

War, Peace and Justice: A New Testament Perspective

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Introduction: Why investigate the problem?

Whichever way we turn, we are surrounded by evidence that the concept of “war” has become fashionable again: War on crime, war on drugs, war on poverty, war on terror. Hollywood is churning out one glorification of war after the other, even turning historical defeats into silver screen “victories”. War is no longer a negative concept as it was for the post-World War II generation. We so easily tend to forget its true meaning: “war is an act of violence intended to compel our opponent to fulfil our will” (Von Clausewitz).¹

In the words of the famous renaissance humanist, Erasmus: *Bellum dulce inexpertis* – “How charming is not war to those who have never been in it!”² My own experience has been very different. As a chaplain in the South African army in Namibia, I was trained to see the war there as a “crusade against godless communism”. But in the chaplain’s office in Army Headquarters in Oshakati, there was a whole bookshelf full of Bibles found on the bodies of dead “terrorists”. Godless atheists carrying their Bibles into battle? Truth is indeed the first casualty of war!³ Ever since my two years national service, I have found it impossible to accept the facile support of war so current among Christians. Because of my own experience, I have been forced to look beyond the “just war theory” we had been taught at seminary, and ask anew: what does *the Bible* say?

¹ “War disguises its guilty character. It gives the appearance of consisting in something more than merely destructive acts for the purposes of self-preservation” (Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics, Vol 2: Politics*).

² Quoted in P.B. Austin, *1812: Napoleon’s Invasion of Russia*. Vol 3, p. 7.

³ Thielicke, *Politics*: “The task of propaganda is to obscure the real, cynical causes of war, so that those caught up in it will not have access to the information which is essential to any responsible ethical and Christian decision in the matter”.

The first fact to note is the considerable difference between the OT and NT on this point. The second, that we so uncritically ignore the NT point of view in favour of the (easier to accept!) OT position. The Old Testament in fact has a very ambiguous attitude to war, as Dr. Gordon Wong has ably pointed out in his article. The New Testament message, on the other hand, is quite unambiguous: it is clearly *against* war as a means to achieve God's justice, emphasising the importance of *acceptance* of suffering, not *inflicting* it, as Jesus showed by his own example.⁴ In ethical deliberations the NT point of view is normally given short shrift: Not war itself, but only the *abuse* of war is usually questioned. Under what circumstances can war be justified? When is it unjust? How can a war be justly conducted? If we want to take the NT position as our point of departure, we need to ask the more fundamental question: according to the NT, is human violence *ever* justified as a means to achieving God's justice? Are Christians *ever* called to take up the sword?

What does the NT say?⁵

War as such is not a theme in the NT. It is mentioned (Lk 11:21-22; 14:31-32; 22:35; Mt 12:25; 22:1ff; etc.), or hinted at (e.g. the destruction of Jerusalem as God's judgement (Lk 19:43-44; 21:6; 13:34-35), but never systematically discussed for its own sake. War is simply presupposed as one of the evils characterizing the present age (Mt 24:6, Mk 13:7. Rev 9:16ff.). Its presence is a result of the fallen nature of humankind (Jas 4:1-3).

The Gospels

⁴Barth emphasises that the whole witness of the Bible regarding war is a "supreme summons to vigilance at this point: We cannot overemphasise the arguments against it, nor raise too strongly the question whether even what seems to be justifiable homicide might not really be murder" (*Church Dogmatics III/4*, p. 400).

⁵ See Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, Ch. 14; Willard Swartley (ed), *The Love of Enemy and Nonretaliation in the New Testament* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992). Cf. also the classical study by John H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972, 2nd ed 1994).

The Gospels depict Jesus as a Messiah who fulfils his calling through suffering and not by conquering the enemies of God and his people. Right at the start of his ministry, Jesus resolutely resists the temptation to establish his rule through any form of worldly power (Mt 4, Lk 4). He rejects violence as a means to enforce the will of God (Lk 9:51-56) and he never uses force against people in order to push through his programme of renewal in Israel. He refuses to be made a king by the crowds (Jn 6:15). He does not allow his identity as Messiah to be made known until he has made sure, by his death on the cross, that no misunderstanding could arise as to the true meaning of this title.

The teaching of Jesus includes the same emphases: His followers must be servants and not lord it over others (Mk 10:42-45; Jn 13). They must be willing to suffer at the hands of worldly authorities (Mk 13:9-13; Jn 15:18-16:4). They are blessed when they are persecuted, they must be peacemakers, turn the other cheek, love their enemies (Sermon on the Mount).

By the way he dies, he confirms the integrity of his life and teaching: He does not resist arrest, and rebukes his disciples for taking up arms in his defence. He does not defend himself or call down God's angels to help him (Mt 26:53). He prays for the soldiers driving the nails into his body (Lk 23:34).

The Acts of the Apostles

The early church continues in the way Jesus has gone before. The Book of Acts portrays a church growing in the midst of suffering and persecution, not through the exercise of worldly power. Their *activities* are all peaceful: preaching, sharing, healing and serving. The believers are *victims* of violence, not perpetrators of violence (cf. the deaths of Stephen, James the son of Zebedee and James the Just). It is the *enemies of the church* who resort to violence time and again (the Jewish Council, Saul, the people of Lystra, the people of Philippi, the people of Corinth, the people of Ephesus, the Jewish leaders of Jerusalem, some Jewish extremists, cf. Acts 23:12-15).

Paul's letters

God takes the initiative to establish *peace* with his enemies; his justification goes counter to human concepts of justice—the innocent dying in place of the guilty! God sends his Son to die—for his *enemies* (Rom 5:8-10). This has concrete implications for us, as spelled out in Rom 12:14-21 (how to treat enemies) and Rom 13:4 (the *government* bears the sword to execute *God's* wrath, it is not in *our* hands!). Jesus Christ empties himself and suffers death on a cross for the sake of serving others (Phil 2:1-13). Christians should rather *be wronged* than to wrong others (1 Cor 6:7-8). That is God's concept of justice! We are called to the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5). Our vocation is to proclaim God's *peace-initiative* towards humanity, not to fight God's battles for him!

The General Epistles

The Letter to the Hebrews recalls that suffering and persecution at the hands of their enemies were *accepted cheerfully* by the readers (Heb 10:32-34). James evaluates wars and fightings completely negatively: they come from desires which are at war in the individual (Jas 4:1-3). In the First Letter of Peter we read how the Christian community is expected to respond to suffering at the hands of persecutors:

- They should rejoice! Faith tested by fire leads to praise, glory and honour for the Lord (1:6-7).
- They should not fear, but speak out with a clear testimony, live with a clear conscience, suffer for doing good—as Christ did! (3:13-18).
- They should rejoice, glorify God and entrust themselves to the faithful Creator while continuing to do good (4:12-19).
- They should stand firm, keep alert and trust God to “restore, support, strengthen and establish you” (5:6-10).

Again and again the church is called to follow the example set by Jesus Christ through his own suffering (1 Pet 2:21-23; 3:17-18; 4:13).

The Revelation of John

This book emphasizes faithful endurance in suffering. Believers should trust in God to vindicate his people in the end, they are called to conquer evil through the “Blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony” (Rev 12:11). Although the book is filled with images of extreme violence, the church never is the subject of such violent action; it is either victim or helpless spectator.

Other voices in the NT?

By highlighting elements which seem to contradict the pacifist thrust of the NT as a whole, efforts have often been made to undermine the unambiguous and outspoken message against violence. Few would go as far as Brandon⁶, who tried to depict Jesus as a violent revolutionary belonging to the party of the Zealots. But proponents of the just war theory would emphasise some of the following passages as indication of a less pacifist point of view in the NT text:

The use of military imagery in the NT

In Matthew 10:34 Jesus says: “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” Does he not here clearly associate himself with violence? If we consider the context, though, it is clear that Jesus is using the image of the sword to talk about divisions which are the result of his coming (Mt 10:34-39). The violence that may result is not inflicted by the disciples;

Rather, they are its victims!

According to the controversial passage in Luke 22:35-38, Jesus told his disciples shortly before his death that “the one who has no sword must sell his cloak and buy one” (verse 36). Is Jesus encouraging his disciples to give up peaceful methods and from now on to

⁶S.G.F. Brandon, *Jesus and the Zealots* (Manchester: University Press, 1967). His position has been very ably refuted by George Edwards, *Jesus and the Politics of Violence* (New York: Harper, 1972). See also Ernst Bammel & C.F.D. Moule (ed), *Jesus and the Politics of his Day* (Cambridge: University Press, 1984).

resort to violence? Judging by his reaction to Peter's ill-conceived resistance to his arrest a few verses later (Lk 22:47-53), this could not have been the intended meaning. Howard Marshall calls the saying "grimly ironical": Jesus contrasts their earlier acceptance among people with the changed conditions in future, where they will face violent opposition in their ministry.⁷ The disciples once again misunderstand, showing off their two swords, to which Jesus impatiently reacts with "Enough!"⁸

Paul makes widespread use of military imagery: In Romans 6:13 and 2 Corinthians 6:7 he refers to "weapons of righteousness". In 2 Corinthians 10:3-6 we find a whole catalogue of military terms: waging war, weapons of warfare, destroying strongholds, taking captive, punishing – but all "not according to the flesh"! Paul talks about fighting for the Gospel, about his struggle (Phil 1:27-30), but the same context emphasises the "privilege of suffering" for the Lord. Paul calls upon his readers to "take up the full armour of God" (Eph 6:10-20cf. also 1 Thess 5:8), but the struggle he refers to is *not* against flesh and blood! In all these examples, the vocabulary of war is used to illustrate *spiritual* actions. Paul never calls on Christians to resort to or support violence as a means to achieve God's will.

Jesus' violent action in the temple (Mk 11:15-19, Lk 19:45-48, Mt 21:12-17, John 2:13-22)

This has always been the one incident in the life of Jesus to which people could appeal as a precedent for the Christian use of violence. Here we see Jesus with whip in hand, overturning tables, chasing out people and animals from the temple courtyard. But once again, if we take account of the context (especially the way this episode is intertwined with that of the fig tree), this is clearly a symbolical action, similar to those performed by the OT prophets. The point of this demonstration is not to take over the temple, or by violence to put to right all that was wrong in the temple system, but rather a final, desperate call to repentance. Just as Jesus could use very violent

⁷I.H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, NIGTC (Exeter: Paternoster, 1978), p. 823.

⁸"Here again, literal armed resistance is exposed as a foolish misunderstanding of Jesus' message" (Hays, *Moral Vision*, p. 333).

language to urge people to change their ways (hacking off arms and legs, cf. Mk 9:42-48), so here his action serves as a dramatic appeal to restore the temple to its original purpose (“a house of prayer for the nations”).

Positive portrayal of soldiers

Sometimes the matter-of-fact treatment of the military career in the NT is cited as support for the view that the NT is not in principle opposed to war and violence. We do indeed come across several references to soldiers in the NT, and many of them are depicted in quite a positive light:

- John the Baptist tells soldiers not to rob (i.e. abuse their power) and to be content with their pay (Lk 3:14). He does not demand that they give up their military careers!
- Jesus points out the exemplary faith the centurion, a faith based on his military experience (Mt 8:5-13; Lk 7:1-10).
- In the Gospel of Mark, it is not a disciple who makes the climactic confession that Jesus is Son of God, but the centurion under the cross (Mk 15:39).
- The centurion Cornelius is described as “an upright and God-fearing man” and becomes one of the first Gentile believers in Jesus (Acts 10:22).
- The tribune Claudius Lysias is depicted as sympathetic to Paul (Acts 21-23).

Jesus does not insist that soldiers leave their jobs, true enough, but neither does he do so in the case of prostitutes and tax-collectors! The positive NT attitude to soldiers *as persons* is part and parcel of the NT message of welcome to all, even to prostitutes, tax-collectors—and soldiers. It does not imply support for a military career as an option for Christians.

Some conclusions

At this point we can formulate some implications of the NT message for a Christian attitude to violence as a way of establishing justice.

God's love for his enemies

The God whom Jesus introduces to us as his Father, and whom Paul and the other apostles worship and serve, is a God who does not use his overwhelming power to destroy his enemies in wrath, but who redeems them in love. Christ died for God's enemies. This is more than an attitude or disposition. God proves his love for enemies in that he did not spare his own Son, but gave him up, in order to turn his previous enemies into his children. If we want to imitate God, we need to find ways to give concrete expression to this type of limitless love and reconciliation.

Jesus Christ as paradigm for non-violence

Jesus died for us. But before he died, he lived a full life: a life of healing, of forgiving, of restoration, thus leaving us an example of true humanity as God originally intended it to be. Jesus, especially as he is depicted in the Gospels, provides us with a paradigm of total commitment to a cause, but without resort to violence. He is the Messiah, with authority to rule given by God himself – and yet he does not exercise his royal privilege through force or coercion. He fearlessly confronts injustice, but he does not take justice into his own hands. Instead, he gives us the perfect example of suffering for the Kingdom. By not retaliating, by refusing to resort to force, Jesus allows himself to be crucified, to die an ignominious death. And thus he fulfils God's justice.

Christian reaction to injustice

The teaching of Jesus and the apostles embodies the same principles displayed by his own life and death: Blessed are those who are persecuted. Rather be wronged than to wrong others. Conquer evil with good. Forgive not seven times, but seventy times seven. Do not

resist an evildoer. Love your enemies. Identify with those who are suffering, in prison, in need.

War as God's punishment/judgement

Together with earthquakes and famines, “wars and rumours of wars” are counted among the signs of the end-time. As in the OT, so in the NT war (or “sword”) is seen as an expression of the wrath of God. Such judgement is both crisis and salvation. Regeneration becomes possible as judgement is born and its justice acknowledged. But one cannot pray for judgement! Under judgement, we can only pray for endurance, for its end, for true conversion, for God to achieve his aims with the judgement so that it might pass.⁹

Peace

The New Testament diverges from the Old Testament in not glorifying war, but exalting peace (Rom 12:18ff.; 1 Tim 2:2; 1 Pet 2:20ff.):

- “Glory to God and on earth *peace*...” (Lk 2:14).
- “For he is our *peace*...” (Eph 2:14).
- “As shoes for your feet, put on the readiness to proclaim the Gospel of *peace*” (Eph 6:15).
- “It is to *peace* that God has called you” (1 Cor 7:15).
- “God is a God not of disorder but of *peace*” (1 Cor 14:33).

Thiselton points out that peace in the NT does not refer to “inner tranquillity” or “an untroubled state of mind”, but functions rather as a concept in opposition to war, with emphasis on the harmony of interpersonal relations (cf. Rom 5:1)¹⁰.

Is a non-violent, anti-war attitude realistic?

⁹ Thielicke, *Politics*, p. 449.

¹⁰ Anthony Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000), 82. Cf. also idem p. 537: “The word [peace] describes an objective condition of harmony or reconciliation”.

No, of course not! But since when have Christians been called to a “realistic” lifestyle? We are called to *obedience*, to a lifestyle which honours God exactly by being *different* from that of the world. The wisdom we live by is not the clever ways of managing and controlling our environment to our own benefit, but the “foolishness of the cross”. If we continue to allow pragmatic concerns to hold sway in the life of the church and in our personal decision making, where is our testimony? In the words of Richard Hays, “the Christian community might have more impact upon the world if it were less concerned about appearing reasonable in the eyes of the world and more concerned about faithfully embodying the New Testament’s teaching against violence.”¹¹

The question is not whether the NT vision of peace and reconciliation instead of violence and force is a realistic option. The question is whether we can preach the Gospel of peace with any credibility as long as we ourselves accept the horrors of war as a necessary and unavoidable evil. Barth’s succinct comments are a salutary reminder of how much is actually at stake in this matter: “How can the Church be, for all its weakness, a small yet significant force for peace when it is obviously no longer horrified by war but willing and able to integrate it quite smoothly into its own Christian system? The primary and supreme task of Christian ethics in this matter is surely to recover and manifest a distinctive horror of war and aloofness from it.”¹²

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¹¹ Hays, *Moral Vision*, p. 343

¹² Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/4, p. 456.

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