
A Christian View of War in the 21st Century

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The Lord taught his disciples (Matthew 24:6) that wars and rumours of wars would be a feature of the last days. He taught us not to be alarmed by this. Too often in the minds of believers, there is alarm and confusion when we face war. Our evaluations can sound like much secular comment, with a tone of dread which speaks little of faith in the Lord who rules all things.

Yet war is terrible, its effects incalculable. Human life is precious, and it is right for us to be deeply concerned about the courses of action proposed by our leaders. A complacent ignorance dishonours God too. So what is a Christian view of war in the 21st Century? This article aims to review key Biblical doctrines which should inform Christians as we seek to think God's thoughts after him in today's world, before making special reference to considerations which may govern a Christian's response to 'rumours of war' in the 21st Century.

Key Biblical Doctrines

Human Life

What is human life worth? Genesis 9:6 is a key verse. *'Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man.'* The context is significant, in that the value of human life is stated after an almost mass extinction (Noah's Flood). Despite the Lord's warfare against, and destruction of, countless people a few months previously, human life is immensely valuable—its value deriving from the *imago Dei* borne by every human being. This immense value is enshrined throughout the Mosaic Covenant made with Israel by the 6th Commandment, and many other provisions which reminded God's people of the value of all humanity. No wonder that it is the Judaeo-Christian world-view which has generated the highest respect for human life and rights. Human life is immensely precious. War is an evil to be avoided if at all possible.

But human life is not absolutely precious. As much as Genesis 9:6 protected human life, it also required that human life be taken—just as the Lord himself had so recently done in the Flood. It required judicial killing of murderers, which was also enshrined in the Mosaic Covenant where a retributive death penalty was extended to a number of other offences. Retribution was not to become vengeance, which was reserved to God alone. This authority was to be exercised with great care by the leaders of God's nation: the elders and priests (Deuteronomy 17; 2–13 cf. 19:1–13). Further, just as human life could be taken to implement justice within Israel, so there was provision for and regulation of the taking of human life in war—both 'Holy War' in the promised land, and campaigns outside it (Deuteronomy 20:1–18).

These are the twin poles of the OT view of human life; it is immensely precious—for we bear God's image. It is not absolutely precious, for under certain circumstances,

it may be forfeit in war or just retribution. Judging this awesome balance was delegated by the Lord to the governing authorities of his nation.

Governing Authorities

We find in the NT that governing authorities of all nations also have power over life and death. Romans 13:1–7 states:

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 honour, then honour. Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellow-man has fulfilled the law.

In passing, it's worth noting that the preceding context (12:19ff.) also prohibits personal revenge. Some significant points arise from these verses:

- 'Governing authorities' in v. 1 cover the *national authorities* whom the Roman empire left in place (such as the Jewish rulers of Jerusalem), the *local Roman governors* (such as Pilate, or Gallio in Corinth) and the *Imperial authorities* in Rome itself (Nero, when Paul wrote Romans). None of these was necessarily elected by the people, and none were obviously righteous in their conduct—yet all were established by God. These three levels coincide with our current world, where we have local, national and supra-national authorities, each just as surely established by God.

This is highly significant; not only local and national authorities are established by God, but bodies such as the EU and UN (see Excursus) are also governing authorities within the meaning of Romans 13. The provisions of their founding treaties or charters, and the rulings they may make, are part of their authority over those nations under them. In Romans 13 terms, a Security Council resolution or a ruling from the European Union comes from a God-established authority. However, it is possible that as individual Christians must reserve the right to obey God rather than man for conscience's sake (Acts 5:29—see below), nations may also reserve such a right with respect to supra-national authorities, especially as the development of such authorities is relatively immature.

- Rebellion against such Governments (v. 2) is likely to incur judgement. We should not be surprised when those who resist their rulings receive their comeuppance. There is a simple way for them to avoid this fate—it is to *do what is right* (v. 3)—*to submit to the authorities* (v. 5).
- So why has all this power and authority been delegated by God to Governments? There is a 2-fold reason in v. 4: to do (us) good, and to bring punishment on the wrongdoer—the latter a synecdoche for the exercise of justice. This is the job of

Governments, and they are to be assessed by us (and will be judged by God as his servants) in relation to their calling to benefit those governed and to exercise justice among them. In these ways, governing authorities in general are one of the many common-grace blessings God has given our race.

Exercising Justice

Proverbs 17:15 states, 'Acquitting the guilty and condemning the innocent—the Lord detests them both', from which we can deduce that God requires justice to control the work of Governing authorities. A blind eye to the crimes of one nation—including one's own—is detestable. It is also detestable for a powerful nation to benefit its people at the expense of those of a weaker one. The final criterion controlling the exercise of power must be *justice and justice alone* (Deuteronomy 16:20).

In the great governmental issue of 'using the sword', justice must control the taking of human life. Christians have historically adopted the provisions of the Just War theory¹ to determine whether a state may go to war (*jus ad bellum*), and how war should be prosecuted (*jus in bello*). Since Augustine, Christians appear generally to have assumed that the only just cause for resort to war is self-defence. Yet if we take Romans 13 seriously, may not supra-national Governing authorities (e.g. the UN) authorise action with 'the sword' to benefit the weak and exercise wider justice, just as a state may take police action for the same reasons? Surely some wars of intervention to benefit the weak (e.g. the work of NATO in the Balkans in the 1990s)—or wars to bring justice (e.g. the campaign to oust the Taliban in 2001) to are not only permitted, but are required of Governing authorities established by God?

In sum, we can concur with the Teacher in Ecclesiastes 3:1, 8 who declared that 'There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: ... a time for war, and a time for peace.' But how is the Governing authority to know whether to make war or peace at any particular juncture? The Bible knows that a Government needs Wisdom if it is to rule and wage war justly ...

Wisdom

Justice, wisdom and prudence are intertwined, as pictured in Proverbs 8: 12–16 'I, wisdom, dwell together with prudence; I possess knowledge and discretion. To fear the Lord is to hate evil; I hate pride and arrogance, evil behaviour and perverse speech. Counsel and sound judgment are mine; I have understanding and power. By me kings reign and rulers make laws that are just; by me princes govern, and all nobles who rule on earth. I love those who love me, and those who seek me find me.' Here the Bible points us to the divine origin and moral character of the Wisdom which is to inform the rule of all human authorities from kings to nobles. Wisdom's character is cautious, informed, discreet, humble: in a word, prudent. The wise ruler will consult, and not embark on doomed enterprises (Proverbs 24:6, Luke 14:31).

True Wisdom is available to those who need it, especially to rulers, and it may come through advisors and other means of grace. But the best of these is not infallible (2 Samuel 17:14), and ultimately, the ruler must obtain counsel from God. Wisdom has no human origin (Job 28); it comes from the Lord (cf. Proverbs 2:1–11)—specifically, from the fear of the Lord. It is denied to the self-seeking (cf. James 1:5f): those who want to be really wise must seek the Lord's Kingdom before their own status. Those

who wonder if they are really wise to make war would do well to ponder James 3:17f '... the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.' For a war to be just and wise not only demands objective decisions to be made about *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*: it also searches out the subjective *motives* of those who govern.

The Church's Role

So how well equipped is 21st Century secular government to discharge its responsibility for determining whether a war is just and wise in Biblical terms? We are uneasy, for wars have been conducted for very mixed motives—self interest, fear, greed, prejudice, ambition and so forth. These motives are incompatible with true Wisdom. We also know that those in power are all too likely to forget the primacy of justice.

For these reasons, the rise of kingship in the OT was accompanied by the prophetic movement. Prophets were at the right hand of kings to remind them of the covenant under which they operated. Their ministries were full of rebuke for kings who wielded their governing power unjustly. Prophets also prayed for their kings. We see both ministries in 1 Samuel 12:23.

Surely it is the job of God's church in our day to perform a similarly prophetic role, praying for Governments to be given wisdom, and reminding them that justice and wisdom must control and inform the exercise of their power. (Perhaps we see a faint foreshadowing of this in Acts 16:37ff.?) In doing so, we shall encounter times when governing authorities will clearly be acting unjustly—or failing to act at all. They have not lived up to their God-given authority. Then churches and individual Christians may have to say with the apostles 'We must obey God rather than men!' (Acts 5:29). Such a stand is likely to be as costly for us now as for them then (v. 40).

In sum, God's church should not back-seat drive the government. Neither do we unthinkingly bless or oppose every war. Our proper role is at the side of the king, praying and prophesying (whatever the cost).

Christian Citizens

Christians have at least 3 responsibilities to the Governing authorities under which they live:

- Romans 13 not only enjoins submission to, but also a whole-hearted support of, governments (v. 6f., cf. 1 Peter 2:13–17). We should be model citizens, supportive of Governing authorities in their difficult task. We should be supportive of the servicemen and women who bear the sword on our behalves.
- In a democracy, we have been given authority to choose our leaders. We shall have to answer to God for the way in which we have exercised this power, just as the leaders will have to answer to Him for the way they have exercised theirs. Christians should be politically aware and involved—both vocal and voting!
- We should pray for our leaders '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. This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.' 1 Timothy 2:1–4. We should pray for leaders to

act according to justice and wisdom, which is God's way to the peace and quiet we all long for. Yet peace and quiet is not an end in itself. Paul explicitly states that we should use the absence of war to pursue godliness and holiness—and he implicitly links all this to the progress of the Gospel (v. 4).

Conclusions and Deductions for the 21st Century

There is much that could be said and argued over in applying these principles to current events. In summarising the above doctrines, we can deduce some elements which surely should be present in the prophetic ministry of the Evangelical church, and the prayers and political participation of Christian citizens:

- **Conclusion:** Whilst Biblical Christianity properly values human life more than any other creed, it recognises too that there are times when lives may justly be forfeit. Judgment in these matters has been committed to Governing authorities.
 - **Deduction:** We recognise that war may be necessary in inter-state relations, but only with reluctance. Vengeance is never a legitimate ground for war.
- **Conclusion:** Governments are instituted by God to benefit those under them, and exercise justice. Supra-national bodies may also have such authority, responsibilities and sanctions.
 - **Deduction:** The UN is a Supra-national Governing authority, established by God.
- **Conclusion:** We thank God for the governments that He has established and unless they seek to compel us to clearly unjust ways, we willingly submit to and support them.
 - **Deduction:** We respect and support our government and Armed Forces. We are well-informed about current affairs and pray for those to whom weighty judgements have been committed. We fully participate in the political process.
- **Conclusion:** Justice alone controls and wisdom informs the right exercise of governmental power.
 - **Deduction:** We are alert to the sinful human tendency to take advantage of power for base motives. We are vocal in insisting on justice in the resort to and conduct of war. We are prepared for the possible evil consequences that may pursue us.
- **Conclusion:** The absence of war is a gift from God for our godliness and holiness. It affords great opportunity for the work of the Gospel.
 - **Deduction:** Wars and rumours of war should stir us up to pursue God's will and to give ourselves to the work of the Gospel.

'As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no-one can work.' John 9:4

The United Nations—an excursus

The signing of the United Nations Charter in 1945 marks a turning point for the Christian consideration of war. For the first time in history, there is a genuine and legitimate human authority over all independent nation states. This authority is exercised in detail through the Resolutions of the Security Council and General Assembly.

The Charter generally prohibits the use of force [Article 2 (4)], except for:

- self defence [Article 51]
- collective enforcement action to restore international peace and security [Chapter VII]

We should also note that:

- a sort of ‘case law’ seems to be developing to legitimise the use of force to prevent an overwhelming humanitarian catastrophe [humanitarian intervention]. This seems to accord with the concerns of Christian Justice. Such ‘case law’ development is untidy and disturbing, but has always been a feature of human law codes. Christians will want be alert to the direction of such developments, but as long as they are compatible with the aims of Government in Romans 13, we need have no great fears about this process in itself.

Clearly, the exercise of the UN’s authority will be subject to many variables, just like the exercise of any other human authority. But the UN is nonetheless an authority established by God. It should therefore be submitted to and supported. Its Charter and Resolutions will be substantial in determining the justice of many different causes, and so the development of its influence should be a matter of keen interest to all Christians. We will also be aware that other supra-national authorities are established, such as the European Union, International Court of Justice and so forth. Christians will insist that their powers should be wielded justly too. As has been recently stated:

The (governing authority) does not have a chaplain at his side, but a lawyer. There is therefore a much greater need for statesmen, generals and lawyers to have a Christian mind to make the law work in a Christian way.

Surely it is the role of God’s church to equip His people to think in such a way in these days.

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¹ This is well summarised in the article ‘Just War Theory’ by Prof. AF Holmes “New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology” (IVP, Leicester 1995) pp. 521f

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More biblical than Leech’s book is *Urban God* (Bible Reading Fellowship 2002) by **John Proctor**. The book is made up of short chapters each of which is a meditation on a biblical passage or passages related to the theme of the city. I found the book very helpful for reflecting on what the Bible has to say about the city. The book is not a biblical study, but it does open one’s eyes and heart to the centrality of the city theme in Scripture, which is something that evangelicals need to rediscover. Let me end on a lighter note. If anyone had a passion for the city and especially its poor it was William Booth. **Jim Winter’s *Travel with William Booth*** (Day One 2003) is a short and well-illustrated biography of the founder of the Salvation Army that is also a travel guide. May the Lord raise up more people like Booth with a love for the cities of our world.