

Should Christians be pacifists?

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The subject of pacifism has been a long controversial subject. All the arguments that have been raised about it, particularly concerning our question, have had positive and negative views. Consequently, it makes it difficult to find a direct and simple answer to our task. Therefore, we need to make sure that our answer had to be justified and built upon a strong biblical and theological base. However, before we begin to do that, it is necessary, first, to understand what do we mean by pacifists?

There are several interpretations of pacifism, but they all contain the notion that war and violence are unjustifiable, incompatible with the Christian faith, and any kind of conflicts must be sorted out in a peaceful way. Christian pacifists believe that Jesus Christ himself was a pacifist who apparently taught and practiced pacifism. Therefore, his followers must do likewise. This is what the early Christians did after they understood the moral teachings of Jesus Christ, for they refused to join the military.¹ They dogmatically stated that all the church leaders before Constantine rejected war as immoral and dismissed the military as an occupation for any Christian. Of course, that was changed. When Constantine converted to Christianity and made it the official state religion of the Roman Empire, Christians have served in the military and did not have any problem with serving both the government and God.² Pacifists believe that they have a commitment to embody communally and historically the kingdom of God so fully that mercy, forgiveness, and compassion preclude the very contemplation of causing physical harm to another person.³ Also, they should not just have to stand against the violence, but as well as to include action to promote justice and human rights, as the Lord Jesus Christ said: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God" (Math 5:9). Moreover, absolute pacifists believe that there is nothing can justify an action of the war, even in self-defence. They believe that the value of human life is so high that nothing can justify killing a person deliberately.

Now, after this brief introduction about pacifism, is it biblically and theologically correct to say that Christians should be pacifists? Well, as I have mentioned above it is difficult to find a direct and simple answer to this question, because each answer Yes or No contain positive and negative views. For instance, if we choose to say yes Christians should be pacifists, some people will not accept it, and for sure they would remind us about many horrible genocides that took place around the world, Assyrian and Armenian genocide for example; or perhaps about September 11 that was titled as one of the tragic and disastrous events in the history of Americans, resulted in 2,996 deaths. Therefore, no one

¹ Rae Murray, *CHTH/231, Coursebook: Christianity, war and violence* (Dunedin: University of Otago, 2015), 24.

² Murray, *Coursebook*, 24.

³ Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Love Your Enemies, discipleship, pacifism, and just war theory*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg1994), 2.

wanted to remain silent against terrorists; people wanted to take revenge. Which apparently the Christian pacifist's view of war was entirely ignored by many people.

Thus, the question is particularly complex because it is difficult to imagine that war can be consistent with the biblical emphasis upon forgiveness and unconditional love. At the same time, it is unfair to ignore the positive impact that the war can bring for many people in case of defending them from any attack. However, in my opinion I should say that people are called to be non-pacifists in many different situations.

When pacifists look at the New Testament, they see that Jesus Christ indisputably commanded his followers to “turn the other cheek” when they are treated with unjust violence (Matthew 5:39). The simple interpretation of this commandment can give a primary meaning of pacifism. Many pacifists will argue that Jesus Christ did not use a sword, so we should not either. Jesus did not strike down evildoers with his dagger. Therefore, if Jesus is the embodiment of justice and God of love, then we should follow his footsteps. He did not use physical force to restrain evil so neither should we? Origen of Alexandria stated that: “We have come in accordance with the counsel of Jesus to cut down our arrogant swords of argument into plowshares, and we convert into sickles the spears we formerly used in fighting. For we no longer take swords against a nation, nor do we learn anymore to make war, having become sons of peace for the sake of Jesus, who is our Lord.”⁴ Pacifists can go on and on citing numerous biblical and theological examples that obviously demonstrate that war and violence are unjustifiable.

However, that does not mean non-pacifists would remain silent and wouldn't support their position against pacifism. Many non-pacifists take seriously into account the evil in the world that is willing to destroy the humanity. They do believe that no nation can be safe if it is unwillingly stand against the use of military force to defend itself. Therefore, Christians are often called to use physical force and occasionally deadly force, in order to protect one's life.

According to non-pacifists, to let someone murder when it is in your power to stop him/her is entirely contrary to our moral values. For instance, ISIS is on the move, seeking to bind the world in oppression and destroy its entire ethnic and religious groups this is what they're doing in Iraq, it would seem absolutely wrong not to oppose them with force (which actually this is what most of the united nations including NZ are doing). However, it is true that war itself is harmful and tragic no one wishes it. However, if we leave the evildoers without punishment, that in itself would result in even more harm to the world because it would give those bad people opportunity to reign over us according to their agenda.

The good news to non-pacifists is that the New Testament does not have a prohibition against their belief. In fact, there is a fairly positive view that supports their argument particularly the one that is connected with military service. For example, in Luke 3:14 soldiers on active service asked John the Baptist for advice. John's reply was very simple, “Be a just soldier.” Neither the soldiers were asked to throw down their weapons nor withdraw altogether from force, but that they should “not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.” Most of the scholars believe that John's answer was not separated their military service from the ethics and

⁴ *Richard Hollerman, carnal warfare or spiritual warfare?, truediscipleship.org, <ftp://truediscipleship.org/Biblical%20subjects/subjects36.htm>.*

nobility of the country served. It could be that these soldiers were confused by John's message; they were wondering how, in light of their repentance, they should relate to the Roman military. John's response was to stay as a soldier, but on an individual level to act justly during their service. Another biblical story can be added here to this one is in Luke 8:5. Jesus heals the servant of the Roman centurion with no indication of displeasure for his military service. Moreover, he was exalted by Jesus Christ. It is necessary to distinguish between individual and corporate ethics. If a Christian is being persecuted as an individual, he has to turn the other cheek (Mat 5:29). But, if he is an agent of the government, sent to punish evildoers, then he has the divine authority to bear the sword and protect those who are being persecuted by the evildoers. This is what Saint Paul said: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God... but if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain." (13:1-4). Here Saint Paul affirms that the government has the right to use force against the evildoers, and there is no indication whether the governor is Christian or pagan. Thus, if God institutes the governor, that means God is not against the use of violence against the evildoers.

Now, if we turn our attention to the evidence of the early church fathers we see few writings are against Christian serving in the military. Obviously even those writings can only be found in fairly random comments. However, most of the scholars believe that the reason the early church was suspicious about Christians joining the military service was the military oath, which had an aspect of idolatry.

Nevertheless, there are also some clear pieces of evidence that indicate a number of Christians were serving as soldiers. For instance, Tertullian 160-220, is considered as the first early father to write significant comment about the Roman military with reference to the Church. Although, we do know that Tertullian was a pacifist person, for he refutes the assertion that John the Baptist did not tell the soldiers who came to him to lay down their arms. Tertullian stated that: "the Lord, by disarming Peter, disarmed every soldier." However, in the following passage he had declared that Christians care very much about the well-being of the Empire and the Emperor overall: "Without ceasing, for all our emperors we offer prayer. We pray for life prolonged; for security to the empire; for protection to the imperial house; for brave armies, a faithful senate, a virtuous people, the world at rest, whatever, as man or Caesar, an emperor would wish. These things I cannot ask from any but the God from whom I know I shall obtain them, both because He alone bestows them and because I have claims upon Him for their gift, as being a servant of His, rendering homage to Him alone."⁵

Moreover, the famous story of Saint George, the soldier of the Roman army, declares that Christians were allowed to join the military service in Roman Empire.

In the end, I do believe that when we are talking about pacifism Christians are urged to distinguish between individual and corporate ethics. Because, the individual has the right to act as free agent, but he is not free to do so if he is connected with a group that shares the same religious and beliefs. Thus, I am convinced that a pacifist break no law if he or she uses violence against evildoers in order to bring peace to other people.

⁵ Philip Wogaman, *Christian Ethics: A Historical Introduction*, (New York: Witherspoon 2011), 46.

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