowed humans to take life in pursuit of justice.

- 2) Jesus' Sermon on the Mount as well as his very life teach us that God is more concerned about mercy than justice. This does not preclude war altogether, but it should move us towards generous forgiveness and love and away from any war of retaliation or rash involvement in conflict.
- 3) If there is a pursuit of justice that involves violence, it is to be directed by those who hold offices of recognized civil authority as it is only these who have been instituted by God to bring the sword of terror to wrongdoers.
- 4) When legitimate authorities consider war, the question they must address is "How shall one neighbor be protected from another neighbor?" as loving one's neighbor is the underlying Scriptural ethic that is to govern our interaction with others. Other questions (such as, "How shall my nation remain supreme?" or "How can the comfortable life-style we have continue?") do not have any biblical support.⁸

It is recognized that these four conclusions do not answer all the questions regarding war (or even close to it) and provide only broad boundaries concerning the attitude, intentions, and leadership under which war must be considered. These boundaries alone, however, would be enough to thwart much conflict if observed. Within these boundaries, questions that might still be asked include: if entrance into a particular war is considered morally justified, does involvement in that war also become a moral imperative? Or, if participation in a particular war is considered morally justified but not morally imperative, are there certain teleological arguments that can or should be considered? Also, if teleological arguments are used to justify participation in a war, should those same arguments be used to set parameters for how a war is waged or when a war should be ended? Needless to say, the complexities of these questions

⁸ Charles Lutz, from the forward in *When War Is Unjust: Being Honest in Just-War Thinking*, Howard John Yoder (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), xix.

alone reveal that even a war that might be within what are suggested as biblical boundaries cannot be entered into lightly.

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