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Biblically Based Perspectives on Pacifism

Pacifism is "The policy or doctrine of rejecting war and every form of violent action as means of solving disputes, esp. in international affairs; the belief in and advocacy of peaceful methods as feasible and desirable alternatives to war."¹ It is as much a philosophy as it is a religious conviction. The pacifist lifestyle nor their stance on war is shared by any of the major U.S. Religions: Christianity, Judaism, or Islam. It is a concept that also moves beyond these mainstream religious groups into such religions and organizations such as the Zoroastrians, Universalists, Taoists, Hindus, and often is more reflective of the individual and their convictions. There is certainly, however, religious groups where a majority of their members practice Pacifism this includes: Mennonites, Quakers, and Jehovah Witnesses.²

With so many different groups and the differences in opinion the issue becomes complex. Pacifism means many things to many different people. For some it conjures thoughts of non-conformity, anti-patriotism, and disrespect. For others it is a way of life, a life that is based on an understanding of the Bible, believed to be wholly consistent with the teachings of Jesus or Rabbinic tradition. It appears many do not take either extreme, but find themselves in some sort of middle ground. A ground of tolerance of other peoples convictions, but without a

¹ Oxford English Dictionary. Second Edition. (Oxford University Press, 1998), s.v. Pacifism.

² Jim Hill and Rand Cheadle. The Bible Tells Me So (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1993), 116.

complete understanding.

It was this middle ground that the US government found itself in during World War II. The reasons for this varied, but none of it could principally be linked to the Bible for reason of separation of church and state. One reason was that people with such strong religious convictions would make poor soldiers and would overburden the armed services. In a testimony to the Senate Committee on Military Affairs in 1940, Howard K. Beale pointed out:

Gentlemen, does anyone think that men fighting in violation of their consciences and in the repudiation of their God as they have honestly conceived Him and believed in Him will make good soldiers? They will make wretched soldiers.³

The second was the concept of freedom of religion as stated in the Constitution. The other powerful influence was the persuasion of the "peace churches" to have the government make alternative service available to their members. Lastly, historical measures provided those objecting to participate in military service other alternatives⁴. There were other minor factors as well, such as the dismal results of failing to have such a mandate in World War I. In 1940, founded in part on the aforementioned reasons, the Conscientious Objector (CO) clause became part of the Selective Service Act.

Of interest is that many religious organizations with often very dissimilar beliefs (such Jehovah Witnesses and Quakers) were able to get together to help influence the federal government to act on the behalf of their members. At the same time many other churches took a patriotic stance and justified war and

3 Cynthia Eller. Conscientious objects and the Second World War: moral and religious arguments in support of pacifism. (New York, NY: Praeger Publishers, 1991), 25.

4 Richard C. Anderson. Peace Was In Their Hearts. (Watsonville, CA: Correlan Publications, 1994), 23.

participation in war. Why such a disparity in opinion? They both used the same primary text for the foundation of their beliefs, the Bible.

The first group, which are often labeled "pacifists" or "peace church's" use the Bible, the New Testament in particular, to promote their notions of peace and non-violence. The argument for some starts and ends with the sixth commandment found in Exodus 6:13, "Thou shall not kill (AV)."⁵ The argument, however, goes far beyond the context of the Mount Sinai law. It delves into a deep hermeneutical study of the Bible. Into what exactly Jesus meant in verses such as Luke 6.27–35. A doctrine of peace and righteousness where loving your enemy is the rule not killing them.

In order to not ignore the Old Testament Christian pacifists show that the peace hoped for in the Jewish Scriptures is found through peaceful action now and the final fulfillment of Christ. The most commonly quoted verse from the Old Testament is Micah 4.3.

He shall judge between many peoples, and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more; [NSRV]

Myron Augsburger, a Mennonite, argues that this is referring to Christ who provides a way for peace to those who follow Him.⁶ What is being done, in effect, is the verse in Micah allows the Pacifist to substantiate their argument in the Old Testament, while making a separation of Old Testament violence by showing that it points towards to the peace in Christ. Other quotations from the

⁵Anderson, 10

⁶ Myron Augsburger. In: Robert G. Clouse, ed. War: Four Christian Views. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 81.

Old Testament are used as well, but not in great number. These typically come from wisdom literature such as Psalms 34.14 and Prov. 25.21–22. These references and others from Jewish Scripture are essential to building the foundation of pacifists who practice Rabbinic Judaism.⁷

The greater concentration of the argument for non–violence and objection to participation in war comes from the New Testament. An important aspect of this is separation from the world. In the more extreme understanding is the classification of non–resistance or not being involved in such a way to promote peace, but to simply ignore the evil. Jesus in John 18.36 when responded to Pilate’s inquires to Jesus about why in fact he was in court with a key verse for the non–resistant position.

Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here."

Instead of relying on the conviction of peace in our age, which is where the concept of "just war" comes in, it is something of another time and place. This also means for many Pacifists that loyalty is not to causes now, but loyalty to Jesus as king and to God of the future kingdom. "To affirm that one is a member of Christ now means that loyalty to Christ and his kingdom transcends every other loyalty."⁸

In order for the Pacifist view to withstand the arguments of other understandings they need to define loyalty. Those who support war with the Bible do so in part by showing that the gospel and the Pauline letters state that

7 John H. Yoder. Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution. (Elkhart, IN: Goshen Biblical Seminary, 1983), 131.

8 Augsburg, 87.

Christians should be loyal to their governments. The pacifist perspective states that should only go to the point at which it is not in conflict with the commandments of Christ. Loyalty to God, to them, comes before loyalty to government. This is fundamentally supported by a literal interpretation of Peter's words in Acts 5.29.

To the those who support war efforts, as is the case of many main stream religions, loyalty is important to living a Christian life. Instead of opposing war certain guidelines are built as to should be considered as a *just war*. It is not a strict avocation of war like that of the crusades of the Roman Empire. Instead it upholds proper motives for war. Instead fighting and killing becomes a civic activity rather than an individual act of violence. Just war advocates use the words found in Romans 13.1–7 on civil service to support their claim. It is an understanding that God appoints government rules and resistance to those rulers, including resistance to serve in the military is a violation of God's decrees, unless it is absolute violation of another of God's laws.

They also point to the Mosaic law where killing out of self–defense was not considered criminal. Biblical figure heads are often used as an example, such as David who lead armies and fought for YHWH's nation. It is a spirit of justice rather than conflict, but also an understanding that punishment is necessary for justice. The understanding is both the Old and New Testament doctrines are necessary for the proper reasoning. War in the Old Testament was justified when God was in control and arguably according to the book of Romans that is still the case.⁹

9 Arthur F. Holmes. In: War: Four Christian Views, 122.

The arguments between opposing or supporting war go far beyond the scope of this paper. Many of them are based upon principle more than theology. In the case of Mennonites and Quakers it also is linked to tradition and family values.¹⁰ It depends on the frame of reference that a person comes to Bible with and their ability to use the Bible to substantiate their argument.

Like other issues that are argued with the Bible, complete agreement will never be reached. Enough evidence does exist to substantiate either view, but nothing makes the argument final and conclusive. There should be continued support for either view and the freedom to practice that view. The same goes for abortion or any other matter of conflict. Individual convictions when combined into national though founded and expanded this country, wrong or right. These convictions should continue to flourish.

¹⁰ Eller, 52–53.