

GOD AND GOVERNMENT:
SHOULD A CHRISTIAN GO TO WAR?
June 2, 2002

INTRO: We have been working our way through God and government in Scripture with a major purpose being to answer the question: Should a Christian go to War? We saw in Genesis how God committed government into the hands of man. We saw the growth of government from a family to the nation of Israel. We saw the time of the kings of Israel end with all government in the hands of unsaved Gentiles. Then Christ came on the scene. He did not change the system of government in the secular realm, as the Jews expected that He would. His life and ministry was instead, a transition to a new time period: the time of the Church.

In our last message we skimmed the time of the church from approximately 30 AD to 1500 AD. The Church, while in subjection to secular government, grew in numbers. Probably one of the most important questions to ask with regard to the Christian's relationship to government is the question: Should a Christian go to war? We saw that up until 170 AD there is no record of Christians entering the army. After 170 AD, some Christians began to join the Roman army. Then when Constantine came into power and claimed to become a Christian, the church came to full acceptance of Christians as soldiers.

I should mention, however, that there have always been those who held that Christians should not be involved in war. Guy F. Hershberger writes in *War, Peace and Nonresistance*, "While Christendom in general has surrendered almost completely on the question of war, the Biblical doctrine of nonresistance has nevertheless continued to live through more than nineteen centuries" (202).

Our question this morning is: How did the reformers view the relationship between Church and state? We begin with Martin Luther.

- d. The modern era (1500-2002)
 - 1) Luther

Martin Luther was born on November 10, 1483, in the little town of Eisleben.

He would become the man through whom the reformation would be blown into Europe. The reformation would mark the beginning of the modern era. Luther, through fear in a thunder storm promised Saint Anne that he would become a Catholic Monk. After being trained as a monk he became a teacher of the Word of God and in his studies of God's Word he found peace in his soul which he had not been able to find in all the rites he had already tried. It was the reading of Romans 1:17 that finally and fully convinced him that salvation was by faith alone.

Now, every church throughout history has had to address the question of the Christian's relationship to the secular state and whether a Christian should go to war. Thomas Aquinas, the Catholic theologian had said that those in ministry should not take up the sword. Waging warfare was left to those not in ministry.

At the time of the reformation the church was run by the state. What would Luther decide? Well, though he was influenced by the teaching of non-resistance (which became the view of the Mennonites) he maintained it was the task of the state to run the church. Everyone who lived in a territory run by a Lutheran prince was required to be a member of the Lutheran church. So Luther concluded that the state was the higher power and if they called their church members to go to war, then the Christian was obligated to go to war (GFH 67-68).

Lutheranism held that the state was to allow the church to run its own affairs even though the church was subject to the state. The church, on

the other hand, was not to interfere in secular matters. But what of the believer, who was a member of both church and state? Well, he was to obey both but if there was a conflict then he must obey the state above the church. So if the state called one to war, to war one must go, because Romans 13 teaches that the Christian is to be subject to the state.

2) Calvin

Calvin, on the other hand, though he believed in a state church, believed that the church was over the state. And since the church was over the state, the state was responsible to see to it that the unsaved lived according to the dictates of the church. If a person became a heretic, then the state must put that person to death. Calvin was responsible for putting to death a man by the name of Servetus because he denied the doctrine of the Trinity (Cairns 338). So of course, as far as Christians going to war was concerned, the Christians could be soldiers.

3) Mennonites

So, when you consider these matters, who do you think was right? Was it Calvin or was it Luther, or was it neither? Was the state to be over the Church or the Church over the state? At that time another group of believers came into being. They would later be known as the Mennonites. They believed that neither Luther nor Calvin were right and that church and state should be kept separate. Interestingly, in actual practice it is this view that has prevailed for most of the time from then until our very day.

One of the early Mennonites, before they were known as Mennonites, was Balthauser Hubmier (1481-1528). He insisted on the doctrine of the separation of church and state along with the authority of the Bible and believer's baptism (Cairns 332). Ironically, the Roman Catholic church drowned his wife in the Danube River and the state burned him at the stake.

Earle E. Cairns, in his book *Christianity through the Centuries* says, "They [the Mennonites] insisted upon the authority of the Bible as a final and infallible rule for faith and practice. Many of them gave it a literal interpretation. They believed that the pure Church was to be an association of the regenerated rather than a state church with some unsaved in it" (333).

Let me say this about early Mennonitism. As today, it was a highly divided group. Because they believed everyone had the right to interpret the Bible for themselves, many did and many groups of anabaptists arose, some of which became radicals. I believe that because of these radicals the Mennonites suffered beyond what they otherwise might have.

Let me read you a quote from Earl E. Cairns book, *Christianity Through the Centuries*. He writes, "The Anabaptists were not 'Bolsheviks of the Reformation' nor were all of them 'left wing' fanatical visionaries. They were simple Bible-believing people, some of whom were led astray by ignorant leaders, who interpreted the Bible literally to their own advantage. Neither the Mennonites nor the Baptists should be ashamed to

count them among their spiritual ancestors" (334).

Guy F. Hershberger gives two very interesting quotes from Catholic writers of that time in their view of the Mennonites. The first quote is from 1603 by the Catholic writer Christoph Andreas Fischer. He writes, "Among all the heresies and sects which have their origin from Luther, to the destruction of the Catholic church, not a one has a better appearance and greater external holiness than the Anabaptists. Other sects are for the most part riotous, bloodthirsty and given over to carnal lusts; not so the Anabaptists. They call each other brothers and sisters; they use no profanity nor unkind language; they use no weapons of defense. They are temperate in eating and drinking, they use no vain display of clothes...They do not go to law before judicial courts, but bear everything patiently, as they say, in the Holy Spirit. Who would suppose that under this sheep's clothing only ravening wolves are hidden" (77).

Another Catholic writer named Franz Agricola wrote in 1582, "Among the existing heretical sects there is none whose adherents lead in appearance a more modest, better, or more pious life than the Anabaptists. As concerns their outward public life they are irreproachable. No lying, deception, swearing, strife, harsh language, no intemperate eating and drinking, no outward personal display is found or is discernable among them, but only humility, patience, uprightness, meekness, honesty, temperance, and straightforwardness in such measure that one would suppose that they have the Holy Spirit of God" (77).

The Annabaptists, in my view, for the most part caught a clear vision of what the life of Christ in the believer ought to be with regard to warfare.

2. Present views

What views are presently held in the church regarding God and government? Probably that question is best answered by asking the question: Should a Christian go to war? The answer to that question will answer most of the other questions that come up with regard to the Christian's relationship to the secular government.

The views, I think can be summarized into two camps: activism and pacifism. Activism says a Christian should fight for his country. Pacifism says he should not.

a. Activism

1) Explanation of the position

David Augsburger, in the book recommended by the Sutara Twins, *Caring Enough To Confront* gives three camps within this view of activism. The first is that the Christian is obligated to fight in all wars. Since the government is over the Christian he is obligated to fight in all their wars. The second view is that Christians should only fight if it is a holy war. A holy war is any war in which the nation defends its way of life. The third view, Augsburger writes, is that a Christian is only to fight in a just war. A just war is one that is declared by a just authority. It seeks to establish an orderly peace. It is fought with a justifiable proportionality between the amount of harm done and the benefits hoped for.

It uses a just means and respects noncombatants and refuses to use inhumane weapons. Each of these views has this in common, that a Christian ought to fight in war.

2) Scriptural support

-The Old Testament

The argument of the Old Testament runs something like this: Since it is obvious that God sanctioned killing and war in the Old Testament by believers, it obviously is not wrong in the New Testament either.

We have considered God and government in the Old Testament and agree that God sanctioned war and killing in certain cases in the Old Testament. However, we have also seen that long prior to the close of the Old Testament God removed Israel's right to secular government. God used ungodly Gentile governments to depose them and to keep them in submission. After the Babylonian captivity we never find God again instructing Israel to kill or wage war. He had removed this privilege from them, due to their failure to honor Him with just government.

And amazingly, when Jesus Christ came to dwell with man, He did nothing to change the fact that unbelievers were in charge of secular government. As a matter of fact, He acknowledged their right to secular government when He said, "Therefore render to Caesar what is Caesar's..."

-The New Testament

But what ground do those who teach that a Christian should go to war find

in the New Testament? Well, let me give you the New Testament defence for this position as given by Jon Bonk, in the book, *The World at War: The Church at Peace*.

John 2:13-17: This is the account where Jesus made a whip and drove the money changers out of the temple. It is argued that His use of violence gives right to the Christian to use violence.

Luke 3:14: "Likewise the soldiers asked him saying, 'And what shall we do?' So he said to them, 'Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages.'" Here John the Baptist is speaking with Roman soldiers and he does not tell them that they must leave their work of being a soldier, therefore it must be OK to be a soldier.

Luke 22:36-38: Just before His crucifixion Jesus commanded the disciples to buy swords. So Jesus not only sanctioned the use of the sword, but he commanded it.

Matt. 10:34: "Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword." Since Jesus would establish His kingdom by the sword, He must also approve of its use.

John 15:13: Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for one's friends." This is the life of a soldier, therefore it must be OK to fight in war.

Mark 12:13-17: Verse 17 says, "...Render to Caesar the things that are Caesars and to God the things that are God's..." We are to obey the

government in secular matters, therefore if the secular leaders call us to war, we are obligated to go.

Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-17: These two passages require a believer to obey the government, so as in Mark 12:17, if the government calls on believers to go to war, then he should go to war.

These are the best texts for the position that a Christian should go to war. We will look at them again at a later point, but we can well see that it is mostly a grasping of straws. The rational arguments for this position are strong. The Scriptural support is almost non-existent.

2) Pacifism

a) Explanation of the position

Christian pacifism says that it is not biblical for a Christian to go to war. There are three groups who have held to pacifism after the reformation; the Mennonites, the Quakers and the Brethren; not Mennonite Brethren but simply the Brethren. William Penn of Pennsylvania tried to run that state on his pacifistic convictions. It is a note of interest that Willima Penn, of Pennsylvania and John Calvin in Geneva tried to run a government by Christian principles. Niether of those efforts was successful.

Now pacifists, I think may be divided into two groups. There are those who think that it is their task to make secular government pacifistic too. War is never right. The secular government does not have the right to go to war. All wars should be stopped and all buildup of armaments should be

discontinued. Christians should try to stop the world from war. This group of pacifists will do things like picket governmental institutions that build war materials. Or they will sit on train tracks trying to stop trains that are moving war materials. They believe no government should have arms or enter into war and they feel it is the Christian's task to bring this eutopia of peace about. They seem to not have read Scriptures like Romans 13:1-7 and especially verse 4.

Jesus Christ did not advocate that the state put away the sword. The apostle Paul did not either. As a matter of fact Paul said that they do not bear the sword in vain (Rom. 13:4). It is my sincere conviction that the Church should not try to Lord it over secular government.

The second pacifistic position would better be called non-resistance. This view says that God has given authority to worldly governments to wage war. But the Christian is not of the world and should not enter war. As a citizen of heaven, his highest command comes from heaven to which he is bound first. If there is a discrepancy between the requirement of the secular government and the Bible, the Bible is the highest authority and must be obeyed above any other authority.

I might add here that the defense of the activist is strong, rationally. It makes a lot of sense. It does not make sense to us to be defenseless before a terrible enemy. Does it make sense to not fight for one's country when an ungodly enemy, such as Germany under Adolf Hitler, attacks? That simply is not logical. Does it make sense to not stand up and fight when some murderer

attacks your family? No. And so, rationally, the position of the activist is the strongest position.

But look at the life of the Lord Jesus Christ now. See Him in Gethsemane. Watch Judas, His own familiar friend approach Him, hug Him and kiss Him. Observe the Creator of the universe as He is tied and led as a sheep to the slaughter. Watch as the courts determine He is guilty of death and then as He is whipped and mocked and crucified. Does that make sense? I'll tell you what. If God's way had made rational sense, the devil would have figured it out. But now, in defenselessness, in submitting to unjust, unfair treatment, the devil is defeated! Such are the unsearchable ways of God! (See 1 Cor. 2:7-8).

I believe that the way of life promoted by the Mennonites, and I believe this promotion is on solid Biblical ground, does not make a lot of sense. The strength of this view is not rational, at least not to the human mind. The strength of this view is found in the Scriptures!

b) Scriptural support

To save duplication, I will deal with these in the next point where at least many of the same texts are used.

CONCL: So, in summary this morning: What did the reformers believe? Well, Luther believed the state was over the church and therefore it only stands to reason that the Christian was obligated to fight in its wars. Calvin believed the church was over the state and therefore the state should see to it that people lived by Biblical standards. But the Mennonites believed in the separation of church and state. The state has its rightful place and that place does not belong to the church and the church has its rightful place and that does not belong to the

state. Where church and state are in conflict, the believer is obligated to the teachings of Scripture first and foremost.

In modern times the views of a Christian's relationship is best settled by his view of whether a Christian should go to war. The answer to that question determines into which of two positions a person will be. Either he will be an activist who believes a Christian should go to war or he will be a pacifist who believes a Christian should not go to war. Both of those positions have further division in their midst.

However, I am firmly committed to the position held by the early anabaptists, a position well defined in our historic Catechism; a position called non-resistance. In the next message I want to state and defend that position.