

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life



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War—a hot-button topic for Christians



Christians not only have widely different views about war. Many also feel very strongly about whatever view they hold. A response I received to the February *Connections* reminded me of that. I had merely mentioned that some Christians feel called to address the question of using military force. I didn't express any position on that question, yet this responder sent an adamant rebuttal as if I had said I opposed all uses of military force. It's a hot-button issue for many Christians.

In recent months many Christians have reconsidered their views about war because of the war in Afghanistan and the possibility of additional military action in nearby countries. A book I've found helpful for thinking about this topic is *War: A Primer for Christians* (Cary M. Maguire Center for Ethics and Public Responsibility, and Southern Methodist University Press, 1991/2001) by Joseph L. Allen, an emeritus professor of Christian ethics. He reminds us that the Bible speaks about war at many points, yet what it says leads to sharply conflicting interpretations. In addition, Allen observes, church bodies' pronouncements haven't always been based on clear reasons and haven't been as self-critical as they needed to be.

Allen discusses three ways in which conscientious Christians respond to war. He observes that some or all of these responses are also made by followers of other religions and by people who claim no religion. Let's look at each of these views.

■ The crusade approach—good against evil

Numerous passages in the Old Testament portray war as a crusade. Some show war between Israel and its en-



What can we do?



How might we cool a hot button by clarifying our views about war? More important, how might we discover God's view?

✓ Recognize nonviolence and peace with justice as our goals, even if we believe war is sometimes necessary for defending freedom or rescuing victims of oppression. I'm very grateful for the servicemen and women who have fought and in some cases, died to defend our country and its freedoms. It bothers me, however, when in church services we appear to glorify war and military service instead of treating them as unfortunate necessities.



✓ Admit mistakes. I'm disturbed by some Christians' refusal to admit that our government could have ever made any mistakes in its choices about when to go to war or how to pursue a particular war. To me, admitting such mistakes seems to be merely admitting that governments, like individuals, are human and thus fallible, even sinful at times.

✓ Have sermons, Sunday School lessons, study groups, and discussions in our churches, about the various ways in which Christians see war. Joseph Allen, the Christian ethicist whose book I describe in this *Connections*, evidently wishes we'd do that, too. He also thinks it's worthwhile to discuss war with non-Christians, and he suggests these other responses that we also need to make.

✓ Pray, for our enemies as well as our allies, for an early and just peace, for ways to bind up war's wounds, and for deliverance from self-righteousness.



✓ Seek the good of all our neighbors.

✓ Repent for the wrongs we may have committed.

✓ Reflect on our lives and reconsider our beliefs, and reorder our priorities if necessary.

✓ Try to influence government policy when we can.

To me, these seem to be wise policies to follow.

So perish all your enemies, O Lord! But may your friends be



like the sun as it rises in its might.
—Judges 5:31

emies as a conflict between the forces of good and the forces of evil. The story of Deborah is one of these (Judges 4-5).

Centuries later, in the 1095 crusade, Pope Urban

II called Christians to liberate the Holy Land from Moslems. Allen also mentions wars that followed the Reformation, when participants showed no moral restraint and claimed to fight in God's name. More recently, says Allen, extremists of the French Revolution took a similar view, the Allies of World War II saw Nazis and Fascists as embodiments of all evil, and Iranians called the U.S. "the Great Satan."

This approach has three main features, says Allen.



[1] Crusaders see a justifiable war as a conflict between forces of good and forces of evil. Crusaders believe that God is actively on their side, to bring them victory as the forces of righteousness. In addition, crusaders reject not only what the enemy does but also who the enemy is.

[2] Crusaders tend to pursue absolute and unlimited goals. "Their wars ...," Allen tells us, "are for the kingdom of God, for the world as they think it ought ideally to be." They don't fight for a world in which serious evils will keep occurring. For example, Woodrow Wilson saw World War I as a war that would make the world safe for democracy.

[3] For crusaders, the means of war are unrestrained. We've seen this in recent times, Allen says, in the Holocaust. "Crusaders believe," says Allen, "that they have no moral responsibility for those who, whether in uniform or not, willingly support the evil against the good."



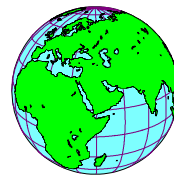
[4] For crusaders, the goal of war becomes utter and unqualified destruction of the enemy's military forces, and often of the enemy's government and entire society as well. "When the ancient Romans defeated Carthage," Allen offers as an example, "they razed the city to the ground and spread salt over the ground, so that Carthage could never again exist." In the 20th century, the crusade approach has promoted mobilization of the whole society. It is di-

rected against the essential services and ordinary peacetime activities of the enemy. But it also drains the attacker's resources rapidly and disrupts the fabric of the attacker's society. This all-out approach, however, can make people more willing to support the war, as can the conviction that the cause is morally and religiously important.



The crusade approach, Joseph Allen believes, has four serious deficiencies.

[1] It implies an inadequate understanding of God. It implies that God cares only for the people on our side, not for our enemies.



[2] It ignores the fact that every person is a mixture of good and evil.

[3] It falsely assumes that the crusade can bring about perfect conditions in the world.

[4] It wrongly implies that what ordinary citizens of the enemy country are doing in their daily life is as bad as what enemy troops are doing.

■ Pacifism—refusal to participate in any war or support any war

Throughout the church's history, many Christians have seen killing as incompatible with Jesus' command to love, and with his commands not to resist evil. Christian pacifists have also pointed to Old Testament passages that seem to reject all killing. In addition, many Christian pacifists cite the Bible's pictures of a peaceful world, interpreting these as judgments against violence and ideals to aim at.



Pacifists, Allen finds, offer two kinds of arguments to support their position.

[1] The pragmatic argument says that a nonviolent method simply works best. It resists wrongdoing in a way that is not only more effective but also costs less in human life. Critics of this argument, however, say that it doesn't recognize the depth and stubbornness of sin, and that in avoiding war it lets tyranny thrive. Critics also find this argument overstating the effectiveness of nonviolence.

[2] The witnessing argument says that because God's character is love, Christians must reflect this character by rejecting all war. Also, because Christ ac-

cepted the role of suffering servant without violence or complaint, to be his disciples we must do likewise, says the witnessing argument. Critics of this position say that meeting our neighbors' needs may require standing between victims and wrongdoers, and that violence can be neces-

... Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for [God] makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good ...
—Matthew 5:44-45

sary to protect the oppressed. Critics also believe that if the church doesn't enter into public discussion of policy about war, it leaves the outcome to others with standards Christians can't support.

■ **The just-war tradition—trying to make discriminating moral judgments about whether to go to war**

This position rests on three convictions.



[1] God has created all people to live in community with God, one another, and the natural world. Thus we must treat even enemies as neighbors.

[2] We can't do away with conflicts. Intentional and seriously destructive attacks are promoted by sin and also by social circumstances that strongly tempt people to do harm.

[3] Respect for all people sometimes calls for using force to protect victims from attackers. Love requires putting ourselves between oppressor and oppressed, even if that means using armed force.



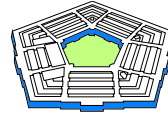
The criteria for a just war usually include these.

[1] A wrong that has been done or is about to be done, which needs to be repaired or prevented, is a

just cause for going to war. "It is not self-defense as such that is justifiable," Allen says in describing the just-war position, "but the righting of a grave wrong or the defense of a fundamental right."

[2] Legitimate authority makes the decision. The war must serve public and not merely private purposes.

The decision to go to war must be made by those authorized to speak for the people, and they must be held responsible for their decision.



[3] War is a last resort. Peaceful alternatives have been exhausted without success.

[4] The war's aims are declared.

[5] The war's evil effects will not be greater than the evil it aims to prevent or the good it aims to do.

[6] The war has a reasonable chance of success.

[7] The motive is a more just peace.

Allen points out that the just-war tradition also limits what is right to do in war.

[1] Direct and intentional attack on noncombatants is forbidden. This distinction, says Allen, depends on roles, not on loyalties or attitudes. Noncombatants thus include medical personnel, chaplains, and others whose roles are to serve the needs of the person as person, not the needs of military action.



[2] Intentional attacks must be distinguished from unintended side effects.

The strengths of just-war thinking, in Joseph Allen's view, include its recognition that we can't make conflict go away. Another strength is its recognition of the moral perplexity that arises when resorting to war seems the only way to restrain wrong-

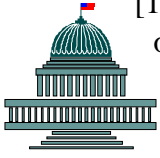
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I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Some readers make voluntary financial contributions, but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 church denominations and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I believe our churches need to address.

doing. In addition, just-war thinking considers many subsidiary questions within the larger issue of war.

Joseph Allen, who takes the just-war position himself, as I do, suggests several questions we need to ask ourselves when taking the just-war position.



[1] It is merely a rationalization for what our government is doing?

[2] Can there be a justifiable war in this technological age?

[3] Can any war be justifiable except for a war of defense against attack?

[4] Are the just-war criteria adequate, and is just-war thinking an adequate way to think about war?

In our churches we need to be asking such questions and discussing Christians' various views about war. We need to admit that conscientious Christians can come to different conclusions about what circumstances justify the use of military force. Merely bombarding others with our own view when our hot button is pushed isn't enough.



Barbara

You shall not murder (kill). Exodus 20:13

When the Lord your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy, and clears away many nations before you ... and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy. Deuteronomy 7:1-2

... The people charged straight ahead into the city [Jericho] and captured it. They then devoted to destruction by the edge of the sword all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys. Joshua 6:20-21

Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also ... Matthew 5:39



Do not repay anyone evil for evil ... If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves ... Romans 12:17-19

What should Christians do about war?

