

THE CHRISTIAN AND WAR/VIOLENCE.

A question every Christian person must ask is - 'Can a Christian go to war?'. Is a Christian in uniform a contradiction in terms? Can a Christian prepare himself to undergo military service? Should Christians ever resort to violence or kill another person?

A large variety of answers have been given by Christians over the ages and all claim Biblical support. In the Old Testament war is one of the facts of life and an acceptable means of settling disputes. In the Gospels there is no one uniform response to the experience of violence in the environment in which they lived. The Christian Church's attitude to war and violence has never been consistent. Early Christians could and did enlist in the army but could not expect much encouragement from the Church. A dramatic change occurred with the Edict of Milan, 315 A.D., whereby Christianity now enjoyed a privileged status enjoying the personal backing of the Emperor. By 416 only Christians could enlist in the army resulting in a synthesis of church and state. In later years the debate centred around what criteria were required for a Christian to participate in a war - the **JUST WAR DEBATE**. Another movement was that of the Peace-Making Movement by the Anabaptists and others from the sixteenth century onwards. A more modern development within the Christian Church is that of Liberation Theology.

In addition, the record of the Christian Church is not without its blemishes e.g. the Crusades against the Muslims or the Inquisitions. Christians have not always worked for peace and have allowed the Cross ^{OF CHRIST} to be turned on its side to become a sword. Scripture, however, promises that until the Second Coming of Jesus Christ wars will continue and will escalate as that time draws near (Mt 24:6-7). The notion that the world is evolving into a better place is false. War is a consequence of sin and war is an expression of sin. As long as sin is present within man, wars will result (James 4:1-2). People become violent because of broken relations. This violence often results in a worsening of those relations. War and violence are evil.

Let us realise, however, that the Commandment 'Thou shalt not kill' (Exodus 20:13) was intended not to prohibit the taking of life in war but was a command against **homicide**, that is taking the life of a fellow human being. '**THOU SHALT NOT MURDER kith and kin**' would be a more accurate translation.

But should a Christian be trained to kill in war or even participate in war? Within the Christian Church, there are various responses to this question. Let us look at some of them :

1. **ACTIVISM:** (It is right to participate in war)

Activism believes God ordained government wherever it is found. Government is given by God and if one's government therefore commands one to go to war, one must respond in obedience. An activist is a patriotic person affording the State its place and power (Rm:13). The activist will therefore argue that a Christian has the right and duty to engage in the violence of national defence and that a legitimate government has the licence to potential or actual violence for effective government.

The activist is appalled at evil and its influence and believes that in the name of God, war must be fought to save people from evil or to prevent that evil from spreading e.g. the wars in Modern Israel, Viet-Nam, Cambodia, Nicaragua, Angola. The activist is prepared to take up arms to stop the spread of evil for to do nothing is to lead to its increase. An appeal is made, on a larger scale, to action taken to prevent death or harm upon a neighbour or his possessions.

The activist draws attention to the fact of a soldier's work and calling being frequently mentioned both in the Old and New Testaments and that there is no indication that their calling was either dishonourable or unlawful. Such persons also refer to God's command of His people to conquer and possess the promised land (Josh 1:3,9); of David's command to attack and kill the Phillistines (I Sam 23:1-2); of Nehemiah building the walls of Jerusalem with a ^{WCFM} ~~file~~ in hand; and of Jesus chasing the people from the Temple. (Mark 11:15ff).

Activism appeals to both Old and New Testament Texts, but primarily to the Old Testament.

Old Testament	New Testament
Genesis 1:28; 2:16; 4:10; 9:5,6;	Matt 22:21
Exodus 21:25	Jn 19:11
I Sam 8:7; 8:22; 10:24; 23:1	I Tim 2:2
Dan 4:25; 2:37	Titus 3:1
NUM. 32: 20-27	I Peter 2:13,14
	Rom 13:1-7.

Activism therefore holds that when a government calls its people to war, because such a government is declared by God, Christians should participate in the conflict and such a war can be seen as acceptable to God.

- However, i) In most wars both sides claim to be right and/or that 'God is on their side! We see this from the World Wars to the war in Vietnam, and between Iran and Iraq.
- ii) It is so easy for sinful leaders to declare war for selfish gain, or to seek to give the war a Christian backing, and sometimes even to turn the dispute into a Holy War. Justification will always be sought for wars fought.
- iii) History abounds with incidents when an appeal to nationalism - that is to place the nation above all else - has led to the legitimising of war eg Germany in the World Wars. Love of God and love of the nation can so easily be equated with disastrous consequences.
- iv) What of Jesus Christ's own response of love and non violence to conflict and hatred as well as that of other Christians who have sought an alternate way of resolving conflicts?
- v) Where violence has become routine, human life is bound to be cheap.

2. PACIFISM

Historically pacifism includes a variety of positions. The Anabaptist movement of the sixteenth century onwards has been the driving force of those seeking a more Biblical and Christlike way of resolving conflicts. That movement, as with pacifists today, reject any attempt to confuse discipleship with patriotism. The prime issue is not one of obedience to rules or principles, but the following of Jesus the suffering Messiah.

The Pacifist appeals to both Old and New Testaments showing that life is sacred. Even the 'enemy' is always to be regarded as a human being for whom Christ died. The pacifist seeks to be a peacemaker without the shedding of blood or becoming violent. The word pacifist comes from the latin words 'pax' (peace) and 'facere' (to make) - in other words to be peacemakers. The pacifist is not neutral and is willing to suffer for the cause of right in the process of peacemaking.

The pacifist will therefore seek non violent means to bring about change. Some pacifists are humanists and are not Christians, but many are Christians. Pacifists are motivated by passages such as the Sermon on the Mount, to the teachings of Jesus Christ and Paul as well as to the example set by Jesus Christ in His arrest, trial and crucifixion. Texts used in the above arguments include :

Old Testament	New Testament
Exodus 20:13	Matt 5:9,38,42
Lev 19:18	Matt 5:43-48
II Sam 12:5-7	Matt 19:18
Job 1:21	Matt 26:51-53
	Lk 6:27-29
	Lk 23:34
	Rm 12:19-21
	Rm 5:6-11.

The pacifist believes that no man is exonerated from God's command not to kill simply because he is acting as a servant of the state. The moral command against

murder is not abrogated by one's obligation to the state. We are to render to Caesar what is his, but Caesar does not hold the power of life and death - only God does.

The pacifist tradition therefore takes the principles and teaching of the Kingdom of God seriously seeking to bring about peace without resorting to war by means of the appeal of love and non violent action.

- However, i) One cannot deny that the wars of the Old Testament are ordered by the same God and Father of Jesus Christ, upon whom the pacifist moulds his teaching. *When can people legitimately resort to violence?*
- ii) One can't overestimate the influence of evil and the power of sin within sinful man. *That evil must be resisted and society.*
- iii) What of the legitimate place of the State and the legitimate use of its powers?
- iv) What of the pacifist seeking an 'opt out' whilst others are then required to do the dirty work?

3. SELECTIVISM: (It is right to participate in some wars).

Not all men are content with the blind patriotism of activism which would kill upon their government's request whilst shouting "my country, right or wrong". Neither are all men satisfied with a naively passive attitude which would permit a Hitler or an Amin to attempt genocide without lifting a gun in resistance.

Out of dissatisfaction with the solutions of declaring **ALL WARS OR NO WARS** justifiable, is emerging a third option of selectivism which holds that SOME wars are justifiable and some are not. Both activism and pacifism are right (in part) and the sense in which they are both right is the essence of selectivism. The truth of pacifism is that some wars are unjust and Christians ought not to participate in these. The truth of activism is that some wars are just and Christians ought to fight in these. Selectivism is committed to the position that one ought to participate only in a just war and one should not participate in an unjust war.

A. Some wars are just:

Lifetaking is often clearly commanded by God both within a nation and between nations. Not all lifetaking is murder. (Gen 9:6; Ex 21:25; Rom 13:4; Jn 19:11; Lk 22:36; Gen 14).

Throughout the Old and New Testaments God used war as an instrument in the cause of justice. War was often the consequence of man's rebellion. In fact Israel was defeated, through God's working, as a sign of His displeasure of her unfaithfulness and sin. This was so in spite of her special covenant relationship with Him. (Deut 28:25ff; Daniel 1:1,2; Daniel 4:17; Isaiah 44:28).

Evil must be resisted - It is morally unjustifiable not to resist evil (James 4:17) The individual Christian is not to avenge himself. He is to live peaceably, he is to feed and love his enemy, he is to love his neighbour and therefore not kill. (Rm 12:17-21 and Rm 13:8-10). But it is the State's right to avenge evil. The state is a terror to evil and is therefore given the sword (Rm 13:4) for order, justice, and to conquer evil under certain circumstances and subject to certain guidelines.

With the coming to power of Constantine, Christians could no longer leave the fighting of wars primarily to the pagans. Bishop Ambrose (339-397) developed the Christian theory of the just war, in other words, what criteria needed to be met for a war to be justified for Christians to participate. These criteria were initially for the defence of the empire and church against the heretical barbarians.

Augustine (354-430), Gratian (1148) and others refined the criteria necessary, but it was Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274) who gave the classic systematic formulation to the doctrine of the just war. These have again been reformulated to include the following:

- (i) The **CAUSE** for which the war is fought **MUST BE JUST**.
- (ii) War must only be declared as a **LAST RESORT**.
- (iii) The **PURPOSES OR GOALS** of the warring party **MUST BE JUST**.

- (iv) **JUST MEANS** must be employed to vanquish the foe; no excessive and unnecessary violence nor indiscriminate use of violence.
- (v) Success must be likely.
- (vii) The peace aimed at must be such that it is not likely to provoke **YET ANOTHER WAR.**

(vii) The war must be **DECLARED** by a **LEGITIMATE AUTHORITY.**

(viii) *Innocent people & non-combatants should not be harmed.*

B. But some wars are unjust:

Some wars do clearly not meet the guidelines and conditions of a Just War. For a Christian to participate in such a conflict would afford a legitimacy that is not tenable.

One also needs to remember that within a war certain actions can be unjust. At the Nuremberg trials for war criminals (of the 2nd World War), the moral principle applied that no individual member of the armed forces of any country should be excused for engaging in a war crime simply because he has been ordered to commit the act by his superior officer. The same held true in Lt W L Calley's trial in the MY LAI massacre during the War in Vietnam (16 March 1968). Even within a war, certain actions can be unjust.

Let us remember that it is possible for the State to misuse its power and authority. Sometimes it uses the sword against the good. The book of Revelation pictures civil government corrupt and against the true Church (Revel 13).

In such situations scripture holds that obedience to the State is relative but our obedience to God is absolute (Acts 4:19ff; 5-29; 40-42). Government and those in authority can be disobeyed. We read of Daniel disobeying the king's commands (Dan 3 & 6); of Jesus disobeying the sabbath regulations for it hindered His healing ministry (Mk 3:1-6); of Jesus calling Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee, 'a fox' and defied Herod's wish to kill Him (Lk 13:31-33); of the early apostles disobeying orders not to obey the Sanhedrin (Acts 4 & 5), etc.

Selectivism therefore looks at each war and each conflict within a war to see if it is justifiable. The selectivist holds that it is therefore possible to participate in some wars but not others.

What of the Just War and the South African Law?

South Africa, in terms of the Defence Amendment Act of 1983, makes provision for persons to apply only on religious grounds, to be categorised as a Religious Objector in 3 different categories :

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- (a) As a religious objector with whose religious convictions it is in conflict to render service in a combatant capacity in any armed force; or
 - (b) As a religious objector with whose religious convictions it is in conflict to render service in a combatant capacity in any armed force, to perform any maintenance tasks of a combatant nature therein, and to be clothed in a military uniform; or
 - (c) As a religious objector with whose religious convictions it is in conflict to render any military service or to undergo any military training or to perform any task in or in connection with any armed force. "

(Government Gazette, 20 April 1983 p 12).

We need to take note that in South African Law, objection to military service must be of a universal nature, that is, not limited to serving in the SADF and must be based on religious grounds.

4. LIBERATION THEOLOGY :

Liberation theology has arisen from the struggle of the poor and the oppressed to gain a better deal for themselves by involving the Christian church and teaching

in that process. Liberation theology largely arose from the situation in South America but has spread to the rest of the world. Its approach and methodology is radically different from that of traditional theology.

Liberation theologians claim that Christian theology has throughout history been subverted to serve the cause of the ruling class and theology has functioned as a powerful legitimization of institutional violence and repression by the state, yet at the same time condemning the revolutionary violence of the oppressed. They claim that the church and its theology should now be committed to the liberation of the oppressed, poor and exploited masses. The church must side with the poor and oppressed, as did Jesus Christ, and work for justice for all before peace can arise.

Liberation theology primarily employs a class analysis of society as the tool with which to understand the dynamics of society. This analysis is a Marxist analysis seeing the conflict between classes as an inherent characteristic of capitalistic society as seen for example in THE KAIROS DOCUMENT. Liberation theology views structural injustice (eg rich vs poor), oppression, and the class struggle as violence.

Therefore Liberation theology is in search of a just and humanised society and would accept that where violence is employed in the service of the poor and the oppressed, to the ends of justice and humanisation, such a violence can be a legitimate Christian option.

Liberation theology does therefore give legitimization to violent revolution. This violence must only be taken up when there is no other viable alternative to overcoming institutionlised violence. Violence is theologically legitimate when it is used in the service of justice and when non violent means alone are inadequate to end injustice. Counter violence is seen as inevitable. This stance is, for example, seen in the LUSAKA STATEMENT of 1987 which deals with the liberation movements, stating, '..... the South African regime which wages war against its own inhabitants and neighbours compels the movements to use force along with other means to end oppression'. Note the emphasis on the word 'compels'.

Within South Africa we find various expressions of liberation theology. It uses the same analysis as in South America, sides with the poor and oppressed and sees violence as a legitimate last resort to use violence to bring about justice. One sees a rejection of capitalism in favour of socialism; a condemnation of the structural violence of the state; an involvement in the class struggle; a support of economic sanctions; and are deeply involved in the political struggle and action.

Liberation theology has taken root in our land. Christians need to be aware of its methodology and its strengths and weaknesses. But careful note needs to be taken of its use of scripture, its tendency to work from man to God and not God to man, its theological base, its social analysis as being the only accepted analysis and its influence in the area of resorting to violence.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS :

1. We have been looking at a Christian's participation in war. Let us not forget the responsibility of those who do not need to make such a decision. What is the quality of our lives? Eleanor Roosevelt, the wife of the President of the United States during the second World War, wrote, "Dear Lord, lest I continue my complacent way, help me to remember out there a man died for me today. As long as there be war, I then must ask and answer : Am I worth dying for?".

2. Christians must seek peace and pursue it. Real and lasting peace is derived from, and the consequence of, righteousness. People need to be at peace with God and themselves in order to become peacemakers. Let us therefore deal with the sin within man as well as the sin of war.

3. Let us pray that our leaders will act righteously and that God will grant to them the wisdom in this delicate matter. And may God guide every one of us into

His will for us. Let us also pray for those in violent and potentially violent situations that the Prince of Peace will be at work to show another way of resolving the conflicts.

Let us remember that once we allow violence, in certain circumstances, as a last resort, provided it is controlled etc, we have a major problem in deciding when it is allowed and when not. Great wisdom is required in this debate.

HANDOUT : THE CHRISTIAN AND MILITARY SERVICE.

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