

Loving Our Enemies: A Christian Response to War

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Introduction

For 2000 years, Christians have lived in a warlike world, having to decide whether to participate in these conflicts, or not. Sadly, most Christians have decided to take part in these wars, sometimes even claiming they are fighting in the name of Jesus. In this study, we will see that Christians must not involve ourselves in human warfare. On the contrary we must love our enemies and not kill them, striving to live at peace with all men, and forgiving all the hurts and wrongs done to us. We will examine the major cause for war, and when confronted by war, what we should do. We will also examine some of the major arguments used to justify Christian participation in military conflicts.

The Cause of War

The apostle James tells us that lust and covetousness are the motivating cause for wars: "What causes wars, and what causes fightings among you? Is it not your passions that are at war in your members? You desire and do not have; so you kill. And you covet and cannot obtain; so you fight and wage war. You do not have, because you do not ask" (James 4:1-2 *Revised Standard Version*). A study of history confirms this truth. When it comes down to it, the basic cause of all human warfare is one person or group of people wanting what isn't theirs, or violently responding to the covetous actions of others. James goes on to show there's a connection between lust, covetousness, and friendship with the world. "You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. Unfaithful creatures! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God" (James 4:3-4 *Revised Standard Version*).

This is an idea supported by the apostle John, "Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever" (1 John 2:15-17; all scriptures quoted are from the *New American Standard Bible* unless otherwise noted). As Christians we're no longer a part of this world, but are "aliens and strangers" who must keep ourselves separate from the evils of this society:

"If you [the disciples] were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I [Jesus] chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you. . . . I [Jesus] do not ask You [the Father] to take them [the disciples] out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world" (John 15:19; 17:15-16).

And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2).

For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son" (Colossians 1:13).

For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Philippians 3:20).

Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier in active service entangles himself in the affairs of everyday life, so that he may please the one who enlisted him as a soldier " (2 Timothy 2:3-4).

Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul" (1 Peter 2:11).

Separation from the world includes not taking part in one of humanity's greatest evils: warfare. When standing before Pilate, only hours before His execution, Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm"(John 18:36). Jesus didn't expect His disciples to fight to save His life, because His kingdom was not of this world. Why then should we think that He would approve of His disciples fighting in this world's wars? The apostle Paul tells us that although we live in this world, we're not to take part in its wars, "For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:3-5).

God warns us that those who kill others will experience the same violence, "And behold, one of those who were with Jesus reached and drew out his sword, and struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his ear. Then Jesus said to him, 'Put your sword back into its place; for all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword'" (Matthew 26:51-52) and "He who leads into captivity shall go into captivity; he who kills with the sword must be killed with the sword" (Revelation 13:10 *New King James Version*). Reaping what we sow is an important biblical principle: "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life" (Galatians 6:7-8). This applies to individuals and nations. Thugs and violent people meet violent ends. The same goes for nations. The more hostile and warlike a nation, the more its people suffer from the consequences of war.

Three Principles

There are three biblical principles fundamental to Christianity, principles that are incompatible with warfare: love, forgiveness, and peace. As Christians we must love others, forgiving their wrongs while striving to live at peace them.

Love

Jesus taught that we must love our enemies (Luke 6:27, 35; Matthew 5:44), and He showed us how:

- By doing good to those who hate us (Luke 6:27, 35).
- Blessing and praying for those who curse and mistreat us (Luke 6:28; Matthew 5:44).
- Refusing to retaliate against those who hurt us (Luke 6:29; Matthew 5:39-41).
- Treating all people, including our enemies, the same way we want others to treat us (Luke 6:31; Matthew 7:12).
- Lending or giving to our enemies when they are in need (Luke 6:35; Matthew 5:42).
- Jesus goes on say that if we're willing to love only those who love us, then we're no different than the average sinner, for they care about only those who care about them (Luke 6:32-34; Matthew 5:46-47).
- Jesus summarizes all this by saying, "be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36).

Jesus lived the words He preached. The final hours of His life give us an example of how to treat our enemies. Jesus' response was to love those involved in His arrest and execution.

The apostle John records that just before Jesus' last Passover, He "loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end" (John 13:1). This included Judas His betrayer. During the Passover meal, Jesus got up and washed the disciples' feet, including Judas' (verses 2-19). Washing someone else's feet was the act of a servant. For Jesus this was an act of loving service to Judas, and all the disciples. Later that night when Judas betrays Jesus to the religious authorities, Jesus doesn't denounce Judas or call him a traitor. Instead, He calls Judas His friend (Matthew 26:47-50). Jesus loved Judas to the end.

During Jesus' arrest, Peter draws a sword and strikes one of the men trying to arrest Jesus. How does Jesus respond? Does He encourage Peter to keep on swinging? Does He let the wounded man suffer and bleed? No. He heals the man and rebukes Peter for using violence (Matthew 26:51-55; Luke 22:47-51; John 18:10-11). Jesus loved His enemies.

While being crucified, Jesus doesn't denounce and revile his executioners. Instead He asks God to forgive them (Luke 23:34). Later while hanging on the cross, not only do the onlookers taunt and ridicule Jesus, but also two thieves crucified with Him. At some point during that day, one of the thieves stops insulting Jesus. He even rebukes the other thief who keeps on taunting Jesus. The first thief recognizes that he and the other thief deserve what they are getting. He seeks Jesus' mercy, asking to be in the Kingdom with Him. How does Jesus react to this man's "deathbed repentance"? Does Jesus ignore the thief, seeking to get even for his abusive words? Does Jesus call him a sinner who is getting what he deserves? Jesus responds to the thief by saying that yes, he will be with Jesus in Paradise (Matthew 27:38-44; Mark 15:27-32; Luke 23:39-43).

In 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 the apostle Paul describes what love is: "Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." There's no possible way that an individual Christian or a "Christian nation" can apply these verses to their enemies while they're waging war against them. We can't love our enemy when we're trying to kill him.

Forgiveness

Forgiveness is another foundational principle of Christianity; without it Christianity wouldn't exist. God is a forgiving God (Psalm 32:1-2, 5; 85:1-3; 86:5; 103:1-4; 130:3-4; Micah 7:18), and He wants us to be forgivers as well: "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you" (Ephesians 4:31-32); "So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you" (Colossians 3:12-13).

If we want God to forgive us our sins, we must forgive the wrongs others do to us: "For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions" (Matthew 6:14-15); "Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven will also

forgive you your transgressions. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your transgressions" (Mark 11:25-26).

Jesus shows the importance of forgiving others when responding to a question by Peter:

Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. But since he did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. So the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.' And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt. But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, 'Pay back what you owe.' So his fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you.' But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed. So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. Then summoning him, his lord said to him, 'You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?' And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart" (Matthew 18:21-35).

There are two types of forgiveness: divine forgiveness of human sin, and human forgiveness of human wrongs. When God forgives someone's sins, He cleanses them of their spiritual guilt and removes the penalty for sin, which is death (1 John 1:7-9; Romans 6:23). When we forgive someone, we're not saying they're no longer guilty or responsible for what they did. Our forgiveness doesn't remove the guilt of any sin they might have committed. When we forgive others, we're saying that we're no longer going to be angry, upset, and resentful towards them.

It's possible we may end up forgiving a person whom God won't forgive. For example, we forgive the person who steals our car and wrecks it. However, just because we have forgiven them doesn't mean God has forgiven them for breaking the commandment not to steal. Before God will forgive them, they have to repent of their sin of stealing and ask for forgiveness (Psalm 35:4; Acts 2:38; 1 John 1:7-9).

It's also possible for God to forgive a person, and we not to forgive that same person. Let's continue to use the example of the car thief. He repents of stealing our car, and asks God for forgiveness. But we're so angry with him; we refuse to forgive him, continuing to nurse our hurt and resentment.

Some people use Jesus' statement in Luke 17:3-4: "Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, I repent, forgive him," as proof that unless someone asks for our forgiveness, we don't have to forgive them. We can continue to be angry, resentful and upset with them until they admit their mistake and say they're sorry. This is not what Jesus means. What Jesus is saying is that God wants us to

always to be forgiving of others. Jesus reinforces this idea by stating: "And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, I repent, forgive him" (verse 4). The emphasis is on the fact of constantly forgiving. In the parable of the Unforgiving Servant in Matthew 18:21-35 Jesus is stressing the same idea of constantly forgiving others, and if we want God to forgive us, we must be forgivers: "Then Peter came and said to Him, 'Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. . . . My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart'" (Matthew 18:21-22, 35).

The Bible provides us three good examples of the unconditional forgiveness of people who express no remorse for their wrong actions. First we have Jesus, who during his crucifixion held no bitterness towards those crucifying Him. On the contrary, He said: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:33-34). An examination of all four Gospels accounts show that during His execution, those crucifying Jesus were not sorry for what they were doing and didn't seek His forgiveness. We find a second example of unconditional forgiveness with the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. While the crowd was stoning him, Stephen cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" In his last moments of life Stephen wasn't asking God to save him, but for God not to hold the sin of his murder against his killers (Acts 7:54-60). Stephen showed a willingness to forgive those not seeking his forgiveness. The apostle Paul is our third example. In the closing sentences of his second letter to Timothy, Paul writes about the failure of fellow Christians to give him moral support during his trial before the Romans, "At my first defense no one supported me, but all deserted me; may it not be counted against them"(2 Timothy 4:16). Like Stephen before him, Paul hoped that God would not hold these brethren accountable for their actions. These three men displayed the attitude of unconditional forgiveness that God wants us to follow. It's an attitude that we must apply to our enemies, personal and national.

The opposite of forgiveness is vengeance, something that Christians must avoid. We must not seek revenge for the wrongs done to us; vengeance belongs to God and no one else:

Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay [Deuteronomy 32:35]," says the Lord. "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 on his head [Proverbs 25:21-22]." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good (Romans 12:17-21).

We must look for ways to love and forgive our enemies. Turning all desire for vengeance over to God, and letting Him handle it as He sees fit:

You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the LORD (Leviticus 19:18).

Do not say, "I will repay evil"; Wait for the LORD, and He will save you (Proverbs 20:22).

Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, And do not let your heart be glad when he stumbles; Or the LORD will see it and be displeased, And turn His anger away from him. . . . Do not be a witness against your neighbor without cause, And do not deceive with

your lips. Do not say, "Thus I shall do to him as he has done to me; I will render to the man according to his work" (Proverbs 24:17-18, 28-29).

You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you. You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5:38-48).

But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. Whoever hits you on the cheek, offer him the other also; and whoever takes away your coat, do not withhold your shirt from him either. Give to everyone who asks of you, and whoever takes away what is yours, do not demand it back. Treat others the same way you want them to treat you. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners in order to receive back the same amount (Luke 6:27-36).

See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people (1 Thessalonians 5:15).

For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in his mouth; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously (1 Peter 2:21-23).

To sum up, all of you be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit; not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing. For, "The one who desires life, to love and see good days, must keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit" (1 Peter 3:8-10).

Nations can avoid war if their leaders and citizens are willing to forgive the evil and harm done to them, and abandon revenge for past wrongs. Participating in armed conflict is a sure sign that an individual has not forgiven the wrongs done to him or his country, and is seeking revenge.

Peace

God is a God of peace (Romans 15:33; 16:20; Philippians 4:9; 1 Thessalonians 5:23; Hebrews 13:20) who wants us to be "peacemakers who sow in peace rais[ing] a harvest of righteousness" (James 3:18 *New International Version*). Jesus said, "blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God" (Matthew 5:9). The apostle Paul writes: "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men" (Romans 12:18); "Pursu[ing] the things which make for peace and the building up of one another" (Romans 14:19); "Flee[ing] from youthful lusts and pursu[ing] righteousness, faith, love and peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart" (2 Timothy 2:22); "Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14). According to the apostle Peter a Christian "must turn away from evil and do good; he must seek peace and pursue it" (1 Peter 3:11; also see Psalm 34:14). The idea of peace is so important to God that it's a Fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), one of the signs of true Christianity. Those engaging in armed conflicts are failing to be peacemakers.

The Christian Response

Since we live in a violent world, how are we to protect ourselves? To whom do we look for protection? How are we to act when someone is trying to kill us and the ones we love? Instead of relying on weapons and armies for security, we trust in God for protection:

The LORD is my light and my salvation; Whom shall I fear? The LORD is the defense of my life; Whom shall I dread? When evildoers came upon me to devour my flesh, My adversaries and my enemies, they stumbled and fell. Though a host encamp against me, My heart will not fear; Though war arise against me, In spite of this I shall be confident. For in the day of trouble He will conceal me in His tabernacle; In the secret place of His tent He will hide me; He will lift me up on a rock (Psalm 27:1-3, 5).

The LORD looks from heaven; He sees all the sons of men; From His dwelling place He looks out On all the inhabitants of the earth, He who fashions the hearts of them all, He who understands all their works. The king is not saved by a mighty army; A warrior is not delivered by great strength. A horse is a false hope for victory; Nor does it deliver anyone by its great strength. Behold, the eye of the LORD is on those who fear Him, On those who hope for His lovingkindness, To deliver their soul from death And to keep them alive in famine. Our soul waits for the LORD; He is our help and our shield. For our heart rejoices in Him, Because we trust in His holy name. Let Your lovingkindness, O LORD, be upon us, According as we have hoped in You (Psalm 33:13-22).

I sought the LORD, and He answered me, And delivered me from all my fears. . . . This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him And saved him out of all his troubles. The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear Him, And rescues them. O taste and see that the LORD is good; How blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him! O fear the LORD, you His saints; For to those who fear Him there is no want. . . . The eyes of the LORD are toward the righteous And His ears are open to their cry. The face of the LORD is against evildoers, To cut off the memory of them from the earth. The righteous cry, and the LORD hears And delivers them out of all their troubles. The LORD is near to the brokenhearted And saves those who are crushed in spirit. Many are the afflictions of the righteous, But the LORD delivers him out of them all. He keeps all his bones, Not one of them is broken. Evil shall slay the wicked, And those who hate the righteous will be

condemned. The LORD redeems the soul of His servants, And none of those who take refuge in Him will be condemned (Psalm 34:4, 6-9, 15-22).¹

God promises to protect us, but we must use wisdom, avoiding dangerous situations whenever possible. God will defend us, but we must not tempt or put Him to the test (Matthew 4:5-7; Luke 4:9-12).

The Bible gives us several examples on how to respond to those seeking to destroy our nation by war or to kill us. In the Old Testament, God fought battles for ancient Israel when they obeyed and placed their trusted in Him (Exodus 14:13-14; Deuteronomy 1:30; 2 Chronicles 20:1-30; 32:1-23). Since God is not a respecter of persons (Romans 2:9-11). He will protect any nation yielding to His leadership and placing their faith in Him.

Our primary example on how to react when someone is trying to kill us is Jesus Christ. As Christians we should follow His example in living our lives, even when mistreated (1 Peter 2:21-23). When examining the Gospels, especially John's, we see Jesus' life threatened on many occasions (John 5:18; 7:1, 19; 8:37, 40; 11:53). Yet, He never turns to violence to defend himself. There was an incident in Jesus' life when His disciples tried to use lethal force to defend Him, and He resisted their help. This happened on the night of His arrest. We find this event recorded in all four Gospels (Matthew 26:47-56; Mark 14:43-50; Luke 22:35-38, 47-53; John 18:3, 10-12). During Jesus' arrest His disciples wanted to know whether they should defend Him with two swords they had brought to the garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:35-38, 47-49). Not waiting for Jesus' response, Peter takes one of the swords and strikes, slicing off a man's ear (Luke 22:50; John 18:10). Jesus orders Peter to stop, and heals the man's ear (Luke 22:51). Although Peter was trying to defend Jesus, Jesus doesn't praise him for almost killing someone. He tells Peter to "put your sword back into its place; for all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword" (Matthew 26:52). It's clear from this passage the use of lethal force just produces more lethal force.

In the book of Acts we see how the early Christians reacted to those seeking to kill them and their family members. The first widespread persecution of Christians began in Jerusalem under Saul's direction. He invaded Christian homes, taking both men and women to prison, sometimes even having them executed (Acts 8:1-3, 9:1; 22:4-5; 26:9-11). Was the response of the Jerusalem Christians to fight back? No, they didn't respond with violence to attacks on their homes and families. At the time, Jerusalem had a population of at least 8000 Christians, if not more (Acts 2:41; 4:4). If they had wanted to, they could have fought back, but there's no biblical or historical evidence they did. Instead, they fled Jerusalem (Acts 8:1, 4; 11:19). During his ministry, Jesus spoke of fleeing in the face of persecution (Matthew 10:16-23) and warfare (Matthew 24:15-20; Luke 21:20-24). Jesus even set the example of fleeing from those who wanted to kill him (John 7:1; 11:53-54). Throughout the New Testament, we never see Christians fighting back when physically attacked. What we do see is a willingness to suffer, and even die, before hurting someone else. If any life is to be taken to save someone, it should be our own (John 15:13; 1 John 3:16).

Although Christians shouldn't take part in physical warfare, we should be combatants in a spiritual war, fighting the "good fight of faith" (1 Timothy 1:18-19; 6:11-12; 2 Timothy 4:6-7; 2:3-4) and resisting evil by spiritual means:

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of

¹ Also see Psalm 4:8; 5:11-12; 20:1-2, 6-9; 23:1, 4; 41:1-2; 91:1-16; 118:5-9, 13-14; 146:3; Proverbs 21:31; 29:25.

God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ, and we are ready to punish all disobedience, whenever your obedience is complete (2 Corinthians 10:3-6).

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil [see James 4:7 and 1 Peter 5:8-9]. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore, take up the full armor of God [see Romans 13:12], so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand firm therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints (Ephesians 6:10-18).

Arguments from the Old Testament Justifying Warfare

We will now turn our attention to some of the arguments used to justify a Christian's involvement in war. First, we will examine the main arguments used from the Old Testament. Then we will look at the New Testament arguments.²

"Thou Shall Not Kill"

Argument: It's not wrong for Christians to kill people in lawfully sectioned wars because the commandment "thou shalt not kill" (Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17 *King James Version*), is better understood to mean "you shall not murder." The Hebrew word translated as "kill" is *rasah*,³ with most modern translations of the Bible, such as the *New American Standard Bible*, rendering *rasah* as "murder." Under the Old Covenant God allows the lawful killing of people for various reasons, including the killing of people in war (Deuteronomy 20:1-20). Killing our enemy in combat is not murder because the Hebrew word translated as "killing" in connection to war is *harag*.⁴ For example: "So they made war against Midian, just as the LORD had commanded Moses, and they killed (*hagar*) every male (Numbers 31:7). The Ten Commandments forbids *rasah*, murder, not *harag*, killing.

Response: Under the Old Covenant God did allow the Israelites, as His agent, to kill other humans under special circumstances.⁵ God also allowed the Israelites to engage in warfare, giving them specific

² These arguments are composites of similar ideas made by authors consulted while researching this paper. See the bibliography for a list of sources.

³ *Rasah* (7523) "to kill, murder, slay," Vine, *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*, 128.

⁴ *Harag* (2026) "to kill, slay, destroy," *Vine's*, 128.

⁵ The Law of God as codified in the Old Covenant specified the death penalty for certain sins: adultery (Leviticus 20:10; Deuteronomy 22:22); bestiality (Exodus 22:19; Leviticus 20:15-16); blasphemy (Leviticus 24:10-16, 23); defying the Law (Numbers 15:30-31; Deuteronomy 17:12); disobedient to parents (Exodus 21:15, 17; Leviticus 20:9; Deuteronomy 21:18-21); eating fat or blood (Leviticus 7:22-27; 17:10-16); false prophesying (Deuteronomy 13:1-18; 18:20); homosexuality (Leviticus 20:13); incest (Leviticus 20:11-12, 14, 17, 19-21); kidnapping (Exodus 21:16; Deuteronomy 24:7); murder (Genesis 9:5-6; Exodus 21:12-14; Leviticus 24:17, 21); rape (Deuteronomy 22:25-27); Sabbath breaking (Exodus 35:2; Numbers 15:32-36); sacrificing to false gods (Exodus 22:20; Leviticus 20:1-6);

instructions on how to wage war (Deuteronomy 20:1-20). But it's a mistake to limit the meaning of the Hebrew word *rasah* to just "murder." Nineteen times *rasah* describes unintentional killing, what we would call manslaughter (Numbers 35:6, 11, 12, 25, 26, 27, 28; Deuteronomy 4:42; 19:3, 4, 6; Joshua 20:3, 5, 6; 21:13, 21, 27, 32, 38). Sixteen times we find *rasah* translated as a form of the word "murder." (Numbers 35:16, 17, 18, 19, 21, 30, 31; Deuteronomy 22:26; Judges 20:4; 1 Kings 21:19; 2 Kings 6:32; Job 24:14; Psalms 62:3; 94:6; Isaiah 1:21; Hosea 6:9). The commandment "You shall not *rasah*" appears two times (Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17). Twice *rasah* describes executing a murderer (Numbers 35:27, 30). Two times the Prophets use *rasah* in lists expressing sinful behavior (Jeremiah 7:9; Hosea 4:2). Finally, *rasah* depicts an animal killing a human (Proverbs 22:13).

Translating *rasah* as "kill" in Exodus 20:13 and Deuteronomy 5:17 more accurately represents the meaning of the word. "Murder," is too limiting of a rendering for *rasah*. It fails to express the full meaning of *rasah*, which includes the intentional and unintentional taking of human life. Before the 1960s, "kill" was the predominant way English language Bibles, such as the *King James Version* (1611), *American Standard Version* (1901), and *Revised Standard Version* (1952), translated *rasah*. Since then, "murder" is the more common translation. I have chosen to use the *Revised Standard Version* when quoting the biblical command not to kill, found in both the Old and New Testaments. The *Revised Standard Version's* translation of *rasah* and its Greek language counterpart *phoneuo*, better express the various meanings of these words.

For a detailed examination of *rasah*, see Wilma Ann Bailey's "*You Shall Not Kill*" or "*You Shall Not Murder*": *The Assault on a Biblical Text*. In this small volume, Bailey shows how and why translating *rasah* during the 20th century changed from "kill" to "murder" in our modern English Bibles. She also demonstrates why "kill" better expresses the meaning of *rasah* than the word "murder."

Bailey summarizes her discussion on the biblical usage of *rasah* by writing:

A final consideration is the nature of the Ten Commandments. All the other commandments that are stated in the negative prohibit behavior that is widespread: stealing, adultery, coveting, lying. It is also behavior that is controllable. Can I get away with cheating on my income tax? Can I enter into this office romance without my spouse finding out? Most adults in the course of their lives will have to make ethical choices that relate to all of these, and it is possible to make an ethical decision to obey or disobey the stipulation. But in spite of what many people may believe if they watch enough television, the crime of murder is relatively rare. Most people are never faced with the question of whether or not to murder a particular person. Indeed, most crimes of murder are crimes of passion or are committed by those who are not constrained by ethical principles. In the Bible few crimes of murder are reported . . . Humans are fascinated with crimes of murder precisely because they are rare. Most people manage to get through their entire lives without murdering anyone or seriously considering murdering anyone. Killing, however, is more widespread than murdering. Although most people do not directly kill anyone in the entire lives, most adults are complicit in killing as part of a community that executes or participates in war. The community gives it collective assent to capital punishment and war. The commandments as listed in Exodus 20 have more internal consistency if they all apply to behavior that is common and that can be

Deuteronomy 16:21-17:7); sexual relations during menstruation (Leviticus 20:18); sorcery (Exodus 22:18; Leviticus 20:6, 27); unchastity (Deuteronomy 22:13-21, 23-24).

constrained because the persons who read them or hear them can also obey them. It is unlikely that the author intends to prohibit behavior in which people do not typically engage.⁶

Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, in their book *The Truth About God: The Ten Commandments In Christian Life*, discusses why “kill” is a better translation of the sixth commandment than “murder”:

In our attempts to weasel out of this command, we shall not be helped much by saying, "It doesn't really mean kill; it means murder." The Hebrew verb "to kill" does mean "murder" in certain contexts (cf. 1 Kings 21:19), but it can also refer to unintentional killing (Deuteronomy 4:41-42), as well as to execution of a duly convicted killer (Numbers 35:30). A sweeping, unconditional claim is being made on us. We do well to admit that it probably refers to any act of violence against someone under a wide range of circumstances, intentional and otherwise. "Murder" is too limited a term to encapsulate the concern of this commandment.

This insight ought to keep us uneasy before this commandment. When we take life for any reason we put ourselves in the place of God. We steal something that God created and that God owns. Stealing from a God who is "jealous" is a risky act. All life is God's. In the Bible, when killing is done, it is done under the agency of God, not by individuals or in service to the state, for only God is to kill and to make alive.

In saying that God's people are not to take life, the commandments put us at odds with every government on earth. Governments put themselves in the place of God and kill to defend themselves and their vaunted claims of sovereignty. With God's people, it is not to be so. Rather than ponder how we might skillfully reinterpret this command to suit present circumstances, our time might be better spent wondering how we might change the church to be the sort of place that produces and supports nonviolent people.

Jesus is no help in attempts to soften the force of this commandment. Indeed, in Matthew 5:21-26, Jesus expands the scope of the commandment to encompass even verbal abuse and angry outbursts against another. Rather than retribution or recompense, he demands reconciliation. Thus Jesus appears unwilling to be enlisted by those who teach "ethics" in an attempt to nuance this commandment. He takes a command that is already quite stark and makes it even more sweeping in its demands. Perhaps we ought to take Jesus' method of interpretation in Matthew 5:21-26 as a model for our interpretation - in Jesus the commandments are intensified, extended, expanded.⁷

Jesus enlarges the meaning of the sixth commandment, showing us that killing someone means more than just physically taking their life. It means having an angry and unforgiving attitude towards them: “You have heard that it was said to the men of old, 'You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be liable to the hell of fire” (Matthew 5:21-22 *Revised Standard Version*). Just as “murder” is too limiting a term for the

⁶ Bailey, “You Shall Not Kill” or “You Shall Not Murder”, 23-24.

⁷ Hauerwas, *The Truth About God*, 80.

Hebrew word *rasah*, so “murder” is too limiting a term for the Greek word *phoneuo*⁸ used to translate the Old Testament command not to kill in Matthew 5:21. The Decalogue command “You shall not kill” (Exodus 20:13 *Revised Standard Version*) is repeated in five other New Testament verses (Matthew 19:18; Mark 10:19; Luke 18:20; Romans 13:9; James 2:11). In each of these verses, *phoneuo* is translated “kill.”

Like its Hebrew counterpart *rasah*, *phoneuo* can mean “murder”: “Thus you witness against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered [*phoneuo*] the prophets. . . . that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of innocent Abel to the blood of Zechari'ah the son of Barachi'ah, whom you murdered [*phoneuo*] between the sanctuary and the altar” (Matthew 23:31, 35 *Revised Standard Version*).

However, *phoneuo* is also translated as “kill,” in connection to fighting and waging war: “What causes wars, and what causes fightings among you? Is it not your passions that are at war in your members? You desire and do not have; so you kill [*phoneuo*]. And you covet and cannot obtain; so you fight and wage war. You do not have, because you do not ask” (James 4:2 *Revised Standard Version*). The apostle James equates *phoneuo* with war; likening it to breaking the commandment: “You shall not kill.”

If we insist on translating *phoneuo* as “murder,” as most modern English translation do, then James 4 shows us that murder and war are synonymous: “Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder [*phoneuo*] and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask” (James 4:1-2 *New King James Version*).

In addition, *phoneuo* is rendered as “kill” in connection to capital punishment: “You have condemned, you have killed [*phoneuo*] the righteous man; he does not resist you” (James 5:6 *Revised Standard Version*), or as the *New American Standard Bible* has it “put to death.”

As it's a mistake to limit the meaning of *rasah* to “murder,” so it's a mistake to limit the meaning of the Hebrew word *hagar* to “killing” in war. There are times in the Old Testament where *hagar* describes “murder:” “As Jehu entered the gate, she [Jezebel] said, ‘Is it well, Zimri, your master's murderer? [*hagar*]’” (2 Kings 9:31); “He [the wicked] sits in the lurking places of the villages; In the secret places he murders [*hagar*] the innocent; His eyes are secretly fixed on the helpless” (Psalm 10:8 *New King James Version*); and “They [the wicked] slay [*hagar*] the widow and the stranger And murder [*hagar*] the orphans” (Psalm 94:6).⁹

The New Testament even supports using *hagar* to mean murder. Norbert Link writes:

Please note, too, that Cain murdered his brother Abel, as it is clearly explained in 1 John 3:12: “. . . Cain who was of the wicked one . . . murdered his brother . . .” But notice, too, that Genesis 4:8 tells us: “Now Cain talked with Abel his brother, and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother and killed [*Hebrew, hagar*] him.” The Hebrew word *hagar* in this passage clearly describes “murder.” The concept, then, that the Hebrew word “*hagar*” does not describe murder is clearly

⁸ *Phoneuo* (5407) “1) to kill, slay, murder, 2) to commit murder,” Thayer and Smith, Crosswalk.com.

⁹ For more examples of the translation of *hagar* as murder see: 2 Chronicles 24:22; Jeremiah 4:31, and Hosea 9:13 (*New King James Version*).

erroneous. It cannot be used for the argument that killing in war is not murder, and that it is not a violation of the Ten Commandments."¹⁰

Under the Old Covenant God allowed humans to kill other humans under certain circumstances, including warfare. But today Christians shouldn't involve themselves in taking someone's life, even in armed combat, because the New Covenant is a covenant of life, not of death like the Old Covenant:

He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant— not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, fading though it was, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? If the ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness! For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory. And if what was fading away came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts! (2 Corinthians 3:4-11 *English Standard Version*).

The Old Covenant focused on the letter of the Law. It made distinctions between types of killing; some forms were unacceptable; other forms were acceptable. Under the New Covenant a change occurred. We now apply God's law in the spirit and intent of its meaning, not limiting ourselves to the letter. The spirit of the law emphasizes life, repentance and forgiveness. The Old Covenant had a heavy emphasis on death, the death of sacrificial animals, the death of sinners and the death of Israel's enemies through war.

Exodus 22:2-3 and Self-Defense

Argument: Exodus 22:2-3 shows that God approves of humans killing others in self-defense, and, by extension, killing enemy soldiers during wars of self-defense.

Response: The context of Exodus 22:2-3 is not dealing with killing in self-defense, whether a personal assailant or an enemy soldier. These verses deal with the unintentional killing of thief while he's breaking into a home at night: "If a thief is caught in the act of breaking into a house and is killed in the process, the person who killed the thief is not guilty. But if it happens in daylight, the one who killed the thief is guilty of murder. A thief who is caught must pay in full for everything that was stolen. If payment is not made, the thief must be sold as a slave to pay the debt" (*New Living Translation*). Commenting on these verses David C. Grabbe says, "This statute illustrates that God differentiates between a killing committed when it is dark and one done when it is light. The meaning is not that darkness gives us license to break God's law, but rather that in the dark it is more difficult to determine what level of force is necessary to restrain an unknown intruder. The law gives the homeowner the benefit of the doubt in assuming that he would not deliberately use lethal force, since that falls under the intentional or premeditated murder (Exodus 20:13)"¹¹

Imprecatory Psalms

Argument: The imprecatory psalms are those, which call for curses and revenge on one's enemies. These psalms prove there are times when one can kill and, if need be wage war. David the author of many of these imprecatory psalms, was a man after God's own heart (1 Samuel 13:14; Acts 13:22), showing that it's not wrong for a follower of God to kill his enemies.

¹⁰ Link, *Should You Fight in War*, 66.

¹¹ Grabbe, "Does Scripture Allow for Self-Defense?," *Forerunner Magazine*, 7.

Response: When examining the imprecatory psalms we see that David and the other psalmists are asking "God Himself to administer punishment. These psalms are not prayers for personal revenge, but rather a willingness by the Psalmist to leave revenge in the hands of God."¹²

Christian musician and scholar Michael Card writing in his book *A Sacred Sorrow*, says, "Though David was a man who could respond in battle with a ferocious vengeance, what little we know of the historical background of the imprecatory laments [psalms] would lead us to believe that he never took his revenge on any of those who were the objects of these often poisonous prayers of protest. By placing his enemies in the hands of God, David acknowledges that revenge is His alone (see Deuteronomy 32:41). Perhaps these psalms were the only thing that stood between David and the revenge he would have taken. . . . Understand, imprecatory laments [psalms] are not some sort of vicious didactic means by which we learn how to curse our enemies. They represent an invitation to the beginning of a process in which first, we admit that we do have enemies. Then these laments serve to guide us in the process of confessing our darkest hatred toward them with a view toward finally handing them over to God."¹³

The imprecatory psalms show that forgiving our enemies starts with admitting we have enemies who have hurt us and that we're angry with. But, we're turning this anger over to God. Like the psalmist, we place vengeance and justice into God's hands. These psalms reveal a safe way to express our hurt and anger, while giving them over to God. This will then allow us to follow Paul's instructions to, "Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay' says the Lord. '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 on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:17-21).¹⁴

Hardness of Heart

Argument: It's not wrong for Christians to fight in wars, since God allowed Israel to engage in warfare in the Old Testament. He even gave instructions on how to fight (Deuteronomy 20:1-20).

Response: As we examine the following scriptures we see that because of the hardness of Israel's heart, God tolerated certain behavior, including warfare. Giving Israel specific laws to help moderate the negative effects of their actions.

In the Old Testament, God provided regulations governing divorce (Deuteronomy 24:1-4). But, Jesus tells us that God's original purpose was for a man and a woman once married, to stay married (Matthew 19:3-9; Mark 10:2-12). The only exception Jesus gives for divorce is sexual immorality. God allowed divorce because of the hardness of Israel's heart. He knew the Israelites, like most human beings, would have problems in this area because they lacked the Holy Spirit. The Israelites of the Exodus had hardened hearts that lead to disobedience (Hebrews 3:12-4:2), meaning they lacked the mind and will to obey God. Most Israelites, and non-Israelites, from that time forward, have had hardened, disobedient hearts (Romans 11:7-10, 25-32; 2 Corinthians 3:12-16). From the start, God knew that Israel would not obey Him,

¹² Towns, *Praying the Psalms*, 214. The following list of imprecatory psalms is from *Praying the Psalms*, 215: Psalms 2, 7, 35, 37, 55, 58, 59, 69, 70, 79, 82, 83, 88, 94, 109, 137, 139, 140, 143.

¹³ Card, *A Sacred Sorrow*, 77-78.

¹⁴ For more information on the subject of imprecatory psalms, see *A Sacred Sorrow* by Michael Card, 73-80; and *Praying the Psalms* by Elmer L. Towns, 213-215.

for they lacked the heart to do so (Deuteronomy 5:27-33; 29:1-4; 31:14-21). But the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel wrote about a day when God would replace Israel's heart of stone with a heart of flesh. They would receive the Spirit of God which makes obedience to God's laws possible (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 11:14-20; 18:30-32; 36:22-27). Down through the ages, most Israelites haven't had the Holy Spirit. Anyone without the Spirit is hostile to God, and won't obey Him (Romans 8:5-9).

God's original intent for marriage was between one man and one woman (Genesis 2:19-25). Although Jesus is directly addressing divorce in Matthew 19:3-9 and Mark 10:2-12, He's also indirectly addressing polygamy. He speaks of God's plan of one man and one woman marrying and staying together. Jesus says a man is committing adultery if he divorces his wife and marries another woman. In God's eyes the man is married to two different women simultaneously, which is polygamy. Although God didn't want humans to practice polygamy, He knew the human heart, and under the Old Covenant established laws to regulate this evil practice (Exodus 21:10; Leviticus 18:18; Deuteronomy 17:14, 17; 21:15-17). But under the New Covenant, Christians are not to practice polygamy.

God didn't originally plan for Israel to have a human king like the nations surrounding them. He would be their king. For many years after entering the Promised Land, Israel had no human king. Because of the hardness of Israel's heart, God knew that they would eventually want a physical king, and in the Old Covenant He provided for the inevitable (Deuteronomy 17:14-20; 1 Samuel 8:1-22).

As with divorce, polygamy, and kingship, God knew the Israelites would lack the heart to trust in Him for physical protection. So under the Old Covenant, God taught Israel about warfare (Deuteronomy 20:1-20). As we have already seen, under the New Covenant, God doesn't want Christians to engage in physical warfare (John 18:36; 2 Corinthians 10:3-6).

The Example of Righteous Men

Argument: God sanctions Christian warfare because the Bible praises the actions of righteous men in the Old Testament "who by faith conquered kingdoms . . . became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight" (Hebrews 11:32-34).

Response: Just because a righteous man in the Old Testament engaged in warfare doesn't mean it's acceptable for Christians to do the same. In Hebrews 11, the emphasis is on the faith of these men and women, even when engaging in war. As we have already seen, because of the hardness of men's hearts, God tolerated warfare in the Old Testament. Occasionally, men like Gideon were specially chosen by God to wage war on Israel's enemies (Judges 6:1-8:35). Having faith in God to give them victory on the battlefield. In other cases, men like Abraham had faith in God to give them victory in battle, as long as they were the ones using the sword (Genesis 14:5-24). It's possible some of these righteous men lacked the understanding that God would fight for them, as He did for Jehoshaphat (2 Chronicles 20:1-30) and Hezekiah (2 Chronicles 32:1-23).

Lee C. Camp in *Mere Discipleship*, comments on the righteous men of Hebrews 11 who used violence:

But do not such war heroes celebrated in Hebrews 11 actually provide counterevidence to the claim that disciples ought to walk in the way of the nonviolent Jesus? No, for the Hebrews writer is instead making this point: that the people of God are called first and foremost to faithfulness, and they then trust that God will provide as is necessary. Gideon, Samson, and Jericho are all classic examples of instances in which the people of God – without might armories or military might or extensive weapons of war – did the

unthinkable. They were victorious over their enemies by trusting that God was faithful. Now, in Christ, we are called to the same thing: to trust that as we walk in the way of the cross, in the way of unjust suffering, God will provide and will vindicate the righteous.¹⁵

Even though the Bible calls Abraham "righteous" and a "friend of God" (Isaiah 41:8; 2 Chronicles 20:7; James 2:23). This isn't a justification for our involvement in war. Abraham was also a liar (Genesis 12:10-20; 20:1-18) and an adulterer (Genesis 16:1-4). Not everything a righteous man does is good and is an example we should follow.

David is another man used to justify Christians taking part in armed conflicts, since God calls him "a man after My own heart" (Acts 13:22). David was also an adulterer as well as a murderer (2 Samuel 11:1-5, 14-17; 12:9). Because he was a man after God's own heart, does that mean it's all right for us to do the same things? No, it doesn't. God saw in David a man who in his heart sought God, but he was also a man who sinned, like all men, falling short of God's expectations (Romans 3:9-18, 23). God expressed his dissatisfaction with David's warlike behavior by not allowing him to build the temple. God said to David: "You have shed much blood and have waged great wars; you shall not build a house to My name, because you have shed so much blood on the earth before Me" (1 Chronicles 22:6-9). This shows that God didn't approve of this part of David's life. God may have backed him in war, the same way He backed Moses when he hit the rock instead of asking that it bring forth water (Numbers 20:1-13). Just as Moses' actions prevented him from entering the promised land, David's life as "a man of war" who "shed blood" prevented him from building the temple (1 Chronicles 28:2-3).

A Time for War

Argument: Based on the book of Ecclesiastes there are times when God approves of Christian involvement in warfare: "There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven . . . A time to kill and a time to heal; A time to tear down and a time to build up . . . A time to love and a time to hate; A time for war and a time for peace" (Ecclesiastes 3:1, 3, 8).

Response: Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, like much of the book of Ecclesiastes, is a description of human life. Specifically a fallen human life shaped by the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, not the Tree of Life (Genesis 2:9, 16-17; 3:1-24). These verses are neither an approval nor disapproval of carnal warfare. They're just stating general facts about human life.

Divine Warfare

Argument: Christian warfare is justified because at certain times in the Old Testament, God sanctions and even commands Israel and other nations to fight wars. On occasion, God used Israel as His agent to punish other nations through warfare, for example: Amalek (Exodus 17:8-16; Deuteronomy 25:17-19; 1 Samuel 15:1-3) and the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, Jebusites (Deuteronomy 7:1-5; 20:16-18). On other occasions, God used the nations surrounding Israel to punish them for their sins by warfare and captivity (Leviticus 26:14-15, 17, 25, 33; Deuteronomy 28:15, 25-26, 32, 36, 41, 48-57; Judges 2:11-15; 2 Kings 17:5-7; 2 Chronicles 36:11-12, 15-20).

Response: As the Sovereign over all creation, God has the right to kill or not kill anyone (Deuteronomy 32:39-43; 1 Samuel 2:6) and to use whomever He wants to do it. But now under the New Covenant, Jesus doesn't want His followers to kill people in physical wars (John 18:36). We should be fighting a spiritual

¹⁵ Camp, *Mere Discipleship*, 206.

one, with spiritual weapons (2 Corinthians 10:3-6; Ephesians 6:10-18; 1 Timothy 1:18-19; 6:11-12; 2 Timothy 2:3-4; 4:6-7). At Jesus' second coming, we will join Him in waging a divine war that will bring this world under His subjection (Revelation 19:7-8, 11-15, 19; 17:14), a war directly led by Christ. When this happens, we will no longer be flesh and blood humans, but glorified spirit beings (Philippians 3:20-21; Romans 8:16-25; 1 Corinthians 15:35-54).

Arguments from the New Testament Justifying Warfare

We will now look at some of the New Testament arguments used to justify Christian involvement in war.

Jesus' Cleansing of the Temple

Argument: By using a scourge or whip to drive out the merchants and money changers from the Temple (John 2:13-16; Matthew 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-17; Luke 19:45-46). Jesus set us an example that there's a proper time for Christians to use physical force to assault others, including the force of armed combat.

Response: Jesus drove the merchants and money changers out of the Temple twice. The first time at the beginning of His ministry (John 2:13-16) and the second time at the end of His ministry (Matthew 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-17; Luke 19:45-46). The account in John's Gospel of the first cleansing of the Temple is the only one showing Jesus using a scourge: "He made a scourge of cords, and drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen" (John 2:15). Jesus made this "scourge of cords" from rushes, a grasslike marsh plant.¹⁶ There's no evidence in this verse that Jesus struck or physically hurt anyone driven out of the Temple. Plainly the purpose of this scourge was to help Jesus drive out the livestock the merchants were selling in the Temple complex.¹⁷ In his commentary, Albert Barnes writes: "This whip was made as an emblem of authority, and also for the purpose of driving from the temple the cattle which had been brought there for sale. There's no evidence that he used any violence to the men engaged in that unhallowed traffic. The original word implies that these cords were made of twisted rushes or reeds-- probably the ancient material for making ropes."¹⁸ The record of the second cleansing of the Temple doesn't show Jesus using a scourge. It's possible He used a scourge, but we have no biblical evidence He did. To use Jesus' cleansings of the Temple as a justification for Christian violence, especially warfare, is a faulty exegesis of scripture.

"Render to Caesar the Things that are Caesar's"

Argument: Christians must give to "Caesar," the governing authorities, whatever belongs to them (Matthew 22:21; Mark 12:17; Romans 13:7). So if the government requires our participation in armed conflicts, we must comply.

Response: The Bible makes it clear that human governments do have certain claims on us, but "it dare not be assumed that whatever the state demands belongs to it."¹⁹ Jesus tells us to "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's" and, more important to render "to God the things that are God's." There's a limit to what the state can demand of us, because God also has demands on us which take precedence over those of the state (Acts 5:29). Jesus recognized that we can't serve two masters. Our devotion must be to one or the other (Matthew 6:24; Luke 16:13). The choice is between God and the physical world, which includes its governments. Since God comes first, the state has no jurisdiction over us when it demands we

¹⁶The Greek word translated as "cords" in John 2:15 is *schoinion* (4979) "'a cord or rope' a diminutive of *schoinos*, 'a rush, bulrush,' meant a 'cord' made of rushes; it denotes (a) 'a small cord,'" *Vine's*, 129.

¹⁷ Hershberger, *War, Peace & Nonresistance*, 303-304.

¹⁸Barnes, *Barnes' Notes on the New Testament*, "Commentary on John 2."

¹⁹ Hershberger, *War, Peace & Nonresistance*, 298.

kill our enemies, instead of doing what Jesus commanded: "love your enemies, do good to those who hate you" (Luke 6:27).

The New Testament Approves of Christians Serving in the Military

Argument: The New Testament approves of Christians engaging in armed conflicts because it doesn't object to them serving in the military, and uses them as models of faith. For example, Jesus praises the faith of a Roman centurion and doesn't reprove him for being in the army (Matthew 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-10). At Jesus' crucifixion a centurion acknowledges Him as the Son of God (Matthew 27:54; Mark 15:39; Luke 23:47). We're given a third example of God's approval of Christians serving in the military, when Peter baptizes the Roman centurion Cornelius in Acts 10 without telling him to leave the military. Finally, John the Baptist didn't condemn military service, when soldiers came to him for baptism (Luke 3:14).

Response: Jesus' praise for the Roman centurion at Capernaum is not an approval of his profession as a soldier, but of his faith in Jesus to heal his servant. We have no biblical evidence this man was a disciple of Jesus or ever became a Christian. What we do know is that someone serving in the military can have faith in Jesus for healing.

The acknowledgment by the centurion at the cross, of Jesus being the Son of God is not an endorsement of his profession as a soldier. What this is telling us is that after witnessing the events of Jesus' crucifixion, the centurion recognized that Jesus was, in fact, who many people were saying He was: the Son of God. Yes, someone serving in the military can recognize Jesus as the Son of God. Like the centurion at Capernaum, there's no biblical proof this centurion ever became a Christian.

The problem with using the Roman centurion Cornelius as scriptural support for military service is the absence of any biblical record of his life after becoming a Christian. Did Cornelius stay in the Roman army or when the opportunity arose leave military services? There was no way for a soldier to leave the Roman army until, either his enlistment was up or he died. Rome didn't have the idea of "conscientious objection." For a Roman soldier, enlistment was for 20 years; for those in the Auxiliary, 25 years.²⁰ However, what we learn from this is that a person serving in the military can become a Christian. But, we also know there's no biblical evidence of anyone joining the military after becoming a Christian.

In Luke 3:7-10, 14, John the Baptist is replying to a question from soldiers who want to know what fruits of repentance they should have. John tells them: "Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse anyone falsely, and be content with your wages" (Luke 3:14). This may not be the best translation of this verse. The phrase "take money from anyone by force" translates the Greek word *diaseio*, meaning "to shake violently" or "'do violence,' including intimidation."²¹

We see this emphasis on violence reflected in the *King James Version* translation of Luke 13:14: "Do violence to no man, neither accuse any falsely; and be content with your wages." Similar translations emphasizing the avoidance of violence are: *Green's Literal Translation* and *Young's Literal Translation*. If "violence" is the correct translation of *diaseio*, then we have a good argument for soldiers avoiding all forms of force and violence, including combat.

²⁰ Helgland, Daly, and Burns, *Christians and the Military*, 55.

²¹ *Diaseio* (1286), *Vine's*, 661.

Then there are those translations like the *New King James Version*, stressing that soldiers shouldn't intimidate people: "Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages." Translations that emphasize not intimidating people are: *The Complete Jewish Bible*, *The Lamsa's Translation*, *The Modern King James Version*, *The New Jerusalem Bible*, *The New Testament in Modern English* by J. B. Phillips, *The Revised English Bible* and *The Rotherham Emphasized Bible*. These translations show that soldiers shouldn't intimidate, bully, molest, or oppress people. Behavior associated with warfare and the military occupation of another country.

Finally, there are several translations which conclude that *diaseio* has to do with extorting money: "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely – be content with your pay" (*New International Version*). Similar translations are: *The American Standard Version*, *The Contemporary English Version*, *The Moffatt Translation*, *The New American Standard Bible*, *The New Century Version*, *The New Living Translation*, *The New Revised Standard Version*, *The Revised Standard Version* and *Today's English Version*. If this is the correct understanding of *diaseio*, then it appears John was addressing the historical reality of soldiers mistreating the civilian populations of the nations they've conquered.

Constant throughout these various translations of *diaseio* is the necessity for soldiers not to abuse those they have conquered; whether by violence, intimidation or extortion. But why doesn't John specifically tell these soldiers to leave the Roman army? As mentioned above, during the first century A.D., it wasn't possible for a soldier to leave the Roman army until his enlistment was up, or he died. Since these men couldn't change their circumstances, it appears John is telling them how to act while still in the military. This is similar to Paul's instructions to Christian slaves on how to live their lives as slaves (1 Corinthians 7:20-24; Ephesians 6:5-9; Colossians 3:22-25).

It's doubtful the behavior mentioned by John was all these soldiers needed to repent of doing. Throughout time, soldiers have been known for their off-duty activities of drunkenness, gambling, and sexual promiscuity. Since there's no record of John addressing these other problems associated with military life, does this mean God sanctions these actions? Of course not! We also have no record of John speaking out against soldiers taking part in Roman military religious ceremonies and customs that were an integral part of being a Roman soldier.²² Does this mean God approved of these practices? Surely not! Because John doesn't directly address the issue of military service isn't evidence of God's approval.

There's another possible reason John didn't tell the soldiers to leave the military. It could be he lacked an understanding of Jesus' teachings to love one's enemies and not seek revenge (Luke 6:27-36; Matthew 5:38-48; Romans 12:18-21; 1 Peter 3:8-10). We know John had doubts about Jesus' identity as the Messiah (Matthew 11:2-6; Luke 7:18-23), and the book of Acts documents that those who knew only the baptism of John had a limited understanding of the truth. These followers needed further instruction and sometimes rebaptism (Acts 18:24-26; 19:1-7).

An examination of Luke 3:14 doesn't provide us with enough information on whether a Christian should serve or not serve in the military. But this verse does give us some idea on how a soldier should treat others once he becomes a Christian. He should avoid violence, be considerate of others, and be content with his wages. Based on scriptures such as loving our enemies and forgiving those who injure us (Luke 6:27-36; Matthew 6:12, 14-15; Mark 11:25-26). Christians should avoid military services, and those who find themselves in the military when converted shouldn't participate in combat.

²² Helgland, *Christians and the Military*, see chapter eight "Roman Army Religion," 48-55.

Jesus Came to Bring a Sword, Not Peace

Argument: Jesus shows His approval of warfare when He said, "Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matthew 10:34).

Response: In examining the context of Jesus' statement in Matthew 10:34, we find that His followers will suffer persecution. Especially from family members, because of their faith in Jesus (Matthew 10:34-39). Jesus makes a similar statement in Luke 12:51-53. These verses have nothing to do with Jesus' approval or disapproval of Christian warfare. They're dealing with the fact that as followers of Jesus Christ we will suffer persecution, particularly from unbelieving loved ones.²³

Jesus' Approval of Violence

Argument: These following statements show there are times and situations in which Jesus supports the use of physical violence: "But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea" (Matthew 18:6); "But these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slay them in my presence" (Luke 19:27); "From His [Jesus'] mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty" (Revelation 19:15).

Response: These scriptures describe God's future judgment on sinners. As we have already seen, God has the right to kill or not kill anyone (Deuteronomy 32:39-43; 1 Samuel 2:6). These New Testament verses apply to God's use of force, not to human use of force. We should note that while Jesus was on earth He never hung a millstone on someone's neck or slew anyone with a sword. On the contrary, He rebuked those who tried to use a sword to save His life (Matthew 26:47-56; Mark 14:43-50; Luke 22:35-38, 47-53; John 18:3, 10-12).²⁴

Military Imagery

Argument: The use of military imagery in the teachings of Jesus and the apostles. Is evidence of God's approval of Christian involvement in war.²⁵

Response: When examining the context of scriptures using military imagery, we see that they have nothing to do with human warfare. Jesus and the others are using these images to illustrate spiritual principles. Just because the Bible speaks of Jesus coming as a "thief in the night" (1 Thessalonians 5:2) doesn't mean God approves of stealing.²⁶

Wars and Rumors of Wars

Argument: In His Olivet Prophecy, Jesus said, "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. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and in various places there will be famines and

²³ Hershberger, *War, Peace & Nonresistance*, 301.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 304-305.

²⁵ The use of military symbolism in the teachings of Jesus (Matthew 22:7; Luke 11:21-22; Luke 14:31-32), Paul (Romans 7:23; 13:12; 1 Corinthians 9:7; 2 Corinthians 6:7; 10:1-6; Ephesians 6:10-18; Philippians 2:25; 1 Thessalonians 5:8; 1 Timothy 1:18-20; 6:11-14; 2 Timothy 2:3-5; 4:6-8; Philemon 1:2; Hebrews 4:12), James (James 4:1-3), Peter (1 Peter 2:11), and John (Revelation 2:16).

²⁶ Hershberger, *War, Peace & Nonresistance*, 305-307.

earthquakes" (Matthew 24:6-7; also see Mark 13:7-8; Luke 21:9-10). Since Jesus predicted future wars, then Christians shouldn't refuse to take part in them.

Response: In Matthew 24:6-7 Jesus is talking about future wars, famines, and earthquakes. If these verses justify our participation in armed conflicts, then they also justify our participation and promotion of famine. In 2 Timothy 3:13 Paul warns that "evil men and impostors will proceed from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived." Does this mean that Christians should purposely strive to become evil, going "from bad to worse"? Of course not. A description of future events is not an endorsement for our involvement.²⁷

Dying For a Friend

Argument: In John 15:13 Jesus said: "Greater love has no one than this that one lay down his life for his friends." Christian soldiers who die defending their country and family are fulfilling these words.

Response: To use this verse as a justification for Christian warfare is to twist Jesus' words. When we examine the context of John 15:13 we see that Jesus is telling His disciples to love one another, and that as their friend He will die for them (John 15:12-17). Yes, if need be, Jesus wants us to lay down our lives for our friends, but he also wants us to lay down our lives for our enemies. Jesus commands us to love our "enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you" (Luke 6:27-28). There's no way that a Christian can fulfill this command when he tries to kill his enemy. Jesus goes on to say "Treat others the same way you want them to treat you. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same" (Luke 6:31-33). As Christians we must be willing to lay down our lives not just for our friends, but also for our enemies.²⁸

Buying Swords

Argument: During His final Passover, Jesus tells His disciples they will need supplies, including swords, in the years to come (Luke 22:35-36). In telling them to buy swords, Jesus supports the use of weapons by Christians for self-defense, and by extension, warfare.

Response: If this is what Jesus is saying, He's contradicting His earlier teachings on loving our enemies (Matthew 5:43-44; Luke 6:27, 35) and being peacemakers (Matthew 5:9). How are we loving our enemy, or being a peacemaker, when we stick a sword in him or use the modern practice of shooting him? Jesus' statement in Luke 22 is hyperbole. He was exaggerating to make the point that the disciple's future would be difficult, even dangerous. Jesus used hyperbole when He told us to pluck out an eye, or cut off a hand or foot if it causes us to stumble spiritually (Matthew 5:29-30; 18:8-9; Mark 9:43, 45, 47). Jesus was driving home the idea that we must be willing to give up whatever causes us to sin. In reality, our eyes or limbs don't cause us to sin; sin starts in the mind (Matthew 15:17-20; James 1:13-15). For example, a blind person can just as easily commit the sin of lust, as can a sighted person.

The account of Jesus' arrest in Luke 22:47-53 shows He didn't intend for the disciples to use their swords in defense of themselves or others. The disciples had brought two swords to the garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:38, 49). As we have already seen, although Peter's motivation was good, Jesus wasn't happy with him for almost killing someone. Another reason Jesus told His disciples to acquire swords was to

²⁷ Ibid., 303.

²⁸ Ibid., 307, 313.

fulfill prophecy. After telling the disciples to obtain swords, Jesus quotes Isaiah 53:12, saying "I tell you that this which is written must be fulfilled in Me," and "He was numbered with transgressors;" for that which refers to Me has its fulfillment" (Luke 22:36-37). As Jesus finishes making this statement, the disciples say, "Lord, look, here are two swords" and Jesus tells them "it is enough" (Luke 22:38). What Jesus meant was that those two swords were enough to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah 53:12. Later that evening Jesus accuses those arresting Him of treating Him as a criminal (Luke 22:52-53).

For the Individual Only

Argument: Jesus teachings in Matthew 5:38-48 and Luke 6:27-36 to not physically resist evil and strike back at those hurting us, as well as loving our enemies; have to do with applying these teachings as individuals, not as citizens of a nation. In these verses, Jesus is talking about "taking the law into our own hands" by carrying out private vengeance. However, if the governing authorities order us to strike back and kill our enemies in war, we must submit and obey (Romans 13:1-7).

Response: If it's wrong to avenge ourselves as individuals, including taking someone's life; but under governmental authority it's biblically allowed. Then is it permissible for a Christian to worship idols if the state orders him to? If it's wrong for the individual Christian to steal or lie, is it acceptable for him to do this if his government tells him to? Is it biblically permissible for a Christian woman to get an abortion if the government orders it for the good of the nation? If this is wrong, along with stealing and lying, why is it any different when the state orders Christians to kill others in war?²⁹

Jesus' commands to not seek revenge and love our enemies are equally valid for the individual Christian as for the citizen Christian. Romans 13 tell us to be law-abiding citizens, but submission to the governing authorities only goes so far. Our first loyalty is to God, not the nation we live in, or its government. If the choice is between obeying God or the state, "we must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

Romans 13

Argument: Romans 13:1-7 shows that human governments have the God given right and responsibility to use the sword of war to protect their nations. If these governing authorities tell us to use this sword, we must submit and obey. Then as agents of the governing authorities, we're not responsible for any lawful actions (as defined by the governing authorities) we do while fighting a war.

Response: These verses in Romans 13:1-7 are not a justification for war by any human government or a command for Christian support of armed conflicts. Romans 13 teaches us that we must be law-abiding citizens who respect our leaders.³⁰ These governing authorities are "ministers" or "servants" of God whose responsibility is to provide a stable and just state for its citizens. Paul writes something similar to Titus (Titus 3:1), and the apostle Peter says something comparable in his first letter (1 Peter 2:13-15).

Although the apostle Paul says these "governing authorities" "are established by God" we mustn't forget their true nature. In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul refers to these same civil authorities as "unbelievers," who are "unrighteous," or as the *New International Version* translates it the "ungodly," and the *King James Version* "unjust" (1 Corinthians 6:1, 6). God is the ruler over all human governments and leaders. With their authority to rule coming from Him (Daniel 4:17, 25, 32 John 19:10-11). To these rulers God delegates the every day responsibility of rulership; which right now includes Satan (Luke 4:5-7; John

²⁹ Bercot, *The Kingdom That Turned The World Upside Down*, 78-79.

³⁰ For a more detail discussion of the historical background to Romans 13:1-7 see the article "Civil Authority," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, Editors: Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid, 141-143.

12:31; 14:30; 16:11; Ephesians 6:10-12) and human leaders who are far from being godly. When Paul wrote his letter to the Roman Christians, Nero was the Roman Emperor, an unrighteous unbeliever.

One of the responsibilities of the governing authorities is to punish those who do evil, that is break the law of the land. Paul refers to this power as "bear[ing] the sword" (Romans 13:4).³¹ God gives the governing authorities the judicial power and authority to enforce law and punish lawbreakers. But, only the lawbreakers under their authority, not the lawbreakers of another nation who have their own governing authorities. Nothing in these verses gives the slightest hint the governing authorities of any nation have the God given right to wage war, for whatever reason, against another nation and its governing authorities. This "sword" is for domestic use as a policing power to help keep order, not to wage war against another country.

An examination of Romans 13:1-7 shows Paul doesn't see Christians as being a part of the governing authority that bears the sword. He keeps addressing the Roman Christians as "you" in contrast to the "governing authorities" and "rulers" whom Paul also refers to as "it" and "them." Paul isn't saying that for Christians to be in subjection to the governing authorities they must submit to their rulers orders to bear the sword against those consider to be the enemy. These verses also don't give Christians the right to bear the sword. On the contrary, remember Jesus' words to Peter, who tried to kill one of the men coming to arrest Jesus: "Put your sword back into its place; for all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword" (Matthew 26:52). The same Greek word translated as "sword" in Romans 13:4 (*machaira*) is also translated as "sword" in Matthew 26:52. According to Romans 13, we must pay our taxes and respect our unrighteous, unbelieving, governing authorities. However, if there's a conflict between obedience to God and the governing authorities, then we must choose obedience to God (Acts 5:27-29).

Finally, to claim that as agents of the governing authority, we can avoid personal responsibility for our actions, including killing others, is wrong. Nowhere in the Bible can you find such an idea. The Bible clearly teaches that each of us is responsible for our own behavior and will have to stand before the divine judgment seat to give an account for our actions: "For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. . . . So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God" (Romans 14:10, 12).³²

The "Yeah But" and "What Would You Do" Questions

In this final section, we will answer some of the major nonbiblical questions asked by those who find it hard to accept the idea that Christians shouldn't take part in war.³³

What if . . . ?

Question: "What would you do if someone was trying to kill one of your family members?"

Answer: Some people think that this question in one form or another will shatter the belief system of those who think it's wrong to kill to save someone else's life. "That it would be inhuman and unchristian not to defend an innocent victim of murder or rape, especially a member of one's own family, is supposedly an unanswerable argument."³⁴

³¹ *Machaira* (3162) "a short sword or dagger," *Vine's*, 613.

³² Also see Ecclesiastes 11:9; 12:14; Matthew 12:36; 1 Corinthians 4:5; 5:10.

³³ These questions are composites of similar ideas made by authors consulted while researching this paper. See the bibliography for a complete list of sources.

³⁴ Hershberger, *War, Peace & Nonresistance*, 308.

In his book *Choosing Against War: A Christian View*, John D. Roth answers this supposedly unanswerable argument.³⁵ First he recognizes that if confronted with such a situation. None of us knows with certainty how we will react when confronted with a threat to our lives, and lives of our loved ones. This “uncertainty simply underscores the importance of giving careful thought to our response in advance of the moment, and to prepare ourselves as best we can to do what is right rather than merely what our natural impulse might be.”

According to Roth the “what if” question, making a direct appeal “to our natural impulse to self-defense and the bonds of affection that connect us with our families,” intensifies the moral decision we have to make. Appealing to human nature isn’t “an adequate foundation for discerning God’s will in matters of ethical decision-making.” Just because our instincts tell us to kill the attacker doesn’t make the choice a Christian one. We “are called to a higher standard of morality than simply conforming to our natural impulses.”

The theoretical question “what if,” has “numerous hidden assumptions about unknown factors.” Making the question almost meaningless. The way the question is typically presented allows for “only two possible outcomes: either you kill the attacker, or the attacker kills your loved ones.” In real life, this scenario could play itself out in various ways “almost never considered in the standard framing of the story.”

Roth presents several other possible outcomes to the “what if” question that don’t involve the use of lethal force. For example, you might have the right training and fast enough reflexes to disarm the attacker without killing him. You may be able to persuade the attacker to give up peacefully. Or having enough faith, God intervenes miraculously delivering you from the attacker. On the other hand, there are negative outcomes to trying to kill the attacker. If you have a gun, you may shoot and miss the attacker, who ends up killing you and your loved ones. In shooting and killing the attacker, you, filled with such remorse, may abandon your faith. These alternative scenarios suggests the hypothetical question so often posed to those advocating nonviolence is far less straightforward than it first appears. This question seems intended from the start “to direct the correct answer away from costly forms of discipleship [loving ones enemies] toward a defense of our natural instincts.”

Roth sums up his response to the “what if” question this way: “In the end, I – like all Christian pacifists – am committed not to take the life of another human being, regardless of the consequences. If someone were to attack me or a loved one, I trust that God would give me the courage to find creative, nonlethal ways of resisting that attack. But in the end, I am willing to allow the attacker to kill me and the people I love rather than to shed another person’s blood to defend my interests. As an undeserving recipient of God’s gracious love, I am called to bear witness to that same love in everything I do, trusting in the power of the resurrection and the hope of eternal life.”

David W. Bercot in his book *The Kingdom That Turned The World Upside Down*, answers this “unanswerable argument” of what “would you do if . . .” in a different, but equally informative way.³⁶ The “what if question” plays upon a man’s protective instincts towards his family. But Christians must answer this question in the same way they would “to any other question concerning breaking the commandments of Jesus.” What would we do if our government told us “to deny Jesus Christ and offer a sacrifice to Satan – or else they would violate” our wife and kill our children? For a Christian, the answer

³⁵ Roth, *Choosing Against War*, 146-148.

³⁶ Bercot, *The Kingdom That Turned The World Upside Down*, 70-71.

is clear. "Jesus has already told us that if we love our families more than Him, we cannot be His disciples" [Matthew 10:37; Luke 14:26]. He told us, "Whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven (Mt. 10:33)."

Bercot then asks what would we do if instead of denying Christ, our government orders us to murder our neighbor or sexually assault his wife, and if we don't, they will harm our wife and children? Would this "be any different from offering a sacrifice to Satan?" In one case, we deny Christ with our mouth, in the other by our actions. Bercot poses another question, what would we do if a foreign government threatened to harm our family if we didn't bomb one of our nation's cities? Most people "would allow their wives and children to be harmed, or even killed, before betraying their country." He concludes by asking how is this "situation any different when it concerns loyalty to Jesus? Jesus' teachings on nonresistance are quite clear. It's a matter of either denying Him or denying our family. To be sure, that's a very difficult choice, but [we] already made that choice when [we] gave [our] life to Christ."³⁷

Loving Our Enemy

Question: Once attacked, is "turning the other cheek" and "loving our enemy" practical for a Christian nation? How could one not expect the United States to retaliate for the attacks of September 11, 2001?

Answer: There's no such entity as a "Christian nation," only Christians who live in them. If a nation of Christians would look to God for protection, He would fight their battles, just as He did for ancient Israel when they obeyed and trusted Him (Exodus 14:13-14; Deuteronomy 1:30; 2 Chronicles 20:1-30; 32:1-23).

Not one country in this world, including the United States, has a domestic and foreign policies based solely on biblical principles. We live in a fallen world whose foundation is the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, not the Tree of Life (Genesis 2:9, 16-17; 3:1-24). Under such circumstances, it's useless to expect the United States to respond to an attack or the possibility of an attack by loving its enemies or turning the other cheek.

Over the years the United States has followed an unchristian foreign policy which has contributed to the current hostilities in the Middle East. These policies may not be as bad as those of other nations, but that is irrelevant. America has followed a course which is unchristian and relies on intimidation and military force to gain its objectives. The result of such a policy is war and death for any nation which follows such a course: "All those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword" (Matthew 26:52).³⁸

The real question is, "How should we as Christians respond to an attack on our country?" We should react to such an attack by following Jesus' instructions to, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you . . . Whoever hits you on the cheek, offer him the other also . . . Treat others the same way you want them to treat you . . . Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:27-29, 31, 36). We should also follow the apostle Paul's injunction to, "Never pay back evil for evil to anyone . . . Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'vengeance is mine, I will repay,' says the Lord. '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 on his head.

³⁷ To examine the "what if question" in greater detail see John Howard Yoder's book, *What Would You Do?* Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1992. In Part One of his book, Yoder examines seven possible responses to the "what if question." In Part Two, he provides the responses of others to this question. Finally, in Part Three, Yoder offers ten stories by people who confronted with violence, responded with nonviolence.

³⁸ Hershberger, *War, Peace & Nonresistance*, 309-310.

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:17, 19-21). It's not possible for us fulfill these commands when involved in striking back at those who have attacked our country.

As Christians, we should trust in God to defend us and our country: "The king is not saved by a mighty army; A warrior is not delivered by great strength. A horse is a false hope for victory; Nor does it deliver anyone by its great strength. Behold, the eye of the LORD is on those who fear Him, On those who hope for His lovingkindness, To deliver their soul from death And to keep them alive in famine. Our soul waits for the LORD; He is our help and our shield" (Psalm 33:16-20).

Resisting Evil

Question: Shouldn't Christians join in militarily resisting evil political and philosophical systems like fascism, communism, humanism, and militant Islam, which want to dominate the world? Especially those opposing Christianity and threatening its existence?

Answer: Christians have a responsibility to resist the evil powers of this world. These powers are spiritual, not physical. These "spiritual forces of wickedness" are the motivating influence behind all the evil political and social philosophies of this world (Ephesians 6:10-12). But we must oppose evil in the manner God says, not in the way which seems wise by the standards of the world, "for the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God" (1 Corinthians 3:19). God says, "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways And My thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8-9). In this spiritual war we must use spiritual, not physical, weapons (2 Corinthians 10:3-5; Ephesians 6:13-18), overcoming evil with good (Romans 12:21).

For 2000 years, Christianity has survived Satan and whatever human political, social, and philosophical systems that have tried to destroy it. Jesus said, "I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18 *Revised Standard Version*). Christians have a promise from Jesus that His church will never be destroyed. It will suffer persecution (John 15:18-20), but it will never die out. As the prophet Elijah thought he was the only true worshipper of God left in Israel, there may come a day when we think that we're the only true believers left. Yet we can rest assured knowing that as God preserved 7000 in Israel who stayed loyal to Him, He will preserve somewhere on this earth those who haven't abandoned the true God (1 Kings 19:9-10, 15,18).³⁹

The Lesser of Two Evils

Question: Isn't it better to destroy evil political and philosophical systems with war than to let them dominate the world? To use the lesser evil of war is better than letting a greater evil exist. War is evil, but it's even eviler to allow a government to oppress its own society or that of a neighboring country.

Answer: The idea that war is the lesser of two evils may make sense in a fallen world, one founded on the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. But Christians must rise above this. The choice between the lesser of two evils is no choice at all; in both cases, evil wins. Christians must "steer clear of evil in any form" (1 Thessalonians 5:22, *Phillips Translation*), not just the greater evils. Pursuing the lesser evil falls so very short of God's mandate to "turn away from evil and do good," to "seek peace and pursue it" (1 Peter

³⁹ Ibid., 310-311.

3:11). God "is against those who do evil" (1 Peter 3:12), not just those who do greater evils, while being for those who do lesser evils.⁴⁰

Christian Witness

Question: Don't members of the armed forces need people to witness to them about Christianity? What better way for this to happen, than having Christians serve in the military as witnesses for Jesus?

Answer: Yes, military personnel need to hear the message of the gospel, a message which includes forgiveness, loving one's enemies, and not retaliating against aggressors (Matthew 6:14-15; Luke 6:27-30; Romans 12:19-21). But these ideas are contrary to the purpose and mission of any military organization. Christians must take the gospel to those serving in the armed forces, but they should do so without becoming members of the military.⁴¹

Positive Outcome

Question: Are there not good outcomes from war? Wasn't the defeat of Hitler in World War Two a positive event?

Answer: We live in a fallen world, in a society established on the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. In this fallen world, mankind decides for himself what is right and wrong, instead of looking to God for these answers. Sometimes these decisions have positive results, sometimes evil results. Often, war appears to have a good outcome, such as winning freedom for some people, but it can also deliver many others to the bondage of savage rulers. Take, for example, World War Two. The defeat of Nazi Germany was good, but it led to Eastern Europe's enslavement under the yoke of Communist Russia for nearly 50 years. It's true that war can bring out moral qualities like courage and self-sacrifice, but history shows that war also produces great downturns in morality. The moral triumphs of warfare are more that outweighed by its losses.⁴²

Conclusion

Christianity is a way of life, a way of love, peace, and forgiveness. As followers of Jesus Christ, and children of God, how can we love our enemy when we seek to kill him? How are we peacemakers when we take part in armed conflicts? How are we forgivers when we seek vengeance? As God's children, we must live by this counsel: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven . . ." (Matthew 5:43-45, *New King James Version*).

⁴⁰ Ibid., 312.

⁴¹ Ibid., 314.

⁴² Ibid., 314-315.

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