

# SHOULD CHRISTIANS GO TO WAR?

BY THE  
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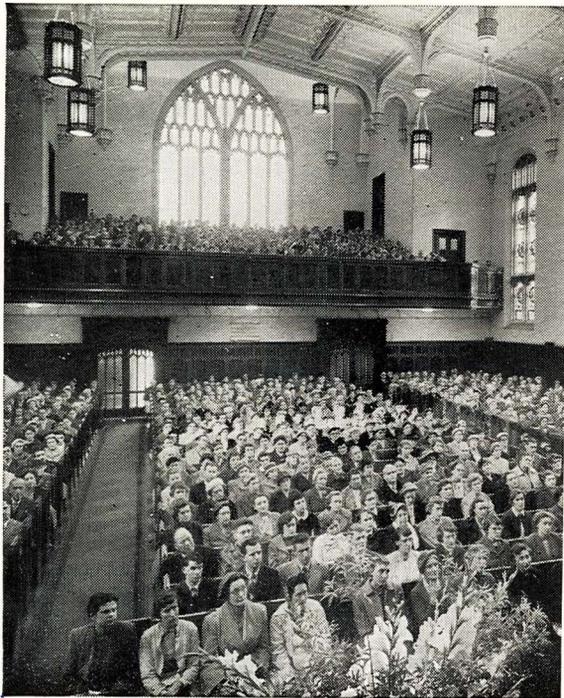
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A sermon preached by the Rev. Gordon Powell at the time of the sending of an Australian battalion to South Vietnam. One of a series on the Ten Commandments, this sermon was given on Sunday evening, 27-6-65 and repeated in condensed form at the Wednesday Lunch-hour Service, 30-6-65. In its printed form it includes a summary of a statement made by Mr. Dean Rusk on 23-6-65 which Mr. Powell received a fortnight later. Extra copies of this pamphlet may be obtained from the Church for 3d. each. This is printed sermon No. 12.

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## SHOULD CHRISTIANS GO TO WAR?

Exodus XX; 13. "Thou shalt not kill"

In our study of the Ten Commandments we come tonight to the sixth which forbids the taking of life, "Thou shalt not kill." In the light of this great fundamental principle of civilisation is it right for a Christian to take up arms? Is it right for a Christian government to send a battalion of men to Vietnam to kill their fellow human beings, and to run the risk of being killed themselves?

To keep these difficult issues clear, let us remember that there are three levels of human behaviour which we might describe as (1) The Law of the Jungle, (2) The Law of Civilisation and (3) The Law of Christ.

### THE OF THE JUNGLE

The Law of the Jungle needs little definition. It is a case of every man for himself, every tribe for itself, every nation for itself. It is summed up quite vividly in the poem about the two cats:—

There were once two cats of Kilkenny,  
Each thought there was one cat too many;  
So they fought and they spit,  
And they scratched and they bit,  
Till, excepting their nails,  
And the tips of their tails,  
Instead of two cats there weren't any.

If it were not so tragic it would be amusing the way we work ourselves up into a frenzy in time of war about the iniquity of the enemy whom we regard as the personification of all evil, and then twenty years later they are our best customers. On the other hand some of our

closest allies twenty years ago are now represented as Enemy Number One. Remember how we hated Japan with a great and terrible hatred and yet today we are signing contracts worth hundreds of millions of pounds with her to take our coal, our iron ore, our wool. In a year or two, if not already, she will be Australia's best customer and from the sight of Japanese cars on the roads, Japanese transistors or cameras everywhere you turn, we are rapidly becoming one of her best customers.

Twenty years ago we were comrades in arms with the Russians and the Chinese. Today they are represented to us as a terrible threat. Why? We give the Russians a tremendous welcome when they send us their ballet, or their circus and they are very happy because, communists or not, they make tremendous profits out of us! We recognise them as very pleasant human beings. Yet, we plan to strain our national finances to breaking point in order to build up arms against them.

We send a battalion of men to fight communism in South Vietnam and at the same time sell Communist China millions of pounds worth of wheat! Are we for them or against them? I have travelled through Soviet Russia and I came away with two very clear convictions. On the one hand whatever the Communist Party may or may not want, the great majority of the Russian people have a deep yearning to live in peace with their fellow men. On the other hand I would hate to live under communism and I would go to almost any length to avoid doing so. But is war the answer? I have quoted just one or two things to show the vast stupidity of war, the law of the jungle. Surely we can do better than this! Let us then in the second place consider,

### **THE LAW OF CIVILISATION**

The commandment, "Thou shalt not kill," obviously

runs completely counter to the Law of the Jungle. Does it mean that human beings should never kill anything or anybody, that a Christian can never don uniform to be a sailor, soldier or airman?

(Note:—In preaching this sermon, Mr. Powell wore his R.A.A.F. chaplain's preaching scarf and the ribbons from his World War II medals. He explained that this was not intended to commit him to one side or other in the 1965 situation, but to indicate that he was speaking from some practical experience of the issues he was discussing).

The Ten Commandments are recorded in the 20th chapter of the book of Exodus. In the very next chapter it is laid down that society shall put to death such people as the following:—"He that smiteth a man, so that he die; he that smiteth or curseth his father or mother; he that stealeth a man (to sell him into slavery)." In following chapters other crimes are listed which merited the death penalty. In the intervening 3,000 years civilisation has progressed to the point where the death penalty has been almost eliminated, although only 150 years ago in Britain judges could still apply capital punishment to 200 different crimes. It will be a great day when the death penalty can be eliminated altogether, but many societies are still a long way from that ideal. Meanwhile let it be noted that the Old Testament recognises the principle that for the sake of all the people, society generally must sometimes protect itself even at the cost of taking life.

I was a boy in Melbourne at the time of the famous police strike. For several days the city was left without the forces of law and order. Instead of bringing out the best in people it brought out the worst. Larrikins broke shop windows and began looting. In no time people, who

would normally consider themselves highly respectable citizens, joined in and looted for all they were worth. Nobody was safe in the streets. Finally volunteers and members of the armed services brought things under control. If all had been committed Christians or at least people with a sense of responsibility, possibly little harm would have followed. But the fact remains that this is an imperfect world with many unredeemed and imperfect people in it and if you don't have lawful force, very soon you will have unlawful force multiplying and getting right out of control.

Surely it is clear that Jesus and the Apostles recognised this principle. They did not have police forces in His day, but in Palestine the Roman Army maintained law and order. There is no record of Jesus ever rebuking a centurion or any other man in uniform for being a soldier. He Himself used a form of force, or at the very least the threat of force, to cleanse the Temple. He did not turn the other cheek to the racketeers and money-changers in the House of God. It is true that Jesus warned "All they that take the sword shall perish with the sword." (Matthew 26; 52). At the same time He urged His disciples to obtain swords for their personal defence. As things moved to a crisis on the night before the crucifixion, it seems clear that He did not want His friends to expose themselves to unnecessary danger. He said, "He that hath no sword, let him sell his garment, and buy one." (Luke 22; 36). This was for personal self-defence. A Christian has no right to provoke violence and bloodshed by putting temptation in the way of those who live by force.

Peter and other New Testament writers make it clear that earthly rulers, even if they are not Christians, indeed even if they are hostile to the Church, if they are maintaining law and order by the proper use of force,

they should be obeyed. In his first epistle Peter wrote (Chapter 2; 13, 14)—

"Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; or unto governors as unto them that are sent by Him for the punishment of evil-doers, and for the praise of them that do well."

Once I was in the company of the Rev. Professor Main of the Church of Scotland at a Sunday afternoon gathering out of Glasgow when he was tackled by an earnest Christian pacifist who said, "Don't you believe a Christian should turn the other cheek in time of war?" Professor Main replied, "I am quite prepared to turn my other cheek, but I am not prepared to turn the other cheek of my wife or my daughter." Personally I admire the man who can turn his other cheek. It is not a weak thing to do. The weak thing is to run away. The natural human reaction is to hit back. It takes superb self-control to remain calm, to stand there and say calmly, "I am a Christian and I refuse to fight you. Here is my other cheek." It is hard enough to do that at the personal, individual level where there is great faith and courage. It is very much harder to do it at the national level when you are mixed in with many other people who do not have the same courage, love or idealism.

I shall consider the Law of Christ as the ideal in a moment, but before I leave the Law of Civilisation, may I point out that Christians have a wonderful opportunity to work at this level to preserve the peace of the world? In terms of the principles I have just been outlining I have no doubt that members of the Commonwealth Government will say, "This is why we have sent the battalion to Vietnam, to help preserve law and order, to bolster the democratic government of South Vietnam." (When you refer to the democratic government

there I cannot resist repeating Bob Hope's quip when he was in Vietnam last Christmas, "Sure it's a democracy. Everybody gets to be president sooner or later."). Now I would feel very much happier about this if the United Nations had something of its old strength and, in the name of world peace, law and order, invited us to send a contingent. But as it is (and may I say that I have the utmost sympathy with the Australian Government in its attempt to make the right decisions in this dangerous situation?) it seems to me the sending of the battalion has at least two great disadvantages. (1) The Asian people are naturally very touchy about white people interfering in their affairs and who can blame them after the history of the past three hundred years? We were in Tokyo in 1960 and night after night we had to make our way through twenty or thirty thousand snake-dancing students "rioting" against the proposed visit of President Eisenhower. (Admittedly, communists were involved in this, but the majority of students were certainly not reds). He was only wanting to make a good-will visit, but they wouldn't have that. How do you think Asian people generally think about white men coming in as armed battalions? (2) The other disadvantage as I see it is the cost. Who can measure the cost in Australian lives, especially if the war escalates? Even if it does not, many millions of pounds will be spent and the Government is talking of devoting hundreds of millions of taxpayers' money a year to defence. My own view is that it would be far better for the defence of Australia in the long run if these hundreds of millions, instead of being squandered in non-productive and highly debatable as well as highly dangerous military activity, were devoted to a crash programme of vast national development and real defence here at home. These millions could be spent on nuclear power to bring fresh water

to the inland, on a network of pipes to bring oil and natural gas to the great industrial centres and so help to set us free from dependence on overseas' supplies. This, surely, is an obvious defence need as well as being the source of great industrial progress. Think what could be done with these hundreds of millions to build standard gauge railways round Australia and a vast network of road expressways across the country, especially in the Northern half, where the fighting may have to be done one day. By doing these things we could bring in millions more migrants and justify our existence on this vast, empty continent.

No doubt the Government sees a parallel between Vietnam and Korea fifteen years ago. Certainly both are peninsulas on the coast of Asia jutting out into the China Sea, both were torn by civil war, both had Communist China at their back door apparently interfering. The difference is that because the Soviet missed its chance with the veto, the United Nations were involved in Korea and Australia took part in the U.N. forces. Following the war in Korea in which about 500,000 people were casualties and 33,600 Americans and 1,000 British and Australians lost their lives, negotiations began and continued for some two years. They seemed permanently deadlocked until an international expert of the World Council of Churches, the Rev. Dr. Frederick Nolde suggested a solution which was adopted. As a Christian, he could look at both sides more objectively than western diplomats who were obsessed by a fear of communism and communists obsessed by fear and hatred of the west.

It seems clear that sooner or later there will have to be negotiations in Vietnam. How much better that these should take place now after 25,000 in South Vietnam alone have lost their lives, than several years hence after

possibly hundreds of thousands have died? This is the consistent viewpoint of Church councils and leaders of all backgrounds from the Pope of Rome to the Church of Scotland Assembly. The Church and Nation Committee of the Scottish Assembly in May commended the resolution passed by the British Council of Churches which reads:—

“The Council supports the world-wide plea for an end to the sufferings of the people of Vietnam and for a peaceful settlement of their future. The Council welcomes the efforts which Her Majesty’s Government are making to promote a settlement throughout South-East Asia, and calls for the prayers of all Christians in these islands to the same end.”

This kind of approach on the part of the Churches of Britain has no doubt played a part in Mr. Harold Wilson’s plan for a Prime Ministers’ Peace Mission. Before he took office, in a television interview Mr. Wilson said he welcomed the advice of the Churches in such matters as these. Since he married the daughter of a Congregational minister, he realises the importance of Church resolutions. Such advice is at least free from the profit motive, or desire for military or national glory or other more worldly considerations.

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(Since this sermon was preached the full text of an important statement by the U.S. Secretary of State, Mr. Dean Rusk, has come to hand. It clarified several points which should be borne in mind. The speech was delivered to the American Foreign Service Association at Washington, D.C. on June 23, 1965. The following are some summarised extracts:—

The situation in South Vietnam is not just a civil war in which one side has appealed to outsiders for help. It is the result of a deliberate and long-matured decision by a persistent aggressor. Intelligence shows that some 40,000 infiltrators from North Vietnam had come south up to the end of 1964. Since 1961 South Vietnamese armed forces have lost some 25,000 dead and 51,000 wounded. In the past 18 months some 2,000 local officials and civilians have been murdered. When an official is not found at home often his wife and children are murdered in his place. Previous attempts to negotiate peace have produced the opposite reaction to that intended. To quote the actual words of Mr. Dean Rusk, “Apparently a totalitarian regime has once again misunderstood the desire of democratic peoples for peace and has made the mistake of thinking that they can have a larger war without risks to themselves.”

Already there have been a number of serious attempts to negotiate peace. (a) Last August the Security Council of the United Nations was requested to discuss the matter, but Hanoi refused to attend. (b) In April Secretary-General U Thant considered visits to Hanoi and Peiping to explore the possibilities of peace, but both regimes made plain their view that the United Nations is not competent to deal with the matter. (c) The British Government sought a new conference in Geneva. This was rebuffed as were (d) the efforts of a senior British statesman, Mr. Patrick Gordon Walker, whom Mr. Wilson sent on a lengthy tour in the hope of establishing personal relationships. (e) In Balti-

more last April President Johnson offered unconditional discussion only to have his offer treated as a "hoax." (f) Then the President of India made constructive proposals—for an end of hostilities and an Afro-Asian patrol force—only to meet the same negative response from the North. As Mr. Rusk says, "There is no procedural miracle through which peace can be obtained if one side is determined to continue the war."

The Secretary of State went on to say that as with many other crises in the past, Iran, Greece, Berlin, Korea, the Formosa Strait and Cuba, there was need to show both strength and restraint—courage and coolness. The United States was not prepared to pull out and leave a friendly people to their fate. He said "We alone cannot determine the future—could we do so there would be a prompt peace." He supported the four-point plan for peace enunciated the previous day by the South Vietnam Foreign Minister:—

1. An end to aggression and subversion.
2. Freedom for South Vietnam to shape its own destiny without any foreign interference from whatever sources.
3. The ending of military measures and the removal of foreign military forces.
4. Effective guarantees for freedom and independence.

Mr. Rusk went further and called on all nations—including the Soviet Union—to unite in the peaceful development of the whole of this potentially rich corner of Asia, through the im-

mense Mekong River project, a new dam ready to rise in Laos, a billion dollar bank, the multiplication of rice production, the doubling of the expectation of life through medical assistance, a tenfold increase in education of the young and a score of other exciting projects. Such are the official aims of the United States Government. The cause of peace is not served by ignoring them or distorting them).

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## THE LAW OF CHRIST

Finally let us turn to the Law of Christ which is the law of love. He was able to love even His enemies and He calls us to do the same. I don't think there is any doubt that as individual Christians we should aim at this ideal, but if we attempt to compel others who are not committed believers there is bound to be trouble. For a time when I was a university student I was an ardent pacifist. But then in the 1930's I saw that such resolutions as those carried by the students of Oxford that under no circumstances would they fight for King or country, merely encouraged war-mongers, like Mussolini and Hitler to believe they could do what they liked in Ethiopia or to the Jews and the little nations of Europe. England, they thought, would do nothing to stop them. It could be argued that the students in their quite proper hatred of war, by adopting a negative pacifism brought upon themselves and their nation the very disaster they were trying to avoid. There were, of course, many other factors, but this was one.

That is not to say pacifism is wrong. It is saying that negative pacifism is highly dangerous. A positive pacifism as taught by Jesus is the one thing that can save the world from extermination. I want to conclude by re-

minding you of the great contribution made to world peace and brotherhood by some of the great Christian peacemakers. There was William Penn who at the age of 37 in 1681 founded Pennsylvania. Until then there had been perpetual war between the white settlers and the Indians, but Penn the Quaker went among the Indians unarmed and said he had no desire to fight. He convinced them trading was better than fighting and for seventy years while the influence of Penn, the devout Christian, prevailed there was peace and great prosperity in those areas.

I think of the war which threatened between the Argentine and Chile in 1899. The two armies were poised for battle, but on Easter Day in Buenos Aires a certain preacher (Monsignor Benavente) made a passionate appeal for peace. Word of this sermon crossed the border and so inspired a bishop in Chile that he set off on a preaching mission to stir up the forces on the side of peace and brotherhood. A great movement for peace snowballed until both sides agreed to submit the matter to King Edward VII of Britain for arbitration. The whole thing was settled by peaceful negotiations, some of the guns were melted down and cast into a huge figure of Christ which was erected and unveiled on 13th March 1904 on a 13,000 foot peak on the dividing range, the Christ of the Andes.

I think of Martin Luther King the negro, surely one of the greatest men of this age and of any age. He has made the doctrine of turning the other cheek work through his policy of non-violent resistance. When he received his Nobel prize he said, "Right defeated is stronger than evil triumphant." In the March on Washington he said, "There is something redemptive about undeserved suffering." His is essentially a positive pacifism. He practises positive resistance to the evils af-

flicting his people, he is doing something about them, even though he is always ready to turn the other cheek when attacked personally.

How can we apply all this to Vietnam? In two particular ways it seems to me. My former Air Force Commanding Officer, a young man named Wilfred Arthur, under the Colombo Plan installed a dairy farm with 183 Jersey cattle from New South Wales, 35 miles north of Saigon at a cost of £130,000. The plan was to show the people how they could defeat undernourishment. But the Vietcong frustrated this great work. They kidnapped Wilfred Arthur in 1961, his wife was injured when a bomb killed a Frenchman she was talking to, their son Haig was in the next room when three Americans lost their lives to a bomb thrown through the window. They had to abandon that farm, but they still cared for the Vietnam people and they set it up in a more secure area. Forty Australian organisations are sending help to Asia in one form or other. Recently the Australian Council of Churches gave £3,000 to assist refugees in Vietnam.

The other way positive Christian pacifism can operate in these days is to give as much active support to the British Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Peace Mission or any other attempt along similar lines to bring both sides to the conference table. In view of all the discouragements of the past it is easy to despair and say there is nothing to do but to fight and go on fighting. Some individual Christians faced with the decision of donning uniform will feel it is their immediate duty to act as guardians of lawful force in terms of the passages quoted above from the New Testament. They could well believe that the cause of peace is best served by restraining the aggressors in a limited area. Others will be conscientious objectors and a true democracy will

give freedom to each man to decide his own duty.

Meanwhile the supreme task of the Church is to go on proclaiming the Gospel of the love of God for all men everywhere. Only as men come to believe in the Fatherhood of God will they be able to talk together as brethren. Then will swords be beaten into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks.

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  - No. 11. WHOM HE LOVETH, HE CHASTENS.
  - No. 12. SHOULD CHRISTIANS GO TO WAR?
  - No. 13. GOD'S LAW ON SEX
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- No. 8. THE GOD BEYOND GOD. (Preached in St. Stephen's by Prof. Charles Birch, Biologist).

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