Should a Christian Go to War?

Louis T. Talbot
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A Series of Radio Messages
by

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IT IS my desire to devote most of my radio time this evening to the answering of just one question, "Should a Christian Go to War?" Within the last six months literally hundreds of God’s people have written, asking me to answer this question over the radio, to explain what I believe the Bible teaches on this subject. These letters reveal the fact that just now, in this time of war, many earnest souls are torn between two opinions concerning this question.

Should a Christian go to war? Many of the Lord’s people would answer: "No; God’s Word is against it; for He has said, 'Thou shalt not kill'; and that is the end of the question." On the other hand, many who are equally devout and sincere, not only would answer, "Yes," but would also add that it is the Christian’s duty to go to war for a righteous cause. These, also, would show Scripture for their position.

Yesterday I had a long conversation by telephone with a young doctor of medicine who was seeking light on this important subject. He informed me that he is a devoted Christian, but that he is in a great dilemma. He said that the government had called him for service within the armed forces of this beloved country of ours, but that he could not respond until he had been given more light on the subject of a Christian’s duty in an hour such as this. He quoted a number of verses from the Bible, among them these three:

"Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord" (Rom. 12:19).

"Thou shalt not kill" (Exod. 20:13).

"Follow peace with all men" (Heb. 12:14).
Having quoted such passages as these from the Scriptures, the young doctor added that they seemed to make army service incompatible with the Christian profession. New remember, my friend, that this young man was, and is, as sincere as a person can be; and I deeply respect his convictions.

It is evident that there are literally thousands in the same position as this young physician. This morning I read over the radio part of a letter which I received from the teacher of a Bible class. The writer informed me that a recent lesson was about “Christian Love”—love to man and love to God. This subject naturally led to the discussion of the question of a Christian’s relation to his government and to war. In the light of the matter under discussion, one member declared that she could not save “fat-drippings” to make bullets for her boys to shoot other mothers’ boys. Another said she could not conscientiously buy victory bonds to help carry on the war. I refer to these incidents only to show the dilemma in which many Christian people have found themselves.

It is in order to try to answer such questions as these that I want to put before you what I understand the Word of God to teach on the subject. And in so doing, I am aware of the fact that many devoted Christians do not take the position that I am about to put before you; but, to me, the Scriptures answer the question definitely and finally.

Civil Government and the Christian Church

God has bestowed two great gifts upon the human race, both of which have to do with the question before us: One is civil government; the other is the Christian church. These two institutions—government and the church—are divinely ordained; that is, both came from God. Their purpose and mission are different, but they are alike in that they came from God. In the Bible, both in the Old and in the New Testaments, God has given commands to rulers whose business it is to exercise law. Moreover, He has stated the penalty of violation of law. In the same Book we find God instructing the church in regard to her mission and conduct in the world, especially toward her enemies.

Now, my friend, if you take the statements of Holy Writ that refer to governments and apply them to the church, or vice versa, you will get into a hopeless muddle in your attempt to understand God’s Word in an hour such as this. You must “rightly divide the Word of truth,” if you are to find God’s answer to this vital issue.

The Mission and Conduct of the Church

What is the mission of the church? And what is her conduct to be? Our risen Lord Himself gave us our mission when He said,

"Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15).

Again, just before He ascended into heaven, He said to His disciples,

"Ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

That is the business of the church—not to convert the world, not to “bring in the kingdom”; the Lord Himself will do that when He returns in glory. But it is the mission of the church to win souls to Christ by preaching and teaching the Gospel of the cross. It is the business of the church to tell the lost that Christ died for sinners, and that He alone can save and keep from sin.

Now, while the church is proclaiming this message, her conduct is to be that of grace. As individual members
of the body of Christ, we are not to “avenge” ourselves; but rather, we are to “give place unto wrath.” We are to “turn the other cheek,” love our enemies, and pray for those who despitefully use us. This should be our conduct as Christians, if we are to bear witness to the love and grace of God before a Christless world. Here are a few of the many admonitions to Christian love:

“Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven” (Matt. 18:21, 22).

“Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying I repent; thou shalt forgive him” (Luke 17:3, 4).

“Recompense to no man evil for evil. . .If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. . .Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:17-21).

In I Cor. 6:1-8 the Apostle Paul admonished Christians not to go to law with fellow-Christians, thus manifesting an un-Christian attitude before unbelievers. Then he asked,

“Why do ye not rather take wrong? why do ye not rather suffer yourselves to be defrauded?”

What Paul meant, of course, is that fellow-Christians can not bear a faithful testimony before a godless world if they quarrel and disagree among themselves. How true this is, the history of the church proves all too well; for human frailties and strife among believers have ever been some of Satan’s mightiest weapons, wielded before an unbelieving world.

The Holy Spirit, through the inspired apostles, has made very plain what our conduct as Christians should be; but in these and in like passages the context clearly shows that He is referring to the conduct of the members of the church— not of citizens of earthly governments. We dare not confuse the government with the church, if we are to understand God’s message concerning both! The mission of the church is to preach the Gospel and lead men to Christ. The conduct of the church is to be one of grace and Christian love, even in the face of persecution and wrong.

The Purpose of Civil Government

Now what about civil government? What does God say concerning it? For God’s first instructions about human government in the earth, we turn to the ninth chapter of Genesis. Man in the Garden of Eden had failed God; he had sinned; and righteous judgment had been meted out upon him. He was given a conscience, by which to discern good from evil; but again man utterly failed God. So great were the corruption and violence in the world in the days of Noah, that God sent the flood, to purify the earth, as well as to judge the wickedness that hindered His testimony in the world. Then, after the flood, for the first time God put human government in the hands of man. Why? In order to restrain sin!

The foundation of that government, which God put into the hands of Noah and his sons, was capital punishment: for He said to Noah these significant words,

“Whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man” (Gen. 9:6).

That verse states God’s fundamental, governmental law; and, mark you, this is not a part of the Mosaic Law. It has to do with the government which God placed in the
“Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves. But if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink.”

In chapter thirteen, however, it is a different story. In the first seven verses he shows that God has ordained “the powers that be,” that they should execute justice in the earth. Let us turn to those verses and read them carefully. Here are some excerpts from them:

“Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves condemnation (R.V.; i.e., ‘in the sense of judgment by the magistrates.’) For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: for he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he bareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake.”

When Paul wrote these words, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, saying that the civil ruler is “the minister of God,” and that he “bareth not the sword in vain,” he plainly stated that “the powers that be” are responsible to God for the faithful execution of their duties. Of course, the inspired writer did not mean that the civil ruler is a “minister of God” in a spiritual sense, in the preaching of the Gospel; but, rather, that he is a minister of governmental power put into his hand by God, before whom he shall be called to give an account of his trust.

There is no excuse for our confusing the Scriptures which have to do with the Christian’s personal relationship to God and man with those which have to do with civil government. The context always makes plain just
what God intended for us to understand in each instance.

Moreover, in faithfully executing justice in the punishment of law-breakers, we need also to keep in mind the fact that the Gospel offers pardon for the penalty of sin, even when the sinner has to pay for his crime with his life. “Whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed.” This is God’s governmental law; and yet God offers eternal life, even to the murderer who will confess his sin and put his faith in the atoning work of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is right that we should pray for the salvation of the condemned man, and seek to lead him to Christ. David was a murderer, and he was forgiven. But a sentimental setting aside of God’s governmental law has led to a great crime wave in our own country in recent years. Throughout the world today human life is cheap; the murderer too often escapes justice; whereas in his execution he makes known the enormity of murder and the value of human life.

Some years ago Governor Pollock of Pennsylvania refused to pardon a young man who was sentenced to die for a deliberately planned murder. In this Mr. Pollock was acting as a governor. Shortly before the execution, this high official, acting as a Christian, sat in that young man’s cell and talked to him about his soul. He said to the condemned youth that, while he could not escape the law of the state, yet One had come to take his place before God. “You can not escape the law of Pennsylvania,” he explained, “for there is none to die for you. But so far as your relationship to God is concerned, you may escape; for Christ died in your stead.” Do you see, my friend, that Governor Pollock was talking as a governor and as a Christian? He was obeying God’s fundamental law in administering justice, at the same time pointing the sinner to the Saviour who is both “just and the justifier” of him who believes in His shed blood as an atonement for sin.

What, Then, Shall the Christian Do About War and Civil Government?

But some will ask, “How does all this affect the Christian’s attitude toward war?” They go to the extreme of claiming that the Christian should hold no public office, should not even vote in elections, should have nothing whatsoever to do with “the powers that be,” should not fight when his country goes to war. “Conscientious objectors,” they are called.

From the Scriptures we have quoted, and from many others of like nature, we believe that those who would not loyally and faithfully support their governments are misinterpreting the plain teaching of the Word of God. It is true that “our citizenship is in heaven”; but, meanwhile, God has entrusted us with earthly responsibilities, during our pilgrimage here. Shall we dismiss all our policemen, all our soldiers and sailors and marines from duty? Shall we let the thief and the murderer and the blood-thirsty dictator kill our mothers and wives and children, rob our homes and steal our property? Shall we stand idly by while cruel injustice is wreaked upon suffering humanity—and yet call ourselves by the name of Him whose own Holy Spirit said that the civil ruler “beareth not the sword in vain”? No; the Bible does not teach that a Christian should never go to war. On the contrary, it teaches us that we are to defend our homes, our country, our loved ones, in order that we may worship God according to the dictates of our conscience, in order that there may be “life and liberty for all.” We do not expect to usher in the millennium by our being “good soldiers.” We know that only the Lord Jesus Himself can and will do that when He comes in power and great glory. But
we are to defend the cause of righteousness with every ounce of our energy and service, with our money and with our prayers. To stand idly by and let others do all the defending is inconsistent. Either we should have policemen and soldiers and sailors and marines, or we should not. If we are to enjoy the security they provide us, under God, then surely we would not let them go into all the dangers!

Suppose, my friend, as you were walking down the street, you should see a group of bandits snatch your wife and children, and begin to beat them. What would you do? Stand by and say to yourself, “Avenge not yourselves...” No; I think not! You would have a right to say, rather, “Be ye angry, and sin not” (Eph. 4:26). And yet there is no fundamental difference between the behaviour of bandits and that of outlaw nations. A man would be a miserable coward not to protect and defend his wife and children; and a man or a nation is cowardly who stands by and does nothing to defend helpless civilians against such bandit nations as the Japanese in this present war, or as Hitler’s Nazi outlaws. The cruel bombing of defenseless cities in China, the barbarous treatment of thousands of Jews of German-occupied countries of Europe, the sneak-attack upon Pearl Harbor—these are some of the countless, despicable acts of outlaw nations that must be dealt with—for the sake of humanity, for the sake of righteousness, and for the sake of the Gospel testimony throughout the world.

After all, there is no fundamental difference between the duties of a policeman and those of a soldier. The former deals with internal enemies; the latter, with external enemies; and both use force when necessary. I dare say there is not a single “conscientious objector” who would consent to our dismissing all our Los Angeles police force, or that of any of our cities and towns!

Again, if we should follow consistently the admonition of the conscientious objector, not having anything to do with civil government, then no Christians should be employed by the state or federal government to teach school. My friend, how would you like to send your boy and girl to a school where there are no Christian teachers? And yet, if the Christian is not to vote, not to participate in civic affairs; then neither should he receive public money to teach school.

Eternity alone will reveal the countless number of souls won to Christ through the consistent Christian testimony of teachers in our educational institutions. Indeed, it is a recognized fact that a large measure of the unbelief in our country today is the result of non-Christian, skeptical, scoffing instructors in our educational system, unbelievers who have put doubts into their pupils’ minds concerning the authority of the eternal Word of God. God needs and wants Christians in places of influence and authority, in order that sin may be restrained and the Gospel made known. Let us never lose sight of that!

Further Objections Answered

For the sake of emphasis, and in order to answer the particular questions that many have asked concerning this important subject, let us examine for a moment a few other passages of Scripture, to see God’s will in this matter. For example, one man asked me to explain the Lord’s words to Peter at His betrayal and arrest:

"And, behold, one of them which were with Jesus stretched out his hand, and drew his sword, and struck a servant of the high priest’s, and smote off his ear. Then said Jesus unto him, Put up again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword" (Matt. 26:51, 52).

In answer to that man’s question concerning this passage, we reiterate what we said earlier in this lesson: Peter
was one of the Lord's disciples, acting here, not in an official, governmental capacity, but as an individual. As such, Christ told him to put up his sword. And in the words, "All they that take the sword shall perish with the sword," our Lord was referring to men like Hitler. He is a veritable madman, a bandit, a blood-thirsty criminal turned loose upon helpless humanity. And as surely as he is slaughtering his millions today, just as surely Hitler will "perish with the sword." The context here, as in similar passages, makes it very plain that it is one thing unresistingly to suffer wrong as a Christian; it is another thing to exercise God-given power to preserve civil law and order in a cruel world.

Another man asked me to explain Matt. 10:16, "Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves." And again our answer is the same: These twelve disciples were going out, personally to represent their Lord and Saviour; and as individuals, they were to manifest God-given grace toward those before whom they witnessed. Christ knew that the nation of Israel would reject Him as King, that some would seek to kill His disciples; therefore, He faithfully warned the twelve of persecutions to come, at the same time bidding them to exercise patience and forbearance, with wisdom of word and act. The twelve were not going out to represent civil government!

When John the Baptist told the soldiers to "do violence to no man" in their personal dealings with others, he also told them to "be content with" their "wages" (Luke 3:14). He did not tell them to leave the armed forces.

Cornelius was a godly man, in whose house the Holy Spirit first came upon the Gentiles! and he was a centurion; that is, a Roman soldier with one hundred men under his charge. Peter did not tell him to give up his commission as a Roman officer. (See Acts 10:1-48.)

If a Christian fighting for the life and liberty of his country is out of the will of God, and should not take part in civil government, then why did the Lord Jesus have a good word to say about the centurion who sought healing for his servant? Christ did not tell that soldier to leave the army; but He did say to His disciples concerning him, "Verily I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel" (Matt. 8:10; Luke 7:9).

The Lord, in these words, said that the centurion had even greater faith than the disciples! He did not take issue with the man because he was a soldier!

The Pilgrim Fathers came to this country, in order that they might worship God in freedom and righteousness. Who would dare say that they and their sons and daughters were un-Christian in fighting for their independence? War is, indeed, a terrible thing! It is cruel and satanic and merciless. But when it is forced upon us, by no choice of our own, then there is nothing for us, as Christians, to do but fight for life and liberty and the protection of kindred and country. To enjoy the blessings of a free nation, yet to have no part in making these blessings of security possible, is to be selfish and misguided, to say the least.

May God hasten the day when "wars and rumours of wars" shall cease! May He come quickly to reign in righteousness over a purified earth! Meanwhile, "till He comes," may we, not only "live at peace with all men" in our personal relationships, in so far as it is possible; but may we also uphold the hands of those civil powers which are "ordained of God" to maintain order and peace in a world filled with cruel, wicked men. This, we believe, is God's will for the Christian.