

# The Christian View of War

*What does the Bible say about killing in the military? What is the just war theory? Are some wars biblically justified? What does the Bible say about war in general?*

Christians have argued over the topic of war for centuries. Many have insisted that the Bible, particularly since the time of Jesus, condemns war and killing. Thus, many practicing Christians have adopted a position very close to pacifism. Others argue that war is a reality of the human condition because of sin, and that even God Himself ordered wars, especially in the Old Testament.

The debate is not likely to go away anytime soon, but the writer of Ecclesiastes probably sums up best the Bible's position on war, when he writes of "a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace".

## **What Does the Bible Say About Killing?**

The classic King James Version of the Bible records the famous Sixth Commandment as saying: "Thou shalt not kill" (Exodus 20:13, KJV).

To modern readers, the King James wording in Exodus 20:13 implies a broad prohibition against the taking of life under virtually any circumstances. However, the original Ten Commandments were not written in English, but rather in Hebrew. And the original Hebrew word standing behind the word "kill" can mean killing or murder, depending on its context.

We need to realize that the context of all the Ten Commandments deals with personal decisions stemming from the intentions of the heart. A person must choose to honor his or her parents, and

must choose to put no other gods before the one true God. Thus, if Exodus 20:13 is read within that context, it refers to an individual intentionally taking the life of another human being.

Yet within the same Mosaic Law (the Ten Commandments, of course, forming the basis of that Law, but not the extent of it), God provides for capital punishment, self-defense, and war.

## **What Does the Bible Say About Killing in the Military?**

In the Old Testament, God ordered the Israelites to wage war against several tribal nations, mainly in the land of Canaan. Even after Israel had established itself within the "Promised Land," wars continued, from the period of the judges (Samson, Gideon, etc.) through the kings (Saul, David, Hezekiah, etc.).

Some Christians argue that this was the Old Testament reality, and that Jesus swept all that aside, when he ushered in peace and non-violence. The problem with this view is that sin was not wiped away by Jesus. The price of sin was paid for on the cross (see John 3, Romans 10, Ephesians 2, etc.), but sin itself persists in this present world. And James writes that wars come from sin, particularly greed and lust (James 4:1). War is a reality in a sinful world.

The apostle Paul acknowledges this, when he tells the church in Rome that the civil authority "does not bear the sword in vain," but "is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil" (Romans 13:4, NKJV).

It is, of course, true that many civil rulers do not "execute wrath" against "evil," but are instead themselves purveyors of evil. Paul wasn't writing that all rulers are good. Rather, he was laying out the purpose of government. It is the purpose of government to restrain evil and protect the innocent. This is seen again in his letter to Timothy, where he urges his young protege to "pray for those in authority," so that "we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence." (I Timothy 2:1-2, KJV)

In order for government to provide a "quiet and peaceable life" (I Timothy 2, KJV) for its people and to "execute wrath on him who practices evil" (Romans 13, NKJV), the government must "bear the sword" (Romans 13, KJV). The "sword" represents power, specifically the power to take life. This therefore applies to both capital punishment and war.

### **The Just War Theory**

The government's biblical authority to take life is not absolute. When Paul lays out the purpose of government in Romans 13, he clearly couches its mandate in the context of promoting good and punishing evil. This premise is, in part, what inspired Augustine (A.D. 354-430) and Thomas Aquinas (A.D. 1225-1274) to develop the so-called "Just War Theory."

The "Just War Theory" holds that wars are necessary under certain conditions, but that certain moral guidelines should be observed, among them:

- *War must be waged only for a just cause.*
- *Peaceful means of settling the conflict should first be pursued.*

➤ *The war must not target innocent civilians.*

➤ *The war should not cause greater evil than that which it is trying to eliminate. The war must be waged by a legitimate (or structurally accountable) authority.*

There are many variations of the Just War Theory, and this is only a bare overview of its concepts. The main concept behind it is simple: The government's authority to wage war (and thus take life) is not absolute, but rather hinges on its adhering to certain moral, God-ordained principles of justice.

### **A Time for War and a Time for Peace**

War and violence are never presented as good things in the Bible, even when God orchestrates or mandates such actions. They are, however, presented as necessary at times. So long as sin is present in the world, war and violence will also remain.

Jesus himself warned that "there will be wars and rumors of wars" (Matthew 24:6, NKJV) and human history will be sadly marked by conflict.

The job of the follower of the Lord Jesus Christ isn't to campaign against war per se, but rather to be "salt and light" in spreading the Gospel of peace and justice throughout the world. By doing so in every area of life, we will be doing spiritual warfare. It is through this warfare that Christ will build His Kingdom, and all His enemies will be defeated. And that's another topic for another time:

*Will Christ's Kingdom of Peace and Righteousness be established on earth through the Gospel?*