

A Christian View of War

By Dr. Greg L. Bahnsen

I want to extend my thanks, appreciation and respect to Rev. Roger Wagner for the help he has been to me over the years in developing a Christian understanding of war.

CONTENTS

Introduction

Lesson 1: The Source of Wars

Preparation for Lesson
Outline of Lesson
Questions on Lesson
For Further Reflection or Discussion

Lesson 2: The Conducting of Wars

Preparation for Lesson
Outline of Lesson
Questions on Lesson
For Further Reflection or Discussion

Lesson 3: The End of Wars

Preparation for Lesson
Outline of Lesson
Questions on Lesson
For Further Reflection or Discussion

Supplementary Reading

INTRODUCTION

In the heat of battle our lingering indifference to, or ignoring of, moral issues melts away. The breaking out of armed conflict makes us face tough questions as Christians—questions which are of enduring importance, not only during times of actual warfare, but also in the peace-times leading up to or following the onslaught of battle.

Which comes first: our patriotic pride or our commitment to God's word? Is Scripture relevant to contemporary events? Does the Biblical ideal of peace exclude any involvement in, or support of, warfare by the believer? Does God reveal moral standards for entering and prosecuting wars? Can we support our troops, while criticizing our politicians? What is the basis for international law? How will peace between nations ever come?

On top of such questions, it is not always clear what the moral principles of our own nation actually are. In August of 1990, the United States of America took steps to intervene in the geopolitical relations of two Arab countries in the Middle East. In January of 1991 our armed forces entered battle against the forces of Iraq and in defense of the Emirate of Kuwait. Yet in previous years the United States had refrained from military intervention in Afghanistan. During the same time of our deployment to Saudi Arabia the United States did not choose to provide military defense to the struggling people of Lithuania. In support of our excursion to the Middle East, the United States made much of the backing and decrees of the United Nations—even though we had earlier ignored its condemnation of our intrusion into Panama to apprehend that nation's drug-trafficking leader.

When the war with Iraq came, then, Christians in the United States were all of a sudden forced to confront some difficult moral questions about warfare in general—and complicated, if not confusing, questions about the policies and principles of our own nation. What would the unfailing word of God lead us to think and do about warfare in this or any other situation?

In February, 1991, I taught a three evening conference on "A Christian View of War" in Akron, Ohio. The purpose of my lessons was to explore the Biblical view of war in general, making the case relevant to assessing any particular war whatsoever—although the conflict in which our nation was presently involved was the most immediate application and obviously on everybody's mind. These three lessons are provided on cassette tapes accompanying the study guide. The three lessons are entitled:

"The Source of Wars,"
"The Conducting of Wars,"
"The End of Wars."

I trust that the intended progression of thought through the lessons is evident enough. We cannot hope to see warfare put to an end unless we understand and deal with its genuine cause. In the mean time, the way in which wars are conducted (e.g., when they are to be engaged, how they are to be fought) remains under the moral authority of God Himself.

Those who first heard these lessons on a Christian view of war, whether they tended to be "hawks" or "doves," all seemed to be challenged by the message. Whether they favored the current military involvement or found fault with it, all parties discovered that the lessons partly supported and partly corrected their preconceptions. Hopefully this is a symptom of the way in which God's word, if read faithfully, cuts through each and every political standpoint which stems from human reasoning and tradition.

In order to maximize what you can learn through listening to the series on war, the following study guide provides for each lesson: an exercise preparing you for the material in the lesson, an outline of what you will be hearing, then questions to be answered based upon the tape, and finally further issues to be discussed (in your study group, Sunday school class, etc.) or for personal reflection—so that you yourself learn to carry out the principles which were taught. If nothing else, we will all be humbled before the quandaries and awesome importance represented by the moral questions pertaining to war.

May we also learn to bow in praise and wonder before our God. “He makes wars to cease unto the end of the earth; He breaks the bow and cuts the spear in sunder; He burns the chariots in fire. *Be still and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.*” (Psalm 46:9-10).

Dr. Greg L. Bahnsen
March 6, 1991

Preparation for Lesson 1

Make a list of the *causes* you find most likely for why nations go to war.

Reflect on the popular opinions which shape the general mindset of your culture today (television, movies, newspaper editorials, teachers, lunchroom discussion, etc.). What do people generally regard as “bad” *reasons* for going to war? What do they generally regard as “good” *reasons* for going to war?

To what extent are wars seen as good or bad according to a person’s own circumstances and the effect on him (her), his family, his financial interests, etc.? To what extent are wars seen as good or bad according to how well they go for “our side”?

With respect to some particular case of war (Viet Nam, Iraq) imagine the best case that might be made for our nation’s involvement in the war, then against that involvement. Try to be honest and fair.

Read Genesis 3. Where and how did “enmity” enter the world? How about violence? What is surprising about your answers?

Read Genesis 4:1-15. Try to explain Cain’s enmity toward Abel. Try (even harder) to explain the rationale for Cain’s killing his brother.

Read James 3:13-4:10 and describe the author’s view of wisdom and humility.

How can waging war ever be an outworking of faith?

Outline of Lesson 1

I. The Need for a Carefully Articulated, Theoretical Basis for Evaluation and Judgment Regarding War

II. Biblical Account of the “First World War”

(Genesis 4)

- A. Incorrect views of the source of warfare
- B. Scripture finds the source of violence in pride, anger, desire
- C. Enmity and violence: God’s, man’s
- D. Confirmation of this analysis (James 3-4)

III. The Fundamental Moral Question: What is the Relationship between Might and Right?

- A. Might does not make right
- B. Need for an objective standard of right
- C. In a fallen world the objective standard of justice (law) will need to be enforced
- D. Vengeance is circumscribed by God

IV. War as an Extension of the Police Powers of the State

- A. The state protects its citizens against aggression
- B. Two-fold sense in which sin is the source of war
- C. War always a sign of spiritual failure

V. Three Applications of the Biblical View Regarding the Source of Wars

- A. Categorical pacifism is unrealistic, unloving, unbiblical.
- B. War must be just (cf. second lecture).
- C. No hope of ending war without dealing with its root cause (cf. third lecture).

Questions on Lesson 1

1. Amid slogans and emotional appeals, what should be the standard by which we morally assess war (generally) or any particular case of warfare?
2. Give two (non-Christian) theories about the source of wars, and explain how they fail to account for the “first” world war.
3. According to the Biblical account, what was the source of Cain’s violence against Abel?
4. What is the source of strife according to James 3:14- 16?—The source of peace according to vv. 17-18?
5. Where do wars come from according to James 4:1-2?
6. If might does not make right, to what must we appeal to settle grievances? Give two mistaken (but popular) answers to this question.
7. Without the objective standard of God’s law, to what is mankind doomed?
8. According to Romans 12:19, who alone has the prerogative to pursue vengeance? What agency is used to accomplish this according to Romans 13:4?
9. How does the above view of vengeance show that the civil ruler’s jurisdiction is circumscribed?
10. What is meant by the “police powers” of the state? How is war an *extension* of the state’s police powers?
11. Give two ways in which sin is the source of wars.
12. Explain why every war represents a spiritual failure.
13. Why is categorical pacifism unrealistic and unloving?
14. Prove from the Biblical account of God, of faith, and of the Christian that warfare is not inherently evil.

For Further Reflection or Discussion

Some people think that if we improve the economic conditions of other countries through foreign aid we can diminish warfare. In a limited way, how is this correct? Why is it ultimately misguided and ineffective?

Why would the extensive use of anti-aggressive drugs still not prevent the possibility of resorting to war?

Think about ways in which the devilish inclination to strife and faction (James 3) is made to look like “wisdom” by sinful reasoning and rationalizing. Are Christians capable of falling for such pseudo-wise thinking?

Do Christians who pray selfishly (James 4:3) or who are worldly in their desires (v. 4) support that mindset which leads nations to war? Are we sometimes part of the problem instead of the solution?

Many schools of thought reject resorting to “might” as the response to grievances; so do Christians. Explain the difference.

Is “majoritarianism” the Christian standard for resolving grievances? If so, can the majority not be morally wrong? Do we not, however, maintain that the majority should rule?

If the standard of justice must be *enforced* in a fallen world, does “might make right” after all?

If war always represents some kind of spiritual failure, is it *ever* appropriate for Christians *enthusiastically* to endorse some particular military confrontation?

Preparation for Lesson 2

Think about the difference between a war fought in defense, a war fought as prevention, and a war fought as a crusade. How would you express the difference between them?

For what causes throughout history (remote or recent) have crusade-type wars been fought? What or who authorized such crusades?

In what way does going to war, by its very nature, deprive people of their property, money, freedom or lives?

Where and under what circumstances does Scripture authorize the taking or jeopardizing of people's property, money, freedom or lives?

Write down what you presently understand to be the most important points about "holy war" as set forth in the Old Testament.

Read Deuteronomy 20 and describe the two kinds of war discussed there. Note some of the particular regulations regarding warfare. Compare Deuteronomy 7.

Read the Westminster Confession of Faith 23.2 and ask yourself what views about war were being opposed there.

If you were to compose a set of regulations governing the engagement and prosecution of a war, what would they include? Why?

Think of some areas of life in which we employ the concept of "lawful jurisdiction."

Outline of Lesson 2

(Review of Lesson 1)

I. Just War Theory

- A. God's moral authority regarding warfare
- B. Westminster Confession analyzed
- C. Just war is basically defensive war
- D. Elaboration of requirements of just war

II. Special Guidance from God for Holy War

- A. Distinguish God's acts from God's laws
- B. Special features of holy war
- C. No revelation today to warrant aggression

III. Revealed Guidance for Common Warfare

- A. A distinction evident within Deuteronomy 20
- B. Sample regulations from Scripture surveyed
- C. Prohibition of destroying fruit trees explained

IV. Thus Scripture Sanctions Only Defensive War

- A. Biblical reasoning warranting this conclusion
- B. Relation of defensive to preventive wars
- C. Wars of intervention violate jurisdiction

V. Three Applications or Qualifications of the Biblical View of the Conducting of Wars

- A. Selective conscientious objection
- B. Distinction between supporting a political administration and its troops
- C. Realism regarding moral questions subsequent to an immoral decision

Questions on Lesson 2

1. Explain and defend the view that the conducting of warfare does not fall outside the moral authority of God.
2. For what “end” may war be lawfully waged according to the Westminster Confession of Faith?
3. Explain the basic cause or aim which makes a war just.
4. Name five other requirements of a just war.
5. What disaster and treachery can result from the failure of a political administration to formally declare war?
6. What is meant by the “discriminate” and “proportionate” use of violence?
7. What is meant by “holy war”? Describe what it required.
8. For what reason, and under what circumstances, did God authorize holy war in the Old Testament?
9. Why is it that no modern nation may legitimately wage holy war?
10. What is the significance of the word “but” in Deuteronomy 20:16?
11. List some Biblical regulations regarding engagement in, or conducting of, wars; give Biblical texts.
12. What underlying principle was being illustrated in the prohibition of destroying your enemy’s fruit trees?
13. Offer at least two lines of Biblical reasoning for saying that just war must be defensive war today.
14. Under what circumstance would a preventive war be warranted?
15. Show that the Bible does not warrant crusade-wars, even for good causes.
16. What moral principle is violated when nations assume moral responsibility for what happens in foreign regimes?
17. Give at least two lines of Biblical reasoning which show that wars of intervention are immoral.
18. Offer three responses to the analogy of stepping in to help a neighbor who is attacked, used to justify a war of intervention.
19. What is meant by “selective” conscientious objection? Would Christian ethics support a right to such?

20. Explain why one may condemn a political administration for deciding to go to war, and yet be supportive of the soldiers who are sent to fight.
21. Give an example to show that the making of one immoral decision does not automatically determine how to respond to every moral question which arises from that primary decision.
22. If a nation repents of unjustly entering into a war, is the appropriate work of repentance automatically that of immediately withdrawing the troops? Explain.

For Further Reflection or Discussion

Christians often say that the end does not justify the means. How would that moral maxim apply to justifying wars of crusade or intervention by pointing to the good end(s) which such wars serve?

Conservative columnist, William F. Buckley Jr., has written that the United States is—to be candid—“very choosy about those aggressive wars against which we will contend” [intervene]. We did not respond to the invasion of Afghanistan, but we did react against Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait. Buckley feels we did this for more reasons than the unjust aggression of Iraq; we also wanted to prevent the invasion of Saudi Arabia, lest 43 percent of the world’s oil reserves come under hostile control. Offer a moral evaluation of this “choosiness” about intervention, as well as about this particular rationale for intervening in the case of Iraq invading Kuwait.

To what extent do nations which engage in crusades or in wars of intervention act as though their situation is analogous to that of holy war in the Old Testament? Why are such implicit analogies ruled Out by the New Testament?

Can the use of nuclear warfare be justified in light of Deuteronomy 20:19-20? Carefully explain pro and con answers to this question. Over what do they ultimately disagree?

Should Christians be idealistic and support un-winable wars? Should the winning or losing of a war determine popular support for it? (Does it?)

Should Christians volunteer for military service or careers, knowing unjust wars may be entered by their nation?

Preparation for Lesson 3

Given views which are popular in our culture, under what circumstances would the use of violence be condemned? Ask yourself how popular views compare to the Biblical outlook on violence. To what degree have such views—of both hawks and doves—been influenced by Christian tradition?

Make a list of different *varieties* of pacifism with which you are familiar. Note the key issues over which they diverge from each other.

From what you read and hear in the news, how would you describe the authority which the United Nations actually wields?

From the moral point of view, does anything which is wrong for someone to do ever become right because a larger group of people (perhaps a majority) decide to participate in it?

Read the following passages and summarize what they teach regarding the person of the Messiah, the character of His reign, and the moral ideals pursued by His people:

Isaiah 2:2-4	Romans 14:17
Isaiah 9:1-7	Psalm 34:14
Isaiah 11:1-10	Ephesians 4:3
Psalm 72	Zechariah 8:16
Zechariah 9:9-10	Hebrews 12:14
Luke 2:14	Galatians 5:22
John 14:27	James 3:17-18
Matthew 5:9	

Outline of Lesson 3
(Review of lessons 1 & 2)

I. Scripture Teaches that War Will End on Earth and the Right Shall Reign

II. False Messianism Distracts From that Goal

- A. No nation called to be policeman or savior of the world by use of might.
- B. Futility and immorality of intervention.
- C. The United Nations cannot warrant intervention.

III. The Propriety of the Pacifist Ideal

- A. Correcting overreaction against pacifist errors.
- B. The Biblical call to peace-making.
- C. The priority of reconciliation over alienation.

IV. The Path to Peace

- A. The gospel more important than guns.
- B. Proclaiming and exemplifying the standard of right.
- C. Universal commitment to fighting only just wars.
- D. How to extend military aid to oppressed nations.
- E. Extending God's kingdom in all areas of life and all places in the world.

V. The Biblical Assurance of Success

Questions for Lesson 3

1. How do false views of what God plans to do in history lead to mistaken ethical perspectives?
2. What does the Bible prophesy with respect to the course of history which is relevant to war and peace on earth?
3. What is meant by “false messianism”?
4. How have United States’ military interventions proven to be tragic and futile (e.g., Viet Nam, Kuwait)?
5. Illustrate how a just or good end (aim) does not justify any means of pursuing it.
6. Explain why the United Nations does not have moral authority to warrant military intervention by its member nations (individually or collectively).
7. Why is it said that the United States’ response to the decrees of the United Nations is fickle?
8. Should the majority rule? Does this mean that the majority is always ethically right?
9. How does the standard and aim of the United Nations stand in antagonism to Christianity?
10. How do Christians overreact to the error of pacifism?
11. Lay out a Biblical case for the priority, importance and ideal of peace for the Christian.
12. What are five steps in the path to peace?
13. What is the only hope of establishing peace in this world? (Can the fruit of salvation be achieved apart from the source of salvation?)
14. How are missionaries more important than military troops for the long-term strategy of peace?
15. Figuratively speaking, how are believers engaged in holy war today? Provide Scriptural backing.
16. What is the Christian’s view of the standard for international law?
17. What would be the effect of all nations adopted the policy of engaging only in just war?
18. Does the rejection of internationalism entail an endorsement of strict isolationism in foreign affairs? Explain.
19. What is morally unacceptable about temporary “treaties” to go to war for the sake of another nation?
20. How could a weaker nation secure the help and defense of a stronger nation? How does the model of the (original) “United States” show us the way here?

21. Should Christian nations extend military aid to nations which are hostile to the gospel? How does Scripture help us answer?
22. Should we be hostile to the people (citizens) of an aggressor nation? Why or why not?
23. "Politics is not the solution to world peace." Explain why this is so and what the Christian alternative is.
24. Provide Biblical support for the promise that wars will end as the kingdom of God expands.

For Further Reflection or Discussion

Evaluate what is right and wrong in the maxim by Benjamin Franklin that “There never was a good war, or a bad peace.”

Offer some examples of the ways in which nations can (and do) reflect pseudo-messianic pretensions.

How is the United Nations a secular counterfeit of the Messiah’s kingdom and aims?

Should the government of a Christian nation, given its general commitment to a free market, permit industry and business within its jurisdiction to sell military technology and hardware to nations which do not share its moral and religious outlook? to likely enemies?

How do Christian evangelism and works of mercy in foreign lands concretely end up affecting the political goal of decreasing the amount of warfare in the world?

Dwight D. Eisenhower once said “When people speak to you about a preventive war, you tell them to go and fight it. After my experience, I have come to hate war. War settles nothing.” In what way(s) would the Christian concur with these sentiments?

“Privileges and protections are tied to responsibilities.” What responsibilities should be shared by a nation which wishes to come under the protection of another? To what extent must there be theological agreement?

Scripture prophesies that the nations will beat their swords into plowshares (Isa. 2:4). In what way and under what circumstances, then, should Christians pursue the aim of military disarmament?

Supplementary Reading

The following list is selective and not systematic. There is value in each selection—whether to inform, provoke, challenge or guide us but I do not endorse everything found in them, naturally.

Bainton, Roland H. *Christian Attitudes Toward War and Peace: A Historical Survey and Critical Re-evaluation* (Abingdon Press, 1960)

Bennet, John C., ed. *Nuclear Weapons and the Conflict of Conscience* (Scribners, 1962)

Boettner, Loraine. *The Christian Attitude Toward War*, rev. ed. (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1942)

Clouse, Robert G., ed. *War: Four Christian Views* (InterVarsity Press, 1981)

Craigie, Peter C. *The Problem of War in the Old Testament* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1978)

Drinan, Robert F. *Vietnam and Armageddon: Peace war, and the Christian Conscience* (Sheed and Ward, 1970)

Eller, Vernard. *War and Peace: From Genesis to Revelation*: (Herald Press, 1980)

Finn, B. A., ed. *Conflict of Loyalties: The Case for Selective Conscientious Objection* (Pegasus, 1969)

Forsyth, P. T. *The Christian Ethic of War* (Longmans, Green, and Co., 1916)

Greene, William. “The Christian Doctrine of War,” & “War Neither Absolutely Right nor Absolutely Wrong in Itself” in *Princeton Theological Review*, vol. 16 (Jan. & Oct., 1918)

Holmes, Arthur F., ed. *War and Christian Ethics* (Baker Book House, 1975)

Lewis, C. S. “Why I am Not a Pacifist,” in *The Weight of Glory*, rev. ed. (Macmillan, 1980)

MacGregor, G. H. C. *The New Testament Basis of Pacifism and the Relevance of an Impossible Ideal* (Fellowship Publications, 1960)

McSorley, Richard. *New Testament Basis of Peacemaking* (Center for Peace Studies, Georgetown University, 1979)

Morey, Robert A. *When Is It Right to Fight?* (Bethany House Publishers, 1985)

Murray, John. “God and the War,” and “The Christian World Order” in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 1 (Banner of Truth, 1976)

Novak, Michael. *Moral Clarity in the Nuclear Age* (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1983)

Ramsey, Paul. *The Just War: Force and Political Responsibility* (Scribner, 1968)

Sider, Ronald & Taylor, Richard K. *Nuclear Holocaust and Christian Hope* (InterVarsity Press, 1982)

Wagner, Roger. “Vietnam: Biblical Reflections, on National Messianism” in *Antithesis*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Jan./Feb, 1990)