

A BIBLICAL VIEW ON
Just War

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Just War



How should Christians think about war and military actions? This is not a question that the early church had to address because the followers of Christ were not political leaders or military leaders. But eventually Christians had to think about the use of force. All government operates on the premise of force.

Historically, Christians have adopted one of three positions: activ-

ism, pacifism, or selectivism. Activism would propose that it is always right to participate in war. Christians must reject this view because moral reflection is eliminated. Pacifism would argue that it is never right to participate in war. A small number of Christian denominations in the past and present have held to this view. But most Christians accept what could be called selectivism, which means that it can be morally right to participate in some wars. The just war theory represents the third position and was articulated initially by Augustine as well as by Aquinas and Calvin (as listed in the additional resources at the end of this booklet).

Augustine developed the just war theory as a logical extension of Romans 13:1-7:

Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore,

whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.

Augustine argued that not all wars are morally justified. Just war theory attempts to bring peace into the world, but also realizes that it will only be a temporal peace. The only true peace will come when Jesus returns and rules (Revelation 20). The theory does not assume that human action will bring absolute justice or peace. Only God provides infinite justice and judgment. "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay, says the Lord" (Deuteronomy 32:35, Hebrews 10:30).

Seven-Point Criteria for A Just War

Just war theory provides a framework for evaluating military action. A just war will include the following conditions: just cause, just intention, last resort, formal declaration, limited objectives, proportionate means, and noncombatant immunity. The first five principles apply as a nation is "on the way to war" (*jus ad bellum*) while the final two apply to military forces "in the midst of war" (*jus in bello*). Let's look at each of these in more detail.

1. **Just cause** — All aggression is condemned in just war theory. Participation must be prompted by a just cause or defensive cause. No war of unprovoked aggression can ever be justified.

2. **Just intention** — War must be to secure a just peace for all parties involved. Revenge or conquest are not legitimate motives.

3. **Last resort** — War must be engaged as a last resort only after diplomacy and economic pressure have been exhausted.

4. **Formal declaration** — War must be initiated with a formal declaration by properly constituted authorities (Romans 13:4, 1 Peter 2).

5. **Limited objectives** — War must be characterized by limited objectives such as peace. Complete destruction is an improper objective. This eliminates an open-ended campaign. War must be waged in such a way that once peace is attainable, hostilities cease.

6. Proportionate means — Combatants may not be subjected to greater harm than is necessary to secure victory. The types of weapons and amount of force used should be limited to what is needed to repel aggression and secure a just peace.

7. Noncombatant immunity — Military forces must respect individuals and groups not participating in the conflict. Only governmental forces or agents are legitimate targets. However, killing innocents may be justified under the principle of double effect. Each action has more than one effect, one intentional and one accidental.

Holy War versus Just War

Given the history of Christian participation in religious wars, it is vital that we make a distinction between a holy war and a just war. Just war does not claim to fight in the name of God or for eternal causes.

Professor Roland Bainton was at

Yale University when I was there and has written about Christian attitudes toward war. He wisely observed that "War is more humane when God is left out of it." Government is not the instrument God uses to establish His kingdom (John 18:36). Here are a few contrasts between holy war and just war:

1. Holy war fights for divine causes, in the Crusades or in Jihads to punish infidels. Just war fights for political causes to defend liberty and religious freedom.
2. Holy war fights by divine command from religious leaders. Just war fights due to moral evaluation and governmental sanction.
3. Holy war has a heavenly mandate. Just war has a governmental mandate.
4. Holy war attempts to eliminate all unbelievers and infidels. Just war practices limited war.
5. Holy war demands unconditional

obedience to faith. Just war fights a defensive war.

Objections to Just War

Two types of objections often surface against the idea of just war theory. First, there is the moral objection. Pacifists argue that it is never right to go to war and often cite biblical passages to bolster their argument. For example, Jesus said believers should “turn the other cheek” (Matthew 5:39). Jesus also warned that “those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword” (Matthew 26:52).

The context of the two statements is key. In the first instance, Jesus is speaking to individual believers in his Sermon on the Mount, admonishing believers not to engage in personal retaliation. In the second instance, He tells Peter to put down his sword because the gospel should not be advanced by the sword. But at the same time, Jesus encouraged his disciples to buy a sword (Luke 22:36)

to protect themselves.

Two political objections have been cited against the application of just war theory to the war on terrorism. Critics say that the idea of a just war applies only to nations and not to terrorists. Even so, that would not invalidate American military actions that have taken place in the Middle East against countries (Iraq, Afghanistan).

The criticism, however, is incorrect. It turns out that Christian thought about just war predates the concept of modern nation-states. The application of these principles can apply to governments or terrorist organizations. Moreover, the very first use of American military force in this country was against Barbary Pirates (who were essentially the terrorists of the 18th century).

Critics also argue that since terrorism is an international threat, the concept of just war would require an international declaration of war. This

is not true. Neither the US nor any other country needs to get international approval to defend itself. Even so, both President George H. W. Bush and President George W. Bush brought the issue of Iraq to the United Nations for a vote.

The just war theory attempts to provide a moral framework for discussion about military action and a framework for evaluating military action. It is easy to scoff at the idea of using moral principles concerning war since modern warfare is so violent and devastating. But a moral framework for discussion is better than no moral reflection on warfare.

Additional Resources

Kerby Anderson, *Christian Ethics in Plain Language*, Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005, chapter twenty-two.

Roland Bainton, *Christian Attitudes Toward War and Peace*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1960.

Robert Clouse, ed. *War: Four Christian Views*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991.

Paul Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience: How Shall the Modern War be Conducted Justly?* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1961.



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