

May a Christian Go To War?

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God, I Have a Question Series

Romans 12:14-13:7

Like many in my generation, I grew up in a home where I heard a lot of stories about WWII from my dad. My father was in the Navy.

PHOTO – Norman Nathan in the Navy

He trained in England for the invasion of Europe and then helped to pilot an LCT, a Landing Craft Tank, to land Army Engineers at Omaha Beach at the beginning of the D-Day Invasion. For the two of you who would be interested in a fairly typical experience of men, who served in the Invasion, you could simply google my dad's LCT.

PHOTO - LCT 538

There are photos of him posted online by his skipper. Dad then shipped out to the Pacific Theater and he was waiting in China for the invasion of Japan when America dropped two atomic bombs and the war ended.

My wife, Marlene's, father was in the Army. He served as part of the 1st Infantry Division which was nicknamed "The Big Red One."

PHOTO – Joseph Schultheis

Joe landed in Algeria and fought across North Africa. He then participated in the invasion of Sicily, slogging through the center of Sicily. He also participated in the D-Day Invasion, marched across France, fought in the Battle of the Bulge, and was recalled home right before Germany surrendered. Marlene's dad was something of a War Hero. He won a Silver Star for extreme valor, as well as a Bronze Star and numerous other medals.

But neither my father, nor Marlene's father were followers of Christ. My dad was Jewish; Marlene's dad was nominally Roman Catholic, but was an atheist by persuasion.

I never was in the military. The draft for Vietnam ended the year I turned 18. After law school I seriously considered joining the Army Jag Corps. I had an interview at Ft. Knox in which they accepted me into the program. But then I had second thoughts and declined becoming an Army lawyer.

Why am I talking about the subject of war in church today? This talk was provoked by three thoughts that troubled me and made me say, “I really need to preach on the subject of whether a Christian may go to war.” First, I’m troubled that a person can attend a Bible teaching church their whole lives and never hear even one sermon about whether it is OK for a Christian to pick up a gun and kill someone else in a war, or if it is OK to send our sons and daughters off to war. With so little discussion about war and peace in most churches, we contemporary Christians base our thinking about war and peace almost entirely on our political affiliations. What are the Republicans in Congress saying about this particular military engagement? I’m a Republican, so I guess I must agree with them. What does our Democratic President or Representatives think about this particular military engagement? I’m a Democrat, so I guess I must agree with what they say. What are the political pundits on Fox News, CNN, or MSNBC saying? I happen to watch one of those particular news stations, so I guess I agree with what they think. What are the editorial writers in the Wall Street Journal or the New York Times think? I guess that’s my opinion.

It troubles me that there is no distinctively Christian thinking about war and peace among most Christians in America today and we’re disciplined more by the media and political pundits than we are by scripture. Previous generations of Christians thought deeply about the issue of war. Martin Luther, the Father of the Protestant Reformation, wrote a tract titled

“Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved”

Whole denominations have been built, in part, on a certain posture toward war. There are the so-called peace denominations – the Mennonites, the Brethren, and the Quakers, who oppose Christians going to war. But in most Bible teaching churches, we are far more likely to be disciplined by the politicians and the political pundits and the talking heads on the news than we are by the scriptures and by what thoughtful Christians in the past taught regarding whether a Christian may go to war.

But here’s the second thing that troubles me. In so many Bible-teaching churches Christianity is almost entirely restricted to the private realm. Who are you sleeping with? What’s your marriage like? How much are you praying? Where do you go to church? But there is almost no distinctively Christian thinking about the public realm. How should we run our businesses? How should we think about our responsibility as citizens? What should our view of immigrants be? What about war and peace? The Bible doesn’t recognize this distinction between the private realm and the public realm.

What we learn in the Bible is Jesus is Lord. And as one Christian theologian in the past put it,

There is not one square inch of the entire creation about which Jesus Christ doesn't cry out, "This is mine! This belongs to me!"

Our Christian faith needs to be a both-and faith, both private and public.

But here is the third thing that troubles me and the reason I am giving this talk today. I'm particularly troubled by the absence of almost any thoughtful Christian conversation about war and peace given the magnitude of the issues involved and how totally relevant the subject is at this moment. The US spends close to \$1 trillion a year if we include veteran benefits and healthcare on the military. \$650 billion, if you cut out benefits and healthcare for the military.

Our country has been involved in over a dozen military engagements since 1950, the largest being in Korea for 4 years, in Vietnam for 12 years, in the first Gulf War, and then the last 14 years in Afghanistan and Iraq. In nearly half the years since 1950 America has been at war somewhere in the world. We're just finishing up our formal commitment to the longest war in American history.

But things are heating up again. Many are saying that we send troops back into the Middle East, or North Africa? Should we put "boots on the ground" in Syria, or to fight ISIS? What if the President wants to reinstate the draft? Should Christians just go along with whatever a particular president says about us going to war? If we challenge a call to war, on what grounds do we challenge it?

So why am I teaching on the subject, "May a Christian Go To War?" As a pastor, I believe my main calling is to disciple you, who are part of Vineyard Columbus. And to be a disciple of Jesus Christ is more than church-going, singing worship songs, reading our Bibles, praying and tithing – although all of those things are important and should be part of discipleship. But to be a disciple of Jesus Christ is to bring our whole lives and all of our thoughts under Jesus and say, "Jesus, you are the Lord of all." To be a disciple of Christ is, as Jesus put it,

To love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.

I've always wanted to produce a church that would think about the great issues of our day in a distinctively Christian way and wasn't just squeezed into the mold of the world. Shouldn't we Christians have something distinctively to say about our country's, our children's, and our own participation in war? There are many of you here who have a family member – a son, a daughter, a spouse, a nephew or niece currently serving in the military. There are many more of you who have served in the military. This message will be particularly relevant for you.

I've been doing a series following Easter that I've titled God, I Have A Question. What I want to do during this series is talk about some of the subjects that are generally avoided in church. We're going to do a message on how should we Christians relate to

Muslims? There will be one titled “How Should We Relate To The LGBT Community?” Today, my title is simply, “May A Christian Go To War?” Let’s pray.

Now, concerning war and peace there are two great traditions in the church’s history. First, there is

The pacifist tradition

Pacifism literally means peace-making. And every Christian is called in this sense to be a pacifist, to be a peace-maker. Jesus said:

Matthew 5:9 (NIV)

9 Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.

But in the history of the church, pacifism has had a more narrow definition than simply being a peacemaker. The pacifist tradition renounces all participation in war. And this tradition of Christians refusing to participate in war goes back to the earliest days of the Christian church.

So why are some Christians pacifists? There are great arguments in favor of Christian pacifism. Why do some Christians say that a Christian may not ever participate in a war? There are, first of all, arguments from history.

Arguments from history

In the first couple of centuries of the Christian era, a church father named Origen said:

We no longer take sword against a nation, nor do we learn anymore to make war, having become sons of peace for the sake of Jesus, who is our Commander.

Another early church father named Tertullian taught that Christ, in disarming Peter, disarmed every soldier. And in the early 3rd century, a document called The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus taught this:

1. *Anyone who is either a Christian or a Catechumen [preparing to be baptized as a Christian] is forbidden to join the army;*
2. *Anyone who has been a soldier at the time of conversion may remain one, but only on condition that he refuse to become involved in warfare;*
3. *If in a responsible position [an officer], he must resign*

And as I said, there are so-called peace churches, many coming out of Switzerland in the 1500’s like the Swiss Brethren, who taught that

True Christians use neither worldly sword or engage in war, since among them taking human life as ceased entirely, for we are no longer under the old covenant.

The Mennonites, the Amish, the Quakers all teach that a Christian may not participate in war.

But it is not just Christian tradition that is cited by pacifists who renounce war. It is also the example of Christ. In the New Testament we read about the first Christian martyr, a man named Stephen. Here is what we read in Acts 7:59-60:

Acts 7:59–60 (NIV)

59 While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”

60 Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.

Why did Stephen forgive his persecutors, instead of attacking them? Well, because he was a follower of Jesus. Here is what Jesus taught.

Matthew 5:38-42

38 “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ 39 But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. 40 And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. 41 If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. 42 Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

When I read the Sermon on the Mount, and particularly this paragraph, it absolutely stretches my faith because I need to ask myself as I read these words: Does Jesus know what he’s talking about? Is he really smart about life and what will produce in us abundant life, or is this some kind of utopian pie-in-the-sky ethic that is utterly unrealistic, impossible to do, absolutely impractical? Jesus teaching, if taken seriously, will absolutely stretch your faith!

Friends, do you believe that as you read the words of Jesus that he is really smart and that he’s not impractical? His teaching is not impossible and he knows the way to abundant life for you and me? And Jesus wants his teaching to be obeyed by his followers – not just some of it, all of it, including the really hard stuff we read in the Sermon on the Mount.

What happened that caused Stephen, one of the early followers of Jesus, to forgive his persecutors even while he was being murdered by them? Jesus actually lived out what he taught others to do. He was not like that Southern governor who recorded an abstinence video while he was carrying on a secret affair. He was not like the politician

who angrily denounced a former president's adultery while he himself was engaged in adultery. Jesus is not like that. He didn't tell us to turn the other cheek, while he sought vengeance.

The amazing thing about Jesus our Lord is that he actually put into practice what he taught us to do. Jesus rejected violence even as he taught his followers to reject violence. Jesus literally turned his other cheek while his beard was being pulled out even as he taught us to turn the other cheek. When Jesus hung on a cross, what did he pray? Did he pray, "Father, get them, consume them?" Did he pray like the Old Testament psalmist, "Smash their babies on a rock; repay them, God, for everything they're doing to me?"

What did Jesus say to Peter when Peter pulled out his sword on the night that Jesus was arrested? Did he say, "Good job, Peter! You're living in the real world, buddy? Not some utopian fantasy world that I've been teaching you about. Peter, you are living in the real world. You are a realist. And in the real world, violence needs to be responded to by violence by my followers."

No, he said, "Peter, you don't get it. You're still living in the world of pay-back and retaliation. I came to introduce to my followers a new normal." And then he modeled it as he hung bleeding on the cross where he prayed:

Father, forgive them.

You are listening to this, maybe thinking about a person who has hurt you, or has hurt someone you love, and you say: Maybe Jesus could forgive his enemies, but I'm not Jesus. I'm not God come in the flesh. Maybe Jesus could refuse to retaliate, but I'm not God come in the flesh.

Friends, do you understand that the Christian life is not only listening to the teaching of Jesus and trying to put his words into practice; and the Christian life is not only looking at the example of Jesus and trying to imitate his example. If you are a Christian that means that the Spirit of Jesus is in your life. If you are not yet a follower of Christ, why not open your heart and invite Christ, by his Spirit, to enter your life. For the Christian Jesus is not absent from the space that we inhabit. Jesus is not absent from our intellect, or our will, or our heart. If you are a Christian, that means the Spirit of Jesus is right there inhabiting you, inhabiting the space that you dwell in. And our wills, our intellect, and our hearts are carried along on the wave of God's Spirit. Yes, we imitate Jesus; yes, we try to put into practice his teaching. But more than that, we live out the impulses that are being breathed in us by God's Spirit.

When you and I say: I have absolutely reached my limit concerning this other person; I have nothing else to give them, Jesus says, "I understand that and I want to help you go beyond your limits." That's what the Christian life is – to be a Christian is to go beyond

your own limits and to ask Jesus to fill you with his unlimited Spirit, to give you his heart. And his Spirit transforms us.

So when we think about an individual who has hurt us and we desire to retaliate against them, we say, “I can’t possibly do, Lord, what you’re asking me to do which is to forgive; I can’t possibly follow your example,” Jesus says, “Open your heart up to me. Allow me to fill your life and give you the capacity that goes beyond what you can do on your own. Let me transform you.”

So the pacifist tradition is rooted in history. It is rooted in the example of Christ. And the pacifist tradition is rooted in scripture.

Arguments from scripture

Here is what we read in the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Romans in Romans 12:14-21,

Romans 12:14–21 (NIV)

14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. 16 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. 18 If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. 19 Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord. 20 On the contrary:

“If your enemy is hungry, feed him;

if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.

In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.”

21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Let me quickly outline Romans 12 for you. Paul roots Christian thinking about our relationships with ourselves, with other Christians, with the world and with the government. Paul roots these with religion in two things – our experience of God’s mercy, and our experience of having our minds renewed by the Holy Spirit.

Romans 12:1–2 (NIV)

12 Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. 2 Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

What Paul teaches is in light of what God has done for you in sending his Son, Jesus Christ to pay for our sins, in light of this reality that God, in love, stepped into the world in the person of Christ, and took on himself all of our sins, thus making a way for us to be at peace with God. In light of this reality that God has opened up a way to come into his presence and for us to be God's friends and not God's enemies, in light of our experience of all of God's mercies in our life; and, second, in light of us having our minds renewed by the Holy Spirit, bringing our thoughts under God, allowing the Spirit to change us by using the Word of God and the teaching of God's Word; in light of God's mercy and the renewing of your mind, Paul says four relationships should be changed in your life.

Our relationship to ourselves

That's in verses 3-8.

Romans 12:3 (NIV)

3 For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.

Paul says in light of God's mercies all that God has done in Jesus Christ, and in light of having your mind renewed, you should approach yourself differently than you used to. Don't have an over-inflated view of yourself. Don't under-estimate the unique way God has made you, or gifted you. Have an honest, God-given perspective of who you are as a follower of Jesus. We ought to have a changed view of ourselves, if we are Christian.

Second, we ought to have a changed relationship with other Christians.

Our relationship to other Christians

That's in verses 9-13. Let's read those.

Romans 12:9–13 (NIV)

9 Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. 10 Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. 11 Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. 12 Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. 13 Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

We who believe the gospel; we believe that Jesus Christ died for our sins; that he rose from the dead; that he gives us the gift of the Spirit – we who have our minds renewed so that we have a distinctively Christian way of thinking about life, here is the way we relate to other Christians. We should be devoted to one another. We should show

other Christians honor, speaking well of other Christians. We should share our financial resources with Christians who are in need. We should practice hospitality.

Here is a third thing that comes from us experiencing God's mercy and having a renewed mind. We have a new way of relating to ourselves, a new way of relating to other Christians, and we ought to have a new way of relating to the world.

Our relationship to the world

It's this third relationship, the Christian relationship to the world, which is relevant for this talk on whether a Christian may go to war.

Romans 12:14–21 (NIV)

14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. 16 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. 18 If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. 19 Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. 20 On the contrary:

"If your enemy is hungry, feed him;

if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.

In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."

21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

And I want to pay particular attention to Romans 12.17-18:

Romans 12:17–18 (NIV)

17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. 18 If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

In light of the teaching of Christ and the example of Christ, Paul, as a follower of Christ, echoes the teaching and model of his Lord. He says don't retaliate, instead pursue peace with everyone. You understand what retaliation is; it is simply getting even. It is the iron law – action and reaction. If I'm mad at my husband, I will give him the cold shoulder. I will make him guess what he did wrong. Don't expect any romance tonight, buddy, after what you said, or what you did! If I'm mad at my wife, I will silently seethe. I won't help with the dishes. I will be sarcastic. The law of action and reaction.

Paul says if you've experienced the mercies of God in your life, and if your mind is renewed so that you think like a Christian, then you should never try to retaliate against

anyone. You make it your aim to try not to get even with a coworker who has offended you, with a relative who has hurt you, with a boyfriend who has dumped you, with an ex-spouse who said negative things about you. Paul says do not retaliate, rather, be at peace with everyone.

Now, peace with someone else is not entirely in our own hands. Paul's statement here is both qualified and unqualified. It's unqualified in the sense that peace is something we should seek with everyone.

Romans 12:17–18 (NIV)

17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. 18 If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

Remember for God there are no unforgivable people...none. There is no one who has ever lived who God is unwilling to forgive, if they repent. And there is no one who has ever lived for whom Jesus didn't die. Paul says we should seek peace with everyone. Not everyone except the stupid jerk who fathered your kids, or everyone except the person who broke into your home. We are supposed to seek peace with everyone – so long as the person is willing to live at peace with us.

Part of our peacemaking task is apologizing. I am not a naturally good apologist. Unlike many of you, I don't really like being wrong and admitting it. Sometimes going first, especially when I'm really angry, tastes like vinegar in my mouth.

But you know, I've noticed something about spending time with Jesus over many years. The vinegar in my mouth doesn't taste nearly as bad now compared to what it tasted like several decades ago. I've learned to apologize to my kids and my grandkids when I've said or did something hurtful. Apologizing when I feel like I'm only partly responsible is not as hard as it used to be. Seeking peace is generally unqualified unless of course as you counsel with a mature Christian, you are counseled that seeking peace with this person would genuinely be unsafe for you or completely unsafe for a loved one. In that case, you can't open the door. But apart from genuinely unsafe people, seeking peace is unqualified.

But achieving peace, Paul says, has two qualifications. The first qualification is if it is possible.

Roman 12:18

If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

The second qualification is

Romans 12:18

If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

Sometimes peace with another person is impossible. Sometimes the other person is not willing to live at peace with us – they refuse to meet; they refuse to go to a counselor or a mediator, or they lay down a condition for reconciliation that is impossible to meet, that would involve some kind of moral compromise. Yes, we can reconcile our marriage so long as you don't complain about my drinking anymore. Yes, we can reconcile so long as you are willing to live peacefully and not complain about my drug addiction, or my adultery, or my abuse, or my refusal to work. Sometimes peace does not depend on us. The other person is simply unwilling to live at peace with us. But as a general rule, we should seek to live at peace with everyone.

So, are Paul and Jesus teaching that a Christian may not go to war as the pacifists teach?

After 9/11 I read comments by some Christians that really disturbed me because they seemed to be very shallow applications of the texts that I've read to you today from the Sermon on the Mount and from Romans 12. After 9/11 there were Christians who said we need to forgive our enemies. We should never use violence against those who attacked America. It seems that for some Christians the only posture ever taken is to critique America's foreign policy, or to say America is just as bad as everyone else is. We just got what we deserved.

There is an entirely different tradition in the history of the church that says that in some circumstances a Christian may go to war. This tradition is called

The just war tradition

I understand the pacifist tradition. I was actually introduced to it 40 years ago and wrote papers on the pacifist tradition in college. And I have read all of the books written by famous pacifist authors arguing in favor of their tradition. The arguments in favor of pacifism are strong. But is it not a position I personally hold. Let me offer you a few reasons why, along with the vast majority of Christian thinkers in history, I believe a Christian may go to war in certain circumstances. This is called the just-war tradition.

First of all, there are moral arguments in favor of going to war.

Arguments from morality

As a matter of morality, it has always seemed wrong to me in this fallen world to renounce war in all circumstances. See, for one thing, I certainly understand why a Christian would say I cannot defend myself; I'm following the example of Christ and I refuse to defend myself. But it is quite another thing for a Christian to say I will not defend you. It is one thing, in other words, for me to say regarding myself, I will submit to injustice. I will allow my rights to be trampled on. I will go the way of the cross. But

for me to say, I'm going to let you, weaker person, my child, my wife, my mother, this older person, minority group. I will stand by and allow you to have your rights trampled on, that seems morally irresponsible to me. I can't imagine not defending my wife, my children, my grandchildren or anyone I cared about from a violent attacker, even it required me to use violence.

And by extension, it seems morally wrong to me to allow a stronger party, an oppressor, a tyrant, to trample on not just my wife, or kids, but millions of people - to have the Nazis herd Jews into concentration camps without going to their aid and violently opposing the tyrant. To sit back and watch nations being trampled on and to be unwilling to oppose the tyrants with force seems immoral to me.

And here is the second reason why I believe that a Christian may go to war in certain circumstances. It seems immoral to me that I would ask a non-Christian to fight a war that I'm unwilling to fight in. Let's imagine that America is attacked like we were in WWII. Let's further imagine that our enemies are planning to invade America. Our neighbors homes, freedom, their very lives are at risk. Should I, as a Christian, say that my non-Christian neighbor may defend our nation and, indeed, defend me, but I won't step up and put my life on the line? There is something that doesn't quite compute for me with that.

Here is a third thing. Some pacifists argue that we're not advocating passivity in the face of tyranny; what we're arguing for is non-violent resistance in the tradition of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the tradition of Gandhi. We're not saying roll over, we're saying resist, but resist non-violently with sit-ins, marches, through non-violent strikes and protests – resist non-violently. And I say yes, absolutely, where it is possible to oppose injustice through non-violence, by all means, yes, resist non-violently. But as George Orwell, the famous author of 1984 and Animal Farm, said when he was a journalist in India and watched Gandhi, he said:

It is difficult to see how Gandhi's methods could be applied in a country where opponents of the regime disappear in the middle of the night and are never heard from again.

What Orwell is saying is non-violent resistance works when you are opposing the oppression of a democratic government, a government that is subject to public opinion. But if you were to stage a non-violent protest today in Russia, or in China, or in North Korea, or in Saudi Arabia, or in Iran, or in anyone of the dozens of countries around the world in which the government doesn't give a rip about public opinion, the secret police will pull you off the street before you picked your sign up and you would be thrown into a prison or worse, never to be heard of again. There are certain circumstances in which the injustice that we're opposing will not respond to non-violent resistance.

But here is a second reason why a Christian may in certain circumstances participate in a war. This has been a majority opinion throughout Christian history.

Arguments from history

It is simply not the case that as pacifists say the church for the first few centuries following Christ was uniformly pacifist and then it was compromised through its allegiance to the Emperor Constantine and that's why we changed our view of war. We just got compromised. There are many documents from the early church telling us that there were many Christians serving in the Roman army. And they did so without being disciplined by the church. The issue appears to be not that a person could not serve in the army, but that participating in the army involves certain idolatrous practices. If you were in the higher ranks of the Roman army, you had to make sacrifices to the Emperor as if he was God. Lower ranks didn't participate in that practice.

It is clear from the early church that there were many Christians who did serve in the army, so it is simply not true that the church at the beginning was all pacifists. There was a division of opinion in the early church. And it is clear that throughout history the vast majority of Christian thinkers have tried to carefully analyze the circumstances in which a Christian may legitimately participate in war. This is part of virtually every Christian tradition – Roman Catholics, Mainline Protestants up until recently, Evangelical churches and so on.

But here is the third thing. In saying that a Christian may go to war, it is not enough to argue morally or historically. But we Bible believing Christians want to see what the scripture says.

Arguments from the Bible

It's clear that people in the Old Testament went to war. It's really important that Christians not cut our Bibles in half and say, "Well, that's just the Old Testament. What about the New Testament?" We believe in the whole Bible, Old and New Testaments. And the same God is the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament. God hasn't changed. And all of the Old Testament has not been set aside in Christ. It's true that we no longer practice the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament. We believe that these things have been fulfilled by the sacrifice of Christ. So we no longer slaughter animals in the temple because we believe in one sacrifice, the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. It is true that we don't practice many of the national laws that were given to the nation of Israel. But we still hold on to the moral laws. Jesus explicitly tells us that he didn't come to do away with the whole Old Testament.

Matthew 5:17–18 (NIV)

17 "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. 18 For truly I tell you, until heaven and

earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.

But in a more explicit way, it has been observed for over 1500 years by Christians that when soldiers came to John the Baptist and said how should we get ready for the kingdom of God, John the Baptist did not say to them, “Stop being soldiers. Quit the Army.” Here is what we read:

Luke 3:14 (NIV)

14 Then some soldiers asked him, “And what should we do?”

He replied, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.”

In other words, be a soldier, but fulfill your job justly. Don’t abuse your power. Neither Jesus in the gospels, or the early church in the book of Acts, ever told a Roman centurion, “If you want to enter the kingdom of God, you’ve got to leave the army.” Jesus had no problem telling the rich young ruler, “Leave all your money.” He had no problem telling the woman caught in adultery, “Stop it. Sin no more.” But he never tells the Roman Centurion, “If you want to be a follower of mine, you’ve got to quit the army.”

But here is the most important biblical argument for me – chapter 13 of Romans.

This is one of those times where the chapter division is entirely unhelpful. Remember chapter divisions in the Bible were not inspired by God. They were put there by the Archbishop of Canterbury in the 13th century to help people find their place. But in this case, the chapter division between chapter 12 and 13 obscures the structure of Paul’s thought. Paul is arguing in light of God’s mercy. In other words, in light of you being changed by the gospel, you’re a believer in Christ, you’ve been changed, and in light of the distinctively Christian way you ought to think, you ought to have your mind renewed. We Christians ought to have a changed relationship with ourselves, Romans 12.3-8; second with other Christians, Romans 12.9-13; third with the world, Romans 12.14-21; and finally, we ought to have a changed relationship with the government.

Romans 13:1–7 (NIV)

13 Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. 2 Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. 3 For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. 4 For the one in authority is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God’s servants, agents of wrath to

bring punishment on the wrongdoer. 5 Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience.

6 This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. 7 Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.

Now, Romans 13 has a number of links to the previous texts, but I just want to compare two verses. In Romans 12:19, we read:

Romans 12:19 (NIV)

19 Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.

Just compare that with Romans 13:4:

Romans 13:4 (NIV)

4 For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.

In other words, what Paul is arguing here is that what is denied to the individual by way of personal retaliation is entrusted to the government. God's wrath can be exercised through the government. It is impossible to be judge and jury of your own case. We can't see everything we need to see. God delegates the task of judgment to others, sometimes to the government, to the state, to punish a thief, or a child abuser, or a rapist. As a follower of Christ we say, "I release you to the state. The government will deal with you."

There is a great illustration in Friday's Dispatch. There was a tragic story from Milwaukee of a 2-year old who ran out into the road to go to a park. Another man and his son were driving in a van and hit the little boy. The man ran out to immediately attend to this little boy, who was lying in the street. The uncle of the little boy ran and got his gun and shot and killed the man who was attending the little boy. He shot the man's son.

What's being condemned in Romans 12 is what we might call vigilante justice, taking the law into our own hands. Paul says leave it to God's agent, the government, to work wrath. And specifically, not just the judicial function of punishing criminals, but the state is entrusted with the power of the sword.

Romans 13:4 (NIV)

4 For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.

What is denied to the individual is given to the government.

So, may a Christian join the state in going to war for moral reasons, for historical reasons, for biblical reasons? My answer is yes. But just because we're not pacifists doesn't mean that Christians unqualifiedly march off to war whenever the government says we should fight in a war. So let me finish quickly with a few limits that Christians have historically taught about when a Christian may go to war. The just-war theory is taught, by the way, in the US Military Academies as our future military leaders are trained to wrestle with the ethics of when we should as a nation go to war. There are limits for Christians joining up in some war effort and the war fever that sometimes grips our nation.

The limitations of going to war

Let me tick these off. First of all,

Only God is God

In Romans 13 Paul says that the government is a servant of God three times.

Romans 13:4 (NIV)

4 For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.

Romans 13:6 (NIV)

6 This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing.

The only one we Christians worship is God. We never give our absolute allegiance to anyone else other than God – not to any king, not to any president, not to any so-called Fuhrer, or emperor, or politician. Just because the government says we're going to fight doesn't mean the Christian says, "I agree, this war is just." Christians need to exercise spiritual discernment. We may not be pacifists, but we're not militarists either. We don't support all wars.

Most Christians in history believed in just wars, but many refused to fight in unjust wars which leads to the second thing.

The war must be just

Not every pretext for going to war allows us to use violence against someone who is made in God's image and for whom Christ died. There needs to be a just cause for going to war. We've been invaded. Our nation has been attacked. Another nation has been invaded. A people group in some other nation is being violently slaughtered. There needs to be a just cause for going to war. But we refuse to go to war to solve some politician's pride or to grab some natural resource which happens to be in another country.

Third, war must be:

The war must be a last resort

We Christians ought to be the slowest to convince about the rightness of going to war. Rather than being at the front of the line, we ought to be at the back of the line arguing in favor of using every means that are at our disposal to negotiate, to engage sanctions, everything, before we reluctantly, because there is no other possible way forward, pick up the sword. In the just war tradition, war is never the first option. It is always the last option. That's what the great Christian thinkers have said.

Fourth,

The war must have a high probability of success

This is dealing with the cost of war. It is appropriate that before we ever engage in war, we weigh the costs. Is it likely that we'll succeed in our mission? What's the cost going to be to soldiers? What's the cost going to be to this other country, or this other people group that we're facing? What's the cost going to be to American soldiers?

I read some tragic stories this past week published by the Army of first-hand stories of soldiers coming home from Iraq and Afghanistan with PTSD – post traumatic stress disorder. The Army published these stories in the hopes of being able to breakdown the shame barriers for other soldiers to come forward and say, "I need help."

There are soldiers who have come home and experienced horrible panic attacks, feel that they are dying. Soldiers who experience uncontrollable rage. Soldiers who found it impossible to readjust to civilian life when they're back home and couldn't comfortably fit back in to their families or their communities.

Part of the just war tradition is weighing the costs, not just in terms of dollars and cents, although that's important, but in terms of people's lives before we go to war.

Finally,

The war must employ just means

As much as possible, in the just war tradition, we don't kill civilians. We don't kill non-combatants. We don't kill POWs. We don't dishonor the corpses of enemy soldiers.

If we want to be disciples of Jesus, then our Christian faith needs to inform the way we approach all of life. We always ought to ask ourselves what is distinctively Christian about the way that I approach my dating, my marriage, my politics, and, yes, my view of war and peace. Jesus is Lord of all! Let's pray.

God, What Do You Think About War?

Rich Nathan

April 18-19, 2015

God, I Have a Question Series

Romans 12.14-13.7

- I. The pacifist tradition
 - A. Arguments from history
 - B. Arguments from the example of Christ
 - C. Arguments from scripture (Romans 12)
 - 1. Our relationship with ourselves
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 - 3. Our relationship with the world
- II. The just war tradition
 - A. Arguments from morality
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 - A. Only God is God
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 - E. The war must employ just means