

WAR:

**WHAT IS OUR
CHRISTIAN
PERSPECTIVE
OF WAR?**

What is our Christian perspective of war?
by Glenn Orsted

Currently the United States is in the middle of a great conflict. There is a civil war of words that is not always so civil. On the one side there are those who believe it would be immoral for us to go to war, and on the other side are those who believe that there is justifiable cause. Demonstrations are taking place around the world, and pressure is mounting to come up with a peaceful solution. Pope John Paul II has made his sentiments for peace clear as he has met with the President and other world leaders. Religious leaders, rock stars and media personalities have entered the fray. Two former presidents are making their voice heard. It is a difficult and tense time as we wait for a resolution to the current global problem we face.

I realize that there are sincere people on both sides of this issue and that the issues are extremely complex. As I considered the circumstances I could think of numerous reasons and scriptures to oppose war, but are there legitimate reasons to support the idea of going to war, in other words from a Christian perspective is there such a thing as a "justifiable war"? What follows is not intended to support the idea of war, but rather the things that we must consider if we are to decide that in fact there is a time where we must support war and why? Ecclesiastes 3:1-7 tells us that there is a time for everything including a "time of war", but what should our attitude be?

This is not a new concern. Throughout history this has been a recurrent problem, and Christians have had to think and rethink their positions. I have personally struggled with the ethical issues involved. What about the innocents who will suffer? What about the hate that will be generated by a war that will affect generations after us? What about the loss of life and the resulting loss of these people's contribution to the world? What about the scars, physical, emotional and spiritual, that will affect the lives of those who fight the war — on both sides? What will this war do to our nation's soul? What about Iraqi Christian believers who will die at the hands of our military? How does my belief in the sanctity of human life affect my beliefs about the justification of war? There are many questions that haunt me. As someone once said, "War is a problem for those of us who claim to follow the Prince of Peace." At heart, I believe that we are idealists and pacifists, but at the same time we have to face some other very grim realities. These are realities with which we must all wrestle, regardless of which side of the issue we are on.

The first reality we need to consider in wrestling with these issues is this: We must face the reality of evil in the world. I have been amazed, as I have listened to some of the talk shows, where people call in and actually believe that if we try hard enough we can negotiate with Saddam Hussein and get him to destroy his weapons of mass destruction. They believe that if we just give him what he wants, or make our case patiently and clearly enough, he will understand and will ultimately cooperate. Whatever our position on war is, we must understand that there are some people who are truly evil, and are bent on abusing their power even to the point of using instruments of death to accomplish their purposes. Whether we believe we should go to war or refrain from war, we cannot escape the reality of evil, and the fact that there are some people with whom you can never negotiate.

Historically, the church has understood this, because Christians have always understood the reality of the existence of evil in the world — not just in some abstract sense, but in a real and personal sense. There have been two strains of

Christian thought through the years: 1) classic pacifism and 2) classic just-war [as in "justifiable"] theorists. Pacifism has always been the respected, but minority, position in Christian thought throughout the ages. Those who have held to the belief that war is always evil, but perhaps the least of two evils, and therefore sometimes justified have always been in the majority. And it is interesting that those in the pacifist tradition (Quakers, Amish, Mennonites, Brethren and Jehovah Witnesses) have historically held that war is sometimes justified, but that Christians should not participate in it. It was similar to their belief that political offices were necessary, but Christians should not hold public office, because they were not to be of this world; they were members of another world — the kingdom of God. Basically, they held to the belief that those who belonged to the world should take care of worldly things like public office and war, but those who were a part of the kingdom of God belonged to a different world order, and should not be a part of the things of this world. The point is that classic pacifism believed that war was sometimes necessary, but that Christians should not be a part of it, even though it might be necessary for non-Christians to wage war in order to protect their nation. The view that war is always wrong, even by secular governments, is a relatively recent development. Because of this, Christians were criticized for wanting others to do their fighting for them. Someone has said, "The Christian pacifist does not offer his views as a necessarily workable solution to the problems of political conflict. Pacifism is a matter of obedience, not an alternative diplomacy." That is an important insight.

I think we would probably all agree, as Christians, that war is never something good, and should be avoided unless it is absolutely the last resort. But we also understand the reality of evil, and how destructive that evil can be. Before World War II the world did not take seriously the evil of a man named Adolph Hitler. The nations of the world engaged in a policy of appeasement. They wanted to avoid war at all costs. The problem was that Hitler was counting on the world's distaste for another global conflict so that he could pursue his plans for overrunning Europe. Great Britain, France and Italy reached an agreement with Hitler in September of 1938 which resulted in the Munich Pact. These three nations agreed to not oppose Hitler's occupation of a portion of Czechoslovakia in return for Hitler's agreement not to invade any other European countries. Britain's Prime Minister confidently went home proclaiming: "Peace in our time." They sold out the people of Czechoslovakia and did not take Hitler's evil seriously — naively believing that he would limit or stop altogether his aggression toward his European neighbors. The United States was standing back wanting Europe to handle its own problems. But Hitler ignored the Munich Pact and defiantly took most of Czechoslovakia and went on to invade Poland. It soon became apparent that France and Britain were now in imminent danger as well. The Munich Pact is now a universal symbol of the failure of the policy of appeasement. What caused these people to actually believe that appeasement would work? I believe it was the failure to understand the reality of evil.

The second thing we need to consider in wrestling with these issues is this: God has given governments the responsibility for the restraint of evil in the world. If we are willing to admit to the reality of evil in the world, then we have to ask ourselves who is responsible for restraining it. Is it all up to God? Is it, like the classic pacifists believed, strictly the job of the secular government and non-Christians? Should others do our fighting for us? Or does God give all of us the responsibility for confronting and stopping the evil that is present in the world? Biblically, it appears that God has given us this responsibility. The Bible outlines the responsibility of government in this way: "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there

is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil." (Romans 13:1-4) This scripture seems to indicate that God has given mankind the responsibility of governing the world. Good government, whether on the national or global level, has to do with protecting people from evil and dealing with those who perpetuate it.

At every level in the world, we are partners with God. We are partners with God in creation as our children are born. We are partners with God in providing food, as we till the soil and harvest the grain. God does not just rain down food without us having a part in it. Likewise, we are partners with God in carrying out his justice and maintaining peace in the world. He gives us his laws and the authority to carry out his justice when evil asserts itself and violates God's laws. There are people who believe that war is always wrong in every circumstance and people are free to believe that, but it is not necessarily the biblical position, or the historic Christian position. We must understand that if we choose to avoid having conflict with evil, then we must be prepared to accept the consequences of that decision and even to suffer and there are many sincere Christians who are willing to do that. But there are also many naive people today who believe, as many did at the beginning of Hitler's aggression, that evil can be appeased and the world can decide to have peace at any cost and still remain basically the same. Life cannot go on as it is, without interruption, if we do nothing to stop the aggression of someone who is bent on evil and destruction. Our country and others will be overrun, democracy will cease, and freedom will end. Radical pacifism always comes at tremendous expense. If we understand that, and are willing to suffer the consequences, that is a viable option. But let's not be deluded into thinking that great suffering and injustice will not come with it.

The third thing we need take seriously in wrestling with these issues is this: If war becomes necessary it must be done justly. Let me be careful to say that not all war is justifiable. There is a portion of the world population willing to go to war at any time for any reason. There are many people who would be willing to blow up our enemies completely and without remorse. That is never the Christian position. Christians never speak of a "holy" war. Even a just war is never a holy war. War must always be the regrettable last option. When it is decided upon it is always seen as a tragic and ugly necessity. It always does great harm to our enemies and to ourselves. We are not to glorify it and brandish our triumph over our enemies.

From the earliest times in Christian history, followers of Christ have thought long and hard about the problem of war. The first Christian thinker to write in any depth about this was St. Augustine (A. D. 354-430). His theory of a "just war" is still used as a guide for Christians today. J. Budziszewski summarizes the seven principles of Augustine's "just-war" theory:

1. **Public authority:** War must be declared by a legitimate government. It is not for private individuals and groups to decide when lethal violence must be used in support of justice.

2. **Just Cause:** War must not be waged except to protect innocent life, to ensure that people can live decently, and to secure their natural rights. Needless to say, this would not authorize the aim of destroying entire groups in a hated population.
3. **Right Intention:** Not only must there be just cause to take up arms; this just cause must be the reason for taking up arms. Our goal must be to achieve a just peace — not to pump up the economy or keep gasoline prices low.
4. **Comparative Justice:** War should not be waged unless the evils that are fought are grave enough to justify killing. Notice the word: 'Killing,' not 'murder.' Murder is deliberately taking innocent human life. This is categorically forbidden, even in wartime.
5. **Proportionality:** There must be reason to expect that going to war will end more evil than it causes. This means not only physical evil, but spiritual — not only destruction of bodies and buildings, but corruption of callings and virtues.
6. **Probability of Success:** There must be a reasonable likelihood that the war will achieve its aims.
7. **Last Resort:** War should not be waged unless a reasonable person would recognize that the peaceful alternatives have been exhausted. There comes a point, though, when even a reasonable person recognizes that the opponent is not interested in peace.

Even if we choose to adopt Augustine's rules of a just war as a guide, the problem is that our enemies seldom play by the rules. Terrorists and tyrants care little for rules. They have no intention of following them. They deliberately target innocent civilians and public buildings rather than military sites. In fact, the more harm they can inflict the better — there are no innocents in their minds. They will cause as much harm and do as much damage as possible. The attack on the World Trade Center violated every one of the principles for a just war. Saddam Hussein will use his own civilians as shields for his military. He will torture and mutilate. He will use weapons of mass destruction indiscriminately — even against his own population.

So what about the sixth commandment which says, "You shall not kill?" The Hebrew word for kill in the command is "rasah". It is the word for murder, and carries with it the idea of premeditated, intentional violence. Murder is never used with the intention of carrying out justice. Murder carries out vengeance, or killing someone for the purpose of personal gain or satisfaction. There is a great deal of difference between murder and killing where the purpose is to save more lives than those that are taken. War is never desirable, but sometimes, as a last resort, it must be carried out for the sake of the safety of a majority of people, or the administration of justice. It seeks to curtail evil rather than add to it.

Jesus was hardly a pacifist, for he chased the money changers out of the temple with a whip. Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers" (Matthew 5:9), but he also said, "Think not that I am come to send peace to the earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword" (Matthew 10:34). He told his disciples of the coming dangerous days where they may need swords (Luke 22:36). They responded that the group already had two swords which they had been carrying (v. 38). Certainly Christ was aware of that. He was realistic enough to say, "all they who take the sword shall perish with the sword" (Matthew 26:52). But he also knew that if no one enforced justice, chaos would prevail. If no one is willing to stop evil, what will become of those who are defenseless? When evil men arise and many innocent people suffer, what will happen if no one comes to their aid? Is it right to do nothing? Can it be moral?

After the Second World War came to a close, the German Lutheran pastor, Martin Niemöller, wrote his now famous confession called "I Didn't Speak Up." Perhaps it has relevance for our time. He wrote: "In Germany, the Nazis first came for the Communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, but I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me, and by that time there was no one left to speak for me."

Having said that, I have to also say that I long for the day when the prophecy of Isaiah will be fulfilled which says, "And he shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people: and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." (Isaiah 2:4)

Questions to consider:

1. Why do some people seem so reluctant to believe in evil? Is there an "axis of evil" in the world today?
2. What are the strongest arguments for pacifism?
3. What are the arguments for a "just [as in "justifiable"] war"?
4. What are the dangers of appeasement?
5. What is the difference between a jihad ("holy war"), and a just war?
6. How do you reconcile Jesus' words: "Blessed are the peacemakers" (Matthew 5:9), and "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matthew 10:34)?
7. Review Augustine's "just-war" theory (see sermon). Which are the strongest arguments? Which are weakest?
8. Read Romans 13:1-4. What is the responsibility of government according to these verses?
9. What are the risks of going to war?
10. What are the possible risks of radical pacifism which will not go to war regardless of the provocation?