

## Editorial

### Just Peace: War and the Christian

On 4 May 2002, the Centre for the Development of Christian Ministry conducted a conference on the theme 'War, Peace and God's Justice'.

Most historians agree that the twentieth century is the most violent in human civilisation. Before even the first year is spent, it has become evident that the twenty-first century promises to be no different. As the Centre was planning this conference in the final quarter of 2001, American fighter planes were bombing the military installations of Afghanistan's ruling Taleban and the training camps of the militant Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda network. These military strikes were made in retaliation to the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre buildings in New York and the Pentagon in Washington on 11 September which killed nearly 7,000 people. War has taken a new meaning, breaking the confines of traditional definitions. But in a fundamental sense, this war is similar to others, because it involves fighting and killing. The purpose of this editorial is not to essay the wisdom of the American retaliatory strategy or its implications. Like the essays in this volume, this editorial wishes to address a more fundamental question. What is the Christian's attitude towards war? Can a Christian whose religion is established upon an ethic of love support or participate in war?

Some Christians maintain that war is an evil that must be avoided, and Christians must never participate in it. This view was espoused by Christians of the second and third centuries. For instance, Justin Martyr believed that with Christ's coming, the prophecy of Isaiah that swords will be turned to ploughshares had been fulfilled, and he urged Christians not to engage in war. Cyprian of Carthage similarly exhorted Christians not to fight against their enemies. Christian pacifism became prevalent in the churches of the 'radical reformation' of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries like the Anabaptists, and the Brethren in the eighteenth. Most Christian pacifists begin with the Sermon on the Mount. They argue that it is quite impossible for the disciple of Christ, who wishes to live according to the ideals of the Sermon – not to resist the evil man, to love one's enemies, etc – to participate in war. War is

inimical to the way of the disciple who is governed by the ethic of love. The disciple, according to the Sermon, must be making peace, not war.

Despite the dominance of the view that war is incompatible with Christian living and inherently ignoble, many Christians still approve of war as a 'necessary evil' to arrest an injustice. This is not a contradiction, but rather a paradox. It is 'necessary' at times to resort to the use of force to rescue the victims of injustice, but such actions are also deemed 'evil' because of their inhumanity and their failure to imitate the life of Jesus. Such ambivalence is common among the strongest pacifists. The desire to act as responsible citizens and also to embrace the non-violent approach of Jesus is sometimes at odds with each other. So war is deemed to be evil – in participating in war, we commit sinful acts. But we *must* participate in war if we are to be responsible citizens. War, although sometimes necessary, is also always a sinful act that requires repentance.

The pacific view is surely to be commended, even if it must be qualified. The Bible certainly urges us to be peacemakers and to love. But the Bible does not allow us to settle for any sort of peace, or embrace love without at the same time also embracing truth. It clearly states that an unjust peace is not real peace, and a love that compromises truth is but an illusion. Peace is not always an order that is worth preserving. For instance, Nazi Germany provided peace and order to those conquered countries that accept Nazi rule. But is such peace worth preserving? War is sometimes not only necessary for bringing about just peace, but it can also end an unjust peace.

To be sure, the Christian must be first and foremost a peacemaker, who tries to achieve peaceful resolutions to conflicts. The Christian has a ministry of reconciliation, to remove enmity and to bring about peace. But, as mentioned earlier, not any peace will do. The Christian has the inalienable responsibility to defend just peace against all unjust peace and against all aggression. To say that war is sometimes the only way of doing this does not mean that no restraint should be exercised. War must be the last option, to be undertaken only when all other ways of resolution are exhausted. Christians everywhere must work towards the liberation from slavery of war. When war has become inevitable, special attention must be given to just conduct in war. For just peace cannot be attained through unjust means. War must always be limited, and directed only to reconciliation and peace. Love of enemy will only

allow minimum killing, and always in sorrow. Civilians must not be killed – even non-intentional killing must be avoided as far as possible. The savagery of Nagasaki and Hiroshima must never be repeated. Thus the ‘limited war’ doctrine that is here advocated cannot countenance nuclear or biological warfare.

How can an act of force ever be seen as loving? This question must surely continue to haunt readers. Just war-making can be an act of love, an attempt to obey the second greatest commandment. It is interesting to note that the great medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas discusses the concept of just war not under the section on justice, but under the section on charity – God’s love. Just war-making can be an expression of God’s love in a world of evil. In the same way, John Calvin, the second generation Reformer, could maintain that the soldier can be an agent of God’s love. By restraining evil out of love for neighbour, Calvin goes on to argue, the soldier performs a God-like act. Christians who maintain that the use of force is a contradiction to the Christian ethic of love must ask whether it is not *unloving* not to stop unjust suffering if it is within our powers to do so. Is it not the case that when we fail to engage in just war in order to bring about just peace we also fail to demonstrate Christian charity? Are we not being uncharitable when we fail to use force to aid our neighbour when prudence tells us that that is the best way to render help? Is not pacifism of this kind but a failure to show love to our neighbour?

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