

# The Ethics of War

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# Introduction

- In the light of our concern over abortion and the sanctity of life, can evangelical and orthodox Christians rightly hold any other position on the ethics of war than pacifism?
- To answer this, we need to answer some basic questions.

# Some Basic Questions

- (1) Where does sanctity of life come from?
- (2) Does God place any bounds on this sanctity?
- (3) Has God delegated authority to humans to take human life?
- (4) Is this authority restricted to OT Israel?



# Some Basic Questions

- (5) Does this authority extend beyond the bounds of police action in one's country?
- (6) Does this authority extend to offensive warfare?
- (7) What is the responsibility of Christian individuals to their government in regard to warfare?
- (8) What is a "just war"?



# Whence Sanctity of Life?

- Human life does not have much sanctity in societies where humans are viewed as merely advanced animals:
  - Nazism, Marxism obvious
  - Hinduism tends to put all life on same plane.
  - Secular humanism: snail darter vs human unborn
- We suggest this sanctity comes from mankind being created in God's image.
  - Apart from this, it is hard to justify such sanctity.

# Does God Place Any Bounds?

- Does the human soul have "infinite value"?
  - Maybe, but what happens when one human kills another?
- 6<sup>th</sup> commandment: "You shall not kill"
  - Not a prohibition on all killing of humans
  - Inconsistent even with near context
  - Hebrew better translated "commit murder"

# Does God Place Any Bounds?

- This translation is recognized by most modern English versions.
  - E.g., NIV, NASB, NLT, NEB, RSV (OAB)
  - New Scofield Bible of the KJV
- God certainly reserves the right to put people to death.
  - Ezekiel 18:4
  - Romans 3:23



# God Can Take Life

Ezek 18:4 (NIV) For every living soul belongs to me, the father as well as the son—both alike belong to me. The soul who sins is the one who will die.

Romans 6:23 (NIV) For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

# Has God Delegated Such Authority?

- Earliest indication:

Genesis 9:5-6 (NIV) And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting. I will demand an accounting from every animal. And from each man, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man. 6 "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man."

# Has God Delegated Such Authority?

- Earliest indication:
  - So, God will demand an accounting for human life from humans who shed blood of others.
  - Ambiguity: Does God appoint humans to kill murderers, or does He say that he will use humans to kill them?
- The Law of Moses clarifies this:



# Has God Delegated Such Authority?

Exod 21:12 (NIV) Anyone who strikes a man and kills him shall surely be put to death... 14 But if a man schemes and kills another man deliberately, take him away from my altar and put him to death.

- Other grounds for death penalty in this context:
  - Attack on parents (15)
  - Kidnapping (16)
  - Cursing parents (17)

# Other Grounds Elsewhere

- Cursing God (Lev 24:16)
- Idolatry (Ex 22:20)
- Sorcery (Ex 22:18)
- Spiritism (Lev 20:27)
- Adultery (Lev 20:10)
- Incest (Lev 20:11)
- Homosexuality (Lev 20:13)
- Bestiality (Ex 22:19)

# The Death Penalty

- Not a blank check for putting other humans to death.
- The bounds involve wicked behavior.
- The death penalty is restricted to more heinous crimes.



# Restricted to OT Israel?

- This authority was not apparently given to the church *per se*, in spite of some actions undertaken now & then in church history.
- But note that such authority was delegated to human governments:
  - Romans 13:1-7
  - 1 Peter 2:13-14

# Delegated to Human Governments

Romans 13:1-7 (NIV) 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. 2

Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. 3 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. 4 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.

# Delegated to Human Governments

1Peter 2:13-14 (NIV) Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, 14 or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.



# Delegated to Human Governments

- The authority to put to death goes with government authority, whether established directly by God (OT Israel) or providentially by God (Gentile governments).
- This authority is not absolute, and it may be misused by governments.
- Believers are right to resist government when it commands what God forbids or forbids what God commands.

# Resisting Government

- Acts 4:19-20 (NIV) But Peter and John replied, "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. 20 For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard."
- Acts 5:29 (NIV) Peter and the other apostles replied: "We must obey God rather than men!"

# Extend Beyond Own Country?

- No biblical reason to distinguish between invaders killing innocent people and rebels or thieves doing the same.
  - E.g., David & Gideon fought invaders at God's express command.
- Therefore this authority certainly extends to defensive warfare.



# Extend to Offensive Warfare?

- Not as much information here in Bible:
  - Deuteronomy 20 pictures warfare both inside and beyond Canaan, including siege warfare against enemies, certainly offensive.
  - 2 Samuel 10 pictures external warfare to redress an insult to ambassadors.
  - Deuteronomy 17 discourages king from multiplying horses, a major feature of military might.

# Extend to Offensive Warfare?

- Amos 1-2 pictures God's response to various Gentile nations' activities in waging war:
  - 1:3 – 'threshing' Gilead (app atrocities)
  - 1:6 – taking captive & selling whole communities
  - 1:9 – selling communities & disregarding treaty
  - 1:11 – pursuing brother w/ sword, stifling compassion
  - 1:13 – ripping open pregnant women to extend one's territory
  - 2:1 – burning enemies' bones to lime (desecrating bodies)

# Extend to Offensive Warfare?

- For these sins listed in Amos 1-2, God will bring destruction on the perpetrators.
- Naturally, it is no more right for a government to steal, murder or oppress than it is for individuals to do so.



# What is Responsibility of Christians In Regard to Warfare?

- See Romans 13:1-7 and 1 Peter 2:13-14 above.
  - We are to submit to government so long as it is not asking us to disobey God.
- There are no statements in Scripture that speak against service in the military.

# Scripture & Military

- Jesus, John the Baptist, and Luke speak favorably of various soldiers.
  - Luke 3:13
  - Matthew 8:5-13
  - Acts 10:1-4

# Scripture & Military

- Luke 3:14 (NIV) Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?" He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay."
- Matt 8:5-13 (NIV) When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. 6 "Lord," he said, "my servant lies at home paralyzed and in terrible suffering." 7 Jesus said to him, "I will go and heal him." 8 The centurion replied, "Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed... 10 When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him, "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith."
- Acts 10:1-4 (NIV) At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. 2 He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. 3 One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, "Cornelius!" 4 Cornelius stared at him in fear. "What is it, Lord?" he asked. The angel answered, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God."



# Scripture & Military

- Jesus' remark about dying by the sword (Matt 26:52) seems to be about resisting authorities by force.
  - Note his remark about legions of angels.
- The non-resistance remarks in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:38-47) seem to be dealing with personal revenge rather than limits on government authority.

# What is Responsibility of Christians In Regard to Warfare?

- In the particular form of government we have in the United States (and other democracies), we should naturally try to see that our government does the right thing if we can.
- This leads us to the concept of the "just war."

# What is a "Just War"?

- This is a term developed over centuries of study of the Bible by Christians to try & work out under what conditions warfare is justifiable.
- The common guidelines are as follows (see Payne & Payne, *A Just Defense*, 42):



# Just War Principles

- (1) Just cause
- (2) Just intent
- (3) Last resort
- (4) A formal declaration
- (5) Limited objectives
- (6) Proportionate means
- (7) Noncombatant immunity
- (8) Reasonable hope for success.

# A Summary

- We haven't solved all the problems here, and good Christians differ on the question of pacifism.
- If all countries believed in & practiced defensive warfare only, there would be no wars.

# A Summary

- God has given governments the responsibility to protect the righteous from the wicked, and this may sometimes involve warfare.
- To advocate that our government practice pacifism either internally or externally would be to hand over millions of (relatively) innocent people to oppression and death.
- For unsaved people, such death would be the ultimate disaster.



# The End

But wars will not end until Jesus  
comes back!