

Can a Christian Go to War? – First Thoughts
By James D. Hernando

The Question Delineated

This loaded question begs for clarification and qualification. Obviously many Christians have fought in wars, but the question is directed at the ethical issue beyond the practical reality. Is it moral for a Christian to go to war, to participate in armed conflict against, as the military induction oath states, “all enemies, foreign or domestic?” This, of course, raises the thorny question and controversial debate over whether there is ever moral justification for war. Is it ever right or righteous in God’s eyes for a nation to wage war? While some might concede that the state might theoretically engage in a “just war,” they balk at the notion of a Christian’s participation in such a war. Does the committed Christian, seeking to live out his/her faith in obedience to the teachings of Christ, have the moral option to participate in military service? The pacifist position is an emphatic *no*. However, given my own denomination’s commitment to the preparation and training of military chaplains, one could adopt a *soft* or *moderate pacifism* and answer, *yes*, but only as a non-combatant. In other words, a Christian could conceivably be involved in a supportive role without personally being engaged in armed conflict. But this position creates its own moral dilemma. Military chaplains routinely lead soldiers to Christ. What are these nascent Christians to do after conversion? Should they immediately drop their weapons and abandon their comrades-in-arms? Should they withdraw from military service, or seek an MOS that has non-combatant status? Are those who continue as combatants violating God law to “love their enemies?” This is the issue I wish to pursue in this essay.

The Question Qualified

Let me begin by stating up front that the prospect of taking a human life should be viewed by Christians as a grave matter of the weightiest moral significance. Human life is created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27) and valued by God beyond all else in his creation.¹ With respect to no other animate creature than man does the Scripture explicitly state that God imparted his creative breath resulting in a “living being” (*nephesh hayah* -Gn 2:7). This points not only to the uniqueness of humanity’s creation, but its unparalleled dignity among God’s creation. Therefore, I support the right of conscience for anyone to refuse military service on moral grounds or religious principle. Our own government respects that right and makes provision and exemption for conscientious objectors. However, it is one thing to state what one cannot do in response to his or her private conscience before God, and quite another to assert that it is never God’s will for a Christian to do something.

The unvarnished question at hand was couched in the provocative chapter title, “Can a Christian kill?” in a popular book on Christian ethics.² When I read that chapter, I was struck by the simplicity of the logic. Jesus’ commandment to his followers is “love your enemies.” Killing your enemies is not a loving act; therefore, killing is never God’s will. Setting aside the obvious fact that God commanded (according to the Old Testament) Israel to kill her enemies during the conquest of Caanan, this logic is still problematic. True, such warfare was necessary to secure God’s covenant people in the land promised to Abraham. It is also true that such security was necessary for Israel to

¹ See Gen 1:26-27; cf. Heb 2:6-7

² See Tony Campolo, *20 Hot Potatoes Christians Are Afraid to Touch* (Dallas: Word Publishers, 1988), 163-69.

survive if eventually it was to provide God's Messiah, the savior of the world (Jn 4:42). But pacifists quickly note that such conduct belongs to the Old Testament. The Church is not a theocracy - a geo-political nation, awaiting God's eschatological savior. The Messiah has come and brought redemption to the world. Jesus came and brought a new law, the law of love which does not include killing one's enemies. We are to be guided by a higher ethic than that of the Old Testament. Jesus' teaching supersedes that of the Law, which, in fact, is fulfilled in the law of love (Gal 5:4).

At first glance, this logic seems unassailable. However, it suffers from reduction and a faulty premise. First, it does not consider what Jesus taught elsewhere by words and example that does not allow for an absolutist interpretation of an isolated command. Furthermore, Jesus committed his teaching to the Apostles who were to be the authoritative bearers and interpreters of his teaching. For example, he chose and appointed Paul to be the apostle to the Gentiles (Ac 9:15). Consequently, we cannot afford to ignore their teaching when Christ himself promised them the provision of the Holy Spirit for that very purpose (Jn 15:26-27; 16:13-15).

Second, the logic problematically assumes that all killing is of the same order. Implied is that "killing is killing," morally wrong and violates the 6th commandment. But such an assumption ignores the obvious distinction between "killing" (Heb. *harag* – kill, slay), which sometimes God not only commands but promises as judgment (e.g., Ex 22:24), and "murder" (Heb. *ratsach* –murder, slay) which He clearly condemns (Ex 20:14). This prohibition against murder is directed at a certain kind of killing, one that is malevolently motivated and characterized as the shedding of innocent blood (Dt 19:10)

Furthermore, and most problematic for some, is the possibility that some killing could be properly motivated by love not hate and thus *serve*, rather than violate the will of God.

Brutal crimes in recent history illustrate this painful possibility. On October 2nd of this year (2006), Charles Carl Roberts IV entered a one-room Amish school house in West Nickel Mines, PA and opened fired on a classroom of young girls, all under the age of 13. Three died instantly. Four more died later in the hospital. The gunman eventually killed himself. Let's for a moment construct two fictional scenarios. Suppose a Christian policeman was out on patrol and happened by the school house. Upon hearing the first shots, he rushes in and sees the assailant leveling his weapon at the head of a seven year old Amish girl. Without hesitation he aims his weapon and shoots the gunman, killing him. We need to soberly ask whether such an action 1) could have been motivated by selfless love, and 2) whether such a killing itself did not serve a loving purpose – the protection of innocent human life. Now, let us imagine that the same armed policeman sees young boys running from the schoolhouse and decides to investigate. He hears the first shots from an automatic weapon. Through a window he observes the gunman walking down a center aisle and methodically firing at helpless school girls lined up at the blackboard. The Christian policeman retreats to his squad car, reports the shootings and calls for back-up. Intuitively many will sense outrage and the immorality inherent in such non-action. But why should they if all killing is morally wrong - a violation of the 6th commandment? To appeal to the incongruity of a “Christian” police officer is to assert that no Christian should ever occupy a position of the state that might require them to protect and defend human life by using deadly force. It is *this* controversial hypothesis I would like to address and begin to test against the tenor of scriptural teaching. To do so I

have chosen to focus on the viability of such a position in light of the implicit teaching found in connection with John the Baptist, Jesus, and Peter. Subsequently I would like to examine the explicit teaching of Paul in the 13th chapter of Romans.

John the Baptist and the Message of Repentance

John, as the herald of the Messiah, was called to announce and prepare for the coming of the Lord. He did so by baptizing and preaching a message of repentance for the forgiveness of sin (cf. Mk 1:3-5). Luke (ch. 3) elaborates on the Baptist's ministry by giving us an expanded version his message of repentance and the groups to whom it was delivered. One of the groups included "soldiers." While it is possible these were not Roman soldiers, but Jewish,³ Luke uses the same unqualified reference to "soldiers" elsewhere (Lk 7:8; 23:36) where the context makes it clear Roman soldiers are intended. Roman soldiers would have been armed and carried the responsibility to secure the *Pax Romana* frequently by means of the sword.

What is fascinating, as well as instructive, is that John's call to repentance focuses on the sins of extortion, false accusation and greed. Missing is any reference to killing or the violent use of the sword. This is not to suggest that both could not find sinful occasions and expressions in need of repentance. It is only to observe that John does not condemn the use of armed force practiced by these soldiers. It is not mentioned as something that requires abandonment and repentance.

³ Liefield makes this conjecture but offers no evidence to warrant it. See Walter L. Liefield, *Luke*, in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, ed. by Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 856.

Jesus and the Commendable Centurion

We are all familiar with the story of the centurion who approaches Jesus with the request to heal his servant (Mt 8:5-13; cf. Lk 7:6-9). As I read this story in Matthew's gospel I am struck by the literary-theological purpose it holds for Matthew. It comes on the heels of the Sermon on the Mount (cc. 5-7) which serves as Jesus' inaugural sermon, launching his public ministry as the Messiah. While the sermon is patently addressed to the "multitudes" (5:1; 7:28), there is little doubt that the scribes and Pharisees are in that audience (5:20; 7:29) and it is to them that Jesus' harshest words are directed (see 6:1-7; 7:1-23). What is at stake is entrance into the kingdom of God and Jesus describes the kind of faith and life that characterizes it (5:19-20). What is amazing, and no doubt shocking to the Jewish religious leaders, is that a gentile Roman centurion is put forth as the example of "so great a faith" found nowhere else in Israel (8:10) - a faith that will secure entrance into the "kingdom of heaven" and participation in blessings forfeited by Israel because of their unbelief (8:11-12).

This unprecedented commendation, and the granting of his request (8:13), certainly suggests that this Roman centurion was accepted into God's kingdom, or at the very least seen as a viable candidate for such entrance. Unlike the Baptist, no prescription for repentance is delineated, only the simple command, "go your way," and the pronouncement that his faith had been rewarded. No judgment is placed on his occupation as a soldier or the duties that he regularly performed. Again, it is noteworthy that a centurion in the Roman army is used to illustrate the kind of faith that secures entrance into the kingdom of God.

Peter and Cornelius - Acts 10

If the previous example leaves doubt as to whether the Roman centurion became a “believer,” there is none in the case of Cornelius. This prominent military officer is described by Luke in terms that suggest that he was a pious god-fearer who worshipped and prayed to the God of the Jews (10:1-4). Beyond question, his encounter with Peter is one that is divinely orchestrated. He is directed by God through an angelic vision, while Peter is prepared by a vision from the Lord. Moreover, the Spirit speaks to Peter and directs him to go with the men to meet Cornelius (v.19). Peter’s vision announces that God is cleansing the Gentiles, language that speaks of their acceptance into the household of God through faith in Christ (cf. Ac 15:9). Upon hearing the gospel preached by Peter, Cornelius and his household are baptized in the Holy Spirit and speak in tongues (v.46), leading Peter to conclude that Cornelius had believed the gospel and needed to be baptized (vv. 47-48). When the Jerusalem elders became disquieted about Peter’s actions, his recounting the story of Cornelius’ conversion and Spirit-baptism led the Jerusalem elders to the same conclusion (11:1-18).

What is fascinating is that Peter’s preaching, while declaring Jesus to be the crucified and resurrected Lord (10:36-40) and God’s universal and eschatological judge (10:42), contains no explicit call to repentance, only the command to be baptized.⁴ Moreover, Luke does not indicate Cornelius was called to abandon his military occupation. While arguments from silence are tenuous, it is a silence that has now occurred for the third time! When addressing Roman soldiers, neither John, the herald of

⁴ Although given that Luke mentions repentance in connection with the call to baptism (Ac 2:38), one can assume that the call to repentance is here implied.

the Messiah, who prepared for his coming by preaching a baptism of repentance, nor the Messiah, who announced the advent of God's kingdom and calls for repentance (Mk 1:15), nor Peter, who was God's instrumental agent in the post-Pentecost offering of God's kingdom and salvation to both Jew (Ac 2) and Gentile (Ac 10), call for repentance that required abandoning the vocation of soldiering. One would expect that to be the case if soldiering was inherently immoral and unacceptable to God.

Paul the Roman State – Rm 13

This brings us to our primary focus and to Paul's explicit teaching that addresses our question and perhaps explains why no such calls mentioned above were made. In Romans 13 Paul takes up the relationship of the Church to the state. He has been expounding how those who have come into the body of Christ by faith are to conduct themselves in a variety of contexts, first with reference to the individual believer (12:1-2), and then within the church, or community of believers (12:3-8). The ensuing series of exhortations (12:9-21) extends beyond the Church to believers' interactions with "all men" (vv 17-18), even those identified as enemies (v. 20) and practitioners of "evil" (vv. 17, 20). It is this latter association that suggests that Paul is expanding the context to include the believer's relationship with society at large. This provides a natural segue to chapter 13, (esp. vv. 1-7) where he takes up the Christian's posture in regard to the state, i.e., civil authority. We should note, as Murray points out, that chapter 13 is not a digression or parenthesis in the section that runs from 12:1-15:13. Paul is still expounding that "good and acceptable and perfect will of God."⁵

⁵ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, in the New International Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1965), 145.

For most this chapter is such familiar ground that no detailed exegesis is necessary. However, I will point out what should be patently obvious to those who have done this exegetical groundwork.

The state exercises an authority that is derived from God - vv 1-2

The universal call to be in subjection to “governing authorities” (ἐξουσίαις ὑπερεχούσαις) might well have contained an element of surprise for two reasons. First, how does one enjoin what *is* in reality a fact of life. Rome’s authority over its empire was not only entrenched, but virtually unchallenged in the ancient world at this time. Would not this injunction to Roman Christians be somewhat superfluous? What else could they do? Obviously, the form of the imperative (ὑποτασσέσθω) can be either middle or passive in voice and take on a number of functions. However, the extended *paraenesis* being carried out by Paul in chapters 12-15, strongly suggests either a command or exhortation. Moreover, even if the imperative constitutes a positive command (cohortative), the nature of the command contains a reflexive idea. The Roman Christians are to subject *themselves* to civil authority, that is, to the governance of the state. Their compliance, suggests Paul, must not be coerced, but voluntary!

What follows no doubt was even more surprising. The reason for their compliance⁶ - All authority is derived from God. The use of the preposition ὑπό instead of the more common ἐκ to speak of *source* suggests that Paul has in mind that such authority is a delegated authority with God as the delegating Agent. This is made plainer in the next clause, “and those that exist are appointed (or established)⁷ by God.”

⁶ Note the inferential conjunction γὰρ.

⁷ The periphrastic perfect (εταγγμέναι εἰσίν) is intensive or consummative and stresses the fact that these authorities occupy a status of being placed there (cf. ἑτάγγησαν) by God

From this established fact Paul draws a shocking conclusion. Not only is there an alliance between God and civil authority but an identity such that to defy or resist one is to defy and resist the other. Stated plainly, those who oppose (ὁ ἀντιτασσόμενος) civil authority have opposed (ἀνθέστηκεν) the authority which is from God (τῆ ἔξουσία τῆ τοῦ θεοῦ) and are inviting God's judgment!

One would not expect, given the long and morally checkered history of the Roman empire, what appears to be an endorsement of a pagan state. But Paul's shocking endorsement is qualified by the divine purpose that lies beneath what seems a most unholy alliance.

Civil Government and Its Divine Purpose - vv 3-5

Far from endorsing or approving all the activities and policies of the state, Paul gives the reason behind and a qualification of this ringing endorsement. The "rulers" (ἄρχοντες) who exercise their civil authority under divine auspices do so for a definite and specific purpose. They do so to promote "the good" (τῷ ἀγαθῷ ἔργῳ) and to punish those who practice evil (τῷ τὸ κακὸν πράσσοντι). Thus, the law-abiding citizen has nothing to fear from the state which is the "minister (διάκονός) of God" for good (εἰς τὸ ἀγαθόν). If they pursue the good, all they should expect to receive from the state is praise. However, it is the punitive function of civil government that draws more of Paul's emphasis. This is suggested in Paul statement that good citizens have nothing to "fear," inferring that there is a function of civil authority that is *to be feared*. Paul does not leave us in the dark as to the nature of that function. The state, as the "minister of God" has been ordained or appointed to execute "wrath" against those who practice evil (v. 4). As such, it serves the role as God's "avenger" (ἕκδικος) punishing evil doers who threaten to

disrupt the peace and order of society. Nor does Paul fail to describe the nature of that wrath. It involved the use (bearing) of the sword, an obvious reference to Roman *imperium* - the power and authority of Rome to execute *ius gladii* (lit. the power of the sword), or capital punishment.⁸ We should keep in mind that a cherished value for the Roman empire was the *Pax Romana* – the peace and order of Roman rule, something which was jealously guarded and imposed with brutal and deadly force if need be. But Paul assures the Roman Christian who stands on the side of good that he has nothing to fear from civil authority (v.3). Nonetheless, an appropriate response is warranted.

A Christian's Duty to the State: A Dutiful Response – vv 5-7

Paul ends where he began – with an exhortation to be subject to civil authority.⁹ Moreover, Christians are to treat and respond to civil authorities as “servants” (λειτουργοὶ),¹⁰ fulfilling their obligations prescribed by the state.¹¹ Consequently, he is to “render all that is due,” including taxes, (or tribute - τὸν φόρον), customs (trade duty - τὸ τέλος), respect or reverence (τὸν φόβον) and honor (τὴν τιμὴν).

Concluding Question: Can a Christian's duty to the state include going to war?

Paul clearly understood that the function of the state as a minister/servant of God included the suppression of evil by means of the sword. It is undeniable that this involved armed conflict, even to the extent of taking human life. The question remains whether a Christian was contemplated by Paul as participating in this function of the state. I think it

⁸ See Albert A. Bell Jr. *Exploring the New Testament World* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 97.

⁹ This repetition is a rhetorical-literary device known as *inclusio* and is used for emphasis.

¹⁰ The cultic association of the cognate noun λειτουργία, and the fact that this noun is also used of *ministers* with priestly functions (Cf. Rm 15:16; Heb 8:6), suggests that again Paul is equating the service to these authorities with religious service to God.

¹¹ Obviously Paul does not contemplate those obligations consisting of clearly defined violations of God's law or will. In the latter case, a Christian is to choose civil disobedience. See Ac 5:29.

is fair to say that if ever Paul was presented with a literary context to deny such participation, this was it. The fact stands that he does *not* here or elsewhere in his writings make such a claim. It seems safe to assume that if Paul held that such participation was forbidden for Christians, he would have made it clear somewhere in his writings. If his testimony in the Philippian letter is credible, Paul's Roman imprisonment not only helped spread the gospel, but became known throughout the whole Praetorium guard (Php 1:13). It is unthinkable that Paul had no converts among that group, and yet no Pauline passage even remotely suggests that such soldiers abandon their present vocation, or refuse to carry out the duties of a soldier because such duties might include wielding the sword of wrath against evil.

What we do observe in the Pauline corpus is a decisively positive portrayal of the "soldiering" through the use of the military metaphor. For example, Epaphroditus (Php 2:25) and Archippus (Phm 2) are called "fellow-soldiers" (συστρατιώτης) with Paul in the work of the gospel. Why could Paul use this metaphor, unless there was something inherently laudatory about the service of a soldier. This is in fact the case. Timothy, Paul's child in the faith (1Co 4:17), is exhorted to suffer hardship "as a good soldier of Jesus Christ (στρατιώτης Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ - 2Tm 2:3). Paul goes on to applaud the undivided loyalty of such a soldier, who avoids entanglements in the affairs of every-day life and with single-minded focus seeks to "please the one who enlisted him" (v.4).

But perhaps the most significant contribution afforded by the soldiering metaphor is its parallel with the *via crucis* - the imitation of Christ's willingness to sacrifice his life in the interest of others. Thus, Epaphroditus is commended for his sacrificial service rendered to Paul at the risk of his own life (Php 2:29). Such sacrifice the Lord himself

commended when he said, “Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends” (Jn 15:13). It is this imitation of Christ, that gives soldiering its greatest nobility.

To those who are pacifists by personal conviction, I offer no call to abandon that conviction, only that they be consistent in their denial of Christian participation in all other occupations that involve the potential use of deadly force. These would include armed guards of all stripes and most notably municipal police who deter evil every day by the mere possession and authority to utilize such force.¹²

I am fully aware that much more philosophical and theological reflection remains, but I have given you my initial thoughts. These await not only refining but the challenges and claims of a more comprehensive biblical analysis.

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¹² Moreover, to be perfectly consistent, one should not call on such agents of the state, who in response to their call for help, might use that deadly force on their behalf.