



Bible Study Conference
Board of Reference and Counsel
General Conf. of MB Church
Calgary, AB, April 27-29 1988
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Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Peace

A review of the basic biblical and theological issues relating to Christian attitudes toward war and violence reveals that the two major positions are in part based on different interpretations of particular passages, but are equally determined by drawing their main arguments from different parts of the Scriptures. Christians who believe that the taking of human life is legitimate under certain circumstances feel most confident in their appeal to the Old Testament as well as in their appeal to reason or natural theology. They perceive the burden of their task as one which must seek to clarify the New Testament ethic of love in a way which does not negate conclusions drawn from the Old Testament. Conversely, pacifist or nonresistant Christians have seen the major strength of their position as arising from the New Testament, especially the Gospels and the Sermon on the Mount. They have accepted the burden of explaining the apparent differences between the two Testaments. To a lesser extent, they have also accepted the task of answering to the seeming political and social irrelevance of their position.

This paper will begin by examining the issues arising directly from the Old Testament. Secondly, it will examine the major theoretical arguments, especially the just war theory, which have been used by Christians to justify war and violence in the history of the Church. Finally, it will make an appeal to root our peace

theology on the life and teachings of Jesus. Although this issue is basic, space does not permit an adequate exposition of all elements.

The Legacy of the Old Testament

Much of the content of the Old Testament deals with war and violence. This fact is indisputable and itself creates a serious dilemma for the Christian. From the slaughter of Abel and the account of the flood in Genesis to the narrations concerning Israel's conquest of the promised land and the later wars which led to the exile of the two kingdoms, the Old Testament is filled with stories which involve the taking of human life. For the Sunday School teacher in particular, this may create a serious dilemma. On the one hand, children are easily captivated by action-packed stories with strong elements of suspense and violence. The David and Goliath story is one prime example. On the other hand, the lessons of such a story are not easily translated into relevant categories for youngsters. The tendency is to moralize on the faith and courage of God-fearing David but to fail to see the account in its larger biblical context and thus to leave very important questions unanswered. The result is often a very fragmented and incoherent biblical theology.

Ultimately, however, the question of violence in the Old Testament focuses on the way in which God himself relates to that violence and on how man understood the nature of God and his will as it related to violence. To be sure, the first instance of the taking of human life was an act of defiance against God. Even more significantly, the Decalogue stated unequivocally, "You shall not

kill!" But these and other examples seem to pale in significance when the evidence on the other side is compiled. Did God not tell Noah after the flood, "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in his own image"(Genesis 9:6)? Did God not instruct Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, even though he withdrew the command at the last moment (Exodus 21:15,17)? Were the Levites not told to slaughter the idol-worshipping Israelites (Exodus 32:26-28)? Was Israel not given a detailed code of war (Deuteronomy 20)? Did the Lord not instruct Joshua to slaughter the inhabitants of Ai (Joshua 8:12)? Did the Lord not send Samuel to instruct Saul to smite Amalek and kill both men and women, infants and sucklings (I Samuel 15:1-3)? Or, perhaps even more troubling, do the writers of the Old Testament not frequently refer to God himself in the image of a warrior, as the Lord of hosts, mighty in battle (e.g., Exodus 15)? All these, and many more examples can be cited in favor of a position legitimizing violence.

What are the options for the Christian in the face of such evidence? Historically, there have been a number of positions taken by Christians. These range all the way from a rejection of the Old Testament because of a perceived total contradiction between the views of God represented in the two Testaments, to a denial that there is any problem at all and a belief that the New Testament doesn't add any new perspectives on the question of violence and the nature of the kingdom of God.

Although it is impossible to speak to all the issues or examine all the evidence in detail, we shall proceed in two stages in the

hope that this will help to resolve some of the basic questions. First we shall approach the problem without challenging the assumption that God's ultimate will was for Israel to engage in warfare and violence. On the basis of such an assumption, what conclusions can be drawn for today? Secondly, we shall seek to challenge some elements of that assumption itself. Does a careful investigation of the Old Testament not lead us to qualify or challenge some of the assumptions about God which presume to be based on the Old Testament.

"Holy War" in the Old Testament

The propriety of the term "Holy War," which is frequently used with reference to the wars of conquest of Israel in the Old Testament, has itself at times been questioned.¹ Nevertheless, it must be granted that the wars of Israel were religious wars. They were often wars of aggression undertaken at the command of God. Their uniquely religious nature is further attested to by such factors as the devotion of the spoils of war to God, and particularly by the fact that divine miracles were often the major cause of victory (e.g., the defeat of Jericho). Therefore the wars are seen more as God's wars fought through the instrumentality of his people than as Israel's wars fought with the help of God. God himself was fighting against the enemies of his people. Israel was God's chosen people. Initially, Israel was not even ruled by a human king. God was their king and his rule over his people was mediated essentially through priests and prophets. Israel was unique among the nations of the world. The real meaning of history

was borne by God's "peculiar" people.

The above factors make it extremely problematic to apply Israel's case to the contemporary situation and to justify violence and warfare by a modern state on the basis of an analogy with Israel. Historically, the temptation to see particular wars as "holy wars" has been a serious one. Even the Zealots during Christ's own time were tempted to wage a holy war against the Romans who were their enemies. But it was precisely such a holy war which Jesus rejected and against which he warned his disciples.

The temptation to fight holy wars has continued to plague Christianity. In the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church applied the holy war concept and launched the crusades against the infidel Moslems. Old Testament passages were quoted extensively in support of the campaign and were used to motivate many people to enter the war and fight boldly. But such crusades represented a fundamental distortion of Christianity. What was wrong was not simply that those who fought weren't true Christians; rather, the use of force was the wrong way to seek to perpetuate and propagate Christianity. In essence it was a denial of the nature of Christianity.

The holy war or crusade concept has not yet disappeared from the arena of christian thought and action. In a world that is to a significant degree divided between atheistic communism and western democracy it is all too easy to see one side as God's people and the other side as God's enemy. It should be possible, however, to affirm many of the very positive elements of our own society, including the religious freedom which we enjoy, without creating

such clear and absolute categories. If any analogy is to be drawn from the Old Testament to the modern situation, the only consistent and logical one would be an analogy between Israel and the Church, rather than Israel and the modern state. If war is to be justified on the basis on such an analogy with Israel, the church should become a state and wage war in the name of Christianity. Nations such as Canada or the U.S.A. are not the church. If holy war is a legitimate instrument today we should mobilize the church itself. That, of course, few Christians really advocate.

A brief reference should also be made to the laws in the Old Testament prescribing the death penalty for certain sins (e.g., Exodus 21 and 22). Again, if violence and the taking of human life is to be justified on the basis of such passages, a consistent approach would mean that the crimes indicated (e.g., cursing father or mother) should still be punishable by death and the method of killing (usually stoning--Leviticus 20:27) should also still be enforced. We cannot arbitrarily pick and choose those Old Testament passages which we wish to apply today and reject those which we find unacceptable.

The Old Testament Vision of Peace

The argument thus far has proceeded by granting a significant assumption, namely that Israel's wars were willed by God. We have tried to demonstrate that even on the basis of such an assumption, very serious problems arise in any attempt to use Israel's wars to justify Christian participation in war and violence today. It is necessary, however, to challenge some elements of the assumption

itself and to place Israel's wars into the larger perspective of the Old Testament which also ultimately points to the way of peace.

Even if it is agreed that it is impossible to apply the ethic of Israel regarding war and violence directly to our situation, questions do remain regarding the nature of God and the nature of revelation. Does God change or does his will for mankind change? Does God reveal his ultimate will progressively as human history advances? Or, does man's understanding of God change? The fact that God is depicted in the Old Testament as one who not only condones but one who commands violence may need to be understood in the light of a variety of other considerations.

First of all, with reference to the prescribed death penalty for certain acts, a number of biblical scholars have pointed out that the "life for a life" and "eye for an eye" policy that seems to underlie some Old Testament legislation is itself better understood as a limitation of violence than as a mandate for violence. Mankind's natural tendency is not to have the punishment fit the crime but to have the punishment exceed the crime. This is based on the premise that in this way violence becomes unprofitable. But, as Jacques Ellul ably points out, violence begets violence. The Old Testament itself seeks to limit violence--if anyone takes out one of the eyes of another, the injured person is not entitled to retaliate by taking out both eyes of the guilty individual. By comparing Israel's code to codes of pagan nations of Israel's day, one finds that Israel's was in fact often much more humane.

A somewhat analogous example might be the legislation concerning

divorce. Divorce was permitted under certain circumstances in the Old Testament. But in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus makes clear that the ultimate will of God is an indissoluble union--divorce is itself a concession. Thus, Jesus sharpens various commandments. The commandment against taking human life is sharpened so that even hatred of a brother becomes equivalent to murder. The intent is to show that the Old Testament commandments must be understood in terms of the underlying values which they seek to enhance rather than as precise statements of what God's ultimate will is.

When we consider the so-called holy wars of Israel, it is helpful to consider some of the internal evidence of the Old Testament regarding their qualified status. Even in the Old Testament Israel's wars stand in some sense under the judgment of God. As was noted earlier, miracles were often major components of such wars and Israel was warned not to rely on her own strength and power. Gideon, for example, was finally forced to reduce the number of his men to three hundred (Judges 7). Furthermore, the fact that David was not allowed to build God's temple, demonstrates that the shedding of human blood by man was fundamentally incompatible with the nature of the kingdom of God. In a simple statement the reason given is that David was a warrior and had shed blood (I Chronicles 28:3).

In the later prophetic literature, of course, the vision of peace becomes unmistakable and compelling. The prophets, in many respects, gave Israel a new understanding of herself. The constant refrain that echoes through the prophets is that Israel had made a

mistake in identifying herself as an entire nation as the people of God. God's choice of a people must not lead to the presumption that the nation itself would be preserved. Israel had to learn the lesson of defeat in war and in that context of defeat came some of the most poignant expressions and descriptions of the true nature of the Kingdom of God. Isaiah in particular utters the hope-inspiring prophecies concerning the time when nations will "beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks" and when the "wolf shall dwell with the lamb" and "the lion shall eat straw like the ox" (Isaiah 2 and 11). It is passages like these that relate most closely to Jesus' teaching concerning the nature of the Kingdom of God.

The question of why violence is so prominent in the life of Israel as she seeks to work out her identity as the people of God may never be fully understood. Peter Craigie suggests that "the activity of God in this world, insofar as it involves human beings as agents, must always appear, to a greater or lesser extent, to be associated with sinfulness."² God works through the "world as it is." But this does not make it "holy" or moral. War is always evil. Violence (war) is natural--it is of the order of necessity (Ellul). But violence is not always inevitable, and "liberty lies in the transcending of necessity."³

From Holy War to Just War

Although the majority of Christians since the time of Constantine in the fourth century have believed that participation in war and violence is necessary under certain circumstances, the

theological justification has not simply appealed to the holy war tradition of the Old Testament, although that has continued to play a vital role in many conflicts in addition to the Crusades of the Middle Ages. Constantine himself was said to have won the victory over his enemies by wielding the standard of the cross. He was hailed as the Lord's Anointed.⁴ A little later, Ambrose gave expression to a similar orientation when he stated, "Not eagles and birds must lead the army but thy name and religion, O Jesus."⁵ In the present century, similar views have been echoed. During World War II, General Montgomery sent a message to his troops, stating, "Let us pray that the Lord will aid us in the struggle."⁶ The underlying premise was that God's elect nation(s) was fighting God's enemies.

But alongside the concept of a holy war, there emerged in Christianity a concept referred to as the "just war" or "justifiable war." While it drew some of its inspiration from both the Old and the New Testaments, much of it was drawn from classical pagan sources and from general revelation or natural law.⁷ Augustine in the fifth century was the first to develop a rather detailed code of war which sought to establish the conditions under which it might be legitimate or necessary for Christians to fight and to prescribe the acceptable methods for the conduct of war. Augustine had no significant Christian tradition to draw on because the Church of the first several centuries was almost totally pacifist.⁸

After Augustine, the major Christian theologians, including Luther and Calvin, as well as most of the major denominations, have

accepted some form of the just war theory, even accepting it as part of their official creed. The criteria cannot be stated in detail here, but they usually include such principles as just intention, just authority, just cause, just means, war as a last resort, and the assurance of victory. Much could be added by way of explanation and elaboration of the above points. It is obvious that the criteria themselves are not drawn directly from biblical sources. The holy war tradition in the Old Testament did not define such sets of criteria--Israel's wars were just by definition because they were fought by God's people, and the authority was a divine authority. The means often went beyond those necessary to win the war (no one was spared) and wars were automatically winnable if God was on their side.

The just war theory does appeal to Scripture both directly and indirectly, however. In a recent essay Arthur F. Holmes states,

Scripture (for example, Romans 1-3) makes plain that general revelation attests to our moral responsibilities, and the apostle Paul indicates that some kinds of acts are "contrary to nature."

These two roots--biblical and the natural law--underlie the just war ethic.⁹

Direct appeal is made to passages like Romans 13:7 and I Peter 2:13,14. The appeal to such passages suggests that war is seen as a kind of global police instrument. It is argued that civil authorities are commissioned by God to restrain and punish evil doers, and that this can apply not only to civil order but also to international order. Since the sword has been given to the authorities, it implies that the taking of life is legitimate for

them. The fact that the New Testament is otherwise quite silent on matters of the state and war is often explained by suggesting that the moral teachings of the New Testament "generally address individuals and churches rather than the governments and rulers that are the Old Testament's concern.¹⁰ Such an explanation seems rather arbitrary and is not drawn from the Scriptures themselves.

Many other questions can be raised about the just war theory, some related to its faithfulness to Scripture, some relating to its theoretical consistency, and some related to its applicability. Historically, the theory has usually been used in defence of the waging of war and seldom as an argument against a particular war. Those who hold to the just war theory should at least be called to a more serious attempt to utilize it as an instrument of restraint. War, even in just war theory, is recognized as an evil, albeit a necessary evil.

The question concerning the extent to which man's reason can be used to develop an ethic apart from the Scriptures is a difficult one and cannot be dealt with in detail here. It might be suggested, however, that an attempt to apply the just war theory to given situations is extremely problematic. How can one determine whether all the options have been explored adequately? Is it really possible to separate the "innocent" from the "guilty." Can victory ever really be assured? The criteria rely on human ability to calculate the results of particular actions. But in actual war, one side has always miscalculated. Is it not hazardous, therefore, to make decisions on such a basis? Is it not better to preoccupy

oneself with the question of obedience rather than with the question of how to make things come out right?¹¹ Ultimately, God will make things come out right, and it may be through martyrdom and suffering rather than through power and violence.

The Way of Jesus

The way of Jesus is fundamentally different from the way of the world. His way of responding to evil was radically new. Jesus proclaimed himself to be the suffering servant of Isaiah, who would establish his rule by means of suffering love rather than by the exercise of violence, which was the option chosen by the Zealots in Jesus' own time. He chose to suffer rather than retaliate. He accepted the blows of men rather than resorting to violent self-defense.

The mission of Jesus is best understood as a mission of peace from beginning to end. The term "peace" is used 91 times in the New Testament, whereas other terms like "salvation" and "gospel" are used less frequently.¹² The birth narratives in Luke focus on Jesus as one who will bring a reign of peace. The teaching of Jesus and the life of Jesus emphasize loving the enemy and doing justice to all. The manner of Christ's death, therefore, was the natural consequence of his life and teaching.

The cross became the ultimate symbol of Christ's entire life--it was not only a tragic event at the end of his life. The cross was a symbol of the kind of rule that he was establishing, which was fundamentally characterized by peace. It was not the kind of rule that characterized the kingdoms of the world, but neither was it

simply a spiritual inward rule. The temptation to spiritualize the teachings of Jesus, such as those in the Sermon on the Mount, is a common one among evangelical Christians today. Such spiritualization leads to a very individualistic Christianity. Jesus was calling for the creation of a new kingdom community in which suffering love was to be the dynamic force. Never before had kingly rule and suffering been brought together in this way--they had been seen as opposites. But in seeming defeat and powerlessness, the working of God's power was splendidly and incomparably shown. The resurrection became the vindication and assurance that suffering love was not weakness. Rather, it was the most powerful force that mankind could imagine. The cross thus points not only to the reality of what God did for us but also to what Christ's way is for us. Paul speaks of our solidarity with Christ. We are "co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with him"(Romans 8:17). Thus a peace theology must ultimately be solidly rooted in the atoning work of Christ and our identification with the way of Christ.

What About Today?

Traditionally the Mennonite doctrine of nonresistance has been understood and applied primarily in relation to direct participation in war. At times the teaching on peace has virtually been institutionalized in various forms of alternative service. This has often resulted in a truncated peace theology whose witness is severely blunted.

The situation today is in many respects quite different from the

situations in which Mennonites have traditionally argued and applied their nonresistant teaching. Exemption from military service in time of war is not the primary issue we are faced with. The threat of nuclear war makes the amassing of large armies in many respects irrelevant. In addition, we have become more aware than our predecessors of the complex situations which give rise to international and domestic violence. The principles of the gospel of peace are unchanged, but the application of the same is much more complex. Many of us would perhaps like to take sanctuary in the traditional expressions of nonresistance rather than venture to define new ways of being emissaries of peace. But an institutionalized peace theology is of no relevance and can be a deadening force in our midst. Our concern must be to revitalize our peace theology in a way that it can be a powerful witness in the world today.

Endnotes

1. Peter C. Craigie, The Problem of War in the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), pp. 46ff.
2. Ibid., pp. 41f.
3. Ibid., p. 73. See also Jacques Ellul, Violence: Reflections from a Christian Perspective (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), pp. 127ff.
4. Roland H. Bainton, Christian Attitudes Toward War and Peace: A Historical Survey and Critical Re-evaluation (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1960), p. 85.
5. Ibid., p. 90.
6. As quoted by Craigie, p. 33.

7. Arthur F. Holmes, "The Just War," in War: Four Christian Views, ed. by Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1981), pp. 121-22.
8. See Jean-Michael Hornus, It is not Lawful for Me to Fight: Early Christian Attitudes Toward War, Violence and the State (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980).
9. Holmes, pp. 122.
10. Ibid., p. 123.
11. John Howard Yoder, The Christian Witness to the State (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1964), p. 44.
12. John E. Toews, "Love Your Enemy into the Kingdom," in The Power of the Lamb, ed. by John E. Toews and Gordon Nickel (Winnipeg, MB, Hillsboro, KS: Kindred Press, 1986), p.7.

Key Biblical Passages

Genesis 9:6
Exodus 15:1-21; 20:1-17; 32:26-28
Numbers 25:17
Deuteronomy 20
Joshua 8:1-29
Judges 3:1,2
I Samuel 15:1-3
Isaiah 2:2-5; 9:5-7; 11:1-16; 31:1-3

Matthew 5:1-11; 17-28; 38-45
Luke 1:46-55; 67-79; 2:14
Romans 12:19-21; 13:1-10
I Peter 2:19-23

Key Issues and Questions

1. How do we deal with God's commandments to fight and do violence in the Old Testament?
2. How was "holy war" understood in the Old Testament? What was unique about it? Was it a temporary expression of God's will?
3. What do the prophets say concerning violence in their own society? What is their vision for the future?
4. What is the meaning of "shalom" in the Old Testament?
5. Does the Sermon on the Mount apply to us?
6. How is salvation to be understood in the New Testament? How does it relate to peace?
7. Is there a different standard for the state than for the Christian, according to the New Testament?
8. Do predictions of continued or escalating violence and war in the Bible mean that Christians should not witness against it?
9. Does the sinfulness of society mean that God still uses war and violence to control violence?
10. Should Christians have one standard for themselves and another standard for the state?
11. What are the primary applications of a peace witness in our society?

Bible Study Conference
Calgary, Alberta
April 27, 28, 29, 1988

PROGRAM:

Session 1 - Wed. April 27, 7:00 P.M.

Chairman: Herb Brandt
Devotional: Jared Burkholder
Confessional subjects of Baptism, Membership and Communion: Marvin Hein and
Roland Marsch

Session 2 - Thurs. April 28, 8:30 A.M.

Chairman: David Ewert
Devotional: Paul Wartman
Confessional Subjects of Baptism, Membership and Communion - cont'd.
Small Groups
Plenary Session

Session 3 - Thurs. April 28, 2:00 P.M.

Chairman: Edmund Janzen
Devotional: Jim Hohm
Confessional Subject of Peace - Abe Dueck and Larry Martens

Session 4 - Thurs. April 28, 7:00 P.M.

Chairman: Roland Marsch
Devotional: Abe Klassen
Confessional Subject of Peace - cont'd.
Small Groups
Plenary Session

Session 5 - Fri. April 29, 8:30 A.M.

Chairman: Harry Heidebrecht
Devotional: Jim Aiken
Vision Statement: Edmund Janzen & John E. Toews

BARBER

Session 6 - Fri. Apr. 29, 2:00 P.M.

Chairman: Roland Reimer - *where is he from?*
Devotional: Abram Konrad
Vision Statement - cont'd.
Small Groups
Plenary Session

Session 7 - Fri. April 29, 7:00 P.M.

Chairman: Waldo Hiebert
Devotional: John Epp
Findings and summary: Clarence Hiebert and John E. Toews

NOTE: Mid-morning and afternoon coffee breaks are planned.