

YOU ASKED FOR IT – “JUST WAR?”
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SCRIPTURES: MICAH 4: 1-5, JAMES 4: 1-10

Over the years I have had my questions and struggles over participation in a war that was patently unjust. Although I served as an army chaplain, a non-combatant, my identity was complicated in representing God’s love to those I served with and yet being part of an entity of power and violence that ravished the country of Vietnam. For over twenty-five years after that conflict I was involved in dealing with the human toll in the aftermath. I also want to assure you that my support has never wavered for those who serve in the military who walk in harms way on behalf of their governments. Even before going to Vietnam, two of my first duties as a military chaplain were to accompany the survivor assistance officer in notifying loved ones of the deaths of their sons or daughters and to perform military funerals for a number of those who died.

My involvement in war has forever changed my life and my perceptions as I readily admit. It is my choice this morning to respond to a “You Asked for It” request that asked that the topic of “just war theory” be addressed. What is Reformed Theology’s view on this subject? Is the Presbyterian church a pacifist denomination or does it subscribe to “just war theory?” Are there evils so great that it is justifiable to counter them with another evil? On what basis is such a judgment made? These are complex and important questions. This sermon will attempt to respond admittedly from my own experiences, perceptions, and probably prejudiced thoughts. So here we go.

The Christian Church through its centuries of history has approached violence and warfare from three emerging fundamental positions. The early Christians took very seriously the injunction that they were not to take up the sword and refused to serve in the Roman armies for the first three centuries. During this time they were a persecuted minority ostracized by the establishment and following a Lord who was proclaimed as Prince of Peace. These Christians were advocates of pacifism.

After the Emperor Constantine was converted to Christianity in 312 CE, Christianity was legitimized as the official state religion, and with the threat to the peace and stability of the Roman Empire by the invasion of barbarians from the north, Christians began to debate that these might be times when they could be justified in waging war if certain criteria were met. This position was developed by St. Augustine and later refined by St. Aquinas in the medieval period and became known as “just war theory.”

The third position which emerged still later was the idea of “holy war” or “crusade” which involved the acceptance of whatever kind of force or violence was necessary to secure a given end, and

the unquestioning participation of the Christian on the assumption that God's will was being served. All these options have existed throughout modern history and continue to be operative today as the national and international rhetoric affirm.

There is much about warfare in the writings of the Old and New Testaments. In examining them, there is no single viewpoint that dominates these scriptures. The devil, as it has been pointed out many times, can quote scripture for his purposes, and in no area of our experience has this been truer than in justifying or condemning war. We must not fall into the oversimplification that is often seen in Christian circles which poses the God of the Old Testament as a God of warfare and vengeance and the God of the New Testament as a God of love and peace. Such a generalization does not hold up to scrutiny. Certainly, there are violent passages in the Old Testament – a fact that is not surprising considering the historical context on which they were reflective. But there are also other passages that witness of the tenderness of God's love for all people and the peace God will bring (Isaiah 2, Micah 4). The Old Testament also stresses the justice and mercy of God who challenges injustice and declares favor for the oppressed.

The New Testament also expresses various attitudes. Jesus declares, "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Mtt. 10:4), a powerful military metaphor. The same Jesus says it's not only wrong to kill the enemy – even hating the enemy is proscribed. There is a positive command to love and even pray for the enemy. Peacemakers, not war makers, receive the blessing. The writers of the epistles direct to overcome evil with good.

So it is that legacy of opposition to violence and warfare produced early pacifism and later conscience-driven just war theory. We turn now to examine this position called "just war theory." There are at least six criteria by which a war might be called "just:"

1. The war must be declared by a legitimate authority. It cannot be the expression of a private grudge of an individual or group who simply decide to exert their power. In the pursuance of this theory this usually has meant declaration by a prince or sovereign head of state.
2. The war must be carried out with a right intention. Its purpose must be to promote peace. Good should be promoted and evil avoided. A war cannot be just if it is waged with wrong intention such as the desire to secure vengeance or to satisfy a lust for domination and acquisition of the other's territory or resources.
3. The war must be undertaken only as a last resort. No war can be just as long as there is any way or chance of resolving the conflict by discussion, negotiation, the employment of economic sanctions, or other means short of military action. All means of peaceful solution must have been exhausted before resort to military force can be justified.

4. The war must be waged on the basis of the principle of proportionality. The relationship between ends and means must be proportionate, i.e. there cannot be excessive destruction for the sake of even minimally desirable ends. The good to be accomplished must outweigh the evil that will be exercised to bring about the good.
5. The war must have a reasonable chance of success. This is a moral consideration, for unless there is a good chance that the objective of waging war can be achieved, it is immoral to incur the damage and destruction that will result.
6. The war must be waged with all the moderation possible. Clear codes of conduct have emerged, embodied with international rules of warfare endorsed by The Hague Convention, the Geneva Convention the Nuremberg Accords, and other such agreements. It is never legitimate to go beyond the minimal moral constraints that have been agreed upon. Wanton violence is prohibited; so is looting; so are massacres. Particular care must be taken to see that civilian noncombatants and prisoners of war are not tortured or killed. Terms of war settlement must embody charity and justice rather than vengeance.

Father John Coleman, S.J. has noted certain important assumptions about the application of these criteria: a) the presumption in “just war” theory is always against war, not in favor of it. There is not an attempt to glorify war or to make it seem less evil than it is. The burden of proof is always on the one who would wage war and all the criteria must be met if the war is to be called “just.” b) The criteria remain operative during the waging of the war. A war originally undertaken for a just cause could be waged so unjustly that continuing participation in it might have to be condemned. c) Since the presumption is always against war, there is a built-in presumption in support of dissent from participation in war; the basis for selective conscientious objection.

Now we turn to the questions that have been asked and to the larger question of our responsibility as followers of Jesus Christ. The Presbyterian Church is not a pacifist denomination though there is a significant peacemaking group among our members called Plowshares which developed largely in response to nuclear proliferation. Reformed theology stresses one’s individual understanding and conscience before God in light of Scripture, and also reinforced a just war stance in confronting evil and in countering the crusades and calls for holy war. Just war meant essentially a war of self-defense. (i.e. Calvin) Underlying such a position is the basic value which God places on all human life. The church of Jesus Christ, in the power and unity of the Holy Spirit, is called to serve as an alternative community to an alienated and fractured world: a loving and peaceable international company of disciples transcending all governments, races, ideologies, reaching out to all “enemies,” ministering to all the victims of poverty, injustice and oppression. We represent the way of God in this world as seen in Scripture. We need to speak for this alternative in the political and governmental realms effecting our and other’s lives. We

need to understand our faith apart from nationalism and recognize that concerned dissent is not unpatriotic.

Perhaps the most difficult question asked is, “Are there evils so great that is justifiable to counter them with another evil and how is such a judgment made?” Anyone who has ever been intimidated or threatened knows the truth of the saying “Your freedom stops at the end of my nose.” What good mother or father would not protect their children from purposeful harm? Society and nations have responsibility to defend their people from each other and from invaders. For our country the last conflict of declared war based on “just war theory” was World War II when the Axis powers perpetrated mass evil and destruction and had to be stopped by the other nations of the world. However, may I also point out that when evil is met with evil, proportionality goes out the window (i.e. fire bombing in Dresden, Hamburg, Tokyo; the unleashing of nuclear destruction). In fact, one has to wonder whether the “just war theory” has any relevance in this nuclear proliferation age.

Now in these final minutes I would like to share a few thoughts for your continued consideration of war and its effects. The first contemplation is about the decisions to go to war in light of “just war theory.” The criterion of the need of declaration by a legitimate authority has always been a bit shaky. Proponents of a just war theory have invariably been able to justify wars in which their own nations were involved, suggesting that the theory is in danger of merely being a self-serving device. Nations serve as judges in their own case. Who is to say that all legitimate alternatives have been exhausted before war is declared? It’s gotten to the point where the lawful way of declaring war has been by-passed and the perceptions of others are ignored. And certainly just war theory that countenances nuclear warfare has lost all moral credibility.

My second concern regards the deception of war. The very idea that someone can win and the losers fold their tents is a gross simplified lie. Even with World War II, The Marshall Plan had more to do with a more peaceful outcome and the rebuilding of trust among nations. As we know and experience, all kinds of rationalizations and justifications can be concocted for going to war and for behavior in war. My favorite example comes from my conflict in Vietnam where a general declared, “We destroyed the village to save it.” States engaging in warfare constantly place their spin through controlled media to present an image of their righteous cause. Too often the crusade mentality crosses over into the rationalization that “God is on our side” in complete contradiction of Christian principles. Out of fear of losing or for our own security, things like mass detainment, torture, abuse of prisoners become actions which in other circumstances we would deplore and condemn. Somehow our world gets turned upside down and principles and freedoms espoused are overcome by fear and power needs. In effect we become what we say we oppose.

A final thought I would raise for your consideration is the destructiveness of war. The cost in lives, resources and national development becomes overwhelming. Proposed plans for a nation are put on hold as the tax budget is expended on arms and the needs of the war. The health and essential services of citizens are sacrificed for the money grinder of implemented conflict. National reputation and credibility are undermined by the need for power and acquisition. Principles are abandoned to seeming necessity.

For humanity wars are horribly destructive. In an age of technology non-combatants and the innocent still disproportionately suffer the major numbers of deaths and casualties. Those who are victimized become embittered and tomorrow's terrorists. The enemy becomes dehumanized and even demonized in order for the implementation of war to be carried out. Intimidation and terrorization flies in the face of all faith teaching.

For the individual combatant or warrior the destructiveness is also intense. Innocence is stripped away in the killing of others. No longer can one's capacity for evil be denied. In life-threatening circumstances, fear and anger express themselves in devastating acts toward the enemy, the prisoner and the innocent. If one can kill with sanction and impunity, is there anything that can't happen? Playing God with others lives can undercut one's sense of trust and caring. The individual wounds of war are not only lost lives, lost arms and legs, but often the loss of the compassionate self. The myth of war has always been the hero, and young men have always been ready to prove their manhood as warriors, an illusion which produces devastation in the aftermath of combat. Perhaps we could end our warring madness if there was a hard-fast rule that no one under fifty was allowed to participate.

In conclusion and in view of some of these lifted concerns, what is our responsibility as Christians as we look at the situations of violence and conflict? James attributes social disruption and violence to a disease of the human heart whose only healing is in turning to God. Paul Tillich defined sin as "separation" and warfare is the epitome of separation between peoples. In contrast, Jesus said, "I have come to give you peace – a peace more abundant." This concept of peace in Christ begins in the heart and expresses that transformation in relation to others. That is our calling as Christians. In this fullness of peace, a just war ethic is not enough. We as Christians must nurture a theology of a just peace. Micah says it will happen. It's God's plan and it's our responsibility to work on it.

In this time of crises we need to consider a new confession of Christ, written in 2003 by Jim Wallis of Sojourners and a large number of theologians with varying viewpoints and from diverse institutions such as Duke Divinity School, Harvard Divinity School, and Princeton Seminary to Candler School of Theology and Southern Methodist to Gordon-Conwell and Fuller Seminaries.

1. Jesus Christ, as attested in Holy Scripture, knows no national boundaries. Those who confess his name are found throughout the earth. Our allegiance to Christ takes priority over national identity. Whenever Christianity compromises with empire, the Gospel of Christ is discredited. We reject

the false teaching that any nation-state can ever be described with the words “the light shines and the darkness has not overcome it.” These words apply only to Christ. No political or religious leader has the right to twist them in the service of war.

2. Christ commits Christians to a strong presumption against war. The wanton destructiveness of modern warfare strengthens this obligation. Standing in the shadow of the cross, Christians have a responsibility to count the cost, speak out for the victims, and explore every alternative before a nation goes to war. We are committed to international cooperation rather than unilateral politics. We reject the false teaching that a war on terrorism takes precedence over ethical and legal norms. Some things ought never to be done – torture, the deliberate bombing of civilians, and the use of indiscriminate weapons of mass destruction – regardless of the consequences.

3. Christ commands us to see not only the splinter in our adversary’s eye, but also the beam in our own. The distinction between good and evil does not run between one nation and another or one group and another. It runs straight through the human heart.

We reject the false teaching that any nation is a “Christian nation,” representing only virtue while its adversaries are nothing but vicious. We reject the belief that our country has nothing to repent of, even as we reject that it represents most of the world’s evil. (Rom. 3:23)

4. Christ shows us that enemy-love is the heart of the gospel. While we were yet enemies, Christ died for us (Rom 5: 8,10). We are to show love for our enemies even as we believe God in Christ has shown love to us and the whole world. Enemy-love does not mean capitulating to hostile agendas or domination. It does mean refusing to demonize any human being created in God’s image.

We reject the false teaching that any human being can be defined as outside the law’s protection.

We reject the demonizing of perceived enemies which only paves the way to abuse; and we reject the mistreatment of prisoners, regardless of supposed benefits to their captors.

5. Christ teaches us that humility is the virtue befitting forgiven sinners. It tempers all political disagreements, and it allows that our own political perceptions in a complex world may be wrong. We reject the false teaching that those who are not for the United States politically are against it or that those who fundamentally question a government’s policies must be with the “evildoers.” Such crude distinctions, especially when used by Christians, are expressions of the Manichaean heresy, in which the world is divided into forces of absolute good and absolute evil.

I believe that acknowledging these truths is basic for followers of Jesus Christ. These principles are important in making decisions as citizens. Peacemaking is central to our calling in a troubled world where Christ is still Lord. William Sloane Coffin states it so well in his book entitled *Credo*, “Peace does not come rolling in on the wheels of inevitability. We can’t just wish for peace. We have to will it, fight for it, suffer for it, demand it from our governments as if peace were God’s most cherished hope for

humanity, as indeed it is.” In the same vein Jesus declares, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called to children of God” (Mtt 5: 9). Is there such a thing as “just war?” It is far more important for humankind and creation to work at creating “just peace.” Make it so, Dear Lord.

Amen

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