

Is There Such a Thing as a Just War?

“The Congress shall have the Power To . . . declare War” (*U. S. Constitution*, Article I, Section 8)

“War is a terrible trade; but in the cause that is righteous, sweet is the smell of power” (Miles Standish)¹

“It is well that war is so terrible—we should grow too fond of it” (Robert E. Lee, Battle of Fredericksburg)

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God” (Jesus, *Sermon on the Mount*)

Introduction

The events of September 11, 2001 have produced many behavioral changes on the part of Americans and others in the world. It has also profoundly affected our thinking. The terrorist attacks have shaken the complacent stability of a theologically and rationally inept postmodernism whose very existence is owed partly to the mantra of relativistic toleration. But what does one do when three thousand souls in one’s country are innocently and brutally murdered and when the prospect for similar events in the future is ever before us? Intuitively, most Americans believe that there are limits to what one can tolerate. Furthermore, it would be proper to say that they “feel” that right is on their side.

Nonetheless, the thinking Christian must approach such issues, not with emotional reactions, as meaningful and righteous as they might be in their proper place, but with the wisdom of the Word of God. The Christian’s responsibility is magnified in the current political climate when so much is being said on the issues of war and peace in the media, much of it incoherent and inconsistent. For example, I performed an AOL search on the web on the name *Osama bin Laden* and came up with over 31,000 hits. I was slightly less successful with only 29,000 hits on the word *pacifism*. However, I was also astounded when the term *just war* yielded over 16,000 hits and when I found over five million web references to the word *peace*. Now many of these are, of course, false hits that must be discarded. However, one is hard pressed to downplay the significance of the volume of web traffic in these areas. In addition, printed resources were also abundantly available. In fact, it was quite obvious in my library searching that books and articles about the legitimacy of war in general seem to proliferate more during times of warfare such as U. S. involvement in Vietnam (1960s and 70s), the Gulf War against Iraq (early 1990s) and now in the War on Terrorism. Both books and journals have consistently cycled back to this topic in one form or another.

Why do discussions of this issue come back with a vengeance when so many people (perhaps 90%+) accept the idea that there is such a thing as a justifiable war?² The answer may lie in the fact that war, especially war that comes close to home, rattles people like nothing else. They are confronted with the depravity of men and women as it

¹ I found this quote at the beginning of an article by Alan Johnson and thought it worth repeating (“The Bible and War in America: An Historical Survey,” *Journal of the Evangelical Society* 28 [June 1985]: 169).

² Of course, it may be true that we spend a lot of time arguing about whether any specific war is, in fact, a just war. My proposed percentage is my own substantially subjective evaluation. Part of that evaluation is that it seems that there is a greater percentage of scholars who favor pacifism than among citizens in general.

has been unleashed in its most hideous expression. It is in war that the cruelty of man is on public display like no other time. At one level, war is a special event that rudely jars us from our normal slumbers of life. On the other hand, its overwhelming presence in the history books reminds us of the domination of evil that is all around. Russell remarks “Warfare has been as difficult to justify satisfactorily in theory as it has been endemic in practice. Often considered as an extraordinary phenomenon, it more accurately occupies a major place in political, cultural and social life.”³ Therefore, I was not a little surprised when an engineering colleague once told me that society was close to ending war as an institution and when one naïve student said to Moshe Dayan during a university symposium that it would take about twenty years to educate the children of the world to want peace.⁴ I guess she was unable to forecast the vast number of training schools available for young boys in militant Islamic areas of the world.

The issue of war and peace also is intricately tied to other troubling questions. Just how are we supposed to handle justice in a public way as a general question (penal theories)?⁵ A particular form of that question is the morality of capital punishment. After all, war is partly the implementation of capital punishment on a large scale. War also raises the debate about the proper role of government versus that of the individual in dealing with issues of justice in society and culture. Can a man legitimately defend himself and his family from rape, pillage and murder? If the answer is *yes*, the defense of some form of a just war theory is virtually won as application can more easily be extended from individuals to governments. Yet the entire debate suggests that war is simply a specialized case of the problem of evil in the world. In the end, we have police and armies because we believe in our heart of hearts that depravity exists in the human race, even if we are not willing to admit it. Its existence and consequences must be taken into account. Arthur Holmes, an able defender of the idea of a just war eloquently points out the complicated nature of the issue:

This is a complex issue, and in approaching it we must make certain preliminary matters clear. First, not all evil can be avoided. Evil is not just an individual’s problem, nor is it confined to deeds and thoughts: it is a pervasive condition of fallen human existence that riddles the political and social reality with which we are forced to contend. Real life situations are so twisted and perverted that often no altogether good option remains. We are trapped in moral dilemmas whose roots live in the past as well as the present, such that whatever we do involves us in evil of some sort. To punish a convicted criminal and to protect the innocent, as society must, requires that we deprive the criminal of something good, something to which he or she would otherwise have a

³ Frederick H. Russell, *The Just War in the Middle Ages* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 292.

⁴ This present writer attended the symposium, which was held at the University of Alabama in Huntsville during the spring semester in 1975. The statement was made to Moshe Dayan during a question and answer session following his speech. The female questioner asked Dayan, in light of the fact that it would take so long to educate the children of the world to want peace, could Israel survive until then? Dayan’s dogmatic response was something to the effect “Israel will live forever.” Dayan (1915-1981) served as Defense Minister for Israel during the Six-Day (1967) and Yom Kippur (1973) Wars. He became Foreign Minister of Israel in 1977 under the government of Prime Minister Menachem Begin.

⁵ For helpful discussion of penal issues, see C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 287-300 and Arthur F. Holmes, *Ethics: Approaching Moral Decisions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 91-98.

right that we must preserve, be it life or liberty or property. There is no easy way out, nor is there in the case of war. To let violence and aggression go unchecked does not eliminate the evil, nor does it leave me unimplicated if I could do something about it.⁶

Yet there are other concerns that make war an especially difficult issue for evangelical Christians. We are to be evangelists above all else. To end life in any form, even in a nationally sanctioned war, means that we are sending real people with real faces along with their families into eternity with their decision for or against Christ already settled. It is hard to imagine a greater emotional tension in the missionary-minded heart of the genuine believer in Christ and His mission. Yet, such a conundrum is solved only by seeing another connecting arm to the issue of war, that of the sovereignty of God in human affairs and all that this doctrine brings to the theological and social debate.

Modern warfare raises the bar even higher since the nuclear and biological weapons age, from a mere human perspective, carries with it the specter of the self-destruction of the human race. This potential consequence brings forward the additional question: if there is such a thing as a just war, where do we draw the line? Are there some forms of war that can never be justified?⁷ Are there certain weapons and methods of warfare that should be off-limits or are the limitations more properly handled within the context of carefully crafted criteria as to the when and how they are to be used?

However, the prospect of a nuclear or biological holocaust also highlights another area of theology touched by the issue of a just war. One's eschatological viewpoint seems to be involved in the discussions surrounding warfare. For example, it is not surprising that a postmillennial theologian would without question hold to a just war approach since the reconstruction of society by Christians could, within his system, be brought about by force at least in part. However, one can wonder if the recent terrorist attacks will give another setback to postmillennialism's unrealistic utopian dream of the Church ushering in the kingdom without Christ's return. The premillennialist, on the other hand, might be more likely to weigh various options and selectively apply the just war idea to various situations. At least the realism of the premillennialist can be harmonized with the world that we see around us and force us to consider the possibility that our hope lies not with conquering armies and governments but with God's promise of hope in His coming kingdom. Those premillennialists of a dispensational variety might be predisposed to emphasize the distinctions between Old Testament teaching where divinely sanctioned war is unquestioned and the so-called more peaceful teachings of Jesus given in the New Testament. Such dispensational tendencies have been taken quite seriously by many Anabaptist groups, who have taken the pacifist road.

Another theological and practical issue that is touched by the war question is one's theory of ethics. In particular, does one opt for a hierarchical approach to solving

⁶ Arthur F. Holmes, "The Just War" in *War: Four Christian Views* edited by Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 118.

⁷ Many scholars and Christian leaders who hold to just war theory have stopped short of justifying in any way the use of the largest nuclear weapons. For example, Norman Geisler holds that "tactical nuclear weapons are a conceivable part of a limited war but megaton nuclear power is so devastating as to make such a war automatically unjust" (*Ethics: Alternatives and Issues* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971], 176). It is not at all clear to me that the use of megaton nuclear power automatically leads to something other than limited war in all cases, so its use should not be ruled out entirely.

ethical dilemmas or some form of ethical absolutism.⁸ When one holds to some form of absolutism, the individual Christian who participates in war is going to be held responsible if his government has made an unjust decision to fight. In contrast, those who follow a hierarchical system of ethics are more likely to see the innocence of a Christian foot soldier while only the national leaders are responsible for the decisions of war. Discussions of just war theory abound with ethical overtones such as “the greater good” and “the lesser evil.” For example, what if some of the German soldiers’ attempts to assassinate Hitler had been successful? Would not the world have been a better place and the act itself justified even in the sight of God? Furthermore, discussions of ethics make us compare notes from time to time. Why do we look at the deaths at the Pentagon and the World Trade Centers as worthy of lethal responses, but nationally overlook the fact that each day in America we murder more unborn, innocent children by means of abortion?

While preparing for this presentation, this writer was surprised by the extent to which the whole debate about warfare touches upon so many areas of theology. The examples cited above only touch the tip of the iceberg. It shows that the student who approaches this issue must do so cautiously, prayerfully, and ready to think systematically to prevent contradictions from existing within his own worldview. The question of the just war is truly a many-sided one. While all sides cannot be discussed here, a thorough understanding of the various options in the debate will be presented and a biblical defense of the idea of a just war will be given.

Brief History of the Just War Theory

Most of the historians who study the history of Christian attitudes about war uniformly but cautiously point out that the early Church was largely pacifist in its orientation.

The . . . oldest Christian approach to war is pacifism. The Christian church of the first three centuries was pacifist. The early Christians combined a simple obedience to the words of Jesus (‘Love your enemies’; ‘put up your sword into its place’) with a genuine international spirit (Christians ‘love all men as their brothers’; ‘Christ is also among the barbarians’). They were also repelled by the idolatry which permeated Roman army life.⁹

⁸ Ethical *absolutism* is used here to refer to the two views that conflicting norms never really exist in real life (*non-conflicting absolutism*) or that when they do conflict one must choose the lesser of two evils and accept a guilty verdict for doing so (*ideal absolutism*). *Hierarchicalism* means “whenever norms conflict one is morally right in breaking the lower norm in order to keep the higher one” (Geisler, *Ethics*, 114). See also Norman Geisler, *Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981).

⁹ Alan Kreider and John H. Yoder, “Christians and War” in *Eerdmans’ Handbook to the History of Christianity* edited by Tim Dowley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 25. For a similar analysis see Roland Bainton, *Christian Attitudes Toward War and Peace: A Historical Survey and Critical Re-evaluation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1960). It must be pointed out that in this case, as in all debates, there are differing opinions on the historical facts. Jean-Michel Hornus joins this general position but interacts specifically with scholars who hold the contrary position that pacifism was in a minority in the early church (*It is Not Lawful for Me to Fight: Early Christian Attitudes Toward War, Violence, and the State* [revised ed., Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980]). It must be admitted by this present writer that only a small

The biblical Christian, of course, relies upon Scripture as his authority and not the practices of the early church although the present day church may need to learn from our more peaceful predecessors. However, an early writing of Tertullian shows that the church was perhaps as divided in that day as ours.

The Chaplet (ca. 211), named after the soldier's crown of laurel, dates from his Montanist period, and was written on the occasion of the martyrdom of a Christian soldier who refused the gift of money, the *donativium*, bestowed upon the army at the accession of Caracalla and Geta. Valuable as the first work to condemn military service in the name of the Gospel and to argue the absolute imperative of conscientious objection, *The Chaplet* indicates, if only by implication, that, at a time when the rejection of the state and military service by the "official" Church was stronger than it would ever be again, there were many Christians in the army, and that the action of the soldier was so unusual as to cause deep embarrassment among his coreligionists.¹⁰

The just war theory became formalized in Christian thought by Ambrose and Augustine in the late fourth century. Much of the discussion involved the hammering out of moral rules and obligations with respect to warfare that allowed its legitimacy under certain conditions. The advancement of the just war scenario can perhaps be viewed as having its basis, at least partly, in the pacifism of earlier Christians.

The just war served as Augustine's means of reconciling the evangelical precepts of patience and the pacifistic tendencies of the early Church with Roman legal notions. Central to his attitude was the conviction that war was both a consequence of sin and a remedy for it. The real evils in war were not war itself but the love of violence and cruelty, greed and the . . . lust for rule that so often accompanied it.¹¹

If such an analysis is correct, the just war idea as it comes to be developed in the early Middle Ages is an application of the peaceful tendencies of Christianity to warfare. Consequently, rules of morality with respect to war are brought forward to lessen its horrors.¹²

Later during the Scholastic Period, Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) merged the teachings of Aristotle concerning society and the common good with Augustine's theory

portion of the historical debate has been pursued in this study since the main purpose lies elsewhere. Therefore, openness to contrary assessments must be maintained and these conclusions held tentatively.

¹⁰ Albert Marrin, ed., *War and the Christian Conscience: From Augustine to Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Chicago: Henry Regenery Co., 1971), 27. The quote comes from the editor's comments, which introduce an excerpt from Tertullian's *The Chaplet*.

¹¹ Russell, *Just War*, 16.

¹² One must be careful not to downplay the extra-biblical and non-Christian influences in the developing ideas of a just war among Christians. Russell's quote above does hint of this truth when he mentions the inclusion of Roman thought in Augustine's synthesis. However, the roots of formal just war theory are probably to be found in the Greek period generally and Stoicism in particular with Roman adaptations coming later (see Bainton, *Christian Attitudes*, 33-43; Kreider, "Christians and War," 24). A full-blown development of the historical influences for the just war theory is beyond the scope of this article.

of a just war. In his *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas crafted precise instructions as he answered four basic questions:¹³

1. Whether some kind of war is lawful?
2. Whether it is lawful for clerics to fight?
3. Whether it is lawful for belligerents to lay ambushes?
4. Whether it is lawful to fight on holy days?

In answering such questions, Aquinas affirmed a three-fold test for a just war. The three conditions necessary for a just war are *public authority*, *just cause*, and *right motive*.¹⁴ While the scholastics were developing such thoughts on war, the Church embarked upon the Crusades, which later writers have come to see as going beyond the just war concept.¹⁵ Most modern Christians have gravitated back to the Augustinian tradition of just war theory, which attempts to be faithful to both the realities of the present evil age and the peaceful tendencies of Jesus.

Various Approaches to the Issue of the Christian and War

Several vantage points to the issue of the individual's relationship to warfare have been presented down through the years, which place the just war idea in relation to a spectrum of ideas. One such approach is to begin with a discussion of the nature of warfare as it relates to *outcomes*. It is a classic case of a debate about the ends justifying the means. This view places the just war theory together with other pro-war advocates generally but on a continuum between those who hold that morality cannot or should not be a consideration in warfare and those who say that the immorality of war is so overwhelming that the Christian should reject it altogether (pacifism). Those who say morality is inconsequential in the affairs of war oftentimes argue in a pragmatic way about the issue:

There are various positions against the need or the possibility of morality in war. Generally, consequentialists and act utilitarians may claim that if a victory is sought then all methods should be employed to ensure it is gained at a minimum of expense and time. Arguments from "military necessity" are of this type: for example, to defeat Germany in World War II, it was deemed necessary to bomb civilian centers, or in the US Civil War, for General Sherman to burn Atlanta.¹⁶

¹³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II, 40. I have accessed this part of the *Summa Theologica* from the Internet; available from <http://ethics.acusd.edu/Texts/Aquinas/JustWar.html>; accessed January 13, 2002.

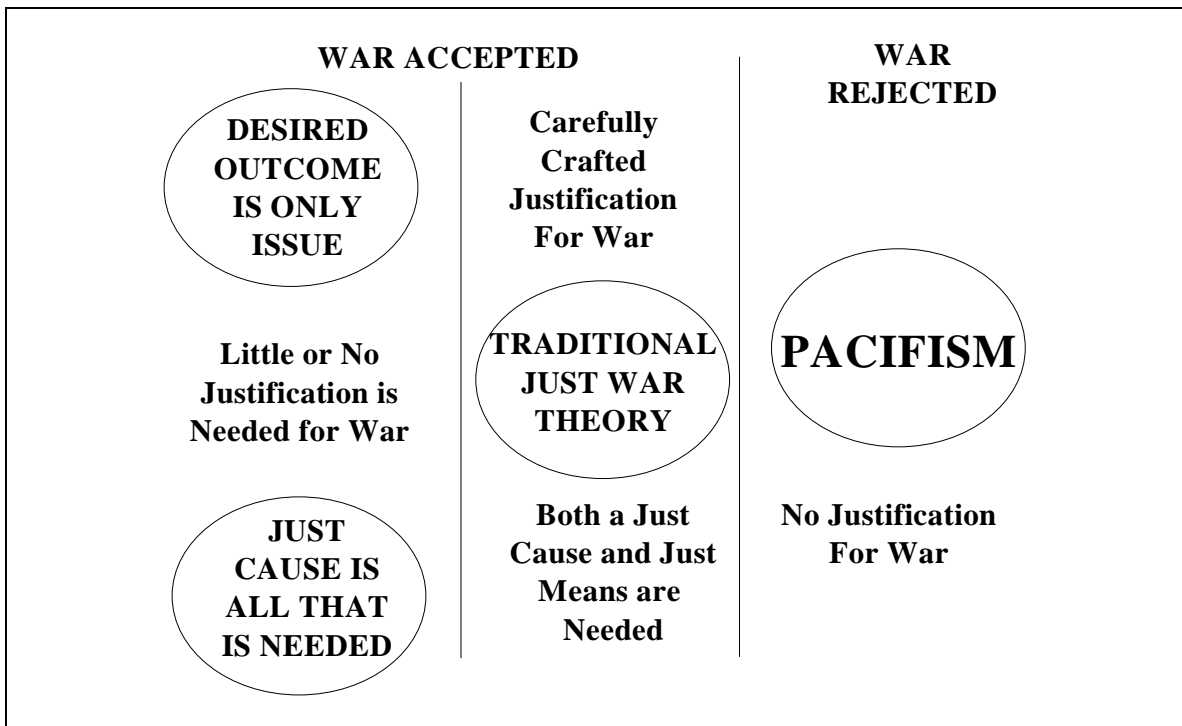
¹⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, IIa-IIe.xl.1. This excerpt was taken from Thomas Gilby, *St. Thomas Aquinas: Theological Texts* (reprint ed., Durham, NC: Labyrinth, 1982), 241.

¹⁵ Kreider, "Christians and War," 24; Bainton, "Christian Attitudes," 101-21.

¹⁶ Alex Mosely, "Just War Theory," *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*; available from <http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/j/justwar.htm>; Internet; accessed 9 January 2002.

Harry Truman's decision to drop the atomic bomb to end World War II might be another classic example in the minds of those who believe that outcomes should judge the morality of war.¹⁷ Truman's agonizing can be seen as the pondering of two equally horrifying options: the predicted loss of hundreds of thousands of American and Japanese lives in a prolonged invasion of the empire versus the quick but deadly use of atomic energy to kill hundreds of thousands in just two days (as well as the ongoing consequences which were largely unknown at the time). Both decisions involved moral considerations that were tied mostly, if not entirely, to outcomes. What complicates the matter in this case is that there is a moral choice between various outcomes.

A differing view than the consequentialist, but one that similarly endorses using whatever means necessary in war (that is, no criteria for means needed) is sometimes called the *intrinsicist* position. This view claims that having a just cause is all that is needed to pursue whatever means are necessary to wage war. It often shares with the consequentialist the absence of rules to judge how war is waged. Both views share with the just war theory that war *can* be waged.¹⁸ However, the just war view seems set apart from these positions in that it includes ethical and moral discussion of *both cause and means*. The figure below helps to portray this way of looking at various opinions graphically.



¹⁷ For a brief discussion of the Truman dilemma see G. E. M. Anscombe, "Mr. Truman's Decree" in *War in the Twentieth Century: Sources in Theological Ethics* edited by Richard B. Miller (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 237-46.

¹⁸ Ibid.

One popular evangelical categorization focuses instead on the issue of *how* Christians in a society should respond to war. Within this scheme there are four views:¹⁹

1. Nonresistance
2. Christian pacifism
3. The Just War
4. The Crusade or Preventive War

While the first two options (nonresistance and Christian pacifism) are often confounded, a distinction is sometimes made. Nonresistance does not mean that there is no such thing as a justifiable war in a national sense. It means that Christians should not be direct partners in any form of combat or violence. It does not mean that a nation sins against God if it goes to war for the right reasons. In other words, it does not necessarily deny the idea of a just war. This view would highlight Jesus' command not to resist evil (Matt. 5:39).²⁰ This is viewed as a command to individual Christians and not to society in general. One form of this approach has been called *noncombatant participation*.²¹ There could be variations in such an approach. While working on F-16s as an engineer I was once asked why I was working at a place that made weapons to kill people while I was going to seminary at the same time. Was this not a contradiction in my life? (The person asking the question did not know that Baptists like to fight!) My immediate response was that it is not a spiritual thing to let your family or your country be destroyed (a classic appeal to the idea of self-defense). For many holding the nonresistant position, such a job could be an uncomfortable occupation for a Christian. They might prefer duties sending food to soldiers or serving as a medical doctor or nurse. However, the nonresistance position would not disallow the government's decision to go to war.

In this four-fold scheme, Christian pacifism is sometimes viewed as stronger in its view against war. Reacting mostly to so-called Christian liberals, Hoyt argues that Christian pacifism is belief that all war is morally wrong (i.e., no such thing as a just war) and that Christians must give active opposition to war efforts not simply nonresistance.²² However, Myron Augsburger uses the term *Christian pacifism* in the debate to define his own view of nonresistance.²³ This points out the slippery nature of discussions about

¹⁹ Robert G. Clouse, ed., *War: Four Christian Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981).

²⁰ Herman A. Hoyt, "Nonresistance" in *War: Four Christian Views* edited by Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 31ff. For another excellent presentation of the nonresistance position, see Adin Ballou, *Christian Non-Resistance in All Its Important Bearings* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1970).

²¹ David R. Plaster, "The Christian and War: A Matter of Personal Conscience," *Grace Theological Journal* 6 (Fall 1985): 435-55. Plaster appears to argue from a selectivist vantage point for a nonresistance position like that of Hoyt.

²² Hoyt, "Nonresistance," 47.

²³ Myron S. Augsburger, "Christian Pacifism" in *War: Four Christian Views* edited by Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 79ff.

pacifism. While on the surface, it appears to be a simple term, John Yoder, one of the most respected pacifists of modern times, has described and analyzed at least seventeen different forms of pacifism.²⁴

The last two categories in this four-fold scheme might also be confused in some measure: the *just war* versus the *crusade or preventive war*. The **just war position** does not affirm that all wars are just, only that in the state of human affairs it is possible to go to war justly before God. That is, there is such a thing as a justifiable war. However, it goes beyond that assertion in two ways. First, it usually suggests that proper authorities (i.e., governmental and societal structures) must be the executors of the just war with the proper criteria followed by them. The national leaders will be held responsible to God for the ensuing military actions. Under this overall view, the Christian participant in a government-sponsored war may or may not be held responsible for his participation depending upon whether one holds to a selectivist approach to war.²⁵ Presumably, if the nation is waging a just war, the Christian's participation is legitimized. Not only has the just war approach emphasized the need for national sponsorship rather than individual action in going to war, it has also required the crafting and execution of specific steps for doing war. At a popular level, this is easily understood when we think of the well-known rules of war found in the *Geneva Convention*.²⁶ That rules of warfare even exist is evidence of the widespread acceptance of the just war idea. In general, unlike the nonresistance and pacifism views, the just war theory attempts to formulate rules of warfare that govern all parties universally and not just Christian believers.²⁷

However, the *preventive war* (also called in this scheme *crusader war*) is one "that is begun not in response to an act of aggression, but in *anticipation* of it. A preventive war intends to forestall an evil that has not yet occurred."²⁸ In one sense, this approach could be viewed as simply a variant of the just war scenario.²⁹ It focuses, perhaps because of the rise of modern warfare, on first strike capability to prevent a

²⁴ John H. Yoder, *Nevertheless: The Varieties and Shortcomings of Religious Pacifism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1971). Others have made a distinction between *historic* and *radical* pacifism (Karl I. Payne and Keith B. Payne, *A Just Defense* [Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1987], 65). Historic pacifism appears to be what Hoyt defines as nonresistance ("Nonresistance," 31ff). See also John H. Yoder, *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1971). Edward LeRoy Long, Jr., has more modestly presented three kinds of pacifism that he labels *vocational* pacifism, *activistic* pacifism, and *transmoral* pacifism (*War and Conscience in America* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968], 53ff). His categories do not prove as helpful as others in understanding the debate.

²⁵ The idea of a selectivist approach to the problem of war will be dealt with below.

²⁶ As a sample, the reader can find the first *Geneva Convention* (signed 1949) online at <http://www.asociety.com/geneva1.html>.

²⁷ Holmes, "The Just War," 119.

²⁸ Harold O. J. Brown, "The Crusade or Preventive War" in *War: Four Christian Views* edited by Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 155.

²⁹ This is exactly what Karl and Keith Payne do in their presentation (*Just Defense*, 40-41). In fact, the three positions of nonresistance, nuclear pacifist, and preventive war are all viewed as subgroups or variants within the just war tradition (39-41).

foreknown imminent attack. While it is hard to predict what other nations might do, most people would probably agree that common sense would dictate that in certain cases, such a preventive attack might be justified. However, in harmony with the just war tradition, rules should carefully be crafted to control its implementation. Harold Brown unfortunately uses the term *crusade* as a term for this form of warfare. He does so on the grounds that it is a good description of the idea of a reconquest or the making right of a past offense. Although he distances his use of the terminology from a holy war mentality, the term is probably not the best one to use in the current climate in which such words are easily misunderstood.³⁰

Another popular way to look at the issue labels the individual Christian's participation in war as *activist*, *pacifist*, or *selectivist*.³¹ In this scheme, the *activist* believes that it is always right for Christians to participate in war. Since government is ordained by God (Rom. 13:1-7), the Christian *must* obey in this matter and does not have the ethical freedom under God to do otherwise. The issue of whether there is such a thing as a just war to the activist is a moot point (although most would answer in the affirmative). Government leaders may be responsible before God for going to war (whether justified or not), but the Christian has no choice but to follow the government. It is his moral duty to participate. In this view, the German soldier, who believed in World War II that his government was making a mistake, was still under compulsion before God to obey his leaders and let God deal with his nation in providential history.

Pacifism in this context is the view that it is never right for a Christian to participate in war. Again, the existence of a just war with a just cause is not necessarily at issue here. Many pacifists would assert more absolutely that war is not justified. However, for some Christian pacifists, especially those who distinguish between what Christians are commanded to do and what the world of unbelievers is commanded and allowed to do, there could be a just war with just cause nationally, but the Christian must still live by the divine obligation not to participate.

Selectivism asserts that the Christian does not have such an easy time in determining the correct behavior in the case of various wars. He cannot go to one side or the other but must make a personal evaluation since it is right to participate in some wars but not all. Most just war theorists would actually be in this camp where the duty for the believer or anyone in society is laid out to make sure that conditions are met for a war to be a just war. In this case, the Christian must make a choice as to whether his government's decisions pass moral muster so that he can participate without offending God.

³⁰ Ibid., 155-57.

³¹ Examples of those who give this basic outline are Norman Geisler, *Ethics*, 158-77; Plaster, "Christian and War," 440-52; and William E. Nix, "The Evangelical and War," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 13 (Summer 1970): 133-68. Nix uses the term *mediative* instead of *selective* for the third category.

The Criteria of a Just War

Several modern authors have reviewed the criteria of a just war. Various lists that have been proposed can be boiled down to a summary such as that given below.³² It is assumed that even if a nation has just cause (one of the requirements), its execution of the war must follow the means outlined by the rest of the criteria. However, the modern emergence of nuclear and chemical warfare is causing some further deliberations on this issue. In addition, the recent rise of terrorism that is not state-sponsored may require some major revamping of how these rules are applied.

1. Only proper and competent authorities may declare and wage war. This means that government authorities and not individuals must be engaged in this process. At no times is an individual to take matters into his own hands.
2. Such authorities must have a just cause. The most common form of this is self-defense as one nation defends itself against the onslaught of another.
3. Violence may only be used as a last resort after all other options have failed or deemed useless by the proper authorities (recall the patience of George Bush, Sr., when giving Iraq time to respond in the early 1990s).
4. The nation declaring the just war must have the right intention or legitimate aim in doing so. In other words, moral goals must exist. The most frequent goals cited are the reestablishment of peace or the restoration of confiscated property and goods (freeing Western Europe in WW2, freeing Kuwait in the Gulf War).
5. There must be a high degree of probability for success for the nation waging a just war.
6. There must exist just means for the just war that are both discriminate and proportional. The means must be discriminate in that a difference is made between civilians and combatants in warfare. There should be an honest effort to hold down collateral damage. The means must be proportional in that the level of the response must be appropriate to the crime committed. For example, if a U. S. ambassador was assassinated by some person from an Arab country, the U.S. should not make a parking lot out of that Arab country destroying millions of lives indiscriminately.

³² My summary comes from a compilation and correlation of four sources: James F. Childress, "Just-War Criteria" in *War in the Twentieth-Century: Sources in Theological Ethics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 351-72; Allen Isbell, *War and Conscience* (Abilene, TX: Biblical Research Press, 1966), 77-78; William V. O'Brien, *Nuclear War Deterrence and Morality* (New York: Newman Press, 1967), 22-27; and Michael Novak, *Moral Clarity in the Nuclear Age* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983), 39.

7. Only one side in the war can be justified. This is a specialized case perhaps of making sure that all options have been exhausted before using violence. It may be that the violent attack upon one nation is deserved for some reason. It is important for government leaders to have the big picture. If it can be ascertained by leaders that their own policies or decisions had provoked an attack, it may not be justified to go to war over what has happened.
8. The war must be fought in a proper spirit of love. While this may seem strange to some ears, since warfare on the face of it seems to be an unloving act, the U.S. example of giving food to the Afghans recently and helping to stabilize the country after their attacks goes a long way toward putting a legitimate face on this concern. In fact, the restraint and restoration attitude, which has characterized the United States the last one hundred years, is quite remarkable considering its overwhelming military superiority. This may be due to the fact that most Americans, including the military, conscientiously believe in the just war theory.

A Biblical Defense of the Just War Theory

For the purposes of this article, a full-blown reaction to pacifistic or other positions will not be given.³³ Instead, an attempt will be made to highlight the basic points in a positive biblical and theological defense of the just war idea. To defend the just war theory biblically one must show the following teachings to be consistent with canonical instruction:

1. Some wars are morally right;
2. Proper governmental authorities must execute the war for it to be just;
3. Rules of engagement in war are necessary to limit the harshness of war.

Before embarking on a brief analysis of the Bible in this regard, one must in a preliminary way deal with the relationship of the Old Testament to the New Testament. Virtually no Christian argues that the Old Testament supports pacifism. Divinely sanctioned war seems assured if all one has is the Old Testament text. All believers then must hold to the fact that in history there have been at least some biblically justifiable wars. One of the most striking examples is that of Moses' instructions to the children of Israel as they await the soon conquest of the Promised Land:

When the LORD your God brings you into the land which you go to possess, and has cast out many nations before you, the Hittites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and mightier than you, and

³³ A basic reaction to pacifistic use of the Bible, especially the New Testament, in this writer's judgment, would have to take into account the following: (1) the logical consequences of pacifism are evil, (2) the beliefs of pacifism are unrealistic, (3) the expectations of pacifism are better suited for the coming kingdom and not the present evil age. In these areas, it would be necessary to show that individual passages have been pressed too far to accommodate the pacifistic conclusion.

when the LORD your God delivers them over to you, you shall conquer them and utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them nor show mercy to them (Dt. 7:1-2; NKJV).

If you hear someone in one of your cities, which the LORD your God gives you to dwell in, saying, ‘Corrupt men have gone out from among you and enticed the inhabitants of their city, saying, “Let us go and serve other gods”’—which you have not known—then you shall inquire, search out, and ask diligently. And if it is indeed true and certain that such an abomination was committed among you, you shall surely strike the inhabitants of that city with the edge of the sword, utterly destroying it, all that is in it and its livestock—with the edge of the sword. And you shall gather all its plunder into the middle of the street, and completely burn with fire the city and all its plunder, for the LORD your God. It shall be a heap forever; it shall not be built again (Dt. 13:12-16; NKJV).

The first quote from Deuteronomy above applies directly to foreign nations and peoples. They were to be “utterly” destroyed. The last section from Deuteronomy, while pertaining to affairs within Israel, nevertheless in warlike imagery shows a *command* of God to utterly destroy an entire city. Furthermore, the context suggests that to do so would be to *keep the commandments of God* and that this is what is *right* (Dt. 13:18). For someone who accepts the Old Testament as canonical, it is hard to dismiss the fact of justified warfare based upon these and many other examples.³⁴

However, the issue is not so simplistic. Some could perhaps take such statements and press them to the point of a crusader mentality. That is one of Bainton’s complaints.³⁵ On the other hand, the present-day Christian believer should admit that he lives in a different world and in a different dispensation than his counterpart in Old Testament days. Many pacifists and nonresistant Christians lean heavily on the distinction.³⁶ There is a separation of Church and State that is normative for post-Pentecost days that does not seem to have the same fit for Old Testament times and structures. The just war proponent need not back away from such distinctions but freely admit them and deal with them accordingly. Any dispensational distinctions that might exist in the area of warfare must be examined carefully passage by passage within the context of New Testament theology. This does not mean that the Old Testament is to be thrown away. It can and does provide wisdom in the area of God’s dealings with individuals and nations. However, most of our attention here will focus on New Testament teaching.

While one should concede that there are New Testament passages that assert that Christians are not to be militantly violent or vengeful (e.g., Mt. 5:21-26, 38-48), such verses do not logically force one to the conclusion that there are not any just wars or even

³⁴ For more evaluation of Old Testament treatments of warfare, see David Atkinson, *Peace in Our Time? Some Biblical Groundwork* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 14-25; Robert A. Morey, *When Is It Right to Fight?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1985), 15-35; Millard C. Lind, *Yahweh is a Warrior: The Theology of Warfare in Ancient Israel* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980); and Harold Lindsell, *Armageddon Spectre* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1984), 27-37.

³⁵ Bainton, *Christian Attitudes*, 44-52. Note that this chapter in Bainton’s work is entitled “The Origins of the Crusading Idea in the Old Testament.”

³⁶ Tom Fitts, *A Dispensational Approach to War* (Dallas: Unpublished Th.M. Thesis at Dallas Theological Seminary, 1974), 70.

that Christians are forbidden from being part of such warfare. Notice the following examples:³⁷

- ❑ There are many references to *soldiers* in the New Testament which are presented in a positive light (Lk. 3:14; 14:31; Mt 8:5ff; Lk 6:15; Acts 10-11). As Jesus and the Apostles interact with soldiers in the world, there is no hint that such an occupation would be inappropriate for a follower of Christ. Although it is pre-Pentecost, John the Baptist gives some insight when he makes a strong statement to soldiers “do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages” (Lk. 3:14). Such a statement implies fair or moral treatment of people by soldiers and acknowledges their occupation as a valid one since they, as ones seeking God, were not told to abandon it to follow Him. In fact, they were told to be content as they went about their work.
- ❑ The faith chapter in Hebrews 11 rehearses for Church saints the great conquests of the saints in the Old Testament, *including those that involved the use of force* (Heb. 11:30-34). That the writer of Hebrews could lift up such examples as encouragement for faith is hard to explain if the dispensational change at Pentecost meant a drastic alteration in the way warfare was to be viewed.
- ❑ *Jesus Himself used force* on two occasions when He angrily drove money-changers out of the temple precincts with a whip and overturned their tables (John 2:15ff, Mk. 11:15). While these events do not deal with national issues, they certainly reveal that Jesus does not dismiss all use of force. His other “peace” statements must not be pressed to the point of ignoring this possibility.
- ❑ While it is a debated passage, in Luke 22:36-38, even on the eve of Jesus’ crucifixion, *the disciples are carrying swords* for self-protection with His approval.
- ❑ While Jesus teaches that his kingdom (and the work of the present age that is related to it) should not be advanced by force, He at the same time seems to acknowledge that kingdoms in this world do exist in their own sphere and that fighting is part of their domain (Jn. 18:36).
- ❑ Jesus teaches that believers should carry out their rightful obligations to government in Matthew 22:21. While the context focuses on financial obligations, one could argue that Jesus is applying a general principle and extend it to defense of one’s country.
- ❑ Some of the parables of Jesus often use pictures of violence, which would be incongruous if He wanted to teach pacifism or nonresistance to His audience (Mt.

³⁷ My list of examples is typical and has been drawn from various sources including the following: Atkinson, *Peace*, 25-34; Morey, *When Is It Right?*, 37-55; Lindsell, *Armageddon*, 38-50. The supplied comments throughout are my own.

18:21-35; 21:33-41). While this particular point should not be pushed too far (since the object of the parables in question involves God's ultimate judgment), it is instructive that such imagery is used to describe the nature of God as He deals with people.

- The Apostle Paul appeals on numerous occasions for military protection for himself. This appears, at the very least, to set up an implicit sanction for just war in case of self-defense (Acts 16:37-39; 22:25-29; 23:12-27; 25:11). It is hardly befitting a man who would want to emphasize avoidance of all use of force.
- The strongest arguments in behalf of a just war are the statements that affirm the government's right to use force. Paul does this in Romans 13:1-7.³⁸ The government can "bear the sword" (existence of just war and punishment) but does so in the context of being ministers of God to punish evildoers (right motive and intentions). Furthermore, the passage seems to imply that Christians are to be submissive to the government in all things (a participatory approach if your country is at war would be consistent with this command). Peter argues the same way in I Peter 2:13-15. Christians are to submit to every ordinance of man. Government is seen as having the right to punish which would imply on occasion the use of force. This is expanded in a second Pauline passage where government's responsibility is to provide a climate of peace and tranquility for its citizens (I Tim. 2:1-2). Furthermore, Paul seems to recognize in a common sense and realistic way that circumstances of life do not always allow you to be at peace with others. He teaches this in the context of an exhortation to Christians not to be vengeful (Rom. 12:18). Such realism with respect to life is part of the spirit that drives the idea of a just war.

What do such examples prove? On the whole they show that the use of force is justifiable and especially so when ordained government authorities are exercising it. Thus, two of our three necessary points have been established. What about the third? What about the establishment of rules of engagements to limit warfare? Even the Old Testament hinted at the existence of rules of warfare albeit in ways not as developed as later applications have been.

The laws concerning war in the Book of Deuteronomy deal . . . with the instances in which persons could be exempt from military service, as with those who were seized with fear, were newly married, had recently built a house, planted a vineyard, and so forth. Other laws deal with vanquished peoples, spoils, prisoners and the prohibition of cutting down fruit trees in conquered lands.

However, the idea of rules of engagement in modern terms is mostly a synthesis of passages such as those indicated above from the New Testament (allowing for war) and

³⁸ An interesting walkthrough of this section of Scripture can be found in John Stott, "Christian Responses to Good and Evil—A Study of Romans 12:9-13:10" in *Perspectives on Peacemaking: Biblical Options in the Nuclear Age* edited by John A. Bernbaum (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1984), 43-56.

the passages that teach the love ethic (such as “love your enemies” in the Sermon on the Mount). The just war view takes both sides of this into account.³⁹

Conclusion

In the end, the Christian should avoid the extreme positions of a militaristic spirit, on one hand, and a pacifistic or nonresistant withdrawal from obligations on the other. The just war theory is the only theory, in this writer’s judgment, which carves out appropriate middle ground. There is ample warrant in Scripture for both just cause and just means and therefore the existence of a just war in general. The Christian must selectively apply wisdom to each case of warfare to determine if his involvement in the war is justified. However, caution should be urged here, since common citizens rarely have access to all the information necessary for a complete picture of what is happening. As the Christian lives wisely he can *both* love his enemy and use force against him as he shows love for the ones his enemy has hurt.

³⁹ E. Stern, “War, Warfare” in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 5:895.