

“Iraq, War and the Christian”  
Romans 13 and I Peter 2  
March 30, 2003  
Dr. Jerry Nelson

We are at war!

Under the leadership of our democratically elected leadership of congress and administration, we the people of the United States are at war with the nation of Iraq.

For thoughtful people, particularly thoughtful Christians, this poses serious questions.

In our continuing study of the book of Joshua (to which we will return next week) we see the people of Israel under direct orders from God invading Canaan which was inhabited by other people.

Oh, if only today’s wars were as clearly and divinely mandated. But America is not Israel and President Bush and General Franks are not Joshua.

All around us the debate, over the legitimacy of the war, goes on.

Some contend that war is never the appropriate action.

There are God-fearing pacifists who think that resistance or any kind of physical response to aggression is immoral and more evil yet is any kind of preemptive action.

Much more likely the debate centers on what is called a “just” war – which I will define later.

Some contend that the war is “just” in that America is defending itself against aggression.

Others contend this war is “unjust” in that America is the aggressor, using 9/11 as an excuse to invade and control the oil fields of Iraq.

Some would contend that it was “just” for America to aid in driving the Iraqis out of Kuwait in 1991 but “unjust” for America to invade Iraq in 2003.

In addition to the debate on WHETHER we should even be in a war against Iraq is the matter of HOW we wage the war.

Every known military action is scrutinized and evaluated as to whether the action is moral or immoral, just or unjust.

- It's wrong to attack a hospital but what if the enemy is launching missiles from the hospital?
- It's wrong to fire on civilians but what if civilians are willingly or unwillingly shielding a military target?

**How do we think “Christianly” in the midst of this debate?  
What part do we, as Christians, play in the actions of our country?**

It is tempting to snuggle down under our religious covers and pretend the problems will go away.

It might be argued that there is a legitimate distinction to be made between the citizens and the leaders in a totalitarian regime such as Iraq BUT no equal distinction can be made in a free democratic country.

This is not the government's war. This is not George Bush's war as much as that popular metonym may be used.

This is OUR war and we are responsible.

And Christians are as responsible as anyone else, if not more so.

Yes it is true that in one sense Christians are not “of” this world.

It is true, Christians answer ultimately to a higher authority than earthly government, we may be citizens of the kingdom of God, but I think the scripture is clear that we are also citizens of and responsible to earthly government here and now.

Peter makes that point, among others, when he writes,  
1 Peter 2:11-15

“Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority

instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God. Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king.”

Peter certainly acknowledges that in one sense we are aliens in this world – citizens of another kingdom BUT at the same time we are citizens of an earthly government and responsible to it.

A second century letter describes this dual citizenship of the Christian:

It is called “The Letter to Diogenetus”:

“Christians are not distinguished from the rest of humanity by either country, speech, or customs. They do not live in cities of their own; they use no peculiar language, they do not follow an eccentric manner of life. They reside in... countries (with the rest of us) but only as alien citizens... They obey the established laws, but in their own lives they go beyond the law. In a word: what the soul is in the body, the Christians are in the world. The soul dwells in the body, but does not belong to the body; just so Christians live in the world, but are not of the world.”

Yes, Christians anticipate the future consummation of all things when Christ returns but we live in the here and now, accepting full responsibility for the present.

**So as citizens of both kingdoms, how do we think and live when we are at war?**

William Tecumseh Sherman is quoted to have said, “War is hell!”

Because of the excesses of war, it is easy to understand why some would assume that war is inherently evil and with the pacifists say that it should never be waged and should be resisted at any cost, even the cost of death or slavery.

At a personal level this is the attitude that says I am so convinced that, as a Christ-follower, I must not harm you that even if you attack my family, I will not intervene if it means harming you.

It is equally easy to understand why many others would call war a “necessary evil”, repulsed by its horrors but knowing no way to avoid it given the need to resist the greater evil of some people.

At a personal level this is the attitude that says, “I don’t want to hurt you but if you attack my family I may have to.”

### **But is all war “evil” or at best a “necessary evil”?**

For at least 2500 years people have carefully reflected on the morality or immorality of war.

One of the early church fathers, Augustine, and many following him have articulated a view of war called the “just war”.

A “just” war, in distinction from an unjust one, is a war waged in conformity with what is morally right and good.

Through the years the idea of a “just” war has developed in two parts:

The just **CAUSE** of a war and the just **CONDUCT** of a war.

Please note that I am not going to evaluate the present conflict for you.

But I do believe each one of us and our leaders must do so.

There are five elements in a “Just” Cause of War (“ius ad bellum”):

And the first three have historically been thought of as the most important.

1. Is there a Just cause – for justice (three reasons: defense against wrongful attack, to retake something wrongly taken, or to punish evil as intervening in the Hutu/Tutsi bloodshed of Rwanda or the ethnic cleansing of Bosnia).
2. Is there Just intention – for peace; not just the cessation of hostilities but a climate wherein justice can prevail.
3. Is there Just authority – government not individuals
4. Is this the Last resort – reasonable negotiations have failed.
5. Is there Reasonable hope for success.

And there are two elements in the “Just” Conduct of War (“Ius in bello”)

6. Limited or proportionate force – Use only the force necessary to accomplish the task and don’t destroy what doesn’t need to be destroyed – justice not revenge.
7. Immunity for non-combatants – civilians, POWS and casualties are immune as much as possible.

These definitions and limitations of a just war have come from principles derived from the special revelation of Scripture and from the general revelation of human conscience.

What I say next I say with humility.

I know there are godly pacifists, more knowledgeable of God’s Word than I am, who disagree with what I will say.

But I also know there are godly people, more knowledgeable of God’ Word than I am, who agree with what I will say.

Arthur Holmes (for many years professor of philosophy at Wheaton College) begins his popular essay on the idea of a “just” war with the words, “War is evil.”

But while that sounds right because of the violence of war, it is in fact a contradiction in terms.

By definition, a “just” war cannot, in and of itself, be evil.

- A just war is certainly caused by evil.
- A just war may be waged against those who are engaging in an unjust war resulting in evil.
- A just war may even spin out of control and become an unjust war, resulting in evil.

But in and of itself a “just” war is not evil.

We naturally and biblically recoil at the hardship, heartache, and death of innocent life that any war causes.

But that does not make war evil in and of itself.

I don’t think it can be reasonably denied that God sent his people into war and even led his people in war – dare we charge God with evil?

**Thus war waged in a “just” way is not evil.**

A just war cannot even appropriately be called a “necessary evil.”  
 Again, if it is “just”, then by definition it is morally good not evil.

**A “just” war is about rightness; it is about justice!**

There are those who would make physical life as opposed to death or peace as opposed to war to be the ultimate issues.

But the issue is not peace; the issue is justice.

Or said differently, peace is not simply the absence of physical hostilities but the presence of order, security and most of all, justice.

According to the Bible, governments are under orders from God to provide justice.

Romans 13:1-7

“Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience. This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.”

Government bears the responsibility to defend the innocent and punish the evil-doer.

It is quickly granted that governments today (even the best of governments) are not ancient Israel.

It is also granted that governments today are not led by God's unambiguous command as ancient Israel was.

But it will still be admitted by many that under the right circumstances "bearing the sword", as the Apostle Paul put it, is a legitimate tool of government in the enforcement of justice.

Some would say we would have to have a perfect government in order to wage a "just" war.

But Paul was writing in the time of a totalitarian regime – the Roman government.

In spite of being less than perfect (an understatement to be sure), that government still had the duty before God to protect and punish – to exercise and maintain justice.

Where does that leave us?

How do we think and act "Christianly" in our present circumstances?

It is true that I have made a simple, maybe simplistic, argument for the possibility of "just" wars.

But I have intentionally not evaluated the present war by those criteria – I believe that is your responsibility before God.

I think there are at least 5 attitudes/actions that can guide us:

1. I think it starts with an attitude of humility in our own convictions and charity toward those who disagree.

I want to respect those who hold a different opinion through thoughtful, prayerful reflection on God's Word.

Pacifists and those who believe in "just" war can't both be right and no government can operate under both a pacifist and non-pacifist policy at the same time.

But we can respect those who hold a different view.

Each will have to decide before God whether the actions of our government violate or uphold the principles of God's Word.

2. Secondly, we must maintain an attitude of dependence on God. And I don't mean that we must believe that God is on our side, right or wrong.

I mean we must believe that God will bring justice.

We need an unwavering confidence in the sovereignty of God.

I am compelled by scripture to believe he is in absolute control of war, without making him the author of the evil that leads to war or the evil that too often occurs in war.

Is God sidelined by current events, only able to pick up the pieces afterward?

Or is God sovereignly active in the details of what is happening – working his will on the nations of men and on individual lives?

I believe Daniel 2:21 "He (God) sets kings up and he deposes them."

3. Thirdly we must maintaining an attitude of mercy that seeks justice not revenge.

This is what I believe Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount are speaking to.

Matthew 5:38-44

"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

I was with a group of Colorado legislators Wednesday morning and I was struck by the fact that they prayed for Saddam Hussein.

As Christ-followers we seek no revenge, we seek only justice.

4. Fourthly, I must retain responsibility for the actions of my country. As a citizen of two kingdoms we stand in the place of obeying our governing authorities AND obeying God.

Usually, according to Paul, they are the same.

Sometimes they are not; as when Peter defied the authorities.

Acts 5:28-29

(The High Priest said,) "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name... Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood." Peter and the other apostles replied: "We must obey God rather than men!"

To us is given the responsibility of knowing the difference.

The unknowns and ambiguities of the war situation make it difficult for us.

On the one hand it is arrogant to assume we know as much as our leaders about the situation.

But on the other hand it is immoral to claim no responsibility.

To be certain the issues are complex but as one author wrote with heavy sarcasm about the talking heads in academia and elsewhere:

"Our morally debilitated professoriat in particular often seems to be a breed apart... They are inveterate complexifiers, offering detailed analyses of the seven sides of four-sided questions... They test the patience of ordinary Americans who view reality from the moral pinnacle of common sense..." (First Things editorial Dec 2001 p13)

Yes, it's complex, but not that complex.

And thus it is immoral for us to assume no responsibility for the decisions of our leaders as when some Germans claimed they weren't in any way responsible for the death camps of Nazi Germany in the 1930s and 40s.

So I don't opt out. I stay engaged. I listen, I ponder, and I discuss. And if I truly thoughtfully and prayerfully believe the actions of my country are immoral, I must be willing to obey God rather than man AND be willing to take the consequences for my civil disobedience.

5. Lastly, we must remain people of prayer.

The Apostle Paul said it this way:

I Timothy 2:1-2

"I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone-- for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness."

Given the huge issues at stake in this war – justice, life, liberty, and the future of millions – there ought to be nothing that has a larger claim on our prayers today than the war.

I know that if the war were being waged on our soil, there would be no question about our prayers.

We have intentionally kept the service sufficiently shorter today to allow for a time of extended prayer.

I am asking you to join others around you, in groups of 4-6.

- Pray that justice would prevail and that evil would be undone.
- Pray for God's will to be done in the details as well as the whole.
- Pray for safety for non-combatants.
- Pray for safety for soldiers fighting in the right and the quick defeat of those fighting in the wrong.
- Pray for wisdom for our leaders.
- Pray that justice will not turn into revenge but will be tempered with mercy.
- Pray for the salvation of souls in the midst of and out of these perilous days.

## Resources:

James Turner Johnson Morality and Contemporary Warfare

John Howard Yoder The Politics of Jesus or Nevertheless (a critique of the just war theories)

David S. Yeago "Just War: Reflections from the Lutheran Tradition in a Time of Crisis" in Fall 2001 issue of Pro Ecclesia

"In a Time of War" in First Things December 2001 p11-17

Also see Stanley Hauerwas also (a pacifist or non-resistance advocate?) and Arthur Holmes War and Christian Ethics

For more popular treatments see:

War: Four Christian Views IVP

(in which I think Holmes provides a poor defense of the "just" war theory).

Or A Just Defense by Payne and Payne 1986 Multnomah Press

War and violence are not synonymous.

Violence is the disordered use of physical force that abuses or the ordered use of force for evil ends.

A just war is an ordered use of physical force to defend or do justice.

Force may be violent without being violence.

In reference to Romans 13:

Charles Hodge wrote in his commentary The Epistle to the Romans: The duty of obedience to those in authority is enforced, (1) By the consideration that civil government is a divine institution, and therefore resistance to magistrates in the exercise of their lawful authority is disobedience to God, verses 1,2. (2) From the end or design of their appointment, which is to promote the good of society, to be a terror to evil doers, and a praise to them that do well, verses 3,4. (3) Because such subjection is a moral as well as civil duty, verse 5. (4) On these grounds the payment of tribute or taxes and general deference, are to be cheerfully rendered, verses 6,7." (Hodge The Epistle to the Romans, 404,5)

Dr. Arthur Holmes (for years a professor of philosophy at Wheaton college) "On this basis the biblical picture is as follows: (1) The use of force in resisting and punishing violence is entrusted to governments. (2) Believers in both Old and New Testaments are involved in governmental uses of force. (3) Such uses of force are to be

drastically limited to what is necessary in securing peace and justice. (4) Vengeance is thereby ruled out, along with all aggression; love and mercy must temper justice.” (Holmes in War – Four Christian Views, 123)

President George W. Bush said to Congress on September 20, 2001, “On September 11 enemies of freedom committed an act of war against our country.”

“Whether we bring our enemies to justice or bring justice to our enemies, justice will be done.”

“Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists. From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime.”

“Our enemy is a radical network of terrorists and every government that supports them.”

“Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty, have always been at war. And we know that God is not neutral between them. We will meet violence with patient justice, assured of the rightness of our cause and confident of the victories to come. In all that lies before us, may God grant us wisdom and may He watch over the United States of America.”

And with only one dissenting vote, Congress gave the president authority to prosecute the war to its end.