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Theme: Veterans' Day
Can Soldiers Be Christians?

My Dad was a WW2 veteran, my older brother a Vietnam vet. I myself never served in the military. As I was finishing high school, the Vietnam War was winding down and the draft was discontinued. I've always had a high regard for those who served in the armed forces of our country and became an even greater patriot after moving to Guam. After hearing the stories of the Japanese conquest of that island and the atrocities committed against the poor Chamorro (native) people, and learning of the American liberation of that island—a powerful but seldom heard story of the Pacific Theater of WW2—I became ever so proud of being an American. (You might be interested to know that Chamorros are among the most patriotic of Americans. Their Liberation Day celebration, July 21, is unparalleled by any mainland patriotic holiday I've seen and the Chamorros have the highest military enlistment rate of any state or territory.)

I suppose it was in my Confirmation class, when I was in Middle School, that I first wondered about the morality of war. Part of our curriculum, of course, was the studying of The Ten Commandments and the Fifth Commandment, by the way we Lutherans count them, got me to thinking about “*Thou shalt not kill.*” My good pastor wisely taught us the better translation of that commandment: *Thou shalt not murder* but it got me to thinking about abortion, euthanasia, suicide—and war. Is killing another human being ever OK? Would God ever approve of the taking of another person's life?

There are those within Christianity who would say, “Absolutely not!” They are called pacifists—and you know, I'm sure, that the word “pacifist” means “peaceful.” The Pacific Ocean, literally, means Peaceful Sea. Anyway, pacifists are convinced that Christ condemned all forms of violence. By these good people and the “peace churches”—Quakers and Mennonites, specifically—appeal is made to Biblical passages such as...

- Matthew 26: 52 – “*All who draw the sword will die by the sword.*”

- Matthew 6:89 – “*If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.*”
- Luke 6:27 – “*Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.*”

In all these statements of Jesus, the Savior commands meekness and peacemaking. The very example of Jesus at the time of His arrest, trial and crucifixion—He didn’t resist any of it—lends support to the pacifist view, these folks think.

Some historians contend that pacifism was the universal position held in the Christian Church during its first 150 years of existence. The second-century Christian apologist, Justin Martyr, said that Christians would gladly die for a righteous cause but would refrain from making war on their enemies. We see this understanding lived out by the way Stephen, for example, underwent his stoning in the book of Acts and by the way Christian tradition tells us all the first disciples met their deaths as martyrs. They didn’t fight it. They submitted to the authorities that took their lives. If you saw the movie *Paul: Apostle Of Christ* which came out last Easter, you saw how he spoke out against those who would brandish the sword against the Romans in defense of the fledgling Christian community—and this from the man who gladly had the sword taken up against Christians before he became one himself!

Throughout Christian history there have been those who repudiate all forms of militarism as intrinsically contrary to the Gospel. They believe that the Church should be a disciplined community in direct reliance on the Holy Spirit—that part of the Holy Trinity represented by the dove which is, of course, a symbol of peace. All Christians—at least the sensible ones—advocate peace in varying measures.

The Crusades of the early second millennium AD—about 1,000 years ago now—exemplified the idea of “holy war.” These Crusaders--some of whom were legitimate believers but many of whom were mercenaries, just in it for the money or the adventure—left from various places throughout Europe and marched to the Holy Land to try to recapture it from “the Turks,” translated Muslims, who had taken over the land of Jesus and were desecrating many of the holy sites of the Christian faith.

But “holy war” wasn’t anything new. Supporters of this view also appeal to the Bible, primarily the Old Testament’s record of God’s people at war—the Hebrews’ conquest of Canaan as they entered the Promised Land, for example. Many of us learned the song “Joshua Fit The Battle Of Jericho” in Sunday School. Well, after those walls came a-tumbling down, God’s people didn’t go in to have tea with the residents of Jericho. They slaughtered them. Mary and I recently finished reading 1 & 2 Samuel for our devotions and the constant battling between the various people-groups of that land in that time is sickening. And yet much of this genocide was ordered by God—the same God who gave us the commandment, “*Thou shalt not murder.*” How do we make sense of this?

Martin Luther, during the Reformation of the 16th century, posited a position which came to be called the Just War Theory. Here’s the bottom line of this position: War is terrible but sometimes war is the lesser of two evils and must be entered into in order to put the Greater Evil in its place.

The foundation for this “Just War” thinking is the condition of fallen humanity. Luther—and others before him, namely Augustine and Thomas Aquinas—saw war as both a consequence of sin and a remedy for it. Those who subscribe to the Just War philosophy believe that violence, including murder, is a result of human sin—but that it’s occasionally necessary to engage in violence, even killing, in order to stem the flow of wanton killing. In other words, war must be waged at times in order that peace might prevail. Furthermore, war must be undertaken under proper authority—individuals can’t just decide to take-on the enemy. This “Just War Theory” of conflict is the position of most Christians--Protestants, Catholics and Orthodox—today, although I suspect most believers haven’t thought this through. Some have, however.

I remember sitting in a coffee shop on Guam with a Navy Seal who was wrestling with the legitimacy of what he had done and may yet be called upon to do. This brute of a man—big, muscle-bound, yet intelligent and sensitive—was a sniper for the Navy. During the Gulf War and conflicts surrounding that, Ty admitted to having shot dozens of people. Ty had recently become a Christian and was learning the ways of Jesus. He was troubled by the example and teachings of Jesus as it related to his occupation, specifically the killing of other human beings.

I was glad for Ty's troubled conscience for the taking of human life is never a trifling matter. And yet as a proponent of the Just War Theory of warfare, I could support what Ty was doing—in the same way that I support our police forces who must, if necessary, take another life in order to protect society. Yes, taking life should always be troubling but it is, at times, the lesser of two evils.

Martin Luther set out a theological principle which, I think, is very helpful in terms of this matter. It's called the Two Kingdoms doctrine. Luther believed that God ordained a "spiritual kingdom" by which the Holy Spirit produces righteous people under Christ. If you believe that you are a citizen of heaven by virtue of the shed blood of Jesus, you are part-and-parcel of this spiritual kingdom. Jesus' statement before Pilate, "*My Kingdom is not of this world*" (John 18:36) is dear to us because we see ourselves as resident aliens in this world. And yet we are residents of this world, even if we don't belong here ultimately. We live in this world and are part-and-parcel of this temporal kingdom also, simultaneously. Every Christian must also live and participate in his or her own society in which the wicked must be restrained and outward peace maintained. Luther, in the development of this Two Kingdoms doctrine, referred to the tension between Christ's rejection of violence in the Sermon on The Mount ("*Blessed are the peacemakers...*") and those passages in Scripture that admonish obedience to secular government. We heard one such scripture as our Epistle Lesson today which tells us to be subject to our governing authorities. Jesus' own statement in our Gospel reading today, "*Give unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's*" is a brilliant summary of this Two Kingdoms doctrine. As Christians we have one foot in the spiritual kingdom and the other foot in the temporal kingdom. The tricky part is how to keep our footing.

Luther and others of his ilk formulated seven points—guidelines—which I think are helpful. Let me share them with you. You might find them helpful, as I have. These seven points can be divided into two categories: 1) principles to govern the decision to go to war; and 2) principles governing proper action during war.

Principles governing the decision to go to war

1. **Just cause.** Self-defense and defense of the “weaker neighbor” against an aggressor is fundamental. Only defensive warfare is legitimate. We must never be the aggressor—only the defender.
2. **Last resort.** War may be waged only after all negotiations and compromise have been attempted and failed. In his *Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount*, Luther remarks that “anyone who claims to be a Christian and a child of God, not only does not start war or unrest; also he gives help and counsel on the side of peace wherever he can, even though there be a just and adequate cause for going to war.” Christians go to war reluctantly.
3. **Formal declaration.** Your government—not you personally, nor your little group—must be the authority that declares and wages war. As Thomas Aquinas commented, “It is not the business of a private individual to declare war...as the care of the common weal is committed to those who are in authority.” There needs to be a chief and the chief needs to be followed.
4. **Just intention.** War must be carried out to secure a just peace—never for territorial conquest, economic gain or ideological supremacy. The only legitimate intention of war is to secure peace.

Principles governing the conduct of war

1. **Proportionality.** The weaponry and force used should be limited to what is needed to secure a just peace and attain better conditions after the conflict than existed prior to it. This principle harkens back to the Old Testament (Exodus 21:24) teaching of “*an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,*” meaning that if someone causes you to lose your eyesight, his punishment must not be death but something proportional, like the loss of his own eyesight. In other words, you can’t go overboard.
2. **Discrimination.** Non-combatants and civilians should be immune from attack. In other words, you don’t wipe out a whole society because of the evils actions of some.

3. **Limited objectives.** Since the purpose of a just war must ultimately be peace, unconditional surrender or the complete obliteration of the social or political or religious institutions of a nation is unwarranted. You don't throw out the baby with the bathwater.

It's good and necessary to have principles to guide you in your understanding of war but it's often very difficult to apply these principles to daily life. Let me give you some examples:

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran pastor during WW2. He leaned toward pacifism because that's what he believed Jesus taught. And yet, as Bonhoeffer became more aware of the atrocities Hitler was perpetrating against the Jews and others at that time, he was convinced that Hitler was evil incarnate and must be stopped. After serious prayer, Bonhoeffer decided to participate in an assassination attempt on Hitler—murdering his country's leader. The attempt failed, Bonhoeffer was jailed and just a few days prior to the end of the war in Germany, Bonhoeffer was hanged. Did he do right? Here was an individual plotting to overthrow his government's leader. Clearly, the principle of "Formal Declaration" was not being followed.

Some of you, likeme, will remember all the protesting that took place toward the end of the Vietnam War--protesting which, to no small measure, resulted in the end of that conflict. While "fighting communism in Southeast Asia" was the government's official line, it became apparent that there were political and economic interests involved in continuing that conflict. The "Military-Industrial Complex" came to be seen as profiting from the war with very little true interest in the welfare of the Vietnamese. The use of Agent Orange affected not just the Viet Cong but much of the civilian population. Were the principles of "Just Intention" and "Limited Objectives" being followed?

What about the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan in WW2? It ended the War in the Pacific (an oxymoron, wouldn't you say?). Some would say it was a necessary evil

to stop even greater evil. But were the principles of “Proportionality” and “Discrimination” followed? Millions of non-combatants, women and children, were exterminated or permanently and grossly disabled.

And today, if it can be proven that North Korea, for example, is planning a strike against the United States, can we—should we—take the initiative and strike first—or does the Just Cause principle, which advocates only defensive action, require waiting to be attacked first? Is severely menacing behavior acceptable as a legitimate basis for initiating an act of self-defense?

It’s complicated.

In his “Instructions Of The Visitors” in 1528, Martin Luther called for the twice-ringing of the church bells to be retained. The bells were not to be rung to tell the time of the morning or quitting time for workers in the field but rather, Luther said, “the ringing of the bells is done as an exhortation to (prayer), particularly for peace.” The Reformation was not a peaceful revolution but involved much bloodshed on the part of many innocent people. Luther was appalled by all this violence and so instructed his people to pray for peace, saying, “...we should plead with God daily not to punish us with the scourge of war.”

The scourge of war. It’s been and continues to be in many parts of this world an awful reality. A necessary evil. Perhaps even the lesser of two evils.

In his treatise, *Can Soldiers Be Christian?* Luther—after spelling out the various principles of a just war--says, “he who fights with a good and well-instructed conscience can indeed fight well.” On this Veterans Day, we pay tribute to those who have fought with a “good and well-

instructed conscience” and in so doing have given us the freedoms we enjoy. While we honor those who have protected us from certain evils, we never glorify war, violence and the taking of life. Today we soberly consider the necessity of war in this fallen world and thank God for those who have been willing to, and those who have actually laid down their lives in service, not just to our country but for the sake of the innocent and vulnerable worldwide. It’s a noble thing. Amen.

Songs:

Opening	“O Beautiful For Spacious Skies” (ELW#888)
Psalm 20	“We Trust In The Name Of The Lord Our God” by Steven Curtis Chapman
Sermon	“God Of Our Fathers”
Closing	“My Country, ‘Tis Of Thee”

Note: Some of the content of this sermon was taken from Dr. John F. Johnson’s article, *Can War Be Just?*’ in January of 2003, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, MO.