

Pacifism and the Bible: Some Unresolved Questions

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Abstract: This paper raises several biblical questions challenging the pacifists' contention that their view has more biblical support. The questions, paraphrased here, include, "Does the New Testament condemn war?", "Should the Old Testament narrative and characters contribute to our understanding of war?", "Can war fit within the command to love our neighbor?", "Is war evil?", "Have we misunderstood Christ?" and "How passive should Christians be?" Thus, rather than offer a critique of pacifism based on non-biblical arguments, this paper highlights areas where pacifism arguably appears problematic in light of the totality of biblical revelation.

War has been defined in many ways. "War is a way of deception" (Sun Tzu)¹; War is "the continuation of politics by other means" (Clausewitz)²; "War is Hell" (Sherman)³; "War is a racket" (Butler)⁴; and "War is a force that gives us meaning" (Hedges)⁵. At its core, war involves one society imposing its will upon another. Humans seem to be naturally drawn to the idolatrous worship of power,⁶ and it is this notion of using the threat of physical injury or death (i.e. violence) to compel others to comply with the collective will of society that troubles Christian sensibilities. In addition, many Christians believe our fallen nature makes everyone susceptible to believing his/her own rhetoric, to be self-deceived.⁷ Humans, as Adam and Eve demonstrated, can easily explain or

¹ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, (New York: Viking, 2002), 106.

² Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*. Translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret. Paperback ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976, 1989), 605 Book 8 Chapter 6 part B.

³ John W. Brinsfield, "The Military Ethics of General William T. Sherman: A Reassessment." *Parameters: Journal of the U.S. Army War College* 12(2), 46.

⁴ Smedley D. Butler, *War Is a Racket: The Antiwar Classic by America's Most Decorated Soldier* Paperback ed. (Los Angeles: Feral House, 1936, 2003).

⁵ Chris Hedges, *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*. (New York: Anchor Books, 2003).

⁶ Theodore Plantinga, *Learning to Live with Evil*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1982), 101.

⁷ Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 105-112.

justify their evil behavior. Since this is the case for individuals, how much greater is this the case for societies seeking to justify war for their own wayward purposes?⁸ One need only consider the case of Nazi Germany to observe how individuals can collectively convince themselves that extreme acts of aggression are necessary, even just.

In light of this troubling fact, many Christians have dedicated themselves to oppose all forms of violence. They believe that war and its accompanying use of lethal and terroristic force run counter to the life and teaching of Jesus Christ and even the broader thrust of the New Testament.⁹ They point to Christ's Sermon on the Mount, with its call to embrace humility, self-denial, and sacrificial love to one's enemies, coupled with His refusal to use violence to save himself (Mt 26:51f), as proof that discipleship demands the adoption of non-violence. In addition, some claim that the virtues of kindness and humility undermine the passions needed for armed conflict. As Christ conquered evil by spiritual and verbal means, Christian soldiers can (and should) do likewise.¹⁰ Pacifism¹¹ has had a long and noble history within Christianity. Undeniably, adherents of pacifism represent dedicated and righteous followers of Christ and it is not the purpose of this paper to challenge the sincerity or their membership within the Christian family. Neither does this paper seek to engage the great pacifists within the Church who have grappled philosophically and theologically with the difficult issue of war from a Christian perspective. Rather, the aim here is far more modest, namely to raise a number of biblical questions challenging the pacifists' contention that their view has more biblical support. Thus, rather than offer a critique of pacifism for its views based on non-biblical arguments,¹² this paper will highlight areas where pacifism arguably appears problematic in light of the totality of biblical revelation.

I do not claim that these questions cannot be resolved in favor of the pacifist position. The following questions are proffered in order to encourage deeper dialogue concerning the use of Scripture in discussions about war in Christian theology. I am asking whether the pacifist understanding of Scripture

⁸ Reinhold Niebuhr makes a similar point. See Stephen D. Long, D. "Humility as Violent Vice." *Studies in Christian Ethics* 12 (1999), 37.

⁹ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996).

¹⁰ Richard B. Miller, "Christian Pacifism and Just-War Tenets: How Do they Diverge?" *Theological Studies* 27(1986), 453.

¹¹ The author is aware of diversity of views within the pacifist camp (see Robert G. Clouse, ed. *War: Four Christian Views*. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1981)).

¹² *Ibid.*, 451.

adequately accounts for all the biblical evidence available regarding war. The aim is to raise a series of questions for further debate, in order to encourage all Christians, regardless of denominational, theological or political background, to work towards developing a more consistent Christian theology of war that accords with the whole of divine revelation. Each of the questions raised are designed to encourage reflection and stimulate such a reassessment. The questions are not intended to be exhaustive, sequential, or organically related; each question should be considered on an individual basis. One cannot be sure such an exercise will necessarily shift the nature of the debate in any way, but even if it only serves to highlight the complex nature of this topic, particularly as it relates to hermeneutics and ultimately our application of Scripture to our lives, then it will have been worthwhile.

I think it is important to state from the outset that my bias lies in favor of a righteous use of war. I simply do not believe pacifism is practical or workable. But more importantly for the purposes of this paper, the biblical evidence arguably weighs against pacifism, that is, it contains more references which seem to support the use of war than those that oppose it. Of course, readers should not take this to mean the use of force view necessarily has more biblical support, as perhaps Scriptures should be weighed and not counted (to borrow a principle from text criticism). But I feel it is important, in a paper which does not seek to be pejorative or polemical for the sake of it, to explain why it takes a more critical position vis-à-vis pacifism than Just War.

THE QUESTIONS

Question 1: Does the New Testament actually condemn war?

Christians throughout the centuries have wrestled with the stark contrast between the violence in the Old Testament and non-violent teaching of Christ. In the Old Testament, Elijah called down fire to destroy soldiers tasked with his capture (2 Kgs 1). In contrast, Christ resisted his disciples' suggestion to destroy a recalcitrant town, (Lk 9:52-56), stating that he did not come to destroy.

It is undeniable that the tone of the New Testament is remarkably less violent than the Old. Nevertheless, before we read too much into that fact, we should note that the New Testament never actually says war has passed away or been fulfilled in Christ. The Bible tends to reserve such language for the Law and to the sacrificial system. Neither does the New Testament actually condemn war. If silence implies assent, then the New Testament's silence provides resounding evidence for the continued relevance of war as a tool of

the state, whose leaders have been established by God. Arguments from silence are notoriously weak, unless one can rule out all other interpretations. Fortunately, the New Testament offers us more than silence. For example, nowhere does the New Testament condemn soldiers for being soldiers, a fact even pacifist concede.¹³ John the Baptist (or Jesus) never commands the inquiring soldiers to leave military service (Lk 3:14). Rather, he tells them to be happy with their wages and not extort money from the vassals under their jurisdiction. Hays seeks to deflect this fact by noting the soldier stories were included to emphasize that the gospel reached the most unlikely candidates.¹⁴ Yet Hays fails to consider that the Scripture could be making both points, namely, that the gospel reached pagan soldiers and that soldiering was not immoral. Consider also Paul's boast concerning his evangelistic efforts with the Praetorian Guard (Phil 1:13). He certainly wants to convert them from their sin but no mention is made about encouraging them to abandon soldiering. Now it is true Christian pacifists could appeal to the idea of progressive understanding, arguing the soldiers (and perhaps the Church) needed time to understand the full implications of Christ's teaching.¹⁵ For example, the need for progressive understanding is frequently cited in discussions arising over the New Testament's relative silence on the subject of slavery¹⁶ and women's ordination. According to this logic, then, John the Baptist and Paul were simply laying a framework that the Holy Spirit would employ to gently guide the soldiers, along with the wider church, to the conclusion that their job was evil.

However, the progressive understanding of scriptural passages on war raises three problems. First, how is it the Bible has no difficulty in condemning activities that scholars claim are extremely difficult for people to change (e.g. homosexuality)¹⁷, yet the Bible neglects to condemn soldiering which involves

¹³ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 335-6.

¹⁴ Ibid. In Richard B. Hays, "Narrate and Embody: A Response to Nigel Biggar, 'Specify and Distinguish'." *Studies in Christian Ethics* 22, no. 2 (2009), 188.

Hays says that the soldiers were never designated as disciples of Christ.

¹⁵ I do not wish to suggest that I necessarily concur with the assumptions or use of a progressive hermeneutic.

¹⁶ While not explicitly referring to a progressive understanding of Christ's teaching, Myron S. Augsburger's comments would likely be sympathetic to the point being made. Robert G. Clouse, ed. *War: Four Christian Views*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 84.

¹⁷ The American Psychological Association states that homosexual orientation cannot be changed. Cited by Stanton L. Jones, and Alex W. Kwee. "Scientific Research,

the lethal use of force alleged to be so abhorrent to God? Is it not more likely that soldiering was not considered evil at all? Does anyone think it odd that the Bible condemns a non-violent act, homosexuality, but neglects condemning behavior that, by its very nature, leads to the destruction of humans? Next, I also question whether the argument for progressive understanding is as applicable to the topic of war as it might be for slavery. The reason is simple. Paul says that governments are ordained by God (Rom 14). Since governments gain their legitimacy by mastering violence¹⁸, it stands to reason that the government holds those powers is because God wants it too. Thus, if the administration of violence is a proper function of government, then is it not likely that people participating in the application of that sanctioned violence have a *prima facie* justification for their actions? This brings us to our third problem, namely, is it not likely that pacifists have blurred the distinction between the Church and her members by their insistence that the Sermon on the Mount applies not only to Christian treatment of fellow believers but also his/her actions as a member of the state? Is it not legitimate to say that the Sermon on the Mount says that the Church should not wield the sword but that prohibition does not extend to the Christian participating in the state? I suggest that Hay's failure to properly account for this possibility represents a significant weakness in his excellent work.¹⁹ We should ask ourselves, if Paul successfully convinced Governor Felix to convert, would he have been instructed to abandon his position as a leader of troops (Acts 24:24f)? Counterfactuals are difficult to assess, however, I provide them here in order to encourage greater reflection on these passages within the fabric of Scriptural revelation.

Question 2: Might the Old Testament serve to contribute to our understanding of war, rather than be regarded simply as a mine of prooftexts against war?

The narratives of the Old Testament are filled with accounts of incredible violence, sometimes described in graphic detail. Consider 2 Chronicles 25, which records Amaziah's battle with the Edomites where 10,000 Edomites died in battle only to be accompanied by a slaughter of an additional 10,000

Homosexuality, and the Church's Moral Debate: An Update." *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 24:4 (2005), 313.

¹⁸ Philip Bobbitt, *The Shield of Achilles: War, Peace and the Course of History*. Paperback ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), 216.

¹⁹ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 317-346.

Edomite prisoners by throwing them over a cliff. The Chronicler does not record God's displeasure over the slaughter, instead he relates God's anger over Amaziah's idolatry. How should New Testament Christians understand and evaluate these texts? I suspect that pacifists view the Old Testament as a source of prooftexts on how Christians should *not* act, and instead they emphasize the non-violence portrayed in Christ's words and behaviors.

I do not doubt that there is a distinction between the Old Testament and the New. But we must take into account Paul's comment that the Old Testament was written for our instruction (1 Cor 10:6f). So then, "How should Christians learn from Israel's behavior?" One option would be to suggest there is a hermeneutical distinction between what the Bible records and what it teaches.²⁰ Just as we recognize the Bible's accurate account of Satan's words and actions, we do not then say, we should obey and mimic him. Interpreters can argue the war accounts of the Old Testament exist as background information designed to put the larger theological issues in historical and situational context. Thus the Bible is not providing a theology of warfare for Christians, it is simply telling us how our theological forbearers behaved before Christ.

The "is-ought" distinction is useful but limited, as we still need criteria to help us determine when the Biblical narrative is simply telling a story and when it is commanding. This problem becomes even more troublesome upon recognition that the manner in which the writers shaped the stories can very well have imperatival import.²¹ For example, it is arguably the case that the notion of Holy War and Israel's conquest of Canaan can legitimately be sidelined as there seems to be nothing in the New Testament to suggest that Christians are to be involved in a Holy War until Jesus returns. I suggest that is how the pacifist words of the New Testament are best understood. As previously noted, Christians are not to take up the sword in the name of Christianity, like the Israelites who took up the sword in the name of Yahweh. The reason is quite simple. The church is presently in the wilderness waiting for the new Joshua to come to take us to the Promised Land.²²

But there are numerous passages regarding war that had nothing to do with "Holy War". Israel battled nations outside the Promised Land and for

²⁰ Gordon D. Fee, and Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide for Understanding the Bible*. 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993), 83-84.

²¹ See Roger Stronstad, *The Charismatic Theology of St. Luke*. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Press, 1984).

²² I regret not remembering the name of the person who said this.

reasons unrelated to the procurement and protection of that land. David besieged Rabbah to punish it for the mistreatment of his ambassadors, who suffered the sole indignity of having their clothing torn and their beards' shaved. In other words, David caused the deaths of many people simply to defend his honor and by extension the honor of his people (2 Sam 10-11). It is unhelpful to say that David simply responded to the military build-up of Ammon because David could have simply sent a message that he had no interest in war. I proffer that the juxtaposition of the Ammonite war with David's sin against Uriah serves to contrast David's righteous use of authority with his abuse of that authority²³. I suggest that pacifists must develop a reasonable argument to suggest why the war narratives in the Old Testament no longer have application to modern Christians.

Question 3: Do Old Testament characters provide any useful, even moral, insight for the use of force by Christians?

Some could claim that the Old Testament comments on war only applied to the Jewish nation and their land. These passages cannot be used for guidance of Christian behavior because Christians are to be in the world but not of it (cf. 1 Jn 2). Christians are landless, and therefore, the war passages do not apply. This approach does have some benefits. First, it is reasonable to say there is something unique about God's relationship to Israel versus His relationship to Christians and the Church. I do not think Christ called Christians to engage in genocide, as noted in Question 2. But we must be cautious to avoid overstating the distinction between Israel and the Church as God's Old Testament saints have much to teach His New Testament ones.

I would also suggest that the lives of Esther and Daniel provide an important illustration for how Christians should conduct themselves in the service of secular rulers. Esther used her position to obtain the legal right for her people to defend themselves against genocidal attack (Esther 8). It seems clear that Esther's actions and those of her people were entirely appropriate. Daniel is likewise a key model as he was a believer who held governmental authority in a pagan nation (Dan 6:2-3). It is likely that he had access to military force.²⁴ Although the Bible is silent on his military role, it is entirely reasonable to think that his position gave him authority over Persian military forces. If we believe Daniel ordered men to battle, does this mean that God had

²³ Cf. Andrew Sloane, *At Home in a Strange Land: Using the Old Testament in Christian Ethics*. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Pub.2005), 58-61.

²⁴ Elwell, Walter A. and Barry J. Beitzel. *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1988), 2:1908.

no problem with this? Or is the Bible's silence on the subject indicative of God's desire for us to focus on the positive elements of Daniel's life and ignore the negative?

Question 4: Can war in fact demonstrate love of neighbor?

D. Stephen Long makes a compelling argument that many people think that the solution to ending war lies in reducing people's commitment to their own 'social particularity.'²⁵ If we can convince people to look beyond their social, national, and religious prejudices peace will be significantly expanded, if not established, because the attitudes that justify our conflicts will have been eliminated. Long observes that if we compare the wars of the prejudicial Crusaders with the wars of enlightened Democratic nations we should recognize that the alleged goal of removing prejudices has not worked. He argues that those who claim that tolerance will end war are really arguing for a form of apathy that fails to acknowledge truth. If Long's assessment is correct, how should we then understand the meaning of "love they neighbor" at a national level? Is the pacifism espoused by many Christians little more than a type of apathy?

Consider whether the behavior of Abraham, the father of the Faith (Rom 4:11), could be a model for contemporary Christians. Note that Abraham was also landless (Dt 26:5) and lived prior to the creation of the nation-state of Israel. In this regard, Abraham is much like contemporary Christians. We do not have a nation-state and are free from the Law. Genesis records that Abraham armed his servants and launched a raid against the Chedorlaomer coalition in order to rescue his brother in law who was taken captive. The problem for pacifists is, if Abraham's military action was wrong, why did God bless him? Could it be that Abraham exhibited the gift of self-sacrifice on behalf of Lot? Does Abraham's behavior suggest that all violence is not necessarily evil and that its use could be righteous?

Question 5: Is war in itself evil, according to the Bible?²⁶

Just War supporter Arthur F. Holmes says that "War is evil."²⁷ In this assessment, pacifists and Just War theorists agree. If war is evil why does the Bible explicitly associate God with war? For example, the Old Testament

²⁵ Stephen D. Long, "Humility as Violent Vice." *Studies in Christian Ethics* 12 (1999), 31-46.

²⁶ Robert G. Clouse, ed. *War: Four Christian Views*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 117.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

proclaims that Yahweh is a warrior (Ex 15:3) after destroying the Egyptian army. Lest anyone dismiss this passage as simply the excited outburst of a grateful nation, the Old Testament also describes an encounter between Joshua and an angel who describes himself as the Commander of the Yahweh's army (Josh 15:14). War, in the Old Testament, is treated as a normal event. This is not to suggest that the Bible saw war as desirable, clearly not. The Bible does not glorify war like a Hollywood movie. War is only exalted as the necessary way to punish and subjugate evil. This does not mean that war is never evil. It is only evil when used to thwart the purposes and command of God. Consider Amos 1:3 where Damascus is condemned, not for attacking Israel, but for the harsh treatment it inflicted on the Israelite towns.

The New Testament does not contradict this connection between God and war as the book of Revelation shows (Rev 19)²⁸. In the end times, the conflict between God and Satan reaches the final battle. God unleashes His fury against Satan's forces (including humans) in order to subjugate evil and to avenge the deaths of His people. In other words, a war motif is God's way of fulfilling his promise to save a people. I suggest if we speak of war as evil we must define it in such a way as to avoid besmirching God's character.

Question 6: Have we misunderstood Christ?

As a general rule, pacifists believe the Sermon on the Mount should guide all Christian behavior. In a recent article,²⁹ David Clough suggests that the time has come for the Church, which has historically supported Just War teaching, to recognize that Christ's teaching is relevant to the question of the use of violence. I agree. Although my sympathies lay with the Just War camp, I do feel uneasy when reading the Sermon on the Mount. A plain reading seems to contradict my educated interpretation suggesting that my sophisticated view is in fact an artificial creation to avoid the impact of Christ's call to embrace a lifestyle of non-violence. I recognize that some passages can be misunderstood from a naïve reading. However, the Sermon on the Mount's aphoristic tone reminds one of the Proverbs.³⁰ The timelessness and ahistorical nature of statements resist appeals to context that can be used to dampen the radical nature of those commands. Is the popularity of the Just War view amongst

²⁸ Thanks to Calvin L. Smith for bringing this point to my attention.

²⁹ David Clough, "On the Relevance of Jesus Christ for Christian Judgements About the Legitimacy of Violence: A Modest Proposal." *Studies in Christian Ethics* 22:2(2009), 199-210.

³⁰ Stanley Hauerwas, "Living the Proclaimed Reign of God: A Sermon on the Sermon on the Mount." *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible & Theology*, 47:2(April,1993), 152.

Christians an example of the Church's accommodation to the ways of the world? Has the Church properly acknowledged the power of the Holy Spirit to empower us to live a life that is envied by non-Christians (Jn 13:35) as well as strengthen us to accept the call of suffering (2 Cor 1)³¹? Has not God given us the Lord's Supper to remind us of Christ's suffering and that as servants we too will suffer until Christ returns (Jn 13:16; 1 Cor 11:25-6)? These are troubling questions for Christians, such as myself, who support the use of war as an activity compatible with Christian behavior.

I am open to changing my mind. But I require convincing evidence that the teachings of Christ were not simply for the Church but also for the Christian's behavior in the political sphere. I suggest the recent research on Christ's teaching by scholars such as N.T. Wright and others requires ethicists and theologians to revisit the interpretation of Christ's teaching about the use of force. I would like to know if Christ's pacifist statements are best understood as a denial of Jewish violent nationalism as I suggest. It will be unlikely we will obtain an answer beyond dispute. Yet, it is possible we could discover the answers which receive the preponderance of support. If the Church is to be constantly evaluating whether she has kept the Faith, which has been handed down once and for all (Jude 3), then it is incumbent upon her divines to renew the investigation on such an important issue.

Question 7: How passive should Christians actually be?

If we grant the pacifist argument that Christians should not participate in violence, the question remains of how removed from the institutions of violence should Christians be. Put another way, should Christians practice nonresistance or should they practice pacifism?³² The Old Testament provides examples of righteous people who assisted military commanders without directly participating in violence. Consider Elisha, a prophet of God, who provided military intelligence to the wicked King of Israel regarding the movements of the King of Aram (2 Kgs 6:8-14)? Does Elisha's behavior provide insight for pacifist concerns about supporting the military goals of a wicked ruler?³³

³¹ Cf. Scott J. Hafemann, *Suffering and the Spirit: An Exegetical Study of II Cor. 2:14-3:3 within the Context of the Corinthian Correspondence*. Vol. 19 Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament. (Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck)), 1986.

³² Robert G. Clouse, ed. *War: Four Christian Views*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 29-57; 81-104.

³³ Other examples include, Jehoida's actions to protect Joash (2 Kings 11) and the wise woman who sacrificed one to save the city from Joab's army (2 Sam 20:16f).

Interestingly, the New Testament provides similar examples regarding a believer's relationship to violent powers. Everyone is familiar with Paul's command to pay taxes to the Roman authorities (Rom 13:6), taxes certainly used to fund the nation's wars. Pacifists may think taxes are sufficiently removed from the taint of violence so as to make their payment morally acceptable. However, I suggest that Christ's command to his followers to carry the equipment of the Roman army for twice the legally required distance (Mt 5:41)³⁴ places the Christian in even closer proximity to violence. The reason is Christ's command actually tells Christians to provide logistical support to an army. Since logistical support is critically important for military success, does Christ's command suggest that drafted Christians should not hesitate to serve in the military, even in non-combatant roles, for more time than the draft requires? Noting that the text states the Christians were forced does not remove the burden of the question because it forces us to ask *why* Christians should help the movement of armies, if violence is so abhorrent. This latter question is even more striking when we consider that the Apostles clearly state that, at least as far as the gospel is concerned, Christians are to die rather than keep silent (Acts 5:29).

A TENTATIVE CONCLUSION

These are just a few of the challenges Scripture presents to a pacifist understanding of war. I agree the biblical testimony is complex and will resist easy and neat solutions; a prediction that should surprise no one. I suggest, however, that the Scriptural testimony is complex not because of conflicting views in the text but rather because the implementation of force is a complex decision dependent on a number of diverse factors. If this is the case, then pacifists need to explain the call of pacifism in light of the Old Testament and all of the teachings of the New Testament. Only then can the Church arrive at a general consensus on this issue.

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³⁴ Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*. electronic ed. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001, c1992 (Logos Library System; The New American Commentary 22), S. 113