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The Morality of Killing In War

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the sons of God” (OSB, Matthew 5:9). Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ famously taught, during his earth ministry, that we should “turn the other cheek” (OSB, Matthew 5:39). Christ constantly emphasized pacifism, loving our neighbors, not killing them. However, war has been the means by which many great things were accomplished in Israel and later in Christendom. God uses war as a means of judgment upon the wicked, as He commanded Joshua to conquer the wicked nation of Canaan - leaving no one left alive (OSB, Joshua 10:36-39). Through Constantine’s Christianization of Rome, followers of Christ went from being a persecuted minority to gaining imperial favor. In our modern day, with the especially recent conflict between Israel and Palestine, it is hard to imagine a time without war - Yet these times do exist, and have existed. Granted, as we have increased in population and have somehow become more tribalistic as time goes on, it is no surprise that we as humans would slip up and cause armed conflict. The writings of the Prophets and Church Fathers convey the idea that war may be deemed justifiable either in self-defense of innocent lives or as a divine blessing, serving as a form of divine judgment upon the wicked.

Jesus Christ was a pacifist in the truest sense - he suffered judgment at the hands of his enemies, and by his bruises we are healed (OSB, Isaiah 53:5). Christ emphasized in his teachings the virtue of suffering in the hands of our enemies, loving them despite their hatred for us. King Solomon teaches that “if your enemy falls, do not rejoice over him, and do not exalt yourself at

his stumbling" (OSB, Proverbs 24:17). We learn that the defeat of our enemies is no cause for rejoicing, for it means that another person, no matter how despised, is suffering. As Christians, we are called to a higher standard, one of peace, not aggression. Tertullian addressed the issue of war in his *Apology*, originally written to refute popular arguments against Christianity for the time. He writes: "neither shall they learn war anymore" (OSB, Isaiah 2:4), that is, the provocation of hostilities; so that you learn that Christ is promised not as powerful in war, but pursuing peace" (Sider 53). Christ, our ultimate exemplar, is against war and instead strives to not only want peace, but actively pursue it. As his followers, we must strive to follow this teaching and fight for the establishment of peace, for "how beautiful are the feet of them which preach the gospel of peace, which bring glad tidings of good, not of war nor evil tidings" (OSB, Isaiah 52:7). In Canon 3 of the Council of Arles, it is written that "those who throw down their arms in time of peace, we have decreed that they should be kept from communion" (Sider 125). This demonstrates that for the early Church, pacifism is a concept that is fiercely guarded. If one is to go to war during a time of peace they will be denied that which is central to the Christian faith, Holy Communion itself. This is no laughing matter, and in this canon, not only does the Church teach pacifism, but it also recognizes the necessity for self-defense.

God makes it abundantly clear in the Old Testament that those who are with Him and have His favor will win whatever righteous war they set out to do. In Exodus 17, the Amalekites came upon the children of Israel in battle. Moses had Joshua set up his army against the Amalekites, and "so it was, when Moses held up his hands, that Israel prevailed; but when he let down his hands, Amalek prevailed" (OSB). It is interesting that Israel was only victorious through the power of God while Moses held his hands up - prefiguring the Cross and how we as Christians are victorious over sin through it. Not only that, but it also shows how the Lord can

favor war when it is against the wicked oppressors of the world. In the letter of St. Athanasius to Amun, he writes:

For example, it is not right to kill, yet in war it is lawful and praiseworthy to destroy the enemy; accordingly not only are they who have distinguished themselves in the field held worthy of great honours, but monuments are put up proclaiming their achievements. So that the same act is at one time and under some circumstances unlawful, while under others, and at the right time, it is lawful and permissible. (Letter XLVIII)

St. Athanasius has the nuanced understanding that most of us today do - that killing in war is not at the same level of murder - so long as the intent is pure. He possesses this idea of a “just war,” in which it is permissible to murder within the bounds of a war that does not contradict Christian teaching (he being a Christian Saint). Jennifer Otto, esteemed writer on Christian history at Cambridge University Press, writes on this idea: “Commenting on Jesus’s instruction to Peter to return his sword ‘to its place,’ Origen writes, ‘There is, therefore, some place for the sword, from which he who is not willing to perish by the sword is not permitted to take it’” (263). Origen is clearly teaching that Christ knows there is a place for the sword - and that that place is for those who are comfortable dying by it themselves. Pacifist Christians would like to argue that we must turn the other cheek, and that “you shall not murder” (OSB, Exodus 20:13). However, if we took that raw passage to its logical extreme, we could never justify protecting our children from our enemies, let alone the wars sanctioned by our own God, the Lord of Hosts, which quite literally means “God of the Armies”. Ideally, we could take that passage completely literally and never have to take the lives of anyone - but in a world corrupted by sin (OSB, Genesis 6:11-12) and left in the hands of evildoers, it must be permissible to take up arms in defense of our brethren. St. Paul the Apostle teaches that “if it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with

all men. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord” (OSB, Romans 12:18-19). St. Paul highlights that *if possible* we must live peaceably, but otherwise - war becomes a sad necessity. No matter the circumstance, the Lord will avenge the righteous and reward them for their longsuffering.

Surely those who occupy military positions and those of power are not always going against God’s plan for their life in not pursuing pure pacifism - for King David conquered Jerusalem; Joshua conquered Canaan, and so on. In *God at Work*, by Gene Veith, he argues that:

...it is God, working through the *offices* of the judge or soldier, who takes life and punishes sin. Christians can indeed occupy these offices, being called to them as divine vocations. So a soldier is loving his neighbor when he protects his country, and a judge is loving his neighbor when he puts a criminal in prison. (102)

As previously stated, God can use soldiers to exact vengeance and bring divine judgment upon evildoers. God is not limited to simply striking someone dead, but works through human vocations to bring about justice and protect his people. Veith argues that defending your country is part of loving your neighbor. St. John the Apostle speaks to this, saying “by this we know love, because He laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brethren” (OSB, 1st John 3:16), as there is no greater form of love than laying down your life for your brother. Christ our God showed us this perfect love through willingly taking on human nature, suffering just as we do, and eventually being crucified and put to death for us depraved sinners. While soldiers and those in positions of power can be used as a means of divine judgment, Veith explains that:

...this by no means negates the commands to love our enemies and to forgive those who trespass against us. In our personal lives, soldiers, judges, and executioners must indeed

love and forgive their enemies. But in their vocations, by virtue of their offices, they are authorized to bear the sword. (102)

If we do find ourselves within a position of power where we can exact judgment upon someone as part of our vocation, we must be careful to do so with fear and trembling. Those who hold the license to kill have not gained a gift, but a heavy cross to carry. Veith writes that: "...it is not up to us, as individuals, to bring global terrorists to justice. Our law enforcement officials and our military do this on our behalf" (103). In war, those who hold the sword allow civilians to have peace of mind, knowing that God will protect them or avenge them through their soldiers.

War is a sad reality of this fallen world, that was never meant to be such. Christ teaches us that as his followers we must be models of pacifism and strive to forgive others, and not pick up the sword, lest we be judged likewise. The Church Fathers, while nearly unanimous in their writings that Christians must embrace pacifism and that soldiers who attack first are under condemnation, also recognize the reality that peace is not always an option. Through soldiers and our government's officials, called to their vocations to serve, protect, and exact justice, we are protected from foreign threats, a mercy afforded to us by God. May we all strive for peace, mentally, spiritually, and with each other.

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