

## *War - What would Jesus say?*

By Jim Abrahamson August 12, 2003

The recent war with Iraq surfaced issues that have been the subject of debate among Christians over centuries. What would Jesus say to us about the war question? Is there a just war? I am not so brash as to suggest that I can dogmatically answer that question but as I look at what Jesus has already said, I have some ideas. One of the interesting aspects of Jesus' response to the questions posed to Him in the Gospels is His tendency to not answer the question directly but to redirect the discussion – suggesting that the wrong question is being asked. When we ask Jesus – are you for or against the war? Jesus would probably not give a direct answer but redirect our focus. Indeed, He might suggest that we often are asking the wrong questions. His response might look like this:

**“You shall love your neighbor”**

**- Love is the real issue.**

Are you as concerned about spiritual war as you are about physical war? The greater conflict in your heart between selfish fear and selfless love has been unattended for a long time. First win the spiritual war and then you will better know how to manage the issue of physical war. It is possible to oppose war and yet not love. If we first learn to love, then we will know how to address the war question with wisdom.

Matthew 22:37-39

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and foremost commandment. And the second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Jesus seldom addressed directly the political issues of His day. He often focused attention on the individual and the dynamics within the covenant community. This is not to say that His teaching did not have social political implications but He seemed to believe those social problems, and solutions both started with giving attention to the individual heart.

The summation of the law is a call to take a posture of love in our relationships. We are to first love God, **“This is the great and foremost commandment.”** The social ethic comes second to the spiritual posture of love toward God. We love God because He first loved us. While we were His enemies He loved us so much that He sent His Son to carry away our sins as an atoning sacrifice. Our experience of this gracious God will shape our relationship with others. The Christian's encounter with God is distinct from that of our Islamic neighbors at this important point. Our experience of God is characterized by a love that is extended even to our enemies. This is not a characteristic of the way in which many Muslims experience God. We have a message (witness) to the world (including the world of Islam). It is that Christians love their neighbors even when they are their enemies.

There is a second important element in our love for God that affects our attitude toward our neighbor. It is human nature to fear those who can do us harm. Discerning danger is a healthy characteristic but fear can become a powerful negative motivation in our relationships with our neighbors. The Christian does not look to the social environment for basic security in life. When we sense that God loves us we are free of unhealthy fear of our neighbor so that we can

love him. The question of the rightness or wrongness of any form of force is answered only as we address the greater war within our members between love and fear.

Jesus tells us that, **“the second is like it.”** That is to say, loving our neighbor is not an option for those who love God. “Horizontal” social ethics cannot be separated from “vertical” spirituality. This brings us to the question of what it means to love our neighbor when we are at war. Love of our neighbor may on occasion call us to resist evil with force, not out of selfish fear but out of selfless love. As a parent, my children have a right to expect me to protect them from evil people who may wish to harm them. Physical force may on occasion be called for in protecting those under my care. The same can be said for human government. Few of us would choose to live in a state that had no police force. However, when we resort to force we must ask the hard questions – What is our motive? Are we acting out of selfless love or selfish fear? Given the fact that our motives are too often mixed, are we willing to be honest and admit this tension? In the case of the war with Iraq, we should be motivated by love for our friends and families in the Free World but also for our neighbors in Iraq, Palestine, Israel, etc. But this brings us to the question, When does love demand physical force?

Some Christians have answered that question with a dogmatic – NEVER! But most have recognized that in a fallen world, the use of force may be unavoidable if I am to truly love my neighbor. Starting with St. Augustine in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, several basic principles of “Just War Theory” were identified. Over the centuries they have been refined to generally address two questions. When is it right to fight? How does one fight right? The following points address the first question – When is it right to fight?

1. **Just cause** – For war to be legitimate its cause must be sound, justifying the great risks and the moral complexities of putting human lives in harms way. Augustine says, *“A just war is apt to be described as one that avenges wrongs, when a nation or state has to be punished, for refusing to make amends for the wrongs inflicted by its subjects, or to restore what has been seized unjustly.”* Three just causes are often mentioned.

a) **Aggression toward self or another (that must be resisted).** (In recent times, this has been the only just cause recognized by the UN.) It is argued by the present administration that “rogue states” (states that openly disrespect the global community of humanity and constitute a material threat to that global community by their declared intentions and actions) that possess weapons of mass destruction constitute aggression waiting to happen. “The United States has long maintained the option of preemptive actions to counter a sufficient threat to our national security. The greater the threat, the greater the risk of inaction—and the more compelling the case for taking anticipatory action to defend ourselves, even if uncertainly remains as to the time and place of the enemy’s attack...” (P15 National Security Strategy). This appeal is a new doctrine that raises a lot of questions and is not without controversy.

b) **Unjust seizure (that must be restored).** This was a principle that could have been used to justify the action brought against Iraq in Desert Storm. Iraq had invaded Kuwait to seize its oil resources. In fact, Desert Storm was sanctioned by the UN, which has the authority as a representative of the international community to do so.

c) **Evil (that must be removed).** This is a critical point in that it might be argued that Saddam needs to be punished for noncompliance to UN resolutions. Although this principle is increasingly problematic in a world of shrinking consensus of what constitutes evil.

Some examples of just punishment of evil might be cited. In 1971, civil war broke out in **Pakistan**, which was then made up of two ethnically and geographically separate areas. A

million people died and ten million fled into India. Faced with an overwhelming refugee crisis, India invaded East Pakistan, which became independent as Bangladesh. In another example, Madman **Idi Amin** brutalized **Uganda** for eight years, killing perhaps 300,000 people, before Tanzanian troops and Ugandan rebels invaded and expelled him in 1979. It should have happened much sooner. Likewise, the **Khmer Rouge** regime of Cambodia killed at least a million people before being driven from power by a Vietnamese invasion in 1979. Most of the American pacifists who opposed the Vietnam War so loudly remained strangely silent while the Khmer Rouge atrocities were being committed (Joan Baez being the one honorable exception). But the U.S. government, still smarting from its loss in Vietnam, shamefully condemned the Vietnamese. We might cite one more example. While Idi Amin was grabbing headlines in Africa, **Jean-Bedel Bokassa** held power in the Central African Republic, which he renamed the Central African Empire. He killed perhaps 100,000 people. In 1979, France engineered a coup that overthrew Bokassa.

2. **Competent authority** - Augustine notes, *“The natural order conducive to peace among mortals demands that the power to declare and counsel war should be in the hands of those who hold the supreme authority.”*

The Scripture sanctions certain systems and gives them authority to act on behalf of those over whom they bear responsibility. [Rom.13:1-7](#), [I Pet.2:13](#). “In the mystery of God’s providence, many or indeed most of the institutional bearers of governmental authority are unworthy of it, often flagrantly so, themselves stained with crime. But this does not make it any less the vocation of government to protect the innocent and punish evildoers. A government which refused to safeguard citizens and exercise judgment on wrong out of a sense of the guilt of past crime would only add and further the crime of dereliction of duty to its catalog of offenses.” David Yeago, *Pro Ecclesia Journal*

3. **Right intentions or limited objectives** - The only legitimate intention for war is to secure a just peace for all involved. Neither revenge nor conquest nor economic gain nor ideological supremacy is justified. Augustine says, *“True religion looks upon as peaceful those wars that are waged not for motives of aggrandizement, or cruelty, but with the object of securing peace, of punishing evil-doers, and of uplifting the good.”*

If the purpose is peace, then unconditional surrender or the destruction of a nation’s economic or political institutions is an unwarranted objective. One of the difficult challenges of the present war with Iraq is that we do not know if the removal of Saddam will bring greater or less stability in the long run. We may find that the misunderstanding and ill will created by our involvement in Iraq will create greater instability, less trust, and less security for all involved. We have no way of knowing how the precedent that we are setting will play out in the actions of other nations down the road.

4. **Proportionate means** - The weaponry and the force used should be limited to what is needed to repel the aggression and deter future attacks, that is to say, to secure a just peace. Total or unlimited war is ruled out.
5. **Noncombatant immunity** - Since war is an official act of government, only those who are officially agents of government may fight, and individuals not actively contributing to the conflict (including POW’s and casualties as well as civilian non-participants) should be immune from attack.
6. **Last resort** - Because of the severe nature of war we should exhaust every reasonable means to avoid it. While we can never be certain that every possible alternative has been exhausted, we must go great lengths within what common sense at the time would dictate.

The principle of loving discipline within the covenant community laid down in [Matt.18:15-20](#) is a helpful guide. Drastic measures are used only when other appeals have been exhausted.

**“These things must take place.”**

**- War is a matter of “damage control” in an evil age.**

Is your hope in this age or the age to come? Why do you keep trying to find your hope in an evil age that will not pass away until the Second Coming of Christ?

Matthew 24:6

“And you will be hearing of wars and rumors of wars; see that you are not frightened for those things must take place, but that is not yet the end.”

Christians should not be shocked by war. Jesus tells us, **“These things must take place.”** The Old Testaments wisdom acknowledges the fact that there is a time for war in a fallen world. [Ecclesiastes 3:1,8](#) “To everything there is a season, A time for every purpose under heaven...A time of war, And a time of peace.” We will not see an end to sin, poverty, or war in this age. The end to war will be at the culmination of this age and the return of Christ. Outward fighting is but the “flare up” of an inner war that is constantly waged in our souls. It is a war between love and hate, faith and fear. We are afraid of each other and for good reason. Apart from a reconciling agent we are dangerous creatures who often misunderstand, rush to judgment, and act defensively when we do not have to.

But the Christian is called to love, which means that he or she live above selfish fear. **“See that you are not frightened.”** Love does not necessarily exclude the use of physical force. C.S. Lewis argued that pacifism is both a theological mistake (though an honest one) and a practical disaster. Jesus words in Matthew 24 are directed to disciples who have been told that this world is not their home. They were expected to know that human politics will not determine their ultimate fate. Jesus knew that war would come and always be a characteristic of this evil age. He is concerned that we not over react. War with terrorism is scary but it is not the ultimate horror. There is a spiritual reality behind and above the physical world. The fears of this world too often catch and hold our attention when we should see our lives in the context of the “spiritual end game.” [Matthew 10:28](#) “And do not fear those who kill the body, but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.” There is an ongoing conflict between God’s Spirit, calling us to repentance and reconciliation, and our spirit, which insists on rebellious independence. We too often fail to realize that when we exclude God from our world we are left with “too much to live with and not enough to live for.” Fear will rule if we live only for this age and in the context of this temporal material world. Our hope is in the soon return of Christ but in the interim we live with a world that permits war because of the hardness of human hearts just as God permits divorce. It is a matter of damage control.

**“I did not come to bring peace.”**

**- Peace is important but not central.**

What is the essence of the Kingdom’s agenda – an ethic or a person? Is Messiah simply a chaplain for a social – political ethic (peace) or is He the peace?

Matthew 10:34

“Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.”

It may surprise some people to realize that the core issue in God’s Kingdom and in Christian theology is not social-political peace. The central issue is Jesus. And Jesus will not always bring temporal peace in this age of conflicted hearts. Jesus is speaking metaphorically here when he speaks of coming to bring a sword. He is not advocating armed conflict between parents and children. In this context Jesus is indicating that, if people follow Him they may experience conflict in their families. Not all will be peaceful when Christ is followed as Lord. The same can be said with respect to the principles of justice and truth in the Kingdom. Paul affirmed conflict in the church at Corinth. (I Cor.11:19) so that those who were standing for the truth would be evident.

Jesus is the Prince of Peace, not simply a chaplain for peace as though peace was the issue no matter how we achieve it. “**I did not come to bring peace.**” Peace is but a part of the package of a relationship with Christ. Reconciliation between man and God is the first call. It will result in peace between individuals and groups of people. But that peace will be “in Christ” and not perfectly realized until He returns.

**“Put your sword back into its place.”**

**- The use or non-use of the sword will not bring peace.**

In your search for peace why is the sword the center of attention? Some of you feel that true peace comes from using the sword; others, from or not using it. Don’t you know that the key to peace is not the sword but Messiah?

Matthew 26:52

“Put your sword back into its place, for all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword.”

Jesus was not the radical pacifist that some would have us believe. Jesus knew that the sword had a role in a fallen world. Jesus instructed His disciples to sell their coat to buy a sword, Lk.22:36. His teaching concerning the non-resistance of evil (Matt.5:39) must be understood in a narrow context of not taking personal revenge. He was not hypocritical in resisting the money changers in the temple (Matt.21:12). Nor was He suggesting that there should be a dismantling of a police force by the state. He was not suggesting that parents should not use force to protect their children from abuse. Personal non-resistance in seeking justice for oneself was not to be extended to the responsibility of the state to keep order in a fallen world, (Rom.13:4 “for it (*government*) is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God an avenger who brings wrath upon the one who practices evil.”). If force was to be used it must be used only by those who have authority to do so, “**Put your sword back into its place.**” God alone has that authority but He mediates some of it through human government, etc.

“**All those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword.**” Jesus recognized that the sword has two edges in that those who take it up without authorization will feel its pain. Jesus recognized that violence is an arena that involves casualties of both sides. While there is a place for physical force it should not be used quickly or from a heart of vengeance, hatred, or

narrow self-interest. There are those who have divine authorization to use force in certain spheres of life. Those boundaries of authority need to be respected.

**“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s”**

**- Government bears the sword for a reason.**

**Does not the Government have the responsibility to preserve social order, which makes social-political peace possible?**

Matthew 22:21

“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s; and to God the things that are God’s”

The state has an authority and responsibility that the individual does not share. We are expected to yield to that God ordained authority, **“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.”** Many of Jesus’ statements suggesting a radical pacifist posture should be limited in its reference to the individual disciple who is tempted to seek revenge or even justice for himself. Vengeance and justice are to be left to the Lord and to human institutions ordained by God to mediate His actions in various spheres of life. The radical proscriptions against resisting evil are not intended to govern the behavior of God ordained authorities that are charged with protecting the lives of those in their care. Notice the following passages which those advocating a full pacifist position often cite. These passages are addressed to individuals who are a part of the covenant community of believers. They are not designed to instruct the state.

Matt.5:38-48 “Do not resist one who is evil . . . if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also . . . Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you . . . You therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Matt.5:9 “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.”

Rom.12:17,21 “repay no one with evil . . . but overcome evil with good”

Rom.13:10 “Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law”

I Pet.2:21 “For this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his footsteps” The example of the cross where Jesus suffered rather than demanding justice. (3:8-11,13-17)

Rom.12:2 “Do not be conformed to this world” Jn.15:19; 17:16)

Matt.5:20; 7:13-14; Jn.3:3,5;18:36; Col.1:3; Heb.11:8-16 The church and state are two separate kingdoms. Christians are to be strangers in this world.

Jn.18:36 The weapons of the two kingdoms are different. One is physical the other spiritual.

II Cor.10:3-4 reminds us that our weapons are spiritual and not physical.

Heb.10:32-34 bears witness to Christians who did not resist evil and suffered loss.

The State’s legitimate, but limited role can be summarized with three responsibilities. Providing **security and order** is the first responsibility. Promoting **justice and peace** is the second. St Augustine (4<sup>th</sup> cent.) in “The City of God” taught that shalom (peace) is “the tranquility produced by order” (tranquillitas ordinis). The primary role of the state is not to chase down criminals after the fact but to nurture the tranquillitas ordinis, using its unique powers of coercion to that end - the peace that produces order. Protecting **freedom and opportunity** (majority rule, minority rights) is the third responsibility.

While we may not fully understand or agree with those in authority over us, we are to give them the benefit of the doubt in areas where the proper direction is uncertain. Part of our civil duty in a free democracy is to voice our opinion and even to demonstrate our convictions through peaceful protest. But in the end we must respect the right of those in authority to make certain calls on our behalf and support them in those calls.

The security and peace that we long for will not be found in human government but only in the Kingdom at Christ's return. As Christians we are full of hope but that hope is not centered on this age or in human government. It is focused on the return of Christ. We are radical realists with respect to the institutions of this age. We are prepared to live with wars and rumors of wars until the end. In this age we work for peace and justice IN CHRIST. But we have no fanciful illusions about a fallen world being more than it really is – a broken and rebellious planet demanding “damage control.” For God's people, this world is as close to hell as they will ever get. It is not heaven. But we have a vision of a day soon coming that will bring true peace and justice for all. Our prayer is that great throngs will welcome that day with us. In the meantime we will not fear but strive to love and serve God and our neighbor as ourselves.

There is one more issue that we must consider – **Chivalry**. This is not a part of Just War Theory but it has a place in a Christian understanding of Just War. C.S. Lewis spoke of chivalry as the Christian alternative to pacifism. Chivalry is, properly speaking, the character that enables human beings to be “fierce to the *n*th degree and meek to the *n*th degree.” This is the Spirit of God in Christ and in His church, an unnatural combination of attributes which is the work of the Spirit of Christ in a human life. If we cannot produce chivalrous persons, then we end up with people who are useful in battle but useless in peace, or who are useful in peace but useless in battle. Noble soldiers who understand and own chivalry are the ones called to fight Just War. Lewis argues for war-as-tournament. This implies that soldiers bring a certain joy to their soldiering and a healthy respect for the humanity of the enemy. These characteristics are foreign to liberal-humanist thought, which may see war as a sad and necessary evil that is to be fought against a demonized enemy.

**“Completely destroy them . . . as the Lord our God has commanded you.”**

**- Genocide in the OT is a picture of the Cross.**

**Is the wrath of God against evil in the OT a model for our present policy, a reason to reject the inspiration of Scripture, or something else?**

Deut.7:1-2, 20:16-17

“When the Lord your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess and drives out before you many nations . . . then you must destroy them totally . . . and show them no mercy. Do not leave alive anything that breathes. Completely destroy them . . . as the Lord our God has commanded you.”

Jesus' words seem to contrary to the Word of God that came to His people in Deut.7, 20. Matt. 5 “39 . . . do not resist him who is evil; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also.” Lest we miss the point Paul and Peter repeat the teaching (It is one of the few ethical teachings of Jesus that they repeat.) Rom.12 “20 “*But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head.*” 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” But to make the waters even more confusing, the Bible that Christians receive as inspired contains teaching

that seems to contradict Jesus' radical views. "Holy War" is not a Muslim invention. Joshua and David were the first to engage in campaigns of "ethnic cleansing." Cities outside the land of Palestine do not need to be entirely destroyed, but attacks on cities inside the land require destruction of all life (Deut.20:10-18). This practice is known as the "ban" (Heb. "herem") or "the law of anathema". To put a city under the ban was to devote its occupants to Yahweh for destruction. It is often translated "completely destroyed" or "devoted". This practice has been cited by Christians down through the ages as to justify similar conduct. Some Christians have seen this as a precedent to justify "holy war."

1. Crusades
2. Colonial period Christian treatment of American Indians –
3. Hotel Rwanda - The true-life story of Paul Rusesabagina, a hotel manager who housed over a thousand Tutsis refugees during their struggle against the Hutu militia in Rwanda. Rwanda (the most Christianized nation in Africa) 1994: The dominant Hutus set out to exterminate the minority Tutsis. There were Christians on both sides and many participated in the killing. The request for help from the district president of a Christian denomination was answered with – "You must be eliminated, God no longer wants you."

The non-Christian world does not struggle with this contradiction. The OT is dismissed as simply a primitive expression that proves how silly it is to believe the Bible.

### How are we to deal with this contradiction?

There are a number of ways in which we understand Biblical difficulties like this. Is this a paradox (with no explanation), a puzzle ("mystery" to be later explained), paradigm ("myth" story that depicts a much bigger truth about life in general) or a picture (a "type" prefiguring something to come)?

<b><i>Paradox</i></b> <i>(enigma)</i>	<b><i>Puzzle</i></b> <i>(mystery)</i>	<b><i>Paradigm</i></b> <i>(myth)</i>	<b><i>Picture</i></b> <i>(type)</i>
Truths that seem to defy logic	Truths that are logical once all the information is known	Truths that are a story-guide to life	Truths that represent a "shadow" of what is to come
<i>Trinity</i>	<i>Church = Jew &amp; Gentile</i>	<i>The sin of Adam &amp; Eve</i>	<i>Tabernacle</i>

Isaiah uses the same language (of wrath) to describe the fate of Messiah in Isa.53 "4 Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. 5 But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. 6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. . . . 12 . . . For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

Jesus felt the need to explain the suffering of Messiah to His disciples in Luke 24 “<sup>26</sup> Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?” <sup>27</sup> And beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures.”

What would Jesus have said when he came to Joshua? I believe he would have gone to the cross and explained that the genocide of Joshua is a dramatic picture of what the cross was satisfied. Paul has a special word for this - (HILASMOS) that is translated “propitiation” and conveys the idea of satisfying the just wrath of God against sin. Rom.3:25 “whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith.”

I Jn.2:2 “and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.”