

What Does the Bible Teach About Christians and the Armed Services?

(Compiled by Paul R. Blake from multiple sources)

Introduction:

- A. The purpose of this lesson
 1. I will not engage in a discussion of the morality of war. I have heard arguments on both sides and can answer both. It is a pointless discussion. Wars are not moral or immoral; they just are. Governments' motivations for engaging in warfare can be moral or immoral
 2. I will not participate in any debate designed to encourage Christ to engage or refuse to engage in warfare. It is unprofitable and harmful to publically berate a struggling brother's scruple of conscience.
 3. I will not engage in a discussion of politics. That has no place in the assemblies or Bible classes of God's people.
- B. This issue has been debated among professed believers since the fourth century AD in the writings of Ambrose and Augustine.
 1. "The relationship between Christianity and politics is a historically complex subject and a frequent source of disagreement throughout the history of Christianity, as well as in modern politics between the Christian right and Christian left. There have been a wide variety of ways in which thinkers have conceived of the relationship between Christianity and politics, with many arguing that Christianity directly supports a particular political ideology or philosophy. Along these lines, various thinkers have argued for Christian communism, Christian socialism, Christian anarchism, Christian libertarianism, or Christian democracy. Others believe that Christians should have little interest or participation in politics or government." (Wikipedia)
- C. This is a spiritual and moral question that can only be answered in the word of God. Governments, while commissioned by God to use force, cannot be trusted to always make moral choices.
 1. "In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist." (Dwight David Eisenhower)
- D. There are three viewpoints on this troubling question: two conflicting, extreme schools of thought and the Bible answer:
 1. All war is evil, and no Christian should ever participate
 2. War engaged by my country is good; every Christian should participate
 3. What God has said about it

I. THE BIBLE APPEARS TO OFFER MIXED MESSAGES

- A. There are numerous passages that seem to speak of Christians as abjectly pacifistic - Prov. 25:21-22; Matt. 5:39; Rom. 12:17
 1. Barton W. Stone of the Stone/Campbell Movement taught that compliance with civil law is equal to disobedience to God's law.

2. Barton Stone's primitivism advocates that Christians do not vote, run for office, participate in the military, etc. because government is inherently evil; a view that tended to be held by many rural congregations
 3. But there are many passages that speak about war and violence that appear to show God's approval of all His people fighting in battles: David and Goliath - 1Sam. 17; Israel and the conquest of Canaan, etc.
 4. Campbell and others in his branch of the movement advocated for and participated in civil government in all of its functions; a view that tended to be held by urban congregations.
 5. There even appears to be conflict in Jesus instructions before His crucifixion: get a sword, but don't use a sword - Lk 22:36, 38, 49-51
 6. The Bible does seem to argue both sides of the case as to whether we should support the military and Christian participation in it. The best way to explain these seeming conflicts is to better understand what the Bible is and isn't. The Bible is not a political or foreign policy handbook. We are not supposed to pull out verses literally and use them to justify our specific national foreign policy.
- B. There are no mixed messages, only mixed understandings
1. Some of the instructions regarding force and violence speak of individuals using it to serve themselves and their personal interests; other passages speak of legitimate organizations using force for Divinely ordained purposes.
 2. Illustration: With regard to the work of the church and that of individuals, the New Testament makes a distinction in the context as to which actions are authorized for individuals versus which works are authorized for the church as a collectivity. The individual cannot take the collective instruction as authority for his individual work, nor can the church as a collectivity take a command for individuals as authority for their work. That is the fundamental error of institutionalism.
 - a. Gal. 6:10 and James 1:26-27 are contextually limited to individuals; 1Tim. 5:9 and Phil. 4:14-17 are contextually limited to the church as a collectivity
 3. Likewise with the instructions regarding force and violence: some of them are for authorized organizations; others are for individual Christians. It is important to examine the context to see not only what is authorized, but also who is authorized to use it.

II. IS THE USE OF FORCE A SIN WHEN COMMANDED BY GOD?

- A. Rom. 13:1-6 - Rulers are a terror to evil works; to withstand them in the exercise of their office is to resist an ordinance of God; they serve a Divinely ordained purpose; they are to use force against evil.
 1. Do they sin when they punish or execute the persistently evil?
- B. God said regarding idolaters: that prophet or that dreamer of dreams, shall be put to death by those who witness it - Deut. 13:5, 7, 9, 17

1. Is God commanding bystander witnesses to commit sin by putting the idolater to death?
2. If it is a sin, then it is a sin God participated in by commanding it
- C. In the case of Achan in Joshua 7:1, 13, who had taken an “accursed thing,” God ordered the people to put him to death.
 1. Did Joshua sin by leading the people in putting Achan and his household to death? (vs. 25-26)
 2. Under the Law of Moses, the sixth commandment in the King James Version says “thou shalt not kill.” However, the Hebrew word, ratsach, is more correctly translated murder. Thus the commandment more accurately reads, “thou shalt not murder.”
 3. “Ratsach” (raw-tsakh') - “properly, to dash in pieces, i.e. kill (a human being), especially to murder, man-slayer, murderer (Strongs - 07523).
 4. A Divinely ordained use of deadly violence is not murder.
- D. In each of these passages, God authorized the use of force, and it was carried out for a Divinely ordained purpose by His people as a collectivity.
 1. The question we must answer: Does God authorize Christians to participate in the authorized use of force for the authorized collectivity?

III. WHAT IS WRITTEN?

- A. The Bible frequently uses military language to illustrate the battle between good and evil, the righteous and the wicked. However, this does not constitute authority to use military force in our battle against evil - Eph. 6:12; 2Cor 10:3-5
 1. The spiritual warfare and conquest for Christ is not part of this question
- B. The Bible does not specifically state whether or not someone should serve in the military. At the same time, Christians can rest assured that being a soldier is highly respected throughout the Scriptures.
 1. Gen. 14 - Abraham’s nephew Lot was kidnapped by Chedorlaomer, king of Elam, and his allies. Abraham rallied to Lot’s aid by gathering 318 trained men of his household and defeating the Elamites. Armed forces were engaged in a noble task, rescuing/protecting the innocent.
 2. God authorized Israel to develop an army to accomplish His purposes of protecting Israel and expanding borders - 1Sam. 13:2, 24:2, 26:2
 - a. David increased the army, brought in hired troops from other regions who were loyal to him (2Sam. 15:19-22) and turned over the direct leadership of his armies to Joab.
 - b. Under David, Israel also became more aggressive in its offensive military policies, absorbing neighboring states like Ammon (2Sam. 11:1; 1Chron. 20:1-3).
 - c. David established a system of rotating troops with twelve groups of 24,000 men serving one month of the year (1Chron. 27).
 - d. Although Solomon’s reign was peaceful, he further expanded the army, adding chariots and horsemen (1Kings 10:26).
- C. Jesus marveled when a Roman centurion approached Him. The centurion’s response to Jesus indicated a clear understanding of authority, as well as faith in Jesus (Matt. 8:5-13). Jesus did not denounce his career.

1. Several centurions mentioned in the New Testament are praised as Christians, God-fearers, or at least men of good character:
 - a. Centurion who confessed Christ at crucifixion - Mark 15:39
 - b. Centurion who was generous and kind to the Jews and acknowledged Jesus' power and authority - Luke 7:2
 - c. Centurion who became the first Gentile convert - Acts 10:1
 - d. Commander who rescued Paul from a beating - Acts 21:32
 - e. Centurion who did not put Paul in prison - Acts 28:16
 2. Nowhere in the New Testament is it implied that soldiers who converted to Christ were required to leave their professions.
 - a. Cornelius was not instructed to resign his commission - Acts 10
 - b. Sergius Paulus was not commanded to resign his commission as chief city enforcer - Acts 13:7, 12
 - c. The Philippian jailor was not commanded to resign his commission - Acts 16:30-34
 3. To insist that each of them resigned upon obeying the Gospel demands multiple assumptions not warranted in the text:
 - a. It begins with the assumption that Christians may not participate in the armed forces (unproven premise fallacy)
 - b. It assumes that government sins when it uses force (sophistry)
 - c. It assumes the conclusion as a proven premise (petitio principia, begging the question fallacy)
- D. Ecc. 3:8, 11; Psalm 144:1-2; Deut. 20:1-4; 1Sam. 30:8; John 19:11, 18:36

Conclusions:

- A. God authorizes civil organizations to maintain order and to use force against those who violate peace and order
- B. It is not a sin for civil organizations to execute aggressors and evil persons when it becomes necessary; if it is a sin for them to do this, then God is complicit in the sin
- C. If it is not a sin for civil organizations to execute the evil, it is not a sin for individuals who participate in civil organizations to execute the evil doers
- D. If it is not a sin for individuals who participate in civil organizations to execute the evil, it is not a sin for Christians who participate in civil government to do the same
- E. Any doctrine that teaches that it is a sin for Christians to participate is based on the following:
 1. A misunderstanding of the difference between authority for individuals versus the authority for civil organizations, or...
 2. Assumptions about the matter that are not supported in scripture and are based on logical fallacies, or...
 3. An overly tender conscience, in which case the individual must forbear service in civil government, and who must be received by brethren who do not hold this issue of conscience
- F. Christians are permitted, not required, to service in the armed forces of civil government in carrying out its Divinely mandated purposes