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Should Christians Fight?

by Keith Stump

Should a Christian ever kill another human being? Are there any circumstances that morally justify a Christian going to war?

In 1941, on the eve of the United States' entry into the Second World War, the motion picture *Sergeant York* was released to wide critical and popular acclaim. The film struck a patriotic chord with Americans, reassuring them that it was both right and honorable to serve their country during wartime.

Gary Cooper won the Oscar for Best Actor for his poignant portrayal of backwoods Tennessee farmer Alvin C. York, the highest-decorated American soldier of World War I.

In the Battle of the Argonne Forest on October 18, 1918, Corporal (later Sergeant) York almost single-handedly killed 25 German soldiers, knocked out 35 machine guns that were pouring deadly fire upon his platoon and captured 132 prisoners.

York's extraordinary exploit was all the more remarkable in view of the fact that he had applied for conscientious objector status when drafted.

A wild, hard-drinking young man, York had found God shortly before the war and had begun to live his life according to his understanding of the Bible. Foremost among York's concerns was the sixth commandment, "Thou shalt not kill." As his denomination did not specifically prohibit service in war, York's application for conscientious objector status was denied.

During basic training, York struggled with the moral issue of killing human beings, debating religion and patriotic duty with his superior officers -- and even refusing to shoot at targets in the form of human silhouettes.

Praying for God's guidance, York ultimately decided to go overseas and fight alongside his battalion. He attributed his decision to Matthew 22:21: "Therefore render unto Caesar the things

that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's" (KJV). He felt that God was telling him that his duty to his fellow soldiers and his country was not incompatible with his duty to his Creator.

Following his heroic exploit in the Argonne, York told his superiors that he was as much against killing as ever, but that he had to kill "to save lives."

A Fallen World

Is it permissible for a Christian to kill "to save lives"? *Sergeant York* raises significant philosophical and moral issues, issues that weigh heavily on Christians in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

Can Christians be involved in wars as combatants? Is bearing arms contrary to Christian doctrine? If God showed up on the battlefield, what would he say?

The teachings of Jesus focus on the principle of love -- including love even for one's enemies. But does that mean a Christian should never kill another human being, under any circumstances? Is war philosophically irreconcilable with Christianity?

All Christians share a common concern about violence and war. All agree that nonviolence is, in principle, preferable to violence. No one disputes that the Christian ideal is brotherly love among all peoples and the elimination of war.

But we live in a fallen world, a world dominated by greed and self-interest, a world of competing ideologies and conflicting ambitions. War has been a fact of life since the beginning of human history. It originates in man's sinful nature, from uncontrolled passions and insatiable desires that war within the human heart (James 4:1-2).

One day this will change. Wars will end and swords will be beaten into plowshares. But what should we do in the meantime?

Four Christian Views

There is no single doctrine of war among Christians. Four classical views have evolved over the centuries. Orthodox Christianity accepts all approaches as legitimate moral choices. They are:

1. Pacifism. Pacifism holds that all war is morally wrong, and that Christians should not participate in warfare in any way.

Pacifists take the "turn-the-other-cheek" and "love-your-enemies" admonitions of Matthew 5 literally. "How can we love our enemies when we're killing them?" they ask.

Pacifists, in fact, regard *all* violence as inherently wrong. According to strict pacifist interpretations, Christians must never use force, even in personal self-defense. They must always be ready to absorb violence without resistance or retaliation. Pacifists see it as logically

inconsistent and hypocritical to make allowances on the personal level for that which they condemn on the national and international level.

Even calling the police to report a crime is viewed as un-Christian by many pacifists, because it is, in effect, a request for "vengeance," carrying with it the potential for violent confrontation.

Pacifists argue that Christians who condone violence and warfare rely more on philosophical argument than on biblical exegesis. They believe that Christians have become corrupted by values that are part of the secular world. Rather than separating themselves from worldly practices (Romans 12:2), Christians have conformed to secular society.

Christians must realize that they have a "new identity" in Christ, pacifists advise. They are part of the Kingdom of God -- "Christ's ambassadors" (2 Corinthians 5:20) with "citizenship in heaven" (Philippians 3:20), and must not become entangled in this world's affairs.

Pacifists make the point that one's loyalties and obligations to God have an important bearing on one's loyalties and obligations within society. When there is a conflict between obeying God or obeying one's government, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

To accommodate such views, many countries allow pacifists to apply for conscientious objector status. Conscientious objection is the refusal, on moral grounds, to serve in the armed forces or to support military action. Nations with mandatory military service usually allow conscientious objectors to perform alternative community service.

2. Nonresistance. This view takes its name from Matthew 5:39: "Do not resist an evil person." It holds that Christians can participate in war, but only as noncombatants -- medics, mechanics, cooks, quartermasters and the like. They regard such functions as "doing good," while not personally resisting the enemy by bearing arms and inflicting injury.

Proponents of this view emphasize that the requirement of nonresistance is laid upon the people of God only. The unbelieving world has no such obligation. War is lawful for a duly constituted government and its non-Christian citizens.

Christians, however, do not have to oppose the war effort of their own nation. They can perform their responsibilities to their government in everything except actively resisting the enemy with carnal weapons.

[It is not inconsistent with biblical teaching to defend oneself and one's loved ones. Love requires action to protect human life. Self-defense is not revenge, but the restraining of further evil.](#)

3. Just War. This is the view held by most Christians throughout history (see "Perspectives on 'Just War,'" page 12). It argues that a war waged in support of a nation's right to a peaceful existence -- in other words, a defensive war against an aggressor -- is "just" and biblically permissible.

Advocates of the just war theory feel that pacifists and nonresistors practice a selective reading of the scriptures. They isolate the New Testament's love-your-enemies ethic, misinterpret it, and use it to evade their responsibilities to their fellow human beings. Some go so far as to charge that pacifism is immoral, being tantamount to an unconditional surrender to evil.

Just war advocates argue that Matthew 5 has to be understood in the context of other passages, such as Romans 13 (see page 14). Life is a gift from God, to be cherished, honored and protected. Warfare is therefore permissible if it seeks to protect and defend innocent lives.

The just war viewpoint emphasizes the Christian duty to work for the betterment of the world. Righteous men and women must stand against evil. If they make no attempt to affect the world for good, they have no standing to decry its evils. Thus, engaging in war for the purpose of self-defense in the face of unprovoked aggression is right before God.

Such a "just war" is not the war of James 4, where the aggressors lust and kill and "desire to have." It is not a war motivated by national ambitions or personal egocentricity. Instigating such a war is clearly unbiblical.

4. Preventive War. The concept of a "preventive war" -- also called a war in the cause of justice -- goes beyond the "just war" theory. It sees war as legitimate not only in *response* to aggression, but also in *anticipation* of it.

Proponents argue that if self defense is biblically permissible, then why would it not also be permissible to act in anticipation of an impending threat? Should we sit idly by, waiting for the enemy to deal the first blow, and thereby needlessly risk the lives of our citizens?

No, say proponents of this view. In the face of a clear and present danger, Christians may legitimately go to war to prevent an attack. A preventive or preemptive strike is fully justifiable.

But there is a further dimension to the preventive war theory. It also views war as a legitimate means of correcting gross injustices. Christian nations must stand against those who use their power to hurt the innocent, regardless of where such crimes are perpetrated.

When outrageous and heinous behavior occurs (Hitler's atrocities, for instance) Christians are obligated, proponents contend, to stand against moral evil as agents of God. In the face of extreme injustice, Christians are duty bound to help lift the yoke of oppression from peoples being victimized by evil rulers, or to come to the aid of innocent nations whose existence is threatened by aggressive outside powers.

Biblical Teaching

Since the majority Christian view allows for participation in war, the scriptural support for this position should be closely examined and considered.

"Just war" and "preventive war" advocates note that at the very beginning of human history, God set out the principle that "whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed"

(Genesis 9:6). This precept was reemphasized in Exodus 21:23-25, in the so-called "law of retaliation": "You are to take life for life, eye for eye."

Further, there is no biblical commandment against killing. The sixth commandment (Exodus 20:13) declares: "You shall not murder." Several Hebrew verbs mean "kill"; this one specifically means "murder."

The execution of criminals for serious crimes and the taking of human lives in war were never regarded as murder in Old Testament times. Nor was killing in self defense punishable as a crime under Old Testament law.

War was a terrible reality in the Old Testament world. God used wars to execute his judgments upon evil nations. The very title "Lord of hosts" indicates a God of battle. In the song of Moses, Yahweh was declared to be "a man of war" (Exodus 15:3 KJV). With few exceptions, all 20-year-old males were liable for military duty in ancient Israel.

The patriarch Abraham waged war against Kedorlaomer, king of Elam (Genesis 14). His objective was to rescue his nephew Lot and his family, who had been taken captive during a raid. Advocates of Christian participation in war observe that "the father of the faithful" (as the apostle Paul called Abraham) didn't simply forgive Kedorlaomer and leave Lot to a life of slavery. He went after the aggressors, attacked and defeated them.

New Testament Teaching

"But that's the Old Testament," pacifists answer. "In the New Testament, the emphasis is on the principle of love and nonviolence."

Just war theorists counter that they see the law of love at work in the Old Testament as well as in the New. And although the New Testament has little to say specifically on the subject of war, general principles can be drawn, they observe. And those principles support the legitimacy of maintaining armies and waging war.

Here are a few key scriptures, as understood in the context of the just war and preventive war theories. (See "Recommended Reading" below for in-depth discussion.)

• ***Luke 3:14.*** "Then some soldiers asked him [John the Baptist], 'And what should we do?' He replied, 'Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely -- be content with your pay.'" John condemned not the profession itself, but the unethical practices associated with it. He nowhere advised soldiers to leave the military.

• ***Matthew 8:10.*** "I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith." Jesus thus praised the extraordinary faith of the Roman centurion in Capernaum. Jesus did not oppose earthly governments or their right to maintain armies, nor participation of the faithful in those armies.

· **Matthew 10:34.** *"Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword."* Christ came to bring peace between people and God. But the inevitable result of Jesus' coming is conflict between good and evil on the earth.

· **Luke 22:36-38.** *"If you don't have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one."* Thus Jesus warned his disciples of perilous times to come. They would need defense and protection. These are not the words of a pacifist. (This does not conflict with Jesus' forbidding Peter to use a sword in a religious cause -- Matthew 26:52; John 18:36.)

· **John 2:15.** *"So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple area...."* Jesus violently drove the money changers from the outer court of the Temple. The Greek language implies that he used the whip on the money changers as well as on the sheep and oxen. Physical force can be applied with justice.

· **Matthew 5:9.** *"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God."* Peace is rarely the product of appeasement. In the words of Billy Graham: "There come times when we have to fight for peace."

· **Matthew 5:39.** *"Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also."* A slap on the cheek is an insult, but certainly an insufficient provocation for violence. Christians are to go out of their way to avoid conflict and live in a peaceable manner.

But those efforts will not always succeed. What about a more serious injury than a slap? To suggest that Jesus is requiring Christians to be passive victims of violence, abuse and exploitation is taking the scripture far beyond its intent.

Some commentators have also suggested that Jesus' advice involved a special circumstance. If his followers at that time had replied to Roman violence in kind, they would have been swiftly crushed, and the fledgling Christian cause extinguished. It should also be noted that Jesus himself did not quietly turn the other cheek when slapped, but boldly protested the affront (John 18:22-23).

Understood in its own context and that of other scriptures, "turning the other cheek" does not support an attitude of non-resistant pacifism in the global arena.

· **Matthew 5:44.** *"Love your enemies..."* Is there an incompatibility between love and the taking of human life? A Christian never delights in the killing of people. But one can actively oppose a criminal without hating him. Through the centuries, devout soldiers with deeply held Christian convictions have shown that it is indeed possible to overcome hate in one's heart and kill without a vengeful spirit of hatred.

"Loving one's enemy" does not mean accepting what he has done and allowing him to avoid responsibility for it. Love sometimes calls upon Christians to restrain an enemy that seeks to harm the innocent. Seeking justice is not inconsistent with loving and forgiving the perpetrators.

An enemy can be challenged in love. We can forgive him, but he still has to live with the consequences of his actions -- and sometimes die because of them.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus was saying that Christians should not lash out in revenge, returning evil for evil. Vengeance and vindictiveness have no place in the Christian life. But it is not inconsistent with biblical teaching to defend oneself and one's loved ones. Love requires action to protect human life. Self-defense is not revenge, but the restraining of further evil.

· **Acts 10:2.** This sympathetic reference to the "devout and God-fearing" centurion Cornelius implies an acceptance of the worthiness of a military career.

· **Ephesians 6:10-17; 2 Timothy 2:3-4.** These and other military allusions of the apostle Paul do not square with a pacifist orientation. A pacifist would never use martial imagery in a positive context. Jesus also used illustrations of war and battle to convey spiritual lessons (Luke 14:31). The New Testament does not renounce using the physical equivalents of spiritual weapons.

· **Hebrews 11.** Military men are among those recognized as heroes of the faith.

· **Romans 12:17-19.** "*Do not repay anyone evil for evil... If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone... Do not take revenge....*" Notice that Paul says, "if it is possible." Christians are to cultivate peace with everyone -- to the extent possible.

Hatred and vengeance must not shape our actions. But there is a difference between vengeance taken with a hateful heart and appropriate self defense. Retributive justice is not the same thing as revenge. There is an appropriate use of force that is neither vengeful nor vicious, and is aimed at seeking peace and justice.

· **Romans 13.** In this key chapter, the apostle Paul teaches that civil government is ordained by God and should be supported by Christians. Paul was no anarchist.

Those in authority, Paul notes, do not bear the sword for nothing. "He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer" (verse 4).

Here is an unambiguous biblical endorsement of the use of the sword for the maintenance of good order. As long as there are those who are bent on doing evil -- victimizing innocent, law-abiding citizens -- police and military will be necessary to restrain evil and protect the weak and innocent.

God has given human governments authority in the physical sphere. And nowhere in Scripture does one find a prohibition on Christians having full participation in legitimate governmental functions -- including the right to use arms to restrain and punish evildoers.

Spiritual Warfare

The above interpretations are presented to explain the majority Christian viewpoint, not to belittle or condemn other legitimate moral choices.

All Christians, however, can agree on this: *Prayer* can help resolve conflicts!

Physical warfare exists because spiritual warfare exists. There is an underlying spiritual conflict between the forces of good and the forces of evil. The powers of darkness are continually attempting to subvert the purposes of God. The apostle Paul acknowledged this spiritual warfare when he wrote that "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the spiritual forces of evil" (Ephesians 6:12).

The clear mandate for all Christians, therefore, is to pray that evil will be restrained, and that the innocent will be protected. Prayer combats the evil forces ultimately responsible for violence and wars. This victory can be won only with spiritual weapons.

Further, it must be kept continually in mind that God will bless those nations that honor him. (Psalm 33:10-17). The strength of a nation is in its devotion to God, not in the size of its armed forces. This is not to diminish the need for a strong defense, but to remind us that our ultimate confidence must be placed in God.

There will come a time when the nations of this world "will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks." (Isaiah 2:4). All humanity will seek to live by the peaceable wisdom of God rather than the passions of corrupted human nature.

But that time is not yet.

Christians must not let the promise of the final removal of war distract them from working for its elimination here and now. We must reach out to all humanity, working to change enemies into friends, working to remove the causes of suffering, working to change the world for the better in every way possible.

For some Christians, this effort will involve participating in armed conflicts. Each individual is responsible before God for his own decision in that regard.

Regardless of our personal views and convictions, we can all thank God for the courageous men and women who fight against the evildoers of this world -- and especially those who, at this very moment, face peril far from home.

Many -- like Sgt. Alvin York -- are soldiers of deep spiritual faith, who prove their courage and character by fighting -- and sometimes dying -- for God and country.

They are all heroes.

Alvin York carried a Testament with him and read it through five times during his stay in the army. "It was my rock to cling to," he wrote in his diary. And so it is with countless others who bear arms.

Whether at home or abroad -- whether in times of peace or of war -- those who follow the Prince of Peace must be in the forefront of those working for a better, safer world -- whether their warfare is spiritual, physical or both.

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Recommended Reading: War: Four Christian Views, edited by Robert G. Clouse, InterVarsity Press (1991).

Perspectives on "Just War"

It's a debate that has spanned the centuries.

The early church fathers were divided on the subject. As early Christians had no role in government, and were generally not subject to conscription, the issue was largely academic.

But the issue became important after the Roman Emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan in 313, legalizing Christianity in an empire that used warfare as a means of preserving its power.

Beginning in the 4th century, the church began developing criteria for determining when war was morally justified. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) held that while war is evil, it is justifiable as a last resort, after peaceful options -- if any -- have been exhausted. "Love does not preclude a benevolent severity," he wrote.

Augustine attempted to define a "just war." His principles were later refined by Thomas Aquinas, the 13th century theologian and philosopher. Though the list has numerous variations, most formulations include the following conditions for a just resort to arms:

1. *legitima auctoritas* (legitimate authority): A just war has to be formally declared and waged by a proper governmental authority, not by a private group or individual.

2. *justa causa* (just cause): It has to be waged for a morally legitimate purpose, such as in response to grave damage inflicted by an aggressor; only a defensive war is legitimate.

3. *recta intentio* (right intention): It must have the intention of establishing a good order or correcting an evil one; a just peace must be secured for all involved.

4. *debitus modus* (the right way of conducting a war): Lethal force may be directed only at the aggressors; civilians and noncombatants may not be intentionally harmed.

The European military expeditions known as the Crusades (1095-1291) -- aimed at recovering the Holy Land from the Muslims -- fell short of these criteria in the view of some churchmen. Most Christians, however, supported these religious wars.

The Protestant leaders of the Reformation accepted the use of violence and warfare. Luther, Calvin, Zwingli and others viewed war as unavoidable, often a necessary evil in the furtherance of righteous causes. The Swiss reformer Zwingli was killed in battle.

When civil war divided England in the 17th century, Puritan leader Oliver Cromwell became a general in the parliamentary army, seeing God's hand and blessing in the battle against tyranny. The Book of Common Prayer notes: "It is lawful for Christian men, at the commandment of the Magistrate, to wear weapons, and serve in the wars."

Groups such as the Anabaptists, Waldensians, Quakers and some Sabbatarian churches have taken strong exception to this approach, condemning war on principle.

The advent of modern total warfare has added a new dimension to the Christian controversy over war. The vast destructive power of high-technology weapons raises new and serious questions.

Is nuclear warfare to be rejected as immoral on its face? Is annihilation of all human life within a given area ever lawful? Is nuclear, bacterial or chemical warfare morally justified under any circumstances? These and other issues will engage the attention of theologians for decades -- perhaps even centuries -- to come.

To War or Not to War

Thoughts about the morality of war by influential Christians

"Today we say to those who masterminded this cruel plot, and to those who carried it out, that the spirit of this nation will not be defeated by their twisted and diabolical schemes. Some day those responsible will be brought to justice, as President Bush and our Congress have so forcefully stated."

- Billy Graham, National Day of Prayer and Remembrance

"Drape the sanctuary in black and mourn that we've had to kill."

- Stanley Hauerwas at a forum at Duke University

"Beginning with St. Augustine 1,600 years ago and modified since, a 'just war' doctrine requires that government military action be measured and appropriate. Augustine's formulation was that it has to be, obviously, a just cause."

- Chuck Colson, host of *BreakPoint* radio program and former adviser to President Richard Nixon.

"Now personally, I'm a man of peace, but this is a defensive war against a destructive evil. As a Christian ethicist, I believe that the most loving thing to do is to seek out the evil perpetrators and their supporters and bring them to justice. If someone comes up and strikes me on the right cheek, I turn the other one. But if someone comes to destroy my family, love becomes justice."

- Henlee Barnette, professor emeritus of Christian ethics at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

"There is no religious goal which can possibly justify the use of violence by man against man."

- Pope John Paul at the peace pilgrimage in Assisi

"Those responsible for such barbaric acts must be held to account. But we must be guided by higher goals than mere revenge."

- George Carey, Archbishop of Canterbury

"Just-war theory was never intended to justify war. Instead, it tries to bring war under the sway of justice as understood by Christians and to ensure that war, when it does occur, is hedged about by limits to reduce its barbarity. It is to be a last resort, authorized only by legitimate civil authority."

- Richard Land, Southern Baptist Convention, appointed by President Bush to sit on the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom

"Do not let the terrorists win with our hatred. That's what they want and expect -- a holy war. But let us come sit in the garden and choose life. Let us choose good over evil."

- Peter Cook, United Church of Christ

"So I speak as a Quaker of not particularly good standing. It seems to me that in confronting the forces that attacked the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the United States has no sane alternative but to wage war; and wage it with unflinching resolution."

- Scott Simon, host of National Public Radio's Weekend Edition

"Let it be said, at least by some in the religious community, that there has been a bastardization of the Just War theory. When in the name of God will the religious community stand up and be the religious community?"

Joseph Sprague, United Methodist Bishop of Chicago

"Today I am not an exceptionally proud citizen of this country. To rely solely on military might perpetuates more violence and a war mentality that will bring the world to a major disaster."

- Sister Kathleen Pruitt, president, Leadership Conference of Women Religious

"As we condemn every recourse to violence and war in the name of God or religion, we commit ourselves to doing everything possible to eliminate the root causes of terrorism."

- Konrad Raiser, secretary general of the World Council of Churches

"Always avoid violence. If you succumb to the temptation of using violence in your struggle, unborn generations will be the recipients of a long and desolate night of bitterness, and your chief legacy to the future will be an endless reign of meaningless chaos."

- *The Most Durable Power*, sermon by Martin Luther King

"I am not a pacifist because pacifism in this fallen world in which we live means that we desert the people who need our greatest help."

- *A Christian Manifesto*, by Francis A. Schaeffer

"Does loving your enemy mean not punishing him? No, for loving myself does not mean that I ought not to subject myself to punishment -- even to death. If one had committed a murder, the right Christian thing to do would be to give yourself up to the police and be hanged. It is, therefore, in my opinion, perfectly right for a Christian judge to sentence a man to death or a Christian soldier to kill an enemy."

- *Mere Christianity*, by C.S. Lewis