

SHOULD A CHRISTIAN GO TO WAR? Romans 13:5

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In the last sixty years or so, America faced three wars in which its young men died by the tens of thousands. One was a declared war; two were undeclared. World War II, the Korean War, and Vietnam have sapped America of much of its physical and moral strength.

Needless to say, Vietnam was the most unpopular war in America's history. It divided our Congress into hawks and doves, and it splintered our nation. There were those who burned their draft cards, those who marched in protests, and even some who fled to Canada. Possibly as never before, America was faced with the right or wrong of war. Many Christians were pricked in their consciences to evaluate the biblical position on war.

The Bible says that until Christ returns in his second advent, there will be wars and rumors of war. We can expect that America's sons, and perhaps her daughters, will face the war issue again.

Romans 13:1-7 teaches that the Christian is to be subject to the government that God has sovereignly put over him. The Christian is to be subject, not only for fear of punishment, but for conscience sake. That is, subjection to government is part of a Christian's true worship of God. The question arises, "Does this include military service?" Is there such a thing as conscientious objection, pacifism, or non-resistance taught in the Bible? Throughout history Christians have been divided on this issue, but the vast majority of them have not been pacifists.

CHRISTIAN VIEWPOINTS OF WAR

There are four basic viewpoints on war that have been held by the historic Christian church. Of course, there are also many modifications of these views.

Crusade War. This view says one should wage war in the name of religion. In the Middle Ages, the Crusaders, inspired by the Roman Catholic Church, felt it was right to spread Christianity by the sword. They made war in the name of the man who gave his life for others, believing it was commanded to take life. This period is a dark spot in the history of the church, and Christians often hang their heads in shame when reading about the Crusades. Jesus Christ made it clear that Christianity is never to be spread by the sword, but in love and by the power of God.

Non-resistance: The other extreme says that Christians are not to participate in any type of war whatsoever. Those who hold this view believe that all killing in war is wrong. Some would not oppose killing in self-defense or fighting a defensive war. Others would enter military service as non-combatants. There is a great deal of latitude in this position. The Mennonite, Brethren, and Quaker groups have traditionally been pacifists. Many Methodists are also of this persuasion.

Blank-check War: This viewpoint says Christians should go to war whenever their government tells them to do so. It makes the state an idol and would cast Christian morality and ethics to the wind. There may be times when Christians cannot fight for their country, such as when the country is an aggressor or when the Christian is required to do unchristian acts.

Just War: Those holding this view evaluate a war and the activities involved in it to see if violence is justifiable. This group feels that Christians, like all other men, have social responsibilities and that war may be justifiable on a political basis in some cases. Their criterion is: Is the war less harmful than the evil it hopes to prevent? This theory has been held by the Reformed groups, Presbyterians, Lutherans, and most Baptists.

MAJOR ARGUMENTS USED FOR PACIFISM

The Sixth Commandment Forbids Killing (Exod. 20:13): The Lord said, "Thou shalt not kill." The Hebrew word is *ratzach*, which refers to murder with premeditation. When Jesus repeated this command in the New Testament, he used the Greek word *phoneuo*, which means "murder" (Matt. 5:21). The Bible student realizes immediately that this cannot refer to all killing because: 1) God ordained capital punishment (Exod. 21:12); and 2) God told Israel to carry out war against her enemies. Surely God would not contradict his own command. The sixth commandment refers to premeditated murder, not to the killing done in military service in defense of one's country.

Turning the Other Cheek (Matt. 5:39): "But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also." In context, this refers to personal insults to a Christian and is put on an individual basis. These words have no political implication and are not to be applied to national situations. When evil is done to an individual Christian, he is not to fight back but to turn the cheek, but this verse says nothing about military service on a political basis. This is very similar to Paul's teaching in Romans 12:19 which forbids Christians to take their own revenge, and his teaching in Romans 13:4 that God has ordained the state to take revenge in some cases. God's commandments to nations are different from his commandments to individuals.

MAJOR ARGUMENTS FOR CHRISTIANS PARTICIPATING IN WAR

No Scripture: There is no Scripture to prove pacifism for the Christian. All wars are terrible, but they are under God's sovereign control, and the Bible nowhere teaches neutrality by Christians.

Obedience to Government: Romans 13 teaches obedience to government, and part of this obedience is military service. For example, a Christian in America does not go to war because he believes that America is a Christian nation, but because as a citizen he has a duty to be obedient to government and he has a social responsibility to his state.

Teaching of John the Baptist (Luke 3:14): "And the soldiers likewise demanded of him, saying, And what shall we do? And he said unto them, Do violence to no man, neither accuse any falsely; and be content with your wages." This should be translated, "Extort by violence from no man"; it means that soldiers are not to intimidate others because of their authority. Notice, however, that John did not instruct the soldiers not to fight or not to serve in the military. Rather, he told them to serve honorably.

Teaching of Jesus: Jesus spoke to many Roman military men and he never told them to resign their commissions or to get out of the army to follow him.

Cornelius (Acts 10): Cornelius was an officer in the Roman army who was a godly man and knew Christ as his personal Lord and Saviour. Apparently, pacifism was not a teaching of the very early church.

Men of History: Great men such as General Stonewall Jackson of the Civil War were good soldiers and maintained a positive Christian witness to men.

For Testimony: A Christian may have a poor testimony with men if he refuses to go to war. The unsaved may conclude him to be a coward and may mock Christ. The Christian should be a "rock" in battle, for he is not afraid of death. This in itself can be a great testimony to unsaved men.

Sinfulness of Men: Non-resistance is idealistic; it is held often by those who do not believe strongly in the sinfulness of all men. Greedy men and nations will always attempt to conquer others. If attacked, we must be willing to protect our country, home and family.

Most pacifists, who decry all war as sinful, would not hesitate to pick up the phone and call the police if their homes were being robbed. Police protect towns and cities. Why not carry this further? State militia and police, under the hand of the

governor, protect life, liberty, and order in the state. A national army does likewise for the nation.

God's Plan: All wars today are simply steps in God's plan for the return of Jesus Christ to this earth. There will always be wars and rumors of wars.

“And as he sat upon the mount of Olives, the disciples came unto him privately, saying, Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world? And Jesus answered and said unto them, Take heed that no man deceive you. For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many. And ye shall hear of wars and rumors of wars; see that ye be not troubled; for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet” (Matt. 24:3-6).

The rising and falling of nations is part of God's sovereign plan. This evil world and wars will go on and Christians living on the earth may have to participate in war. However, Christians can never be warlike or enjoy war. They must remember that they are left on this earth to be a witness for Jesus Christ in this present evil world.

Now the questions will be asked, “What is a justifiable war? What happens if our nation becomes the aggressor?” Only the conscience can decide, and when making such decisions, the Christian must keep in mind that he is to be in subjection to his government.

CAN A CHRISTIAN BE A CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTOR?

The first question a person must ask himself when considering the issue of conscientious objection is, “Do I choose not to kill because I am afraid to be killed or because I abhor killing another man?” Some so-called conscientious objectors are simply cowards.

I have a friend who was from a strict Mennonite family who were pacifists. During World War II this friend left his Mennonite home under terrible pressure and became a medical non-combatant in the Canadian Army. He did not want to kill nor did he want to stay neutral. I respect him for this. When he was shipped overseas he went to France. Being a Mennonite and from a German home, he spoke the German language fluently. He was stationed behind the lines in a hospital for the recovery of wounded German prisoners of war. He found the Hitler youth hardened to spiritual things, but many of the older soldiers were Christians. My friend found sweet fellowship with these German Christians, and they would read the Bible and pray together. He also had the privilege of leading several of the younger Germans to Christ. But he had a high price to pay for his convictions: the American soldiers turned him in as a collaborator with the enemy

because he had so much in common with some of these German Christians. My friend later told me that he had more in common with his German Christian brothers in Christ than with his godless American comrades in uniform. Why? Christ transcends all political boundaries.

What if a Christian's conscience really does tell him not to kill in war? Should he disobey his conscience? Absolutely not? He should not kill, but this does not always keep him from military service. For example, the United States and Canada allow a conscientious objector to go into the military as a non-combatant. In such instances, there is no need for a true Christian to avoid military service.

I had another Mennonite friend who refused to go to war, but who was really not doing much for Jesus Christ. He was a poor soldier of Jesus Christ and a disgrace to the Lord.

CONCLUSION

All Christians should hate war and we must never be warlike, but if our government calls us to go to war, most of us will go. We will become part of the military not only to protect our country, but to be a witness to those in the military service of the saving grace that is in Christ Jesus. Christians are first citizens of heaven and then citizens of the state. A Christian's religious convictions, as a soldier of Jesus Christ, transcend his political convictions. Wherever God, in his sovereignty, places the follower of Christ, the Christian must tell all that Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation, that everyone without Christ will pass on into a godless eternity and be judged forever.

If you have never trusted Christ as your Saviour, he will save you when you commit your life to him. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved.