

The Christian and the Unjust War

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When I was an undergraduate student in college, the United States was involved in a military conflict which was later classified as a war. Vietnam was a regular part of the headlines in those years. As it escalated, I saw high school classmates and members from my home congregation drafted into the armed forces and sent overseas. Some of them returned as casualties of war.

To say the war in Vietnam was not popular would be an understatement. Neither the military objectives nor the reason for our presence in that conflict were clearly defined. As a result a large minority of Americans chose not to support that war effort. Some escaped the draft by moving to Canada. Many thousands of others showed their opposition by demonstrating. Sometimes those demonstrations turned violent. Lives and property were sacrificed in the process.

Even students at a small church-related college in Watertown, Wisconsin were impacted. Years later President Carelton Toppe would tell me that the Vietnam years were the most difficult years of his presidency. Restlessness and lack of respect for authority seemed to be in the air. In one form or another we all were affected.

The time since Vietnam has not been conflict free. The present military action in the Balkans between the Serbian and NATO forces is only the most recent in a long line of international disruptions. Although the draft is not presently functioning and although American ground forces have not yet been committed to this conflict, emotions are once again running high. We are again witnessing a growing number of people who are questioning American involvement in a military action overseas. As was the case thirty years ago, our fellow citizens are asking questions about our involvement in this Balkan war. Why are we there? Should we be involved? Is it proper for a Christian to support or to be involved in such an activity?

As we consider “The Christian, the Church and the Government” during our symposium it is inevitable that we will have to deal with questions which revolve around the Christian and war. As we consider “The Christian and the Unjust War” in particular, it will be necessary to look at a variety of related issues. There are those who believe that war like small pox can be eradicated from our world. Others insist that no Christian will ever get involved in an activity which by its very nature places life in jeopardy. We will also need to differentiate between “just” and “unjust” war. Once those issues have been taken care, the difficult topic before us will be less intimidating.

We Americans are famous for our philosophical prowess in condensing the major issues of life and death and transforming them into bumper stickers. A recent bumper sticker suggested, “Eliminate hate.” That sounds easy enough, but how do we do that? If we could eliminate hate, we would remove many problems. The truth is, however, that in our present state we cannot eliminate hate from our world.

In his New Testament epistle James writes, “What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don’t get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have,

because you do not ask God” (4:1-2).¹ James is pointing out that conflict with our neighbors, friends and relatives rises out of our anger and feelings of injustice. Such attitudes produce world conflicts as well.

War is an inevitable consequence of sinful people living together in a fallen world. It is really naïve and simplistic to think that our efforts will eliminate war from the earth. We have Jesus’ own comments on the topic of war in Matthew 24. As Jesus sat on the Mount of Olives, looking over the city of Jerusalem on the night in which he was betrayed, he revealed the course of history until the day when he returns again. Of the time between his first and second comings, Jesus says: “You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth pains” (6-8).

Since Adam and Eve fell into sin, human history has been a series of “wars and rumors of wars.” When mankind has not been busy fighting war, it has been busy preparing for war. Yet there are those people who would like to ignore sin and its consequences. People want to forget about the evil in our world, if for no other reasons than it is an open reminder of their own condition before God. It is relatively easy to practice a collective amnesia and forget what God has said about sin. When that happens we also see no need for a Savior sent to free us from sin. War is a grim reminder of evil. War destroys the notion that people are evolving into better beings. War shows us that we do not have the ultimate answers and that we need help which we have no ability to provide.

God in his providence and protection oversees what happens in our world. That does not mean that the Lord is directly responsible for war, but God sometimes permits what he does not cause. It is important to remember that the Lord uses even the evil for which people are responsible to carry out his purposes. The Scriptures have much to say about war. In Ezekiel 33 the Lord speaks about bringing war to people. He says to Ezekiel,

Son of man, speak to your countrymen and say to them: “When I bring the sword against a land, and the people of the land choose one of their men and make him their watchman, and he sees the sword coming against the land and blows the trumpet to warn the people, then if anyone hears the trumpet but does not take warning and the sword comes and takes his life, his blood will be on his own head” (2-4).

We often hear pacifists quote the famous passage from either Micah 4:3 or Isaiah 2:4 about beating swords into plowshares. Rarely do we hear people quoting the Lord when he declares the exact opposite in Joel 3:9-10. There he commands, “Proclaim this among the nations: Prepare for war! Rouse the warriors! Let all the fighting men draw near and attack. Beat your plowshares into swords and your pruning hooks into spears.”

No one is immune from the violence which sin brings into our world. Knowing that both Jews and Gentiles are under the power of sin, the apostle Paul reminded the Romans, “Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know” (Romans 3:15-17). In Paul’s day war meant disciplined Roman legions, horse-drawn chariots, and slave-powered galleys. We have come a long way since that time. Now we can direct rockets from safe distances toward victims that we will never see. Wars no longer involve

¹ All Scripture references are from the New International Version of the Bible. The location of individual references are indicated in the text and/or in the parenthetical documentation following the verses quoted.

only the soldiers who are fighting. Private citizens are often caught in and become casualties of war. We have perfected armaments to the point where one nuclear bomb can kill and destroy in quantities beyond our imagination.

Warfare is one of the problems our world endures as a punishment for the sins of mankind. This does not mean that every individual who suffers in war is being punished for his personal sins, since many God-fearing people suffer in war. It does mean, however, that God allows wars on earth as demonstration of the terrible consequences of man's rebellion against him. Furthermore, the Lord even gives to his authorities on this earth the right to bear the sword. They are instruments of God's anger. They fulfill a necessary function in this rebellious world.

In Romans 13 we are told:

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience. This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor (1-7).

Everyone is subject to the governing authorities. God has appointed them to rule. This does not mean that all authorities are good. Paul wrote while under Roman rule which in many ways was ruthless and corrupt. Yet, the Lord still told Paul, as he tells us, that Christians are subject to government. The only exception is when the commands of men contradict the commands of God. In Acts 5, when Peter and the other apostles were told by the governing authorities not to preach Christ, they answered and said, "We must obey God rather than men!" (29).

The Lord uses even the evil and godless individuals in government to accomplish his purposes. Remember how the Lord allowed the Babylonians to carry off his people into captivity. God had a plan to bring his people to repentance and in this plan he used Nebuchadnezzar and company. In carrying out his plan, however, the Lord was also going to bring judgment on a number of peoples. War sometimes results in a vicious cycle. God allowed Babylon to destroy Judah as punishment. Later that same Lord allowed the Medes and Persians to destroy Babylon as punishment for its sins. Still later he allowed the Medes and Persians to be destroyed as punishment for their sins.

The Savior told Peter at the time of his capture, "Put your sword back in its place, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword" (Matthew 26:52). Christians, as individuals living as private citizens in a country, do not have the right to use the sword indiscriminately as they see fit. Christians, after all, are to be ambassadors for Christ, ministers of God's reconciliation. Paul writes to the Romans:

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good (12:17-21).

As citizens of a country, we participate in the affairs of the country. One of the ways a Christian can serve his/her country is as a member of the armed forces. It is not a sin to be a soldier. The New Testament mentions a number of soldiers and even gives some instructions to them. Among the Jews soldiers did not enjoy a very good reputation. Jewish scorn, however, was not directed so much at the profession, as it was directed against the unethical practices which were often associated with the military. When John the Baptist called for "fruit in keeping with repentance" (Luke 3:8), some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?" He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely – be content with your pay" (Luke 3:14). It is worthy of note that John does not tell the soldiers to get out of the armed forces. His comments are directed at their conduct.

Jesus in Luke 7 and Peter in Acts 10 had contact with centurions, who were Roman military officers. If service in the military was a faith-destroying proposition, Jesus and the apostle certainly would have suggested a change in occupation. According to the information provided in these two accounts that was not the case.

Soldiers are not acting as private citizens. Soldiers are an instrument of the state and as such they have duties and responsibilities which ordinary citizens do not have. In particular, soldiers may in the course of carrying out their duties have to take human life. When they do so, they are not committing murder. Remember that God gives the sword to the government and it is for this authority that the soldiers are working.

As was indicated in the opening remarks, war is here to stay until the world comes to an end. That means Christians who serve as soldiers will at times be involved in the activities of war. Members of the military usually are not given choices as to whether or not they should participate in military exercises. Soldiers do not vote before going into battle to determine whether or not they should fight. Such an option was tried during the early years of the French Revolution with less than positive results. War demands the participation of those who are in the military. War requires that orders be obeyed.

Since Scripture recognizes a God-given role in this world for governing authorities, it should not surprise us that the Lutheran Confessions also recognize that God gives powers and responsibilities which he has not given to private citizens. Article XVI of the Augsburg Confession deals with the subject of civil government. In part it reads:

Of Civil Affairs they teach that lawful civil ordinances are good works of God, and that it is right for Christians to bear civil office, to sit as judges, to judge matters by the Imperial and other existing laws, to award just punishments, to engage in just wars, to serve as soldiers, to make legal contracts, to hold property, to make oath when required by the magistrates,

[The Gospel] teaches an eternal righteousness of the heart. Meanwhile, it does not destroy the State or the family, but very much requires that they be preserved as ordinances of God, and that charity be practiced in such ordinances. Therefore, Christians

are necessarily bound to obey their own magistrates and laws save only when commanded to sin; for then they ought to obey God rather than men. Acts 5, 29.²

In between these two paragraphs Article XVI condemns the Anabaptists and others who claim these secular activities are unchristian. It likewise condemns those who claim that Christian perfection is possible only if such activities are renounced. The Lutheran position regarding war and the Christian involvement in war was, however, not a point of contention with the Roman church. In Article XVI of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession it is noted:

The Sixteenth Article [of the Augsburg Confession] the adversaries receive without any exception, in which we have confessed that it is lawful for the Christian to bear civil office, sit in judgment, determine matters by imperial laws, and other laws in present force, appoint just punishments, engage in just wars, act as a soldier, . . . finally, that legitimate civil ordinances are good creatures of God and divine ordinances, which a Christian can use with safety.³

Later in this paper we will have opportunity to hear what Luther has to say about these same issues.

Disagreements concerning a Christian's attitude toward war did not begin at the time of the Reformation nor did they end there. A variety of attitudes toward war remain in the church militant today. Roland Bainton in his book, *Christian Attitudes Toward War and Peace*, describes three common attitudes toward war. They can be summarized in the following ways:

- 1) War is irreconcilable with the teachings of Jesus and it is never a Christian option. We call this position "pacifism."
- 2) In an evil world war is at times a necessary and justifiable option. We will be referring to this position as the "just war" theory.
- 3) War can be an enactment of the will of God in conquering the powers of evil. This attitude describes war as a "crusade."

"Crusade" is the medieval equivalent of a Christian term for a "holy war." During the Middle Ages this term was used to differentiate a religious motivation for war from a purely political conflict. The crusade differs from the "just war" in a number of ways:

- 1) Its cause has a transcendent validation. That is, what is at stake is not a political consideration. Warriors are freed from political concerns by the overarching value of the holy cause. Religious beliefs provide a justification for the war.
- 2) This transcendent quality is known by revelation. The need for such a conflict is determined by more than the physical situation. The call for this type of war is communicated by a special kind of person or institution. In the church of the Middle Ages that might be a pope, a bishop or a council.

² *Concordia Triglotta*, "Augsburg Confession" (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), 51.

This subject is also addressed in greater detail in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article XVI "Of Political Order," paragraphs 53-65, PP 329-333.

³ *Ibid.*, "Apology of the Augsburg Confession," 329.

- 3) The adversary has no rights. Therefore restraint is considered to be no virtue.
- 4) The criterion of last resort does not apply. Other ways of achieving the same goal are dishonorable in the face of the transcendent duty. Mediation and compromise are therefore not acceptable.
- 5) The conflict need not be winnable. To fail in a holy cause is a moral victory. For both the Muslims and the Christians in the Middle Ages, to die in war was the surest and quickest path to heaven.⁴

In our circles today the crusade has lost its appeal and there are few legitimate calls for a return to its principles.

Both pacifism and the ideal of “just war” contend for support in our world. Both regard war as an evil which is to be avoided and both seek to counteract violence, although they disagree on the means for doing so. But where pacifism in the name of Christian love takes a stand absolutely prohibiting all violence, the “just war” position maintains that the desire for peace with justice may require us to use force under certain conditions and at certain times. It maintains that it is justifiable for a country to go to war.

From before the Crusades until the present day leaders of church and state have used God’s name to justify wars of all descriptions. In numerous conflicts soldiers on both sides have prayed to God for victory and “knew” that God was on their side. The struggle to find a justification for war has led to the continuing development of a “just war” theory.

“Just war” thinking is not a new concept. In the secular world it goes back at least to the time of Plato. Aristotle first used the expression “just war” and Cicero also contributed to its development. Ambrose, a fourth-century bishop of Milan, who had previously served in the Roman imperial service, developed one of the earliest Christian perspectives on “just war.” Augustine then formulated this concept more completely.

Augustine was impressed by the impact of sin and its consequences on history. In his view war was both the result of sin and a tragic remedy for sin in society. He believed that war arose from disorderly ambitions, but it could be used, in some cases at least, to restrain evil and to protect the innocent. When some opposed the use of all war, Augustine called it a Manichaean heresy to assert that war is intrinsically evil and contrary to Christian charity. In his *City of God* he states, “War and conquest are a sad necessity in the eyes of men of principle, yet it would be still more unfortunate if wrongdoers should dominate just men.”⁵ This perspective has come to be known as the moral theory of “just war” or “limited war.” It can be summarized in six basic points.

- 1) The purpose of war is to restore peace. The object of war is to vindicate justice.
- 2) War should be waged only as a last resort.
- 3) War is waged only under the authority of the ruler and only those in public life could take life.
- 4) The conduct of war must be just. Minimum force should be applied. Wanton violence, profanation of temples, looting, vengeance, atrocities, and reprisals are excluded.

⁴ John Howard Yoder, *When War is Unjust*, 2d ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 26-27.

⁵ Augustine, *The City of God*, Book IV, C. 15; quoted in the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response, A Pastoral Letter on War and Peace* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1983), 27.

- 5) A just war is always between equals.
- 6) An underlying assumption is that one party in a war represents “the right” and “the good.”⁶

Augustine’s concept of the “just war” is based on two premises. First of all, the common “good” for people exists most productively in an atmosphere of peace and justice. Secondly, war is a last resort to maintain peace and justice. Thomas Aquinas and, more recently theorists of the nineteenth century have further shaped Augustine’s position. The modern criteria for a “just war” now includes the following points:

- 1) It must be a declared war and waged by a legitimate authority. Whatever channels the nation has defined for making decisions of this sort must be observed.
- 2) The cause must be just. This is usually understood to mean that the nation must defend itself against attack, preserving an order that serves its citizens and preserving the lives innocent citizens.
- 3) There must be a right intention or attitude. This was particularly important to Augustine, who believed a Christian should not enter into war with a spirit of hatred or vindictiveness.
- 4) It must be the last resort. Every peaceful means of resolving international problems must be vigorously pursued.
- 5) There must be reasonable hope of success. It is irresponsible to go to war if there is no realistic prospect of a nation’s successfully defending itself.
- 6) The good likely to be achieved by victory must outweigh the possible evil effects. This is the norm of proportionality. Even if a nation believes its prospects for winning the war are good, the cost in terms of loss of life and massive destruction may not warrant the conflict.
- 7) The right means must be employed in the conduct of the war. This is the norm of discrimination. A nation is responsible for avoiding acts that show a wanton disregard for life. This means that there are legitimate and illegitimate military targets. The distinction between combatants and noncombatants must be observed, and prisoners of war must be treated humanely.⁷

The modernized “just war theory” attempts to humanize war which is often a dehumanizing activity. It addresses not only the reason for going to war, but it also deals with conduct in war. Critics of the “just war,” however, insist that the theory still suffers from a lack of realism. In particular, they have difficulty with the assumption that nations can be influenced by moral imperatives. Furthermore, critics will argue that nations will do what they believe they must do for the promotion of their self-interests. Experience seems to support that concern. Although national leaders appeal to moral and religious ideals, politics does tend to transform such appeals into self-serving attempts to justify a nation’s actions.

As is apparent from Augustine’s premises, not all wars are created equal. There are differences of motivation and purpose. This presents us with the difficult challenge of

⁶ Sigval M. Berg, “Toward a Christian Ethic on Peace and War,” in *Peace and the Just War Tradition: Lutheran Perspectives in the Nuclear Age* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1986), 26.

⁷ Paul Jersild, “On the Viability of the Just War Theory,” in *Peace and the Just War Tradition: Lutheran Perspectives in the Nuclear Age* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1986), 71-72.

distinguishing between types of wars: just wars in which a Christian can participate and unjust wars which stand in opposition to the Christian's conscience. Some insist that such a distinction is artificial at best. One recent critic contends, "There's no such thing as a just war, for all wars represent a judgment of God upon the participants."⁸ Historically, however, attempts have been made to justify Christian involvement in some conflicts and to reject cooperation in others.

In making such determinations, we will find ourselves wrestling with "just war" ideals, just as the church has done down through the centuries. The fact remains that some wars are defensive. When a country is attacked, it has the right to defend itself from aggression. Under such circumstances there is generally little debate as to whether or not military action is justifiable. If its citizens refuse to defend the country, they demonstrate not only a lack of patriotism; they also commit sin. In his *Large Catechism* Luther points out in connection with the Fifth Commandment:

God's purpose here is to have all persons protected, set free and enabled to live peaceable lives in the presence of the injustice and violence of all men. This commandment is likewise a wall, a fortress of defense, about our neighbor to protect him in his liberty and to guard him from bodily harm and suffering.⁹

Later Luther adds: "[N]ot only he who directly does evil breaks this commandment, but also he who unnecessarily omits a service to his neighbor which he might render by anticipating and restraining, and by protecting and rescuing his fellow man from bodily harm or suffering."¹⁰ To fight a defensive war does not present us with a problem. By his/her involvement in such a conflict the Christian is acting in accordance with God's directives.

The real question about the Christian's involvement in war comes in those conflicts where a country goes on the offensive and is the aggressor. In some cases the involvement can be explained as action taken to protect national interests and to prevent future problems. In other instances a country might take such action in defense of an ally. At still other times a country might act against injustice that is inflicted on others. We might wage an offensive war to punish evil committed against humanity, although not specifically against our own country or our own citizens.

An on-going problem we face is whether or not we have all the information we need to make the determination as to whether a war is justifiable. Citizens may receive a flood of information, but the government or the media may slant things to achieve the desired reaction. As a result Christians may disagree with each other on whether a particular conflict is a just or an unjust war. Daniel Deutschlander in *Civil Government: God's Other Kingdom* summarizes the problem when he writes,

When it comes to deciding whether a war is just or unjust, the individual citizen, Christian or not, has a very difficult time. The propaganda organs of the state are well oiled and armed so that the enemy is made to appear inhuman. Often the country finds

⁸ Ray C. Stedman, *A Christian Reaction to the Nuclear Arms Race* (Palo Alto, CA: Discovery Publishing, 1995), 3.

⁹ Martin Luther, *Luther's Large Catechism*, trans. J. N. Lenker (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1967), 46.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 47.

out the true nature of the conflict only long after the damage is done. Thus we do the best we can with the information we have.¹¹

The classic doctrine of “just war” allows us to use force, if the end is just, the means appropriate and if all peaceful means of settlement have failed. As the Augsburg Confession indicated earlier, the Anabaptists and others took the position that a Christian could not bear arms under any circumstances. Representative of this stance was Felix Mantz, a Zurich Anabaptist who insisted, “A Christian will not wield the sword, nor will he resist evil.”¹² Luther did not agree with this position. He believed that the military profession was a divine institution that had been established to punish evil, protect the good and preserve peace.

Luther’s position was crystallized in his dealings with Assa von Kram. Von Kram was the counselor of Duke Ernst of Braunschweig-Lueneberg and he was also a professional soldier. Apparently von Kram’s conscience was having difficulty reconciling his Christian faith with his profession. In July, 1525, von Kram, while in Wittenberg, discussed with Luther the question of whether soldiers could be Christians and continue in their profession. In the course of this conversation Luther consented to address the topic in a future publication. After a reminder in January, 1526, Luther finally addressed the subject in his treatise, “Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved,” which was in print by October, 1526.

In its understanding of the role of civil government this treatise is largely dependent upon Luther’s earlier work, “Temporal Authority: To What Extent it Should be Obeyed.” This work was completed by Christmas Day, 1522 and published in the early months of 1523. Here Luther rejects the Roman Catholic idea that the church is the source of all earthly authority. He points out that the state as well as the church is of divine origin. As we would expect, Luther separates church and state, defining the spheres in which each works. He indicates that the primary function of the state is to serve its people. Just as he opposed the Roman Catholic notion of the temporal power of the church, so Luther also opposed the sectarian concept that a Christian should not participate in civil affairs. He points out that the Christian has both the right and the responsibility to hold office under the state, even if that meant serving as an executioner should the need to do so arise.

In “Temporal Authority: To What Extent it Should be Obeyed” Luther states rhetorically, “You ask whether a Christian too may bear the temporal sword and punish the wicked, since Christ’s words, ‘Do not resist evil,’ are so clear and definite that the sophists have had to make of them a ‘counsel.’” He then responds:

You have heard two propositions. One is that the sword can have no place among Christians; therefore, you cannot bear it among Christians or hold it over them, for they do not need it. The question, therefore, must be referred to the other group, the non-Christians, whether you may bear it there in a Christian manner. Here the other proposition applies, that you are under obligation to serve and assist the sword by whatever means you can, with body, goods, honor, and soul. For it is something which you do not need, but which is very beneficial and essential for the whole world and for your neighbor. Therefore, if you see that there is a lack of hangmen, constables, judges,

¹¹ Daniel M. Deutschlander, *Civil Government: God’s Other Kingdom* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1998), 97.

¹² *Luthers Werke fuer das christliche Haus*, ed. Georg Buchwald, 7:384; as quoted in *Luther’s Works*, American Ed., vol. 46, ed. Robert C. Schultz, (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1967), 90.

lord, or princes, and you find that you are qualified, you should offer your services and seek the position, that the essential governmental authority may not be despised and become enfeebled or perish.¹³

In “Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved” Luther show both his familiarity and agreement with the just war theory when he writes:

No war is just, even if it is a war between equals, unless one has such a good reason for fighting and such a good conscience that he can say, ‘My neighbor compels and forces me to fight, though I would rather avoid it.’ In that case, it can be called not only war, but lawful self-defense, for we must distinguish between wars that someone begins because that is what he wants to do and does before anyone else attacks him, and those wars that are provoked when an attack is made by someone else. The first kind can be called wars of desire; the second, wars of necessity. . . .

Take my advice dear lords. Stay out of war unless you have to defend and protect yourselves and your office compels you to fight. Then let war come. Be men, and test your armor. . . .

The reason is that every lord and prince is bound to protect his people and to preserve the peace for them. That is his office; that is why has the sword, Romans 13[:4].¹⁴
. . .

Luther demands that all questions of right and wrong be submitted to the conscience of the individual and that the individual must decide the moral questions on the basis of God’s revealed Word. In addition, in matters pertaining to the state and civil life the individual Christian is to make decisions according to the “natural knowledge in which reason appears at its best. Luther stresses the need to investigate the situation “with the greatest diligence.”¹⁵

Luther recognizes that our concerns need to be taken to the Lord in prayer. He understands that human reason is flawed and needs divine guidance.

Even though you are absolutely certain that you are not starting a war but are being forced into one, you should still fear God and remember him. You should not march out to war saying, “Ah, now I have been forced to fight and have good cause for going to war.” You ought not to think that that justifies anything you do and plunge headlong into battle. . . . But there is nothing to the idea that this will produce a victory, as though it were our deeds or power that did it. Rather, God wants to be feared and he wants to hear us sing from our hearts a song like this, “Dear Lord, you see that I have to go to war, though I would rather not. I do not trust, however, in the justice of my cause, but in your grace and mercy, for I know that if I were to rely on the justness of my cause and were confident because of it, you would rightly let me fall as one whose fall was just, because I relied upon my being right and not upon your sheer grace and kindness.”¹⁶

¹³ Luther, “Temporal Authority: To What Extent it Should be Obeyed,” *Luther’s Works*, American Ed., vol. 45, ed. Walther I. Brandt, trans. J. J. Schindel, rev. trans. Walther I. Brandt (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1967), 95.

¹⁴ Luther, “Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved,” *Luther’s Works*, American Ed., vol. 46, ed. Robert C. Schultz, trans. Charles M. Jacobs, rev. trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1967), 121.

¹⁵ Luther, *Luthers Werke*, St. Louis Ed., 10:416ff; quoted in Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 3, trans. Walter W. F. Albrecht (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), 66.

¹⁶ Luther, “Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved,” 123.

Luther later again cautions that a soldier must not trust in the justness of the cause for which he fights. He reiterates that confidence and trust must be in God, who alone gives victory.

Our conclusion on this point, then, is that war against equals should be waged only when it is forced upon us and then it should be fought in the fear of God. Such a war is forced upon us when an enemy or neighbor attacks and starts the war, and refuses to cooperate in settling the matter according to the law or through arbitration and common agreement, or when one overlooks and puts up with an enemy's evil words and tricks, but he still insists on having his own way. I am assuming throughout that I am preaching to those who want to do what is right in God's sight. . . . The same kind of necessity arises if subjects fight at the command of their rulers; for God commands us to obey our rulers [Rom. 13:1], and his command requires that we fight, though this too must be done with fear and humility.¹⁷

The presumptions of just war thinking – that we live in an evil world and that God gives us the right to defend ourselves – are clearly affirmed in the Lutheran tradition.

But what action does the Christian take when it appears that there is no justifiable reason for involvement in a conflict? What does the Christian do when the war is unjust? Luther recognized that as a possibility. With this concern in mind he also wrote in “Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved”:

A second question: “Suppose my lord were wrong in going to war.” I reply: If I know for sure that he is wrong, then you should fear God rather than men, Acts 4 [5:29], and you should neither fight nor serve, for you cannot have a good conscience before God. “Oh, no,” you say, “my lord would force me to do it; he would take away my fief and would not give me my money, pay, and wages. Besides, I would be despised and put to shame as a coward, even worse, as a man who did not keep his word and deserted his lord in need.” I answer: You must take that risk and, with God's help, let whatever happens, happen. He can restore it to you a hundredfold, as he promises in the gospel, “Whoever leaves house, farm, wife, and property, will receive a hundredfold,” etc. [Matt. 19:29].¹⁸

Luther's comments are straightforward and brief. However, he also reminds us that if there is considerable doubt, then we would do well to give the authorities the benefit of a doubt. Luther suggests:

But if you do not know, or cannot find out, whether your lord is wrong, you ought not to weaken certain obedience for the sake of uncertain justice; rather you should think the best of your lord, as is the way of love, for “love believes all things” and “does not think evil” I Corinthians 13[:4-7].¹⁹

The difficulty is not so much determining what the Christian should do in case of an unjust war. The difficulty that faces us is arriving at the conclusion as to whether a conflict is just

¹⁷ Ibid., 125.

¹⁸ Ibid., 130.

¹⁹ Ibid., 131

or unjust. If a Christian does finally conclude, on the basis of the best information available, that the war is unjust, then he/she must act oppose the action as Luther suggested. Professor Deutschlander explains why when he writes: “The goal of the Christian life is service to God by service to our neighbor. To fight in an unjust war renders no service to God or to one’s neighbor. It serves only the greed and the ambition of those who want others to bleed and die for the sake of selfish gain.”²⁰

In discussing the Fourth Commandment, Luther in his “Treatise on Good Work” writes:

But if, as often happens, the temporal power and authorities, or whatever they call themselves, would compel a subject to do something contrary to the command of God, or hinder him from doing what God commands, obedience ends and the obligation ceases. In such a case a man has to say what St. Peter said to the rulers of the Jews, “We must obey God rather than men” [Acts 5:29]. He did not say, “We must not obey men,” for that would be wrong. He said, “God rather than men.” [It is] as if a prince desired to go to war, and his cause was clearly unrighteous; we should neither follow nor help such a prince, because God had commanded us not to kill our neighbor or do him a wrong.²¹

Convinced that the war is unjust, the Christian will refuse to fight. In some countries the government will honor such personal views and provide what our country calls a “conscientious objector” status. This might provide a total exemption from military service or, at least, an exemption from taking an active role in the fighting. The government might also choose to substitute community service on the home front for military service. Conscientious objectors, however, often have their loyalty questioned by fellow citizens and might become the targets of verbal abuse or worse. Luther understood that possibility. Still he insisted:

So, then, you are secure and walk well before God. If they put you to shame or call you disloyal, it is better for God to call you loyal and honorable than for the world to call you loyal and honorable. What good would it do you if the world thought of you as a Solomon or a Moses, and in God’s judgment you were considered as bad as Saul or Ahab?²²

Christians who refuse to fight in an unjust war might have to flee the country, if there is no other alternative which allows them to live with a clear conscience. Those who refuse to take that action could face imprisonment for their convictions. There are those who would insist that, if the government forced them to participate in an unjust war, they would have the right to rebel against the government. Revolution, however, is not an option for the Christian. The government is still God’s established authority. We can work within the framework of the established laws of the land to bring about change, but resorting to a violent confrontation with the government is not acceptable before God. Two wrongs do not make a right. If the government is wrong and we are mistreated for refusing to participate, the Lord will take the proper action in his own time and in his own way.

²⁰ Deutschlander, 96.

²¹ Luther, “Treatise on Good Works,” *Luther’s Works*, vol. 44, ed. James Atkinson, trans. W. A. Lambert, rev. trans. James Atkinson (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1967), 100.

²² Luther, “Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved,” 131.

Faced with his/her country's involvement in an unjust war, Christians may have to deal with troubled consciences, even though they have gone on record in opposition to the war and are not cooperating in the war effort. In this and all other areas we ultimately find our comfort only in the gospel. In spite of the difficulties that we might face in opposing an unjust war, the Lord continues to support us with his love and strengthen us with his Word and sacrament. To look elsewhere would rob us of lasting relief.

Given our sin and the sin which infects our world, we will not experience a trouble-free paradise on this side of Judgment Day. Wars and rumors of wars will continue to plague our world, until that day when Jesus returns. In the meantime we must contend with a number of challenges. We are to recognize our government as God's representative. We are to serve our government with our abilities either on our own volition or as the government calls us into service. As Christians we are not prevented from serving in the military or from participating in just wars.

As Christian citizens we may be forced to distinguish between just conflicts, in which we can be involved, and unjust conflicts, which go against our Lord's directives. Because we are not omniscient, we may not always make the right determinations. It is, however, important for us to recognize that our response to war begins and ends in God's Word. Only on the basis of what we learn there will our relationship with people and with the agencies of government be God-pleasing. Only when we search what the Lord says will we be able to overcome our own fears, doubts and weaknesses. Only with the foundation of God's Word under us and with the Spirit guiding us will we determine what is just and unjust. Then, and only then, will the Christian be able to respond to questions concerning war in a manner which gives all glory to God.

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