

# **Development of Christian Responses to War and Peace**

by D. Stephen Long  
Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary

Any discussion of the early development of Christian responses to war and peace is complex and open to criticism. This is largely due to the fact that no simple or consistent response was possible. The early Church did not have a commission that gathered and issued a position statement on a Christian's participation or non-participation in war like the modern church does. It took some time for that kind of unity to develop before specific pronouncements could be made.

## **The Jerusalem Council**

There was, however, the early Jerusalem council which is noted in Acts 15 where the Church met to determine what should be asked of Gentiles now grafted on to the Jewish covenant. James offered the following conclusion to that council: "Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood" (Acts 15: 19).

Because Jesus did not overthrow the law of holiness but fulfilled it, the early Christians had to address what aspects of the Jewish holiness laws Gentiles would be asked to observe. Three commands were still binding: avoid participating in things associated with idols, fornication, and eating things that were not properly prepared. Or at least that is most likely what was intended by the third conclusion – "from whatever has been strangled and from blood."

However, some in the early Church interpreted these three conclusions from the Jerusalem Council as commands to avoiding apostasy (idolatry), fornication, and killing. The latter was a misunderstanding of the Jerusalem Council, but nevertheless consistent with the Sixth Commandment given to Moses: "Thou shalt not kill (or murder)." These three prohibited acts became the three grave sins for which the early Christians first suggested no repentance was possible after baptism, and then gradually permitted one repentance after baptism and finally would permit repentance for these sins as long as it was genuine.

## **Participation in War**

The Jerusalem Council did not make a ruling on how Christians should or should not participate in war. The later tradition did interpret the Council's ruling as applying to killing. Along with other biblical claims, such as Jesus' charge "to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's" as well as the teaching in the Sermon on the Mount to turn the other cheek, the early Christians had to discern how best to witness to Christ's life, death and resurrection through participation or non-participation in violence.

To simplify matters greatly, let me suggest that as the Christian tradition developed, two passages of Scripture set the stage for various responses to the question of Christian participation in warfare. They are both found in the 22<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Luke and occur at the Last Supper and in Gethesemne. In the first story Jesus tells his disciples that even though he sent them out previously without “purse, bag or sandals” and that they lacked nothing, now they should sell their purse or bag and buy a sword. The disciples tell him they have two swords with them, and Jesus responds, “It is enough.” In the second vignette, Jesus is being betrayed in the garden and one of the disciples whips out the sword and cuts off the ear of the slave of the high priest. Jesus undoes the violence and says “No more of this.”

### **Two Swords and Just War Tradition**

In the Christian tradition, the first story developed into the doctrine of the two swords. It stated that there are two swords by which God governs creation; one is wielded by the secular power and one by the Church. The secular sword is real; it is the means of violence, which should serve the end of justice. The Church’s sword is allegorical; it is the power of “binding and loosing,” or excommunication. It makes judgments as to what constitutes the holiness of life that the faith requires (See Matthew 16 and 18). Later in the Christian tradition, this meant that the Church had an obligation to determine the limits against which Christians could not transgress when they went to war as well as how they should wage war once they were in it.

Perhaps it was Bishop Ambrose (c. 340 – 397) who first developed this teaching by drawing on the wisdom of the pagan philosopher Cicero. Cicero wrote that people owe each other obligations even in wartime, especially not to kill the innocent or to use means that exceeded the justness of the end for which they fought. Ambrose developed this teaching for what became known as the Christian just war tradition. It permits Christians to participate in war, but it limits what they can do. Christians must not abandon Jesus’ command to love their enemies.

For someone like St. Augustine (354 - 430) war is permissible only to defend against an unjust attack on one’s neighbor and not to defend one’s self. By the time we come to Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225 – 1274), the use of violence to defend one’s self is possible not because one is directly defending one’s self, but because by defending one’s self one is indirectly defending others who depend upon you for their sustenance. But notice that the notion of mutual deterrence, torture, total warfare, genocide, terrorism or preemptive war – which are primarily modern inventions – violate just war teaching.

Most Christian churches, Roman Catholic, Anglican, Lutherans and Presbyterians for example, stand in the just war tradition. This teaching is also shared among Jews, Muslims and Christians. We have not always practiced it even though we were commanded against unjust killing in the Sixth Commandment. But simply because we do not practice well our principles does not mean they should be ignored. That gives us all the more reason to abide by them.

## **Pacifist Tradition**

The Roman Catholic Church once taught that pacifists were the enemies of humankind and that war was an obligation if it was a just war. However, this is no longer an official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. It now has a pacifist tradition as do what are called the historical peace churches. These churches argue that pacifism, or at least a Christian refusal to participate in violence such as abortion, capital punishment and warfare, bears witness to the most ancient tradition of thought in Christian tradition. They make nonviolence a necessary characteristic of Christian discipleship.

This brings us to the second vignette in Luke 24 when Jesus told his disciples “no more of this” when one of them (Peter) used the sword. For some in the early church, when Jesus took the sword away from this disciple, he took it away from every Christian. In fact, prior to the fourth century, the overwhelming testimony of the Church’s bishops, pastors and theologians was that they were not to be soldiers. Their political witness in the world was to be consistent with Jesus’ own, who did not seize power through the sword but endured the cross. For this reason, he was vindicated and revealed as the true Lord of all. As his obedient subjects, the sword has been taken away from us and we must follow their gentle Saviour by way of the Cross rather than the sword.

Not every theologian or bishop of the early church made such an explicit witness against Christian participation in warfare. But notice the following witnesses. Justin Martyr (c. 100 – c. 165) an early Christian apologist wrote,

“We [Christians] who had been filled with mutual slaughter and every wickedness, have each one – all the world over – changed the instruments of war, the swords into ploughs and the spears into farming instruments, and we cultivate piety righteousness, love for men, faith and hope which is from the Father Himself through the Crucified One.”<sup>1</sup>

In his essay explaining idolatry, Tertullian (160-225) an African Church father gives us one of the most explicit statements that warfare is impermissible to Christians. He wrote:

“But how will a Christian war, nay, how will he serve even in peace without a sword, which the Lord has taken away? For albeit soldiers had come unto John, and had received the formula of their rule; albeit, likewise, a centurion had believed, still the Lord afterward, in disarming Peter, unbelted every soldier.”<sup>2</sup>

Origen, (185-254), an Alexandrine church father, made a similar argument and explained that the Christians could not participate in violence because their origins were not like the origins of all other nations. They were not founded in an act of violence against others, but by the cross endured by Jesus. He wrote,

If a revolt had been the cause of the Christians existing as a separate group, the lawgiver of the Christians would not have forbidden entirely the taking of human life. He taught that it was never right for his disciples to go so far against a man, even if he should be very wicked; for he did not consider it compatible with his

---

<sup>1</sup>Quoted in Cadoux, The Early Christian Attitude to War (New York: Seabury Press, 1982, p. 61.

<sup>2</sup> Tertullian, “On Idolatry” in *AnteNicene Fathers*, p. 73.

inspired legislation to allow the taking of human life in any form at all. Moreover, if Christians had originated from a revolt, they would not have submitted to laws that were so gentle which caused them to be killed as sheep and made then unable even to defend themselves against their persecutors.<sup>3</sup>

And St. Athanasius (296-373), one of the leading bishops responsible for setting forth Christian orthodoxy, explains why it is Christians should believe Jesus was fully divine because of the peace his death accomplished.

Who, then, is he that has done this, or who is he that has united in peace men that hated one another, save the beloved Son of the Father, the common Saviour of all, even Jesus Christ, who by his own love underwent all things for our salvation? For even from of old it was prophesied of the peace he was to usher in, where the Scripture says: 'They shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their pikes into sickles, and nation shall not take the sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.' And this is at least incredible, inasmuch as even now those Barbarians who have an innate savagery of manners . . . and cannot endure to be a single hour without weapons; but when they hear the teaching of Christ, straightway instead of fighting they turn to husbandry, and instead of arming their hands with weapons they raise them in prayer, and in a word, in place of fighting among themselves henceforth they arm against the devil and against evil spirits, subduing these by self-restrains and virtue of soul. Now this is at once a proof of the divinity of the Saviour, since what men could not learn among idols they have learned from him.<sup>4</sup>

In what is called the Hippolytean canons, which were once attributed to Hippolytus who lived from 170-236, but most likely written much later, we find rules for church membership and discipline that refuse to allow soldiers into the communion of faith. It states, "A person who has accepted the power of killing, or a soldier, may never be received [into the church] at all."<sup>5</sup>

## **Changing Attitudes**

What do these early witnesses tell us about the early Christian's attitudes toward war and peace? One would be hard pressed to find a theologian or bishop of the church prior to St. Ambrose of Milan (339-397) who taught that Christians should be allowed to participate in warfare. Many said nothing about it. Many theologians, as the above quotes note, spoke against it. Some argued that those who wanted to be part of the faith must abandon it. We do know that Christians were found in the military and that some refused soldiering, even though it cost them their lives to lay down their swords. This history is relatively non-controversial.

The controversy begins when we ask why? Why was the early church on the whole opposed to Christian participation in warfare?

---

<sup>3</sup> Origin, *Contra Celsum*, 3.7.

<sup>4</sup> *On the Incarnation*, Library of Christian Classics, p. 106.

<sup>5</sup> Cadoux, p. 122.

Some argue that this primarily had to do with the fact that soldiers during this time were called upon to make sacrifices to the Roman gods and thus the problem with military service was primarily idolatry. But the quotes from Tertullian and Origen above suggest otherwise. For them the refusal of Christian participation in war and violence was directly related to the fact that Jesus inaugurated a new people who were commanded not to use the sword. They were to live holy lives that differed from the violence around them.

This began to change about the fourth century. The conversion of the emperor Constantine is often viewed as the key reason for the change, but the historical record is much more complex than simply blaming Constantine for a transition from the Church's non-participation in warfare to an enthusiastic participation. Nevertheless, we can invoke the conversion of Constantine as a symbol for what was a change with respect to the Christian Church's relationship to the warmaking power of governments. We became comfortable with it and merged "throne" and "altar."

### **In Our Era**

Now in our post-Christendom era, it once again requires an intentional effort to be a Christian. It can no longer be acceptable that simply being a citizen of a so-called Christian nation makes one a Christian. While some bemoan this loss, others of us see in it a gift from God where the Church is given the opportunity to recover its witness without asserting the power of the sword. Refusing to participate in warfare and violence, as Jesus did and the early Church bore witness to, may be a crucial step in cultivating our own witness in this post-Christendom era.

---

This article is part of a project on "The Theology of Peace and War". For further information, go to <http://www.mupwj.org/theologyofpeaceandwar.htm>. Or contact Methodists United for Peace with Justice at 1500 16<sup>th</sup> Street, NW, Washington, D.C.20036 or at [mupwj@mupwj.org](mailto:mupwj@mupwj.org).