



# Christian Responses to War

## SESSION 2

*How does a Christian think about events of war, whether it is a civil war in another country, a war between nations in another part of the world, or a war in which our own country is engaged? How do Scripture and tradition shape our questions, inform our thinking, and guide our responses in thought and action?*

### Joining the Conversation

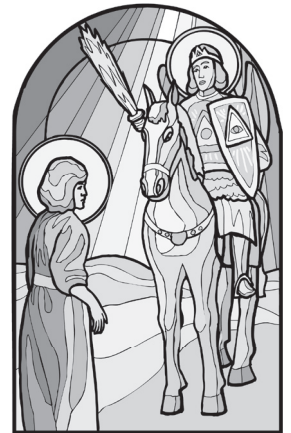
From the time of Jesus' death and the beginnings of the church as an entity distinct from the Judaism of Jesus (roughly 33 CE to 70 CE), his remaining disciples, the apostles, and new converts to the faith struggled with what his words meant for them and with what his life, ministry, death, and resurrection called them to be and do in their own lives.

As the church aged, initial understandings and resolutions about matters of faith and practice did not remain static. They were continually reexamined in the context of the history and culture in which the church existed. This struggle to understand the implications of the gospel of Jesus Christ in relation to our time and our culture continues into the twenty-first century as Christians seek to understand what it means to be disciples of Jesus as we respond to the possibility and event of war.

### The Struggle of the Church: War and Peacemaking

As we look at key responses of the church to the question of how to respond to war, it is essential to remember that the dialogue that produced the responses was both internal and external. It was a dialogue *among* Christians

committed to following the lifestyle of Jesus. It was also a dialogue with the issues of particular historical periods and within specific cultural settings that were *beyond* the church as both a community of faith and as an institution. It is also important to remember that there were varied perspectives. Even when official positions were formulated, minority opinions remained active as undercurrents or alternatives in the conversation.



### The Very Early Church: The Apostle Paul and Others

The early church lived as an oppressed minority in the shadow of the Roman Empire. Questions about how to respond to the outside threat of an enemy continued. As the church moved further and further away from direct experience of Jesus, conflict also arose within the church and raised questions about how to deal with issues of difference in individual opinion as well as the threat of warring factions within its growing constituency. The words of the Hebrew Scriptures as well as the words of Jesus and his lifestyle example continued to be the starting point for these conversations. As these early Christians wrestled with whether to pay taxes to Caesar in the secular realm and how to deal with competition about spiritual gifts in the ecclesiastical one, they continued to struggle with issues of authority. These questions were not just about specific behaviors. They were also and more deeply about identity and loyalty: "Who am I as a Christian and what does that require

#### WHOM DO CHRISTIANS OBEY?

Read these texts to get a sense of the issues present in this conversation in the early church: Acts 5:29; Romans 13:1–7; 1 Corinthians 1:10–13; 6:1; 11:17–22; chapters 12–14; 1 Timothy 2:1–2; Titus 3:1; 1 Peter 2:13–17.

of me? To whom do I give my primary and ultimate allegiance?" These questions would be repeated over and over again in the conversations between church and culture and with the church when differing opinions arose.

## The Continuing Conversation: Early Church, Emerging State Church, Developing Christendom

In the first twelve centuries of the Christian church, three positions emerged as significant responses to the question of what is a Christian response to war: pacifism, just war doctrine, and holy war (or crusade).

### QUOTES FROM CHURCH FATHERS

We who used to kill one another, do not make war on enemies.<sup>2</sup>

*Justin Martyr*

We are a race given over to peace . . . . We are being educated not in war but in peace.<sup>3</sup>

*Clement of Alexandria*

For we no longer take sword against nation, nor do we learn any more to make war, having become sons of peace for the sake of Jesus . . . .<sup>4</sup>

*Origen*

*Pacifism* is the total opposition to war. This opposition is not limited to the active participation in war. It extends to support for war even if not an active combatant. It opposes war, military intervention, or other violent methods as a means of dealing with and solving conflict.

The early church fathers—the earliest leaders in the church—showed a strong commitment to pacifism in their writings. John Ferguson says, "The central traditions of the early church were uncompromisingly pacifist."<sup>1</sup> It is important to recognize that not all the church fathers held this commitment. However, a significant group did make a personal profession of pacifism and included it in their guidance to the church as a whole. Cyrilian, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, Justin Martyr, and Clement of Alexandria wrote from a pacifist perspective, often echoing words from Scripture as part of their witness.

### JUST WAR CRITERIA

1. War must be declared by a legitimate authority.
2. War must be carried out with right intention.
3. War must be the last resort.
4. War must be waged on the position of proportionality.
5. War must have a reasonable chance for success.
6. War must be waged with all moderation possible.

These early pacifist commitments in the church have been the foundation of several other focused pacifist movements within the Christian church over the centuries. As part of the Reformation in the sixteenth century, the Mennonites claimed a pacifist position and formulated an initial understanding of conscientious objection to war. In the seventeenth century, the Religious Society of Quakers (Friends) also adopted pacifism as a core commitment. In the eighteenth century, the Church of the Brethren also established itself as pacifist. These three denominations are sometimes called the Historic Peace Churches because of their common commitment to pacifism in relation to war as well as their promotion of peace in the world.

*Just war doctrine* suggests that going to war, while not the preferred option, is necessary in certain cases. Just war doctrine is very clear that it is only under certain conditions, and when all of its criteria are met, that war that war is justified or acceptable as an option for responding in situations of conflict.

Just war doctrine emerged in the fourth century after Emperor Constantine proclaimed Christianity to be the official religion of the Roman Empire (315 CE). Before this time, Christians were not required and may have been prohibited from serving in the Roman army. After Christianity was established as the state religion, service in the army was both open to Christians and could be required of Christians. The question of military service became acute when the Roman Empire was threatened by invasion from its northern neighbors. In response to the change in status for the church, to the vulnerability of the Roman Empire, and consequently to the questions of identity and loyalty it posed for Christians,

Augustine of Hippo proposed that there could be situations in which going to war was an acceptable act on the part of a Christian. Later, Thomas Aquinas refined this thinking in the context of medieval Europe. Still later, during the Counter-Reformation Period, it was refined again by a Jesuit theologian named Suarez. For a significant period of time, just war doctrine was applied to almost any war and became a disreputable way to deal with the complex issues of how a Christian may faithfully respond to events of war. More recently (for instance, World Wars I and II, the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, the Iraq War), it has been revived as a way of evaluating responses to war.

### FOR REFLECTION

Think about recent conversations about the war in Iraq or before that, the Gulf War or the Vietnam War. In what ways have you heard these three positions on war articulated in the public debate about engaging in a particular war? Have you heard them expressed in official statements of the Christian church in any of its denominations or by individuals who are Christian and acknowledge that identity in the public media?

*Holy war* is the concept that there are times when faithfulness to God requires one to go to war. War is then fought for God as part of, not in spite of, one's faith.

The Crusades are one of the clearest examples of holy war in the history of the Christian church. Early in the tenth century, when the Roman Catholic Church in France perceived that the Eastern Orthodox Christian Church was being threatened by a growing Muslim population, Pope Urban II proclaimed a holy war to protect these fellow Christians. The battle cry of the Crusades was "God wills it." Seven major crusades occurred from 1095 through 1244.

Holy war is no longer an official position of the Christian church in any of its mainline denominations. However, it is still an active position in the argument for particular wars in both explicit and implicit terms. God's will for war and God's blessing on war continue to find expression in theological circles and in public dialogue and debate.

## The Twentieth Century

In the first half of the twentieth century, two world wars challenged Christians to continue their struggle with the question of how to respond to war. In both wars, Christians wrestled with their response to war as a method for addressing conflict and violence and to these two wars in particular. Responses varied. There was a wide range both among denominations and within denominations. It is fair to say that both pacifism and just war doctrine were considered, and both evoked a practice on the part of individuals. They were also part of the public discourse, especially in the period leading up to the beginnings of these wars.

In 1914, Christians from Europe gathered in Switzerland for an ecumenical council hoping to prevent the outbreak of war. World War I began before the council ended. Attendees had to return to their own countries. Henry Hodgkin, an English Quaker, and Friedrich Sigmund-Schultze, a German Lutheran, said goodbye at a railway station in Germany, pledging to work for peace even in the context of war. In December of that year, Christians gathered in Cambridge, England, and the International Fellowship of Reconciliation was founded. Today it is not only an ecumenical Christian witness for peace but also an interfaith organization building peace throughout the world.

In the 1930s, at least one mainline denomination, the Presbyterian Church USA, nearly became a "peace church." By a close vote of its General Assembly, it chose not to adopt a pacifist stance in regard to World War II.

In Germany, the Lutheran Church as well as other Christian churches did not resist Hitler's "final solution," and many served in the army that carried out his orders. In other places, resistance movements grew up from religious communities. Individual Christians in many countries practiced civil disobedience by hiding Jews and others vulnerable to the Nazi Holocaust. Some German pastors such as Martin Niemoller and Dietrich Bonhoeffer agonized over the issues of violence as an acceptable response to violence. Bonhoeffer eventually died because of his part in a plot to assassinate Adolph Hitler.

## JUST PEACEMAKING

Just peacemaking must (1) respond to a genuine need that cannot be met by other means, (2) have a reasonable chance of alleviating the conditions it seeks to overcome, (3) constitute humanitarian rescue, (4) have international sponsorship to establish legitimacy, (5) advance the general welfare of all inhabitants of the region, (6) involve a minimal degree of coercion to achieve the purpose of the action, and (7) be focused against those in authority rather than the broad population (adapted from the *Just Peacemaking Study Guide* published by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

At the end of WWII, the explosion of the atom bomb over Hiroshima and Nagasaki brought a new challenge to Christians considering how to respond to war. The atomic bomb changed the waging of war and its consequences. In the aftermath of the atom bomb and in the years of the Cold War that followed, the conversation about how a Christian responds to war brought a significant divide in churches that were not already committed to pacifism as a tenet of their religious belief and practice.

## FOR REFLECTION

As you consider the various positions the Christian church has taken in regard to war and situations of violent conflict, is there a position with which you agree strongly or a position with which you disagree strongly? What further questions need to be part of the church's dialogue as it continues to think about how to respond to war in the twenty-first century?

In the latter half of the twentieth century, this conversation led to the establishment of programs in many mainline denominations that wrestled with more than the question of the Christian response to war. The conversation broadened to include the responsibility of Christians to be actively engaged in the making and building of peace through the establishment of justice and the cultivation of alternatives to violence and military solutions. A second focus in the latter half of the

twentieth century centered on how individual nations as well as the United Nations should respond when basic human rights were being violated in another country or region of the world. From this concern, criteria were developed for what has been called just peacemaking.<sup>5</sup>

## The Twenty-First Century

In 1998, the United Nations proclaimed the first decade of the twenty-first century to be a Decade for Peace and Nonviolence for the Children of the World. Following the UN declaration, the World Council of Churches proclaimed 2001 to 2010 to be a Decade to Overcome Violence in the World. Since then, the National Council of Churches in the United States and a number of mainline denominations have established their own emphasis on ending violence and promoting nonviolence during this first decade of the twenty-first century. These efforts involve actively learning nonviolence as a practice in all aspects of life and working for justice in order to establish peace in local communities, the nation, and the world.

In this first decade of the twenty-first century, the question of a Christian response to war engages churches, denominations, and individuals in a larger conversation than the response to war itself. It asks Christians to develop a more holistic understanding of the causes of war, the nature of violence, and institutional and systemic injustice. It also asks Christians to learn peacemaking and engage in peace building by adopting nonviolence as a lifestyle and by working for economic, social, and political justice.

## About the Writer

*Barbara Battin has served the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in pastoral ministry in six congregations and is currently Protestant campus minister at Sinclair Community College in Dayton, Ohio.*

## Endnotes

1. John Ferguson, *The Politics of Love: The New Testament and Nonviolence* (Nyack, New York: Fellowship Publications, 1979), 55.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., 56.
4. Ibid., 57.
5. See Glenn Stassen, ed., *Just Peacemaking: Ten Practices to Abolish War* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1998).