

123 What Are Christians Fighting For?

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Introduction

And David said to Solomon: "My son, as for me, it was in my mind to build a house to the name of the Lord my god; but the word of the Lord came to me, saying, 'You have shed much blood and have made great wars; you shall not build a house for My name, because you have shed much blood on the earth in My sight. (I Chronicles 22:7)

Why did the Lord disqualify David from building the temple on the basis that he'd shed much blood?

I mean, isn't this the same God who told Saul, through the prophet Samuel, to attack Amalek, and utterly destroy them.

...The same God who slew the firstborn of Egypt when he delivered the nation from slavery.

At the start of Psalm 144 David even says:

Blessed be the Lord my rock, who trains my hands for WAR, and my fingers for battle...

How can we make sense of God telling David that he was not to build the temple because of war, when God's hand was clearly behind David's wars?

It seems kind of paradoxical.

I'm going to suggest that we need to start by understanding that, with Israel, God separated out to himself a nation, ...AS OPPOSED TO INDIVIDUALS from ALL nations (as is the case with the church).

So God had to build them as a NATION, protecting and establishing them in the midst of a fallen and violent world. And this involved warfare!

But, while God has been behind war (either offensively or defensively) many times in the Old Testament, I believe that his words to David convey something very important.

They convey that war is not his perfect way. That the heart of God is for peace.

In a fallen world he may have to be the righteous judge and make war, but his heart is for peace.

This is clearly shown forth in what God will ultimately bring about on the earth. He will judge the nations in the tribulation and pour out his wrath upon them for all their evil, yet in the final state of things there will be no war. There will not even be death nor crying any more, for this former state of things will have passed away.

Prophecy tells us that one day God will make his home amongst men, and his perfect way of peace will prevail.

So, we understand that with Israel God was building a nation, and by doing so in amongst a fallen world conflict and war was an inevitable part of his dealings.

But what about Christians?

What are God's purposes concerning us?

And where should Christians stand when it comes to war?

To provide some degree of answer to this I'm going to look at:

- The nature of the new covenant, and what it means to be a citizen of God's kingdom
- The pattern of the early church
- The change that occurred from the time of the Roman Emperor Constantine
- Some aspects of the situation today

The new covenant

OK, so starting with some thoughts about the New Covenant, the covenant that we as Christians live under.

You may have noticed that the Sermon on the Mount is a pivot point between the old Mosaic covenant and the new covenant. What is the essence of this change in covenant?

I think it would be fair to say that it is a change from following RULES to applying the deeper PRINCIPLES behind the rules. Ultimately it's about having God's LAW written on our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

And this is what Jesus came teaching. The ways of the kingdom of God, where kingdom citizens have the perfect law of righteousness in their hearts. A law which supercedes the laws of Moses because it is straight from the heart of God WITHOUT any acceptance of compromise with the fallen nature.

You may think "surely the law of Moses did not compromise with the fallen nature", but Jesus tells us that it did.

Under Mosaic law in Deuteronomy 24 it says that a man could write his wife a certificate of divorce, and yet Jesus says in Mark 10:5 that it was because of the hardness of their heart that God allowed this, but that from the beginning it was not so – that what God has joined together man should not separate.

In other words, although this was allowed under the Mosaic covenant, it did not reflect God's perfect way.

Let's read the actual words in Matthew 5. Jesus says:

"Furthermore it has been said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' 'But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife except for sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery. (Matthew 5:31-32)

So Christians, as citizens of Christ's kingdom, really do follow a HIGHER law than that of Moses when it comes to marriage. A law that is aligned with God's heart and HIS perfect way, just as things were in the beginning before the fall.

And just as Jesus in the new covenant teaches a transition from an imperfect Mosaic law concerning marriage, to a new kingdom teaching which reflects the true heart of the Father on the matter, so also he also does the same concerning war.

He starts by saying:

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' (Matthew 5:43)

When the Jews were told to Love their neighbor in Leviticus 19:18, the application was limited to their "brother". In other words to their fellow Jews. Now later in the story of the Good Samaritan Jesus greatly expands on this original concept of neighbor.

But now, in Matthew, he takes them from loving their fellow Israelites and hating their enemies to the perfect ways of God when he teaches, saying to them:

"But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, "that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. "For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even tax collectors and sinners do the same? (Matthew 5:44-46)

Just as with marriage, he shows us the kingdom way, the Father's perfect way...the New Covenant way.

And why does he direct us towards this new, vastly higher, indeed this perfect, law?

Because under the New Covenant we are no longer servants, but sons. Children of God's household. Fellow heirs with Christ. So because we are no longer servants but sons we are called to take on the very nature of the father... not just to follow a set of rules as a servant does.

We are to love our enemies that we may be sons of our Father who is in heaven, just as the verse says.

Besides, unlike the Jews under the Mosaic covenant, the new covenant is nationless. Jesus knew that the citizens of his kingdom would come from ALL nations.

Now, I've based quite a bit so far on the Sermon on the Mount, so I really need to address the fact that some theologians in effect write-off the whole Sermon on the Mount. They do this by saying that it was for the Millennial Kingdom which was to be ushered in at that time ONLY IF Israel accepted Messiah; but that because of Israel's national rejection of Messiah both the Millennial Kingdom AND it's kingdom principles were put on hold.

Now, it's true to say that the ushering in of the Millennial Kingdom could in a way be seen as being put on hold; but the principles? I don't think so.

Let's look at what Jesus said concerning the coming of the kingdom that he was preaching:

In Luke 17 it says:

Now when He was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, He answered them and said, "The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, 'See here!' or 'See there!' For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you." (Luke 17:20-21)

It's completely clear isn't it?

Jesus knew the kingdom would not be ushered in straight away in its complete and visible form, but that the kingdom of God would start in the hearts of believers.

Thus it's obvious that the principles were also meant to start in the lives of the kingdom people; who are the pilgrim citizens of a kingdom in mystery – a kingdom that exists only in its people for now (though will be materially established on the earth at some future point).

However, clear as this really is, in a bid to separate themselves from the high calling of kingdom citizenship, Christians throughout many ages have sought to intellectually distance their doctrines from Christ's kingdom teachings. Only "radicals" and "non-conformists" have sought to be kingdom citizens amongst a fallen world right here and now.

The early church

But it's not even as cut and dried as that. Christians often seem to choose whether to be kingdom citizens, or citizens of this present world, on a case-by-case basis.

...even which covenant they are under on a case-by-case basis.

For instance, while heartfelt giving is encouraged in the New Testament, legalistic tithing requires going back to the Old Testament and the OLD covenant.

Likewise prosperity doctrine, while doing its best to put some pretty weird twists on the New Testament, gets its best ammunition from the Old Testament – in other words from the OLD covenant.

The matter of war goes even further down this path, since to date I've NEVER heard a New Testament justification for war. When the issue comes up it's like we just forget which covenant we are under and leap back in time to God's dealing with a physical earthly nation (Israel).

Not only do we as Christians have the teachings of Jesus on loving one's enemies, but we have two other powerful witnesses of the true Christian way.

- The epistles in the New Testament
- And the records of the early, pre-Constantine, church.

To start with the epistles. Let me be clear that they contain NOT A SINGLE MENTION of Christians supporting any of the empires military endeavors or political power struggles, or even of supporting the patriotic movements of the Jews themselves.

Can you imagine Paul toting an AK47?

Of course not, that's a Russian rifle. Surely if Paul was around today he'd use a good western rifle. Maybe something more like an American M14 or M16.... I'm being facetious. You see how stupid it all sounds. How do you both shoot the gentiles and be the apostle to the gentiles?

Does it make any more sense to divide the role? To have some Christians shooting them while others preach to them? Such thinking belongs to the Catholic crusades, NOT the true body of Christ.

The only hint of tacit acceptance of Christians going to war in the whole of the New Testament is that when soldiers asked what they should do in their situation Jesus didn't command them to resign, but told them to not intimidate anyone for money but to be content with their wages.

It may be relevant to understand that these soldiers often weren't in a position to be able to resign, and in Israel were largely in a policing role, however I accept that this may not be a completely answer.

Still, if the New Testament says nothing to ACTIVELY support Christians going to war, the history and actions of the early church sound out resolutely against it.

Let's look at just a few representative quotes from early church writers:

Justin Martyr wrote:

"We who formerly murdered one another now refrain from making war against our enemies"

Tertullian wrote:

"Can it be lawful to make an occupation of the sword, when the Lord proclaims that 'he who uses the sword shall perish by the sword'? And shall the son of peace take part in battle when it does not even become him to sue at the law?"

Arnobius, an apologist in the third century wrote:

"We have learned from His teaching and His laws that evil should not be repaid with evil. That it is better to suffer wrong than to inflict it. And that our own blood should be shed rather than to stain our hands and our conscience with that of another."

The following excerpt is from a collective response to Roman pressure for Christians to take part in the empires wars:

The more anyone excels in holiness, the more effective in his help to kings, even more than is given by soldiers who go out to fight and slay as many of the enemy as they can. To those enemies of our faith who would require us to bear arms for the empire and to slay men, we reply, "Do not the priests who attend [your gods] ...keep their hands free from blood... If, then that is a praise-worthy custom, Christians too should engage as the priests and ministers of God, keeping their hands pure... By our prayers we vanquish the demons who stir up war... In this way we are more helpful to the kings than those who go into field to fight for them.

And here's an excerpt from the book entitled "Will the real Heretics please stand up" on how the early church handled the matter of being soldiers:

Generally speaking, the church did not permit a Christian to join the army after his conversion. However, if a man as already a soldier when he became a Christian, the church did not require him to resign. He was only required to agree never to use the sword against anyone. One reason for this flexibility was that the Romans did not normally allow a soldier to leave the army until his time of service was completed.

Of course history is complex and it's hard to verify how universal or localized this judgment was. As we saw earlier Jesus only commands soldiers not to shake people down for money, but didn't comment on the issue of them going to war.

The Constantinian change

But, whatever minor ambiguity, it seems reasonably clear that the early church shunned the sword in favour of the gospel. When did all this change?

Like so many things, the source of its change of its change can be traced back to the Roman Emperor Constantine.

Let me read a summarized account of the life of Constantine that I've put together, because it tells us a lot about changes that followed in the church.

Born in the area now known as Serbia in around 272AD, he was the son of Constantius, a Roman officer of the Imperial bodyguard who later became a Caesar, or junior emperor of part of the empire, under Emperor Diocletian. His mother was a Greek of low standing and may not have actually been married to his father.

Constantine was educated in the court of Diocletian as heir presumptive of his father, but was also in a sense being held as a hostage to ensure the loyalty of his father

He witnessed the political beginnings of Diocletian's "Great Persecution" of Christians which commenced in the year 302, though was probably not involved in it.

After the abdication of Diocletian Constantine was in danger from Emperor Galerius, whom Constantine was able to persuade (at the end of long night of drinking), to permit him to return to his father; permission which he made use of that very night before Galerius awoke and changed his mind. Thus Constantine joined his father in France in 305AD and together they crossed into Britain and spent a year trying to subdue various tribes of the Picts, (or what we would call Scots).

After the sickness and death of Constantius in 306, Constantine took his father's place to the great anger of Emperor Galerius from whose court he had fled a year before, though to avoid war Galerius accepted Constantine's position as a co-emperor.

In 310 a jealous Caesar Maximian rebelled against the Emperor Constantine, proclaiming himself as Emperor. Although his quest quickly failed and he was caught and committed suicide, his son Maxentius soon carried on his rebellion creating a civil war between the parts of the empire he controlled and those controlled by Constantine.

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