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WAR AND THE CHRISTIAN

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by D.B. Knox

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The Protestant Faith

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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 is the Old Testament, whether it is part of revelation. After all, the Old Testament forms by far the greater bulk of the Bible and it is the only Bible 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 Testament, 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 Are we to be modern Marcionites and say that the Old Testament has been superseded by the revelation of a God of love; that the Old Testament is antiquated, so that we do not accept its point of view, nor regard it as Christian revelation and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 today.

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 and 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 the Pharisees, ye shall in no wise enter into the kingdom of heaven." A hasty judgment of 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 regard 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 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 elation 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, because 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 defence against an aggressor (Ex. 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 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).

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