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"Can Christians Engage in War?"

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Alexander Moseley (2010) defined war as a "state of organized, open-ended collective conflict or hostility" (para.15). By this definition, war can be a state of hostility between small groups and not always necessarily between nations. War engagement means promoting, supporting, and being in war. It involves weapons and intentional killings. War is horrible. Consequently, Christians' participation in it brings controversy. Some Christians consider it inherently evil and there are others who view it as necessary for peace. Is it possible to engage in war and honor God at the same time?

Significance of the Study

People have been at war toward one another since the fall of man. Since then the history of mankind was littered with countless stories of armed-conflicts. At the present time almost all parts of the world have war of all sorts—civil wars, invasions, tribal wars, revolutionary wars etc. Some conflicting countries are: Israel vs. Palestine; Iran vs. US; Pakistan vs. India; North Korea vs. South Korea and the number is many. We know throughout the history that war is real and its effects are gruesome. Colson and Pearcey (1999) asked, "How now shall we live?" (p. 477). Christians should not ignore this question for their calling as God's stewards of the good creation is at stake. They must ask and give an answer from a Christian worldview perspective. How now shall we live in relation to war?

Sam Childers, a missionary in Sudan, dealt with the same question. However because of rampant atrocities, he resorted to warfare. He fought against the rebel group led by Joseph Kony who was described in the New York Times as a terrorist: He was responsible for mass killing, kidnapping, sex slavery, and mutilating people (NYT, 2012). For Childers, killing one rebel meant saving many lives (Childers, 2009). Yet, the idea of Childers having a Bible in his left hand and AK-47 in his right hand has become controversial within the Christian community.

Engaging in war while honoring God is an issue that has to be dealt with by all Christians regardless of military status: those who hold offices in the government, army commanders, soldiers, and civilians. Hereby, I argue that Christians can engage in war and honor God at the same time. This paper seeks to provide a biblical understanding of Christians engaging in war.

Contemporary Views

Norman Geisler (2010), in his book *Christian Ethics*, categorized various Christian perspectives on war into three groups: Activism, Pacifism, and Selectivism.

Activism

War is always right under the declaration of the government. Geisler (2010) said that activism is the belief that Christians should always support all wars sponsored by the government. This is due to the belief that all government is ordained by God. The Bible says that God is “sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them [the kingdoms] to anyone He wishes” (Dan. 4:32, cf. 2:37). In the book of Romans, Paul commanded Christians in Rome to submit to the Roman government because there is no authority except that which God has established. It follows that he who rebel against authorities is rebelling against God (Romans 13, also I Peter 2:13f). From these biblical principles, Christian activism says that whatever the government decides on, the governed must obey; for to disobey the government is to disobey God. (Geisler, 2010).

War is always right for the sake of the oppressed. As opposed to the supremacy of the government, Liberation theologians said that Christians should always revolt against cruel and abusive people, institutions, or even governments. They believe that God wants them to establish a better society through class struggles. Thus, a faithful Christian should develop a revolutionary theory and get involved in revolutionary groups (Pottenger, 1989). This is due to the framework of their interpretation of the Bible that God favors the oppressed. Liberationist hermeneutic is concerned about freeing people from abuses and oppression (Wright, 2006). Therefore, for liberationist, it is always right to engage in war if it is against social injustice and oppression to the extent of rebellion and guerilla warfare. Tony Campolo (2008) commented on Liberation Theology in the *Washington Post*:

There will be those who will claim that Liberation Theology is nothing more than a baptized version of a Marxist revolutionary ideology. There is good reason for this because some prominent Latin American theologians have integrated Marxism with a theology of liberation and offered it up as justification for the violent overthrow of what they considered to be evil dictatorships. (para. 9)

Many liberationists deliberately combined Marxism and Christianity. Pottenger (1989) said that for liberationists, “the use of Marxist social analysis assists them not only in liberating the poor. . . . but also in liberating theology itself, thereby liberating the Church to become an agent of social change, and fulfilling the hope of Christianity” (p. 97). But there are also forms of Liberation theology which do not mix Christianity with Marxism. Father Gustavo Gutierrez, (as cited in Cloutier, 1997), a Liberation theologian, said that Liberation Theology is based on the Bible that God is always

siding with the oppressed “as Moses led the Israelites out of Egyptian slavery, as Jeremiah proclaimed freedom for the oppressed, as Jesus had come to ‘set at liberty them that are bruised’” (para. 10). Nevertheless, using revolutionary action as a means to obtain justice still reflects the Marxism principle that it is always right to engage in warfare for the sake of the oppressed.

Pacifism

There are many forms of pacifism (i.e. absolute, conditional, active, and selective) but all of them share the same conviction that war and violence are by no means justifiable (BBC, 2012).

Christian pacifists argue that Jesus Himself was a pacifist. Pacifists use Jesus’ statements such as “Blessed are the peacemakers…” (Matt. 5:9) “Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also” (Matt. 5:39), and “Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5:44) in order to support their case. I Peter 2:21 and 23, says that we have to suffer and endure aggression by doing good “To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in His steps…When they hurled their insults at Him, He did not retaliate; when He suffered, He made no threats.” Jesus, when He was arrested by a large crowd armed with swords, responded with peace though He had legions of angels at His disposal. When one of Jesus’ companion did strike one of them, Jesus quickly interdicted, “Put your sword back in its place for all who draw the sword will die by the sword” (Matt. 26:52). With these verses above, Christian pacifists are convinced that Jesus was a pacifist and did not use violence in face of aggression. Man must follow Jesus’ example to end war. If man will continue to justify war, it will result to an unceasing spiral of violence that will go on forever, as man repaying evil for evil. (Neal, 2009)

Christianity is a religion of peace. Any violent actions cannot be consistent to the teachings of Christ. The assemblies of bishops of Anglican churches in England (Lambeth Conferences, 1978) stated that “war as a method of settling international disputes is incompatible with the teaching and example of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The early church is also considered as pacifist. [BBC \(2012\)—The Ethics of War](#)—describes early Christianity:

The early church (the first 300 years) was strongly pacifist. Origen said that Christians “do not go forth as soldiers.” Tertullian wrote “only without the sword can the Christian wage war: for the Lord has abolished the sword.” Clement of Alexandria wrote “...he who holds the sword must cast it away and that if one of the faithful becomes a soldier he must be rejected by the Church, for he has scorned God.” (para. 12)

The underlying doctrine behind pacifism is the redemptive work of Christ. McGee (1994) argues that humans were created having peace with self, others, and

God but sin destroyed those relationships. Then Jesus came to bring peace among men and with God. With that, Christ's followers must also reflect His work. Macgee (1994) said, "The church is the product of the gospel and also its continuation." The continuative work of the church is to reconcile men to God as well as to other people. This cannot be done through violence but through the love of Christ. With this foundation, Christianity is intrinsically pacifistic. Jones, who was a missionary to India and was a friend of a great pacifist, Mahatma Gandhi, distinguishes pacifism from passivism (Graham, 2004). For him, pacifism is active and "aggressive" whereas passivism is inactive. In the cases of terrorism and war, Christian pacifists are actively involved in bringing justice and peace. Jones suggested that sovereign nations (or the United Nations) could use political and economic sanctions towards aggressors as substitute for war (Graham, 2004). In that way, horrible results of war might be avoided. Christianity must reject violence and must advocate peace and reconciliation as a reflection of Christ's work on earth.

Critique of Activism and Pacifism from a Biblical Perspective

Activism is Untenable

Idolatry of the government. It is true that all governments were established under God's sovereignty, but to infer that to disobey the government is disobeying God is theologically obtuse. Activism denies the reality of evil governance. God is perfect and the government has been affected by sin. Therefore Christians must disobey the government authorities when they demand something that contradicts God. The Bible says that God is supreme over human institutions. Peter and other Apostles defy the authority of the Sanhedrin by saying: "We must obey God rather than man" (Acts 5:29). There are many more passages that support defiance when the government's decision is conflicting with God (Exodus 1:17; Daniel 3:12; 6:13; 1 Kings 18:16-18, etc.). Thus Christians must disobey when the government declares war which contradicts God's principles. Failure to do so is tantamount to the idolatry of the government (Mcgee, 1994).

Idolatry of the oppressed. We agree that Christians should defend the oppressed, but to justify war in all circumstances for the sake of the oppressed is biblically untenable. Jesus never endorsed rebellion. In fact, in Matthew 22:21, He encouraged Israel (the oppressed) to pay taxes to Caesar (the oppressor). Peter said, "Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors..." (1 Peter 2:13-14b). When this was written, Christians were being persecuted. Yet, instead of inciting rebellion, Peter commanded the believers to endure suffering by doing good and rejecting evil. The real problem lies in the oppressed-centered outlook of liberation theologians. They looked at Jesus as

liberator from poverty and political oppression (Boulton et al., 1994) and interpreted the Bible in the light of the poor (Galli, 2011), thus, justifying revolutionary actions. Based on the verse above, this contradicts the Bible. Jesus came primarily to liberate man from sin, both the oppressor and the oppressed. We cannot reduce the work of Christ to a purely political liberation from poverty (McGrath, 2011).

Pacifism is Unlivable

Jesus was not a pacifist. To say that Christians cannot engage in war since Jesus was a pacifist is a lame argument. Jesus is both a king and a conqueror now and in the Second Advent, and He will defeat all His enemies by force (Revelations 19:11-21). On the other hand, Jesus did not retaliate when He was arrested, spat upon, flagellated, and crucified because He came to save man from sin. It is not because He was a pacifist but because He had a salvific purpose. Moreover, if He was indeed a pacifist, He would have stopped the centurion who had faith in Him from being a soldier (Matthew 8:10). With regard to His teachings such as, "If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also," and "Love your enemies" etc. are applied to interpersonal relationships only. Sacrificing oneself because of love is applicable to individuals not to the whole nations. Carmical (2012) said, "People who use this verse further fail to mention that this is a situation involving individuals and does not apply to governmental affairs" (para. 5). A government should not sacrifice his people to the aggressors because it has a responsibility to protect, take care of the governed, and execute justice before God (Romans 13).

Christianity affirms both evil and sword. Pacifism cannot really stand the test of the scripture. It is true that Jesus is the Prince of Peace and Christians are called to be peacemakers. But to say that there is no justifiable war on that account denies the legitimacy of war in the Bible under the leadership of Abraham, Moses, Joshua, the Judges, Samuel, and David. It does not only deny the legitimacy of war in the Bible but also denies the reality of evil and sin. Absolute Pacifism is unlivable in this fallen world. John Calvin (1847) said:

We might indeed do without the sword, were we angels in this world; but the number of the godly... is small; it is therefore necessary that the rest of the people should be restrained by a strong bridle; for the children of God are found mixed together, either with cruel monsters or with wolves and rapacious men. (p. 203)

The evil in this world makes war necessary. When the Bible says that the government must defend the weak, it necessitates weapons for war. Nehemiah, when he sought the welfare of the people, had the Israelites carried swords along with bricks as they build the wall of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 4:18). I conclude that godly people cannot continue to live without swords in this fallen world.

Proposed View: Selectivism

There are some truths in both pacifism and activism but we need to strike a balance. This balance is selectivism. There are some legitimate wars wherein Christians have to engage. First of all, the Bible says that the government must defend the oppressed and bring justice. Defending and bringing justice entail force and at times necessitate war. At the 2005 World Summit, the United Nations sponsored the R2P Bill. It stated that "each individual State has the responsibility to protect its populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity" (UN, 2011, para. 1). When it is needed, the international community can work together to achieve the said goal. Biblically speaking, Christians have to promote, support, and be in war with those crimes. However as opposed to activism and pacifism, we have to engage in war with certain strict conditions. In order to show those conditions or criteria, I extract some principles from the work of Sheila Harty's article (2011) entitled, The Just-War Principles of Augustine:

- War must have a just cause.
- Declared by legitimate authority.
- War must be waged with the right intention.
- The force that is going to use must be proportion to the goal.
- There must be a big probability of success.
- Noncombatants must not be harmed.
- War must be the last resort.

The concept of selectivism, following the said criteria, is faithful to the Bible than the activism and pacifism. For it affirms both the reality of sin and the repelling of it. Restraining evildoers by using violence does not contradict the Christian faith. Martin Luther said:

When I think of a soldier fulfilling his office by punishing the wicked, killing the wicked, and creating so much misery, it seems an un-Christian work completely contrary to Christian love. But when I think of how it protects the good and keeps and preserves wife and child, house and farm, property, and honor and peace, then I see how precious and godly this work is... (Placher, 2005, pp. 218-219)

This is consistent with the words of John the Baptist. When the Roman soldiers asked him what they must do, John replied that they must be good soldiers (Luke 3:14). This implies that military service can be a godly calling. It follows that warfare can be done in a godly way. Abraham engaged in warfare and killed many kings and soldiers for a just cause. He waged war to save his nephew and other people (Genesis 14:15-16). The Bible says that Abraham's engagement in war was blessed by the Lord (Genesis 14:19). It is worth noting that this happened prior to the establishment of theocracy in Exodus 19 (Geisler, 1989) which pacifists used to argue that war is exclusive only to Israel as a theocratic nation. Thus the case of selectivism

does not contradict the Bible. On the other hand, it is safe to say that the Bible is endorsing selectivism as a legitimate approach to war.

Conclusion

War is an effect of sin but it is not inherently sinful. This paradoxical truth signifies that Christians must engage in warfare as they are to engage every aspect of life and submit it under the Lordship of Christ. We must use it as a tool to honor God by restraining terrorism, social injustices, and other crimes against humanity. We have to promote, support, and be in war in Christ's name to bring earthly peace as a foretaste of heaven.

Psalms 144:1-2a

"Praise be to the Lord my Rock, who trains my hand for war,
my fingers for battle. He is my loving God..."

Celui qui veut la paix prepare la guerre.

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