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Is War Ever Justified? A Reality Check

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Monday, April 19, 2004

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The hard part comes in understanding how peace—even the partial and temporary cessation of war we call peace—can be achieved and established. Is war sometimes necessary for the making of peace?

Christians have struggled with this throughout the long span of Christian history. Some Christians have been willing to die but unwilling to kill—whatever the cause. Other Christians mounted crusades to reclaim territory and establish a Christian order by military force. The majority of Christians have struggled with the question in an attempt to be faithful in wars understood to be necessary as well as tragic.

The most thoughtful Christian tradition of moral reasoning on the question of lethal violence is customarily described as the Just War tradition. This pattern of careful thinking goes back to the earliest centuries of the church, when the armies of Rome defended the empire against aggression. When can a state lawfully go to war? What are the conditions necessary for risking and taking life? How is a war to be fought with ethical concern?

Based on biblical reasoning, the Just War tradition insists that war must be the last resort, after all reasonable alternatives have failed. A lawful authority must authorize the military action, and that authority must be driven by an intention to establish a righteous peace—not to gain territory or claim the goods of another lawful nation. Furthermore, any military action must be proportionate to the good that can be gained. No military action is justified that is not absolutely required. There must also be a very real hope of success.

In the final analysis, the only justifiable war is defensive rather than offensive—it is undertaken to right a wrong, not to gain an advantage.

Once military action is necessary and justified, commanders must take care to protect civilians to the greatest extent possible, and must avoid using certain weapons and forms of violence such as chemical and biological weapons, and torture.

These principles have guided Christian moral thought for at least 1,500 years, even as each generation has faced and answered new questions. Now, a new generation of American Christians face the challenge of thinking as Christians about the war in Iraq, the war on terror, and the use of deadly force. Now, with the war over a year old, and with the stark reality of continued warfare before us, these questions deserve our most careful thinking.

Pacifists claim that war can never be justified, whatever the cause or conditions. The moral failure of pacifism is found in its deadly naivete, not in its abhorrence of violence. In reality, the world is a violent place where humans with evil intent will make war on others. In such a world, respect for human life sometimes requires the taking of human life. That tragic fact is as clearly revealed in history as any other, and far more than most. Pacifism fails to keep the peace against

those who would take it.

The moral agent of war is the sovereign state—not individuals or international organizations. In the final analysis, nations go to war one by one, and individually they will be judged. At the onset of hostilities in Iraq, President Bush stated his war aim as the removal of Saddam Hussein as a murderous tyrant against his own people and a dangerous aggressor against peaceful nations.

Further, the President claimed that all reasonable alternatives to war had been tried, and had failed. The United States pledged that the purpose of the war is to liberate the Iraqi people, not to subjugate them. The United States declaims any ambition to gain territory or resources from the nation of Iraq, and promises to rebuild the nation, feed its people, and establish a representative government accountable to Iraq's citizens. Is that enough?

With the 2004 presidential race shaping the political debate, President Bush's doctrine of preemptive war is on the agenda. Is preemptive military action ever justified? Admittedly, this is a hard question. But the answer must be yes, if the threat is real and the response is proportionate. President Franklin Roosevelt understood this when in one of his famous "Fireside Chats" he argued, "when you see a rattlesnake poised to strike, you do not wait until he has struck before you crush him."

This simple logic is lost on those who would demand that a nation wait until it has been attacked in full force. A decision to wait is in this case a decision to allow lives to be lost when the warnings were clear. Without doubt, a doctrine of preemptive war can be misused. Statecraft must be humble as well as courageous, and the judgment for preemptive military action must be justified by overwhelming evidence of deadly ability and intention.

War is sometimes required by a motive to protect human life within another nation, when genocide or ethnic conflict threaten the innocent. As with preemptive military action, the evidence must be clear, the motivation for action must be honorable, and the goal must be nothing beyond the establishment of a just peace and respect for human life.

Augustine, the greatest theologian of the early church, gave the question of war one of its most faithful considerations. In summary, he argued that "true religion looks upon those wars that are waged, not for motives of aggrandizement or cruelty, but with the object of securing peace, of punishing evil-doers, and of uplifting the good."

The Christian conscience should struggle with the awful question of war. We know that every human life is sacred—and we know why. Christians must never grow to love war, nor to seek battle, yet those who righteously fight for life serve with honor. Those who fight for life and liberty deserve our gratitude, our support, and our prayer. We must pray for our troops and for their families. The terrors and heartbreaks of war are known most fully by those whose lives and loved ones are in the line of fire.

War is a demonstration of the utter sinfulness of sin. In the name of the Prince of Peace, Christians must seek to establish and maintain our faltering and transient efforts at peacemaking until our Lord comes to establish the only peace that endures. In this fallen world, we must honestly acknowledge that peacemaking will sometimes lead to war. In the final analysis, war is the worst option imaginable, until it is the only option left.

