

ERSP FORUM

Evangelicals and War

by Paul Alexander, Peter Dixon, Brian Edgar,
Thomas Simpson and Derek Tidball

The aim of the ERSP Forum is to provide an arena that allows Evangelical scholars to express their views without the constraints and cumbersome nature of debates normally carried out in academic journals. Contributors are therefore invited to comment briefly on a given topic and do not see the responses of their fellow contributors prior to publication. In this edition, the Editors of ERSP asked contributors to respond to the following question: “Commenting both as an Evangelical and a scholar within your particular academic discipline, what are your views on war?”

PAUL ALEXANDER, Ph.D.

Paul Alexander lectures in Theology and Ethics at Azusa Pacific University, California, and writes on Pentecostalism and pacifism. He is co-founder of Pentecostals and Charismatics for Peace and Justice.

I think the first question Christians must ask regarding participation in war is, “how do we live as faithful followers of Jesus?” In the context of imperial conquest, rape, and occupation, Jesus taught his followers to love their enemies and not to resist evil with violence. I would prefer that God not be this way, that God not invite humanity to confront hatred with prayer, persecution with forgiveness, and violence with nonviolent resistance, but that is the God who is revealed in Jesus. Jesus reprioritized tribal, nationalistic, and familial loyalties by calling his followers to love not just those who loved them but to love also those who sought to destroy them. So clear was this to the early church that the majority of early Christians for two centuries refused to participate in warfare – they were faithful to Jesus and recognized that Spirit-empowered discipleship necessitated that one pick up one’s cross (sometimes quite literally) rather than pick up a sword. When early Christians fought it was with “weapons of righteousness” in their right hands and in their left (which left no room for carnal weapons of warfare) and with the whole armor of God. I think the biblical argument for consistent, active, and engaged Christian nonviolence is strong and that the stupidity and weakness of the

cross should be the shape of our faithfulness – for it is wiser and stronger than human wisdom and strength.

*I think the second question Christians should ask is, “since we see clearly in Jesus that we should love our enemies and not kill them; what should we do to work for peace and reduce war?” Pacifists and just war theorists can argue continually about whether to kill or not, so instead of doing only that I recommend that they work together and engage in the ten practices of Just Peacemaking. Just Peacemaking is a third approach to war that enables both pacifists and just warriors to live up to their stated ethics of war – reduce it significantly and have it truly be a last resort. Just war theorists, pacifists, social scientists, political scientists, theologians, biblical scholars, and Christian ethicists developed Just Peacemaking practices together in interdisciplinary collaboration, and based it on empirical studies and solid theology. 1) Support nonviolent direct action. 2) Take independent initiatives to reduce threat. 3) Use cooperative conflict resolution. 4) Acknowledge responsibility for conflict and injustice and seek repentance and forgiveness. 5) Advance democracy, human rights, and religious liberty. 6) Foster just and sustainable economic development. 7) Work with emerging cooperative forces in the international system. 8) Strengthen the United Nations and international efforts for cooperation and human rights. 9) Reduce offensive weapons and weapons trade. 10) Encourage grassroots peacemaking groups and voluntary associations. For more on Just Peacemaking practices, see Glen Stassen, *Just Peacemaking: The New Paradigm for the Ethics of Peace and War* (Pilgrim Press, 2008).*

PETER DIXON

Formerly a Royal Air Force pilot and Chairman of the Armed Forces Christian Union, Peter Dixon now leads Concordis International, a charity involved in conflict resolution, and has managed strategic peace-building interventions predominantly in Sudan. His PhD research is exploring cooperation in civil war interventions, and his book *Peacemakers: Building Stability in a Complex World* was recently published by IVP.

It is perhaps unfair to reframe the question posed, but in this brief article I write as much in the role of pragmatic practitioner as in that of theoretical scholar. Our view of any issue is shaped at least partly by our background. Given past military service and a subsequent period with a focus on peacemaking, my view of war is coloured both by my understanding of the biblical principles and by experience.

It is no surprise that a person who has completed a military career would not espouse a pacifist position. While there are biblical texts that suggest a

non-violent response to aggression, these seem to refer primarily to attacks on us as individuals. When there is aggression against our neighbour or a threat to peace and stability, it is legitimate and perhaps even obligatory to use force. The one true God - the same yesterday, today and forever - is not a different God in the 21st century or in New Testament times than in the Old Testament. There is a continuity today with the God who not only allowed but even commanded warfare.

However, this is not a mandate for holy wars, and the use of violence is not necessarily the right way to deal with a threat or attack. We need some means of determining whether and in what form force may be used. I have come across no better framework for making such judgements in an imperfect world than the Just War tradition, however misused it may have been at various times in the past. Too often the tradition is used as a stick to beat political enemies or as a means of self-justification. Used properly, though - as a basis for difficult decisions of life and death in the face of confusing circumstances, as a means of self-examination of motives and capabilities, and as a foundation for developing operational principles and training regimes - it offers much of value. It is therefore sad that what Nigel Biggar calls 'practical' and others call 'functional' pacifism, assuming that war is so rarely the right answer that it is effectively excluded, pervades among Christians who are not actually fully fledged pacifists. In this way ownership of the Just War tradition has shifted away from its natural home, the churches, to the realms of secular philosophy.

The Just War tradition provides principles regarding the ways in which force may be used, but there may be means other than force to right even the most heinous wrongs. Moreover, the growing willingness to override sovereignty for humanitarian reasons, encapsulated in the United Nations' 'responsibility to protect' doctrine, can benefit greatly from being put under the Just War spotlight. The 'law of unintended consequences', strongly recognised in the tradition, has been much in evidence in recent military interventions. Here, another area of which I have some experience, variously known as peacemaking, conflict resolution or peacebuilding, offers alternatives. While I think it legitimate for a Christian in certain circumstances to fight, there are many other ways in which the believer can engage with armed conflict. Moreover, there are other means of working for peace than campaigning and advocacy.

Christians would be arrogant to imagine that only they can be the peacemakers blessed by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. I have learned a great deal about conflict and peacemaking from those who approach these issues from other traditions or from a secular viewpoint. Nevertheless, our faith has reconciliation at its heart and Christian believers are well placed to bring their trust in God's sovereignty to a patient, non-judgmental work of building peace. But that is a subject for book-length treatment.

BRIAN EDGAR, Ph.D.

Brian Edgar is an Australian serving as Professor of Theological Studies at Asbury Theological Seminary, USA. He largely formed his views on war some years ago when he felt compelled to actively resist his government's call to be conscripted to the war in Vietnam.

Every new violent international conflict means a resumption of the long-standing debate between proponents of the two historic Christian approaches to war - Pacifism and Just War theory. Each argues its case in its own way. Pacifism is strongly idealistic and grounded in a theology of redemption - hoping to realise in the present those characteristics of the future kingdom of God. Just (or 'justifiable') War theory is as pragmatic as Pacifism is idealistic, and is rooted in a theology of creation - seeking to deal with the sin that has come into God's good world.

But neither can offer more than a provisional and incomplete answer because both deal with circumstances that have already gone seriously wrong. A situation where either of these approaches might become necessary already involves a level of evil which makes it impossible for either to be the definitively 'right' answer.

Yet each has some merit. Pacifism involves the belief that killing is never right and that 'it is better to let someone kill me than for me to kill someone else.' Aiming to overcome evil with good it is a bold and radical approach which takes seriously Jesus' command to 'love your enemies.' Yet it is often criticised as perhaps being possible for an individual but definitely being impractical for a nation. But who said that a Christian ethic had to be reasonable, rational or practical? In the garden of Gethsemane Jesus overrode Simon Peter's reasonable and proportionate defence of an innocent victim who was threatened by armed men doing the bidding of people who wanted him dead. His actions matched his teaching.

Just War theory is as much in search of peace as Pacifism, but believes that there are situations where war is the only way to peace and that it is more just that an aggressor be killed than innocent people. But it must not only demonstrate that the principles which govern its implementation are valid (Is there a legitimate authority? Can the death of the innocent be avoided? Is it reasonable to think that the end result will outweigh the costs of war?) but must also show that violence can actually lead to peace. There was a slogan during the Vietnam war which made this point: 'Fighting for peace is like fornicating for chastity' (except they didn't say 'fornicating').

There are serious questions for both views. Just War theory has to consider whether justified violence will not, in the long term, actually produce more violence by legitimating war as a means of resolving problems. And Pacifism has to ask whether it should not revise its argument to the effect that 'it is better for me to forego my own moral purity for the sake of another and

therefore to kill the aggressor and have a bad conscience, than it is for me to allow them to go unchecked and kill another innocent person.'

In the face of these soul-searching but inevitably partial responses to war the only undeniably Christian option is to become active peacemakers. And not merely in reactive mode. It is not peace-making unless it is positive, preventive action, done well in advance of any problem, creating a world in which the possibility of war becomes increasingly absurd. Christian peacemakers will work to reduce the distance between cultures and will overcome the divisive effects of nationalism. In the 1980's and 1990's large-scale aid, generosity and cultural interaction between nations (instead of, for example, the provision of weapons of mass destruction to help Iraq in its war with Iran) may well have undercut the motives which led to several wars, and may have saved many thousands of lives and billions of dollars. It is not only the case that 'those who live by the sword die by the sword' but also that, as Dwight Eisenhower said, 'Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and who are not clothed.'

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God" (Mt 5:9).

THOMAS W. SIMPSON

Tom Simpson is studying for a Ph.D. in Philosophy at the University of Cambridge, with interests in a variety of areas, including Just War. He previously spent five years as an officer with the Royal Marines Commandos, including tours in Northern Ireland, Baghdad (Iraq), and Helmand Province (Afghanistan).

It seems to me that what C. S. Lewis called 'semi-pacifism' has grown in strength in recent years, and is now the prevailing mood in our culture. Semi-pacifism is 'the idea that though you have to fight, you ought to do it with a long face and as if you were ashamed of it' (C. S. Lewis, Mere Christianity, London: Fontana Books, 1955, p 104). I contend that this mood is unsustainable. We should either be wholly against war, or wholly unembarrassed about war. And it is the latter I espouse.

I would argue against both pacifism and semi-pacifism on grounds that are recognisable by secular liberals. But I also hold that for evangelicals there is an excellent reason why we should be unembarrassed about war. The reason is: God is wholly unembarrassed about war. As our picture of God has distorted, so the justification of war has seemed more difficult. So as we bring into focus sometimes neglected aspects of the biblical picture of God's character, so war is seen as the right and appropriate means by which we

establish and uphold the good in a world of oppression and wrong. It is not good that there is injustice. But given that there is injustice, it is good that its perpetrators be punished.

Semi-pacifism becomes plausible for Christians when the gospel imperative to love your neighbour is held in a way that excludes all else. But as the Anglican Articles of Religion so wisely have it, we should not ‘so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another’ (Art. XX). God’s love indeed has the final word. God’s love is further witnessed in the offer of mercy to those who seek forgiveness before his judgment is executed. But the preceding word, in response to sin, is: those who persist to the end in rejecting God will be brought to judgment. And God is greatly honoured in that judgment, for his justice and holiness are upheld. Can we exult with Moses at the divine rescue, that ‘The Lord is a warrior’? Do we thrill that on the Lord’s final Day ‘a large and mighty army comes, such as never was of old nor ever will be in ages to come’? Are we embarrassed that Jesus is not only the King who reigns, but will be the General who conquers all? (See Ex 15:3, Joel 2:2, Rev 19; quotations NIV.) This too is good news, for without it, there is no final justice.

Of course, these themes have to be treated with care. Israel’s wars in Canaan are not our wars, and we have no equivalent promise of land here on earth. Further, our justice is proximate; all are fallen, liable to seek disproportionate revenge if slighted, and lacking wisdom and knowledge. ‘With justice he judges and makes war’ implies a contrast with our judgment (Rev 19:11; italics added). So the prosecution of war by right authorities must be a careful, prayerful matter. But it must not be reticent; undue and excessive caution becomes complicity.

There is a final related theme. As we have grown uncomfortable with war, so the honour and renown due those who fight for justice has been airbrushed out of ethics. The occasional mood of passive hostility from civil society towards the police and the military, who are responsible for its very protection, is extraordinary and hypocritical. Those who carry out the difficult task of protecting society are rightly subject to scrutiny, but also deserve plaudits and honour when the task is carried out well. For it requires bravery and self-sacrifice to do so.

DEREK J. TIDBALL, Ph.D.

Derek Tidball was formerly Principal of London School of Theology from 1995-2007, President of the Baptist Union (1990-1991) and became a Vice-President of the Evangelical Alliance in 1995. He was elected Chairman of the Council of the Evangelical Alliance in 2004-8. A

sociologist and Baptist pastor he is currently Visiting Scholar at Spurgeon's College and engaged in a writing and teaching ministry.

There are basically three positions religious people can adopt regarding war. The first is pacifism; the second, 'a just war' position; and the third, a 'holy war' or jihad. Jihad, to which Christians resorted in the Medieval Crusades, has no place, in my view, in Christian thinking and practice. That is why I deliberately began by referring to 'religious' people rather than 'Christian' people. Unfortunately, given the West's history of empire, any contemporary war perpetrated against Islamic Countries will be seen by them as a Holy War.

Such wars, however, cannot be conducted in the name of Christ for several reasons. The Christian faith is an international faith and about the creation of a new inter-racial humanity, as Ephesians 2 emphasises. Patriotism may be a good thing but too easily becomes idolatry. Phrases like 'For God and Ulster' which were used by armed and militant Protestants during the troubles in Northern Ireland are offensive. In no way does Christianity depend on the possession of particular territory. The centre of our faith is Jesus Christ, not a temple or a tract of land, however precious they may be in our history. Nor is Christianity wedded to one particular form of government. Democracy may be a good thing, and the outworking of Christian principles, but various forms of government are demonstrated in Scripture, all of which have their strengths and weaknesses.

Pacifism is a position I respect immensely, but I cannot adopt in general, even though I do so in two minor ways. First, I believe the Sermon on the Mount advocates pacifism at the personal level for disciples of Christ. Secondly, for reasons I will mention below, I am a nuclear pacifist.

The difficulty with pacifism in general however is that it fails to take into account the role of the state as an institution ordained by God with responsibility of promoting justice, punishing injustice, ruling over and defending its people. Issues of justice and injustice do not stop at national borders, especially in a shrinking global village, there are times when a 'good' government has to take action against an unjust one. War should be the very last weapon to be used in the armoury of bringing unjust nations to their senses.

The New Testament never advocates that the early Christians should go to war against Rome. Rather it seems to leave it up to God to intervene apocalyptically on behalf of his people. But the reason for that is simply that Christians, however, political the implications of their faith, are not a nation.

So, a just war position seems to do most justice to me to scripture. It recognises the justice of God, the fallenness of humanity, the role of the state and the evil of war. Adapting David Atkinson, we 'sometimes need this alien expression of enforced justice which may include a limited resort to war'. A just war has to be declare by a legitimate authority, for a just cause, as a last

resort, using proportional means, discriminating between combatants and non-combatants and have a reasonable chance of success.

In our world, the application of these principles is far from simple. Fighting terrorism is to fight ‘an illegitimate authority’ and military hardware (and terrorist techniques) makes the targeting only of combatants very difficult. Yet the principles remain significant and raise the right questions when war is considered. The principles of the target and of proportionality combine to convince me that nuclear war is never the right option.

Like many Britishers, I struggle to believe that recent interventions in Iraq measure up to the criteria of a just war and believe the invasion was based on politically manipulated information. I believe it was not the last resort and more could have been done to defend our people before going to war. The issue of justice would have been much clearer if the vested interests of oil had not been involved. And I, like many others, am left mystified why intervention was considered essential there when so many other evil and unjust regimes are left undisturbed.

Given the topical nature of the issue in the United States, in the next ERSP Forum contributors have been asked to comment, from an Evangelical perspective, on government provision of healthcare. Comment will include US, British and Canadian perspectives.