

THE CHRISTIAN ATTITUDE
TO WAR

by
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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

To answer the question "What is the Christian attitude to war?", we must make up our minds first of all as to what we believe about revelation. Do we believe that God has revealed His mind to us and in the Bible has given us a pattern for our thinking so that our task is to seek to understand that revelation, seek to verify it, seek to correct our interpretation of it but nevertheless to stand firm on revelation. This has always been the Christian point of view; because apart from revelation, we have only our own innate judgment as sole guide, though garnering ideas from Confucius or from Christ, or from whomever it may be, on which to base that judgment.

The Christian attitude to war means an attitude informed and based on revelation; because the fact of revelation is the basic concept of Christianity, so that we must make up our minds on this question of revelation first of all because if there is disagreement here, our

attitudes will merely touch like a tangent every now and again.

Now the second thing we must make up our mind about is the Old Testament, whether it is part of the revelation. After all, the Old Testament forms by far the greater bulk of the Bible and it is the only Bible that Jesus had. When, for example, Jesus said to the Sadducees (Mt. 22:31) "Have you never read what was spoken to you by God"? He showed that He took the written word of the Old Testament (the word you read) to be a contemporary word from God to the Sadducees. That was our Lord's attitude to the Old Testament, and St. Paul's attitude was similar, as was also that of the other writers of the New Testament.

What then is to be our attitude to the Old Testament? In the early church there was a heretic named Marcion who rejected the Old Testament, which he said was the product of a God of justice, and confined himself to the New Testa-

ment, which he said reflected a God of love. Are we to be modern Marcionites and say that the Old Testament has been superseded by the revelation of a God of love; that the Old Testament is antiquated, so that we do not accept its point of view, nor regard it as Christian revelation and thus as part of the source from which we obtain our Christian attitude to war; or do we try to understand the Old Testament in the light of the New Testament and as unity with it since all has been inspired by the one Spirit of God?

These basic questions must first be faced if we are to ascertain the Christian attitude to war.

In other words do we accept the revelation as Christ accepted it, trying to understand it, trying to integrate it, trying to correct our interpretation of it OR are we going to be modern Marcionites, people who toss over the Old Testament and pick out from the New the

concepts we like and model our religion on that? For this is a popular point of view which goes under the name of Christian to-day.

The Old Testament is not superseded by the New; it is fulfilled by the New Testament, but not superseded. The New Testament assumes the Old Testament. It does not go over the ground again where a doctrine has been clearly taught in the Old. It is sometimes said that Jesus corrected and superseded some of the Old Testament teaching in His sermon on the mount. Let us look at the passage. It is Matthew chapter 5, verse 17 onwards. Jesus is speaking in the context of endorsing the Old Testament which He refers to under its contemporary title "The law and the prophets". He said "Do not think that I came to destroy the law or the prophets: I came not to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass away from the law, till all

things be accomplished. Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say unto you, that except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no wise enter into the kingdom of heaven." A hasty judgment by Jesus' hearers might have led them to think that He was contradicting the Old. But Jesus is emphatic that He is not doing that. But he says that our conformity to the will of God in the Old Testament (i.e., 'our righteousness') must be more genuine than the shallow formal righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, who were content to observe the merely outward letter of the law. Then in v.21 Jesus goes on to amplify the Old Testament. He quotes the sixth commandment "You have heard it said in old time 'thou shalt not kill'" and He adds the phrase "I say unto

you...". By this addition is our Lord abrogating the commandment "Thou shalt not kill"? Of course He is not doing anything of the sort. That commandment remains, but He is deepening our understanding of the spirit of the Old Testament by removing shallow interpretations which regards the sin as merely in the external act and not in the attitude of the heart. The same is true in verses 27, 33 and 36, where the same formula is repeated. The same consideration applies to verse 31, which shows that our Lord was not annulling the Old Testament provision for divorce resulting from hardness of heart, but rather drawing out its implications.

We then come to the question thrown up in v. 43, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour and hate thine enemy". These words "Thou shalt hate thine enemy" are not an actual quote taken from the Old Testament but a deduction from the action of going to war against your enemy.) Now the question is

whether Jesus by His statement "I say unto you love your enemies" is abrogating the command contained in the Old Testament "Thou shalt hate thine enemy". The answer must be that He is not doing this if His words at the beginning of the passage are to be given their full value about not one jot or one tittle passing away from the Law; or if the rest of these similarly structured paragraphs are to be a guide, for in none of them does He abrogate the Old Testament command which He quotes and amplifies.

What then does He mean when He says we are to love our enemies while still endorsing the injunction to hate them? For it is exegetically out of the question that Jesus is abrogating the Old Testament. So then the principle still remains "You shall hate your enemy". But obviously it had been misunderstood and had been given an unchristian meaning, and that is why Christ says "I say unto you love your enemies". We must

love them at the same time as acting towards them in a way that could be construed as hatred. There is to be no vindictiveness in any action we are obliged to take towards them. Nor is there to be any personal retaliation in their suffering and defeat. We are helped to understand what is to be our attitude to our enemies when we recall that in Malachi 1:2 God said He hated Esau, we read "Jacob I loved, Esau I hated". This verse occurs not only in the Old Testament but is quoted and endorsed in the New Testament (Rom. 9).

The statement that the God of love hated Esau can only mean that God's actions toward Esau were those which men would attribute to hatred. But to assume that God had feelings of vindictiveness or dislike towards Esau, would be a denial of the known character of God. This command of our Lord "Love your enemies" must not be quoted out of context to bolster up a pacifist position already adopted on other grounds. The

context shows that this sentence certainly does not abrogate the Old Testament. In the Old Testament and in the New God who is unfailing love acts in judgment on sinners in a way that could be construed as hatred. And Jesus instructs us that our "Hating our enemies" is to be confined to acts of hostility, and is not to spread over into an attitude of vindictiveness and hatred. But even so, it remains true of course that such acts of hostility are to be undertaken only for the gravest reasons and are legitimate only in the cause of righteousness.

The Old Testament describes the people of God engaging in war as an instrument of righteousness. Of course, the sovereign God is able to use every event that takes place for His purposes of righteousness and is able even to use the cruel and horrible wars of the Chaldeans as the rod of His anger (Is. 10), for nothing happens outside God's control. But I am speaking of the people

of God receiving a direct command of God to go to war. For example, the Israelites were commanded to fight against the Amorites in Canaan and to destroy them completely. Why? Because the iniquity of the Amorites was now full (Gen. 15: 16, Amos 2:10). The instrument of war was used as righteous judgment to bring on the Amorites what their sins deserved. Had they not received their deserts justice would have gone astray.

Notice that the Children of Israel did not destroy all the neighbouring tribes in this way (Deut. 2:5, 9, 19). They were commanded not to attack the Edomites or the Moabites or the Ammonites, but they were told to exterminate the Amorites, cause of the iniquity of these Canaanite nations. The Israelites were the instruments of God's righteous judgment. They engaged in war to carry this out.

In the Old Testament war is also waged as defense against

an aggressor (Exodus 17:8) and to throw off the bonds of the oppressor; then when they repented and prayed to God, God raised up a servant of His, a Judge to deliver them by leading victoriously in battle.

Thus the Old Testament shows us the people of God, under the direction of God, engaging in war; not against anyone, as in an expansionist war, but for certain specific purposes. Indeed, the Old Testament describes God as "a man of war" (Exodus 15:3).

The New Testament also speaks of the sword being God's instrument. In this case the reference is to the sword of the civil magistrate. The magistrate is said to be the minister of God to punish the wrong-doer with death (Rom. 13:4).

A passion for righteousness is something we have largely lost sight of in our modern society. The Old Testament, and the New, are full of a passion for righteousness,

for right relationships, for right dealings.

A passion for righteousness may call us to war. Righteousness may well involve anger; but it never involves the hating of your enemy in a vindictive sense. Regard for righteousness involves anger against unrighteousness. In Rom. 1:18 we read of the anger of God revealed against all unrighteousness of men.

Anger is compatible with love, but only with holy love: that is, a love which hates unrighteousness, hates iniquity and which shrinks from it with that instantaneous reaction Christ had when He said to His friend, "Get thee behind me, Satan, thou savourest not the things of God...". This intense and holy passion for righteousness has nowadays been largely lost amongst Christians. We need to ask the Spirit of God to teach us the mind of God with regard to righteousness because otherwise we fall into the quagmire of sentimental

love. Sentimental love which does not differentiate - a love which has no principles - is the curse of our modern society. This is absolutely foreign to the New Testament and the Old. God is love and God is righteous; there is no contradiction between the two. Love must always be righteous. God's love, His holy love, is seen in His holy righteousness on the cross. "He spared not his own son but delivered him up for us all". At Calvary pain and suffering and death was accepted, indeed inflicted, by God to achieve righteousness, and it was action of love. But it was holy love, not sentimental love which does not differentiate between right and wrong, justice and injustice, good and evil. This latter so called love is the thing to beware of, and it is this which is played upon to-day with regard to the Vietnam war. Every sensible, responsible adult regards war as horrid, but undifferentiated dislike of war is not the Christian attitude. The Christian must hate with an intense

hatred unrighteousness and accept, if necessary, suffering and indeed inflict it as God inflicted it on His Son, in vindication of righteousness. To think that freedom from pain and injury is the great aim in life is to have lost all sense of the supernatural dimension of life and indeed all sense of moral values. This is, of course, what our modern society has done. It ignores, if not denies, that man is a being of two worlds, the supernatural as well as the natural, and that he lives by values which transcend the natural order. Typical modern thought cannot avoid wrong conclusions because it abstracts from the whole merely a part and bases its judgments on this part, ignoring the rest of reality.

War is only to be undertaken as an act of righteousness and judgment. God delegates to men His supreme right to judge in certain circumstances. We have not all got the duty to judge, but this office is delegated to some,

e.g. parents have a duty to judge the behaviour of their children. Private persons have received from God no right or duty to judge one another, and we are not to usurp this office. God is ultimately the only judge, for He alone has the right to judge, for He is our creator and we are all created as it were tenants-in-chief to God. Through God's nature of long-suffering, He has postponed judgment for our sins for the time being, to provide us with the opportunity for salvation. Otherwise, if God entered into judgment with us, we would all be condemned and finished. Meanwhile, in the long-suffering of God, and for the preservation of society, He has delegated to persons holding institutional positions His right of judgment which then becomes their duty to discharge conscientiously. It is no mere option. That is why St. Paul says in Rom. 13 that the magistrate is the minister of God. In this the apostle was echoing the Old Testament "The judgment is God's" (Deut. 1:17); "He said

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to the judge... You judge not
for man but for the Lord"
(2 Chron. 9:6).

Unless the magistrate is
acting as God's delegate he has
no right even to lay an arrest-
ing hand on a person, a fellow
man created in God's image.
Nor have we any right to judge
one another unless we are act-
ing in God's name. Now of
course judgment administered by
men may be very inexact, because
of their sin and blindness and
ignorance, nevertheless the
administrator of justice is
ultimately acting in God's
behalf. That is why the police-
man may arrest you.

The ultimate sanction of
the magistrate in the community
is the sword, that is to say,
force, and the ultimate sanction
of international justice is war.
We all hope that through the
establishment of other less
drastic methods of internation-
al justice, the time may soon
come when the sword of war will
very seldom have to be unsheath-
ed, but at present it is the

only method. It may well be that a nation has an obligation to vindicate righteousness in the community of nations and it may be only able to do so by war at the present juncture.

It is not right for the magistrate to let individuals do as they like in the community; and it is also not right, if it is the duty of a particular nation to enter into an obligation to fight for right relations amongst nations, to neglect to do so. The question of when there is a duty to enter into a war is a difficult one and it will be resolved for any nation by a consideration of such things as its commitments, its obligations and its ability to help, but basically, underlying all, is the fact that if your brother is suffering wrongfully and needs your help and you are in a position to give it, it is your duty to help. So in quarrels between the nations you must ask where does the right lie, if anywhere? What is my obligation to that right? The painfulness of war

is not an ultimate reason for refraining from it. A nation may have to engage in it until we can develop better forms of international tribunals.

There is, however, this difference between the magistrate's use of the sword, and war, in that war is not primarily an act of retributive justice though ultimately it must be grounded on this principle. The conquest of Canaan by Israelites was an exception in that retribution was not only its ground but also its objective. The extermination of the Amorites was retribution for their iniquity and the Israelites received a clear command to this effect. But normally war, when undertaken in the cause of righteousness, is not undertaken primarily to kill people. It is undertaken to deter nations from actions they ought not to be doing. If a person is doing an unjust act it may be your duty to restrain him. This is the question to be faced; not how painful it is to him or you.

In seeking the Christian attitude to war, we need to ask, is righteousness something God maintains and does He call on us to maintain it also; does He call upon us to react to unrighteousness? We are to have a hostility in our own hearts to unrighteousness so that we hate it in the same severe way that God does. A passion for righteousness has no place for vindictiveness against the person, but it does make you hate the unjust action and it may require you to act in a way that other people say you hate the person because it may require you to engage in horrible war against him.

The questions that must be asked about Vietnam are these: Where does the right lie? Does it lie on any side at all? Where does our duty lie if a right lies in a certain place? These are the questions to be asked. Not how many innocent people are involved. The involvement of the relatively innocent with the guilty is inseparable from war and

although this should prompt us to energetic striving to achieve more efficient international tribunals, it is not a reason for embracing passivism or declining to fight in the cause of righteousness.

In the national sphere we have advanced considerably in efficiency in the administration of justice compared to the early days when it was left to 'the avenger of blood' to vindicate righteousness. But force still remains the final sanction. In the international sphere, we have not made much progress at all. But the way of progress is not by the denial of the rightness of war when it is the only way of vindicating righteousness, but by improving international institutions so that war, though remaining the final sanction, need be seldom, if ever, resorted to, and then limited war rather than total war.

The rightness of any particular war and rightness of the way it is waged are two

distinct questions. In the discussion of the Vietnam war these two questions are constantly confused. Moreover, the obligation to maintain righteousness is omitted. All war is horrid. So is an execution; so is life in confinement in Grafton gaol. But it may become our duty to inflict these judgments. If anyone delights in war he is sinning against God and is doing the very thing Christ corrected when He told His disciples "Love your enemies". If we are to engage in war without sin we must strengthen our belief in the supernatural God.

We must answer the question of Vietnam conscious of our relationship to our revealed God who is judge of all. If we think of God only as the ground of our own being we will have lost the key of God's revelation as the guide to ultimate values in morality. Everything will be relative, and our judgment will be swamped by undifferentiating sentimental "love". Love in the Scripture is holy love, which goes out to all

people and treats all people as persons. But the very fact of treating them as persons, honouring them as persons, may mean you have the awful responsibility delegated to you by God to give them what they deserve. For at the last, as the Scriptures constantly reaffirm, God the righteous judge will give to every man according to his works.

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