

Topic: The Peace Position

Title: What Are We Fighting For?

Key Verses: Romans 12:14-21

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary:

*"If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.*

In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Introduction:

We live in a strange world... We live in a world of contradictions.

The phrase "War on Terror" confuses me, especially with all of the bad press coming out of the US about prisoner abuses and civilian casualties. I just finished reading a memoir of a World War I vet named Stephen Pike and in the memoir, he is quoted as saying: "War: You don't have to do any lyn'. You can't tell it as bad as it was." We've all heard similar descriptions when talking about war. If anything, I'd say the "War on Terror" should be aimed at preventing war. War seems to be the real terror here.

Speaking of contradictions... I read a Time magazine story that ran just before the Iraq war started. In the March 17 2003 issue of Time, there was a picture of a group of soldiers being baptized in the desert before marching off to war. This was an important image to many American families who believe wholeheartedly that their mission in the Middle East is sponsored by God and that they are doing God's work in bringing democracy to the Middle East through violent intervention.

I'm puzzled by the theology behind baptizing a person that is being prepared to break not only one of the ten commandments, but also the greatest law of all, as spoken by Jesus: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. [...] And the second is like it: Love your neighbour as yourself." How anyone can take that quote and mangle it into support for war is beyond me.

Today I'm going to talk to you about a topic that I am very passionate about: the peace position. Pacifist Christians have been quite unpopular ever since Augustine's conversion in the early 4th Century. Even today, the peace position is considered a "radical"

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perspective. Regardless, I'd like to suggest that there's nothing radical about pacifism. In fact, I find it more radical that someone could claim that they follow the teachings of Jesus, but that they miss the pacifist message. I don't know about you, but that's far more radical to me.

Today I'm going to share with you the story of how Christianity evolved from Christ's pacifist message into a message in support of "Just War". And, we'll ponder what Just War really means. That's another one of those confusing phrases that I was referring to a minute ago.

War and persecution is nothing new. It's been going on for centuries. We see numerous examples of war in the Old Testament. I remember a sociology class I took in my undergrad days, and the term given to wars like those described in the Old Testament are "Holy Wars", where entire groups of people are completely wiped off the map. My sociology professor argued that Holy War, no matter what the religion, is always the worst possible kind of war. Nobody is spared in a Holy War. Everyone on the opposing side is considered evil and must be destroyed, men, women and children included.

But Holy War isn't on Jesus' agenda. He is completely adverse to violence in any way. Look at the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:4-12):

- *Blessed are the:*
 - *Meek;*
 - *The merciful;*
 - *The pure in heart;*
 - *The peacemakers;*
 - *And those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake;*

So I have to admit... I'm quite confused. I don't know how a Christian can open the New Testament and justify war in any way. I've been studying this topic for quite some time, and I'm not convinced by any of the arguments I've heard thus far. If anything, Jesus is a pacifist, which is someone who believes in a non-violent approach to conflict resolution.

And just to be thorough, I'm sure that some of you are wondering what Just War is. Just War refers to a war that is considered fair and respectful for all involved. In a nutshell, a war is considered just if it is:

- Based on a just cause (self defense against a hostile attack from an enemy);
- That it is based on a right intentions (to defend oneself, not to get revenge); and
- That it is a last resort (all other efforts have failed).

There are other criteria, but these three cover the main idea of Just War.

To understand the current debate and the mad circle that we keep going in, it helps to look at the past. Understanding the past gives us tools to deal with the present. Let's take a quick look back and see where the Christian message of peace has changed from the time of Christ to the present day.

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0 CE: The original message of Jesus

As I have already mentioned, Jesus presented his pacifist message quite clearly in the Sermon on the Mount. Additional support is provided in areas like:

Matthew 5:38 – turn the other cheek:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also;”

Mark 12:30-31 – the greatest commandment:

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”

Paul carries on this message of peace. He gets it. Consider today’s key verse:

Romans 12:17-21:

“Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord. On the contrary: ‘If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

Pro-war Christians point to other scripture verses to support their cause. They point to:

1. Jesus overturning the tables in the temple in John 2:15;
2. Jesus’ praise towards centurions and warriors (Matthew 8:10 and Acts 10:1); and
3. Jesus’ and Paul’s respect for the governing authorities (Mark 12:17, Romans 13);

In all of these situations though, there is nothing to suggest support for war. Jesus is demonstrating his authority in driving out the moneychangers. It doesn’t say that he actually hurt anyone. As for praise towards centurions and governing authorities... well... Jesus also hung out with tax collectors and sinners. Does that mean that he condoned their actions either? And as for Romans 13... didn’t Paul end up in jail in the end for refusing to keep quiet with his gospel message? Hmmm...

313 CE: Augustine & the Political Realm

Augustine was an influential Christian. He lived in the 4th Century and he was the first influential Christian to codify the terms around justification for Christian violence.

During Augustine’s lifetime, the Roman Empire was facing extensive threats from the far reaches of the Empire. Barbarians were banging at the gates. Self-defense was required or the Empire would not survive. The Christian leadership required some wiggle room in order to protect the state and all of its inhabitants from violent ends.

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As Jesus and Paul had not written specifically about these types of situations, Augustine took it upon himself to outline some times in which violence could be used. This writing was considered the official word of the church due to Augustine's high standing within the Church at the time.

In a nutshell, Augustine argued that Christians can support war, but it is only to be used to gain peace.

The Just War argument hinges on Romans 13, which argues that individuals are to be subject to the authorities. But where this means that the authorities should proceed with war is beyond me.

Due to the political need for advocating war, Augustine's Just War tradition quickly became the de facto preaching of the church. With the need for military intervention to protect and expand the Roman Empire, the Just War tradition became an important tool to maintaining military superiority throughout the early modern period.

1095 CE: Pope Urban II & The Crusades

Up to 1095, the Christian world was suffering greatly from a number of attacks from Muslim invaders. Augustine's Just War theory was still being used to justify war, but it was justified in a self-defense type of situation. This changed in 1095.

Pope Urban II felt that his back was against the wall and that he wanted to fight back against the Muslims and reclaim land that had been taken by Muslims in earlier battles, including Jerusalem. Urban's goal was to retake Jerusalem at any cost.

To muster the troops, Urban went on an extensive year long pre-war tour, spreading the news and gaining support for his upcoming offensive. Finally, in the fall of 1095, Urban gave a rousing speech to a large number of willing Christian warriors. Urban's speech was loosely based on Augustine's Just War law pertaining to self-defense. Urban argued that Jerusalem had been taken illegally from the Christians and that it was the duty of the Crusaders to take back what was theirs.

In addition to the religious charge to reclaim holy lands, Pope Urban II further motivated his troops by offering a "remission of sins and great reward in heaven to those that participated in this Crusade". These were heady words for someone speaking on behalf of the divine.

It seems that Pope Urban II forgot to direct his charges regarding respectful conduct when fighting though. Instead of simply defeating the Muslims, the Crusaders destroyed their enemies, legend holding that the conquerors were knee deep in Muslim blood from the slaughter. This sounds more like that Holy War that I mentioned earlier, not the Just War that was supported by the Christian Church at that time.

Needless to say, this kicked off a couple of hundred years of embarrassment for Christians everywhere. The behaviour during this time showed the dangers that can come

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when power is left unchecked. Even hardened war-defending Christians agree that the Crusades went too far with their abusive violence.

1527 CE: Mennonite Roots: The Radical Reformation

In 1517, Martin Luther kicked off the Protestant Reformation by posting his disagreements with the Catholic Church (his 95 theses) on the front door of one of their Churches. This began a period of great instability in the church. When the dust settled, there were a wide variety of Christian denominations, many centred along national boundaries: Anglican for the English, Lutheran was mainly German, France stayed Catholic, etc.

Out of this Reformation came what historians refer to as “The Radical Reformation.” This is the term given to a small group of churches that aligned themselves around two fairly unique actions:

- First, believer’s or adult baptism (not infant baptism, which was standard practice in the Catholic Church during this time); and
- The pacifist position that was presented by Jesus;

Many of these people chose to become baptized again to show their adult confession of faith. This is where the term Anabaptist comes from. It means, literally, rebaptized.

This led to many problems for the Anabaptists. Although scripture does support these two Anabaptist practices, they were considered unpopular as they differed from the traditions that existed during that time. Because of this, the Anabaptists were mercilessly persecuted. It has been suggested that more Christians were martyred in the 1500s than in the early church times. Talk about Christian commitment.

Thus, the pacifist position remained very unpopular and supporters of the pacifist position were greatly persecuted.

2001 CE: Modern Day “Crusades”

Here’s a quote taken from late 2001, after the attacks of 9/11:

“On Sunday, Bush warned Americans that “this crusade, this war on terrorism, is going to take awhile.” He and other US officials have said that renegade Islamic fundamentalist Osama bin Laden is the most likely suspect in the attacks.”

(<http://www.csmonitor.com/2001/0919/p12s2-woeu.html>)

Did I hear that right? Did George Bush use the term “crusade”? Yup. I’ve confirmed this with various sources. He did use the term “crusade.” It seems that we’re right back where we were in 1095 with Pope Urban II and his Holy War. Advanced civilizations? I beg to differ when I see quotes like this one. It’s like we’ve learned nothing from history.

The problem with the Just War position is that it means different things to different people. One person may justify war in order to defend themselves, but that war is likely to harm other innocent people that were not the target of that justified response. And,

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both sides in a conflict believe that they are justified in what they are doing. Surely both sides can't be the "Just" side in the confrontation, can they?

And, we need look no further than recent history to see the problem of "Just War": remember the weapons of mass destruction? Well... so much for that justification.

So the question then becomes: Which justification is the right justification? The US claims to have the moral justification in current world conflicts. But, non-Western people don't view it that way. Who's right? Who's wrong? How do we judge? And, in what ways should we judge? War is so permanent, irreversible, and cripplingly painful to experience. The damage caused by mistakes in judgment are extremely expensive and can rarely be reversed.

To put it into perspective for you, here's something to consider.

A few days ago, I stumbled across a heartrending picture of an 18 month old Iraqi boy who had been killed after being fired upon by US forces during a street battle in Baghdad's Sadr City neighborhood in June 2004. The boy, lovingly dressed in his best clothes: a pair of red shorts, a colourful buttoned up short sleeve polo shirt and a pair of sandals, looked like he was dressed to go to church, a family picnic or maybe even to school. In any other setting, he would have been a bright image of sunshine on an otherwise dreary day in Iraq's war-torn land. But instead, his family was preparing to lay him to rest. I can't even begin to imagine the pain and frustration that family must have experienced that day, and for many days before and after. I'm sure it's something that you could never recover from.

This picture really hit home for me, as I have a young boy myself. It really put into perspective for me how I would feel if one of my loved ones was hurt or killed in such a manner. The picture has repeatedly left me numb, unable to move. I keep thinking of the grief that has been experienced by that family and countless others from the violence that exists in the world today, much of it senseless.

Perhaps most of all, this picture provides a very real jolt to those that feel removed or disconnected from a conflict occurring far away from our comforts of home.

While I would like to think that I would have the moral strength to turn the other cheek and to try for a peaceful resolution with those that I felt were responsible, I know that my initial response would be one of anger and seeking revenge. It's tough not to feel that way with something as permanent as death, especially of the young and innocent among us.

Can anyone justify any action when it results in loss of life in this way? Does it matter when irreversible damage is being done? Loss of life, loss of hope, loss of civility and respect are all at play here. There is no easy answer.

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Is violent response an appropriate way to honour God? Is violent response an appropriate witness as a Christian? I want to go back to an item that I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon: the image of the baptized soldier, heading off to war in Iraq. What does that image say to you? There are a few things that I see in that image:

1. First, the image says to the American soldier: your actions are okay according to God;
2. Second, it says to the American's family, watching helplessly at home: your son or daughter will be watched over by God and his or her soul will rest with God should things end badly for them in Iraq;
3. Third, it says to the rest of the Western World: God is with us on the battlefield. We have God's backing. Our troops are walking with God in this war;
4. And Fourth, it says to the enemy: These soldiers are Christian soldiers, marching off to war.

For a secular society, the United States certainly did frame the "War on Terror" as a religiously supported crusade. Very dangerous indeed.

And don't kid yourself. This reflects upon all Christians. Time magazine is a very popular magazine. It is read by a huge cross-section of people every day. Do you feel at all mis-represented by the media in this way? Do you feel that the mainstream media misses the mark when it comes to capturing the spirit of Jesus and his message of peace?

The question then becomes: what are we supposed to do? Do we just continue to turn the other cheek? Definitely. Lead by example. If you claim that you are a disciple of Jesus, then you have to live the part. That means standing up for the principles of Christian living, as they are provided to us in the Bible.

I think we have to go further though. Others are speaking on our behalf in the public square. Christians are speaking up and saying that war is okay. Christians are speaking up and saying that violence is allowed if it's in OUR best interests. It is our responsibility to speak up and correct these false assertions about Christianity. Ours is a religion of love and peace, not of war and domination.

We have so much potential. We live in a land of free speech. We have access to the internet. Blogging is so simple. Writing and publishing books has become a breeze. Organizations like MCC are just waiting to help us channel our energies into positive changes across the world, represented by the healing and loving hand of Jesus.

We need to embrace our gifts and take advantage of the opportunities available to us to make a difference, to represent our faith in a positive manner and to build a relationship of love and peace throughout the world.

Let me leave you with this thought as I wrap up:

Current U.S. expenditures in Iraq (according to Harper's, Oct 2006):

- \$246 million each day, or more than \$10 million an hour

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- direct costs. And those costs continue to grow:
 - \$77.3 billion in 2004
 - \$87.3 billion in 2005
 - \$100.4 billion in fiscal year 2006
- Estimated that staying in Iraq another four years will cost at least \$1 trillion.

By comparison, Human Rights Watch's World Report 2007 provided the following numbers required in Afghanistan:

- Amount raised during a 2006 summit attended by approximately 60 countries with the stated goal of providing economic and military aid to reconstruction efforts: \$11 Billion USD
- Amount required, as per estimated provided by the World Bank and the Afghan government: \$28 Billion USD.

Something is askew when priorities are that far out of whack. Imagine investing those war dollars into the local economies to make them self sufficient? I don't know about you, but it sure seems like a better use of money than building bombs and bullets that will only further divide all of us.

Now, it's important that you don't just take my word for it. Research the things that we've talked about today. Make up your own mind. And if you disagree, I'd love to talk further with you. I have yet to be convinced that the peace position is wrong.

My hope is that we will be able to work together to raise awareness of the radical reformation that the global Christian church requires sooner rather than later.

Thank you and God bless each and every one of you.