IS THERE SUCH A THING AS A JUST WAR?
A CRITIQUE OF THE JUST WAR DEBATE

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In the quest to justify conflict through the course of man’s history, more than blood has been spilt. Countless gallons of ink have also been shed in the attempt to provide a rationale for going to war. Much of that ink, like the blood shed on the battlefield, has been shed in vain, if the results are any indication. I think it reasonable to say that in every account of war ever written or remembered, in every civilization of every epoch, reasons are given as to why the war was necessary (from the vantage point of the attacker) or unjust (from the standpoint of the attacked). The reasons may be given explicitly, or they be implicitly communicated through the manner in which the story is told.

The main question remains, though: is war ever truly just? Surely this question concerns every Christian, who must do all things “for the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). Can I condone or participate in any act of war as a Christian?

I will not attempt to review the history of the just war doctrine itself as it has developed in the West through the centuries. There are plenty of other sources for that. Nor will I systematically address the tenets of just warfare that are typically espoused. My intent is to survey the ideas of men concerning war in general, and hold them under the light of reason and Scripture.

The Confusion of the Ages

I think it helpful to survey opinions about war throughout history in more or less chronological order:

We have discovered war to be derived from causes which are also the causes of almost all the evils in States, private as well as public.

We no longer take up the sword against any nation, nor do we learn the art of war anymore. Instead of following the traditions that made us “strangers to the covenant” (Eph. 2:12), we have become sons of peace through Jesus our founder.

The Lord, in subsequently disarming Peter, disarmed every soldier. No uniform is lawful among us if it is designated for an unlawful action.

Objection 3: “…War is contrary to peace. Therefore war is always sin.” Reply to objection 3: Those who wage war justly aim at peace, and so they are not opposed to peace, except to the evil peace, which Our Lord “came not to send upon earth” (Mt. 10:34). Hence Augustine says (Ep. ad Bonif. clxxix): “We do not seek peace in order to
be at war, but we go to war that we may have peace. Be peaceful, therefore, in warring, so that you may vanquish those whom you war against, and bring them to the prosperity of peace."²⁶

Fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you but do not transgress limits ... And slay them wherever ye catch them, and turn them out from where they have turned you out; for persecution is worse than slaughter; but fight them not at the sacred Mosque unless they (first) fight you there; but if they fight you, slay them. Such is the reward of those who reject faith. But if they cease, Allah is oft-forgiving, Most Merciful. And fight them on until there is no more persecution and the religion becomes Allah’s. But if they cease, let there be no hostility except to those who practice oppression.⁷

War is an ugly thing, but not the ugliest of things: the decayed and degraded state of moral and patriotic feeling which thinks nothing worth a war, is worse…. A war to protect other human beings against tyrannical injustice; a war to give victory to their own ideas of right and good, and which is their own war, carried on for an honest purpose by their own free choice is often the means of their regeneration.⁸

Anyone who has ever looked into the glazed eyes of a soldier dying on the battlefield will think hard before starting a war.⁹

We all know the dictum of Clausewitz, one of the most famous writers on the philosophy and history of war, which says: “War is a continuation of policy by other means.”¹⁰

We used to wonder where war lived, what it was that made it so vile. And now we realize that we know where it lives, that it is inside ourselves.¹¹

If a man would not put restrictions on himself, if he would not conform to the necessary limits that allow people to live together in peace, then he must not allowed to infringe on the liberties of those who wanted to live in peace. And that might lead to violence, even to killing. The trouble was that … men had lived so long in a society that demanded order and conformity that they failed to understand that there were societies where violence was the rule, and where there were men to whom only the fear of retribution placed a bridle on their license.¹²

The East did not seek to answer questions concerning the correct conditions for entering war and the correct conduct of war on the basis of the possibility of a “just war,” precisely because it did not hold to such a view. Its view of war … was that it is a necessary evil. The peace ideal continued to be normative, and no theoretical efforts were made to make conduct of war into a positive norm.¹³

Although …God is able to use something evil, like war, to do his will…, this does not give Christians license to participate in such evil.¹⁴
In the face of persisting evidence of war, and the countless grievous defeats of life, Christ, the conqueror of sin and death, urges us not to surrender. Peace is possible, peace is a duty, peace is a prime responsibility of everyone!\(^{15}\)

There are many, many people in this country who see clearly that one killing of innocents will not be requited by another, that a radically different path is needed to assure our security and that of people in other parts of the world.\(^{16}\)

**The Debate Continues…**

The conflicting opinions you have just read are a mere sampling of the plethora of ideas that are currently being bandied about in the public forum. They are, I believe, fairly representative of their respective positions. Everyone brings his or her own ideas to the table about war, each defining terms and concepts as suits their assumptions, which may be categorized as follows:

- War causes such immense human suffering that it can never be right. (Secular pacifism)
- War is contrary to the nature of God, and is always sinful. (Religious pacifism)
- War is a fact of life, and should therefore be exploited when necessary to bring about desirable goals. (Secular pragmatism)
- War is permissible to force conversion to religious ideals. (Religious pragmatism)
- War creates greater problems than it solves, and is never necessary if people will simply act honorably and desire peace. (Secular/Religious idealism)
- War is a necessary evil, and should only be entered into as a last resort for as short a time as possible. (Secular/Religious realism)
- War is a glorious means to restore a nation or secure peace. (Secular/Religious romanticism)

In short, wars have ensued over the fundamental differences of the principles expressed here!

Two things, however, are characteristic of each position. First, each has an element of truth in it. War does cause immense suffering and senseless damage to property as well (does September 11, 2001, come to mind?). One of our Redeemer’s names is the “Prince of Peace.” Wars are an unpleasant but expected part of life in every epoch and society (the UN has successfully used this tool to further the aims of totalitarian globalism since its inception). War is a useful tool to gain or keep “converts” to one’s religion (think of the Jesuits or the early Mormons, for example). War does cause problems that could be avoided if people would just sit down and treat others humanely. Not everyone is a saint out there, and sometimes force is required to get his attention. Finally, war can be the means of a nation’s rise to prominence, prosperity, and peace. So much for the truth.

Second, each position is also tainted with an element of error, to one degree or another. Thus, there are worse things than human suffering; not many, true, but wickedness stands high in the list and is to be opposed. Limiting God to only being interested in peace does not do justice to the Scriptural record of His character (Ex. 15:3, “The LORD is a man of war; the LORD is
His name”). While war is effective, it should not be used to accomplish whatever goals the warmonger desires to achieve at the expense of others (Lk. 16:15, “You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God”). God’s work is not done with man’s strength (2 Cor. 10:4, “For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal”). While on the short term a temporary peace may be won through negotiation, it is naïve to think that fallen, sinful man can achieve any lasting solutions to anything (or, to pretend man isn’t fallen and sinful). War may not be a last resort: it may be required straightaway if the offense is grievous enough. Finally, glory may be possible in war, but wisdom is infinitely more desirable and glorious (Eccl. 9:18, “Wisdom is better than weapons of war; but one sinner destroys much good”).

The Biblical Perspective

I have already hinted at some of the Scripture’s perspectives on the typical arguments set forth in the just war debate. But I must go further. Hundreds of biblical passages speak to various aspects of warfare, and so we will have to be content here with only a small sampling. I will particularly focus upon passages that address the essence of war, and why it exists.17

Pacifists are fond of pointing to such passages as “You shall not kill” (Ex. 20:13), “Blessed are the peacemakers” (Mt. 5:9), and “Turn the other [cheek]” (Mt. 5:39) to justify their thinking that war is always evil and always to be avoided.18 Unfortunately, pacifists are equally fond of skipping the context and/or actual meaning of these passages. The sixth commandment is distinctly referring to murder, and the Scriptures make it abundantly clear that not all killing is murder. The peacemaker of the Beatitudes is a witness to the gospel unto others (cf. 2 Cor. 5). And, to turn the other cheek to one who strikes you is in the context of one’s stance for Christ.

The bottom line is, war is part of human existence because of sin. James 4:1-3 reads,

“What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don’t get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.”

People who start wars most generally do so because they want something they can’t get any other way, considering their own goals to be more important than the concerns of others. So it is true that war is a necessary evil, in the sense that as long as there is sin in the world, there will be war. Only by pretending that men are not really sinful can one hold the view that we can eliminate war entirely through our wisdom. It’s time for such thinkers to wake up and smell the gunpowder.

But what about self-defense or coming to the aid of an oppressed neighbor? Are these acts to be considered as a product of sinful motivation, and always reprehensible? This is the area of the just war debate that engenders the most controversy. Consider the following:
Numbers 10:9, “When you go to war in your land against the enemy who oppresses you, then you shall sound an alarm with the trumpets, and you will be remembered before the LORD your God, and you will be saved from your enemies.”

Deuteronomy 20:12, “Now if the city will not make peace with you, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it.”

Luke 14:31, “Or what king, going to make war against another king, does not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand?”

The concept of self-defense is very strong in Scripture. One of the several clear examples is found in Genesis 14, where Abraham retrieves his nephew Lot from the marauding Chedorlaomerean alliance. Bleeding hearts (Christian or not) that argue that there should never be war are simply refusing to deal with the fact of sin. Ecclesiastes 3:8 forcefully declares that there is “A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.” It is right and just to defend yourself, or others, from the wicked attacks of others. The sixth commandment is not simply a negative injunction against murder; it is also a positive injunction to preserve life.19 To preserve the lives of mankind on this earth, God has granted authority to society to put to death in his name those individuals and nations who oppress others in rebellion against God’s law (Gen. 9:5-6; Rom. 13:1-7). The lack of will to defend oneself (or to arm oneself) is regarded as an demonstration of moral and spiritual decline in Deborah’s song recorded in Judges 5:8, which reads, “They chose new gods; then there was war in the gates; not a shield or spear was seen among forty thousand in Israel.” There is need for readiness to defend ourselves. The Song of Solomon 3:8 notes that Solomon’s soldiers “all hold swords, expert in war. Every man has his sword on his thigh because of fear in the night.” When wickedness ceases in the earth by the direct act of God, then, and only then, will “swords be beaten into plowshares” (Isa. 2:4).

Jesus acknowledges that in God’s plan, war is a tool in his hands. Matthew 24:6 reads, “And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not troubled; for all must come to pass, but the end is not yet.” But war is not something that happens in God’s presence apart from his will. Consider the following:

Deuteronomy 4:34, “Has any god ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another nation, by testings, by miraculous signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, or by great and awesome deeds, like all the things the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes?” (NIV)

Joshua 11:20, “For it was of the LORD to harden their hearts, that they should come against Israel in battle, that He might utterly destroy them, and that they might receive no mercy, but that He might destroy them, as the LORD had commanded Moses.”

Job 38:22-23, “Have you entered the treasury of snow, or have you seen the treasury of hail, which I have reserved for the time of trouble, for the day of battle and war?”
God is called the “Lord of hosts” 245 times in Scripture of both the Old and New Testaments. He is the “King of glory … mighty in battle” (Ps. 24:8). He uses war to bring about the rise and fall of nations according to his will, to judge the wicked (even his own people – Jer. 6:4), and to cause stubborn men to turn from idols unto him. Augustine is right when he says, “God commands war to drive out, to crush, or to subjugate the pride of mortals.”

I must hasten to agree with the statement, “Anyone who likes to fight has something wrong with him.” The Bible speaks clearly of the distress and anguish that war inevitably brings, even as God uses it to bring about his own holy purposes in creation. The point is, though, that war is because sin is, and there is no escaping that truth. However, we must not revel in the thought of the destruction of others, lest we be guilty of Jonah’s sin, or that of the Chaldeans in the book of Habakkuk. Vengeance truly is the Lord’s.

**Conclusion**

In the end, God will bring an end to the miseries that human sin causes, including war. We may confidently pray with the psalmist, “Scatter the peoples who delight in war” (Ps. 68:30). Hear what God has to say to those who place their confidence in the strength of arms: “… the mighty fallen of the uncircumcised, … have gone down to hell with their weapons of war…” (Ezek. 32:27); “The horse is prepared for the day of battle, but deliverance is of the LORD” (Pro. 21:31); and, “Some trust in chariots, and some in horses, but we will remember the name of the LORD our God” (Isa. 20:7).

It is God who “makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow and cuts the spear in two; he burns the chariot in the fire” (Ps. 46:9). Until he does so, he calls upon society to exercise his authority to further righteousness and preserve the larger company of mankind. May we not shirk our duty, however reprehensible it may appear to us.

Can any war ever be just? Yes, when it is waged for reasons God approves. Let’s just be sure the reasons truly are God’s, and not our own.

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2 The general rules of just war are as follows: (1) War must be declared by a legitimate government; (2) there must be just cause; (3) there must be a right intention for going to war; (4) the war must be proportional in level of response and objectives; (5) there must be a reasonable probability of success; (6) there must be discrimination between combatants and noncombatants. Most theorists insist that all of these must be true for a given war to be just. See J. Budziszewski, “New War, Old Principles,” *World* (Sep.29, 2001), pp. 28-29, as well as Moseley (endnote 1) for discussions of the implications and problems these rules present.


17 For rules governing warfare, see Deuteronomy 20 and 21. On spiritual warfare, start at Ephesians 6:1-10; 1 Timothy 6:12; and 2 Timothy 2:3, 4.

18 Other passages often cited include Mt. 5:43-48; 22:39; 26:52; Jn. 18:11; Rom. 12:17-18; Heb. 10:30 and any that speak of God as loving, forgiving, etc.


20 Augustine, Against Faustus 22.75.