

*By Al Shine, Colonel, U.S. Army, Retired*

**Author's note:** *The comments below were originally written in the early 1970s, a time when there was a strong "anti-war" movement in the United States, and much discussion and debate about issues relating to morality and war. As a young officer wishing to be honest with my calling as a Christian I believed it important to ask the age old question: "May a Christian rightly serve in the military?" In seeking to be as honest as possible in answering the question for myself, I took a concordance and, over many weeks, looked up every verse in the Bible which seemed relevant to the topic. I then looked for patterns and principles. The comments below reflect that search. I have since read much else on the topic, and have learned much from others, but have found nothing to challenge the essence of the comments below.*

(All biblical quotations are from the King James Version)

## INTRODUCTION

What are a Christian's responsibilities when he is called to fight for his country? This is a question that has troubled serious followers of Christ almost since the founding of the Church. Correspondingly, the tide of support for either the pacifist or non-pacifist position has tended to ebb and flow in the powerful currents of history.

Unfortunately, in pondering the question of Christian involvement in war, many people are often swayed more by the temper of the time than by an objective evaluation of biblical evidence. Difficult as it often is, we need to objectively seek God's truth, *then* apply it to experience—not try to fit that truth into the logic of our experience. After undergoing this exercise, I've concluded that a Christian may be a soldier, but I'm very much in agreement with C.S. Lewis' comment: "I

can respect an honest pacifist, though I believe he is entirely mistaken.”

### PHILOSOPHICAL PACIFISM

Before considering the Scriptures directly, we ought to separate those arguments that spring not from Scripture, but from humanistic philosophy. Many of these arguments for pacifism, though echoed by Christians, are not biblically based, but rather are the product of human reason. They are thus as shallow of real truth as the pithy 1960s bumper sticker which stated, as if to end all debate, “War is harmful to plants, animals, babies, and other living things.”

The essence of the philosophically based argument for pacifism usually runs something like this:

1. War is horrible and foolish. People would obviously be better off if they learned to solve their problems peacefully.
2. Men are not so foolish that they can't see this. And yet fear, greed and mutual distrust prevent them from taking the first step.
3. If only some people and nations would be bold enough to unilaterally take that first step, to renounce war and dismantle their armies, the rest of the world would surely follow.
4. Concurrently, the vast quantities of resources squandered in war preparations could be put to more beneficial uses.

There is some truth in this line of reasoning. From a Christian perspective, however, the argument contains serious flaws. The Christian knows that human history is not a road of perpetual progress; that war will never cease until Christ intervenes in power at the end of the age, and that the root of the problem lies in the limitations inherent in the nature of men. Man's understanding is so blinded by sin that he cannot always see what is right. Even when he does

see, his will is so dominated by sin that “the things which he would, he cannot do” (Romans 7:19) Just as no war will ever end all wars until the Lord of Hosts decisively defeats His enemies (see Revelation 19:20), neither will any pacifist theory or program end all wars, no matter how logical or high-minded its appeal.

A second oft-stated philosophical argument is that “war never accomplishes anything.” Stated as a literal truth, of course, this is foolishness. War conquered Canaan for Israel, and war enslaved the Israelites. War brought political independence to the United States. War ended black slavery in America. War subjugated Europe to Nazi tyranny, and war freed Europe from that tyranny. The list of things war has accomplished is endless.

All wars accomplish something, but we must be careful not to expect that war can do more than its nature makes possible. It may prevent an evil, or execute justice, or make possible a political climate for good to be done, but it is seldom, of itself, a positive force. Nor will any war bring about all the utopian goals we sometimes claim for it in our wartime propaganda. Just because war cannot accomplish everything, however, is not to deny that it does do *something*—and that what it does may be worth the cost.

### The Question of Comparative Right

Finally, before we deal directly with Scripture, we must address the question of comparative right in cases of human conflict. The ideologue never asks this question, because he is always sure his nation, his revolution, or his cause is “right” and his opponent is “wrong.” Any honest student of human nature and human history knows, however, that few, if any, human conflicts pit an individual or nation that is purely right against one that is purely wrong. Because of our nature, the motives and goals of human beings are always mixed.

To admit that there are no “white hats” and “black hats” in areas of human conflict is not, however, to subsequently conclude that there are no significant differences between moral shades of gray. An ethical person makes numerous decisions daily based on his evaluation of comparative right. In considering a conflict between nations, the “plague on both our houses” approach may be simply moral escapism. We must honestly face the fact that to avoid choosing sides in the case of human conflict is to make a practical choice in favor of the strongest.

### REASONING FROM BIBICAL TRUTHS

Most philosophical arguments are morally attractive, but many flounder when they stumble upon the truth that the nature of man is sinful. Simple human reason, however, even when it's based on God's revealed truth, is not enough. What God demanded of His own Son wasn't logical by human standards, and His commands to His children frequently go far beyond the confines of our simple reasoning. It makes little sense to pray to a God we can neither see nor hear, to rejoice in tribulation, or to bless those who persecute us. But that is exactly what the Christian is commanded to do.

Perhaps God has said to us: "Look. There will be wars and rumors of wars and all sorts of evils until the end of the age. Even the power of My Gospel will not change that, because Satan is still loose in the world. But you are nonetheless forbidden to take up arms in the defense of yourself and others. Just as the Christian may not be a prostitute, neither may the Christian be a soldier." *Perhaps* God has said this to us, but *perhaps* He has not. If He has, we ought to be able to prove it directly, because the consequences of the pacifist position are extreme, as we will discuss later.

### Examining Scripture

As a starting point, the legitimacy of soldiering is generally *assumed* in Scripture. The Bible does not contain any direct condemnation of soldiering. It appears, then, that the positions of the policeman and soldier are biblically sanctioned positions in human society. Just as Christians may be doctors, teachers, bricklayers and homemakers, Christians may also be soldiers. We should then say to the pacifist: "The burden of proof is on you." The pacifist has to dig deeper than the surface to prove his point.

### Scriptures that May Appear to Support Pacifism

There are at least six general categories of Scripture that might appear to directly support pacifism for the Christian:

1. *The Old Testament commandment: "Thou shalt not kill"* (Exodus 20:13). That the Hebrew word translated "kill" in the King James Version would be better translated "murder" seems almost universally accepted by students of Hebrew and Greek. Furthermore, it is obvious to anyone who reads only the King James Version that it must mean something less than "under no circumstances may a man in God's will kill another man." If not, the God of the Old Testament is grossly inconsistent. This commandment, although often thoughtlessly used by secular pacifists, presents no problem to a serious student of the Scriptures

2. *The large number of verses that applaud men of peace, for example:*

"Blessed are the peacemakers" (Matthew 5:9)

"Seek peace and pursue it (Psalm 34:14)

"The work of righteousness shall be peace" (Isaiah 32:17)

"Love and truth and peace" (Zechariah 8:19)

"Follow things which make for peace" (Romans 14:19)

3. *The New Testament commands of nonresistance:*

"Resist not evil, but whosoever shall smite thee on the right cheek, turn to him the other also"

(Matthew 5:39).

“Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21)

“Avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath” (Romans 12:19).

From a human perspective, these commands don't seem at all reasonable. “Wait a minute, Lord. In this sinful world I know some guys who would just love for me to turn the left cheek so they could complete the job they began on the right.”

“True,” our Lord might answer, “but have you forgotten what I told you? You must expect this and endure it. In the world you shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.” (cp. John 16:33) So the principle of nonresistance appears to stand, and to argue against the soldier's profession.

4. *The command to love your enemies (Matthew 5:43-48)*> Can you love a man and yet put a bullet through his head—perhaps sending him to an eternity apart from Christ? Is this the love of 1 Corinthians 13 that “suffers long and is kind”? Such questions are not easily answered in the affirmative.

5. *Christ's command to Peter:*

“Put up thy sword into thy place; for all they that take the sword shall perish by the sword” (Matthew 26:52).

6. *Commands to trust in God, not in our own arms, for our personal and national security:*

“Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we will remember the name of the Lord our God” (Psalm 118:8).

“It is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in men” (Psalm 118:8)

Pacifists also use two other arguments to support their position: They reason that *Christ's lifew* as normative. He ought to be our example for Christian living. Yet to the best of our knowledge, He never killed anyone during His earthly ministry. Instead, He deliberately accepted unjustified torture and death rather than to physically resist.

*"The classic Anabaptist position* echoed by the Mennonite tradition today argues as follows: The Christian's primary loyalty is not to any human kingdom, but to the Kingdom of God. We are but “ambassadors” (2 Corinthians 5:20), and “strangers and pilgrims” (1 Peter 2:11) on this earth. We are called to be obedient to human governments, but only within limits. One of the limits is that we are not to kill. Because of sin, there may be a necessity for secular governments to use force in governing. But in this age, prior to the full coming of God's Kingdom to earth, the Christian community ought to mirror that kingdom to the society that surrounds it. Thus, while accepting the ways of the world—to include police and military—we show by our actions that there is, and will be, a better way.

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## **Some Biblical Facts**

These arguments for pacifism from Scripture are not specious and many not be ignored. Neither, however, are they conclusive. Let us consider some other biblical facts (some briefly mentioned earlier) that we need to ponder if we're to know *all* that God has revealed about this matter.

*1. In the Old Testament, God forbade murder and praised peace-makers, but He frequently*

*commanded men to kill in war and in the execution of criminals (for example: Exodus 21:14; 32:25-29, Joshua 7:25 and 1 Samuel 15).*

The God who commanded the complete destruction of the Amalekites in 1 Samuel 15 is the same God who became flesh and dwelt among us, and Who told us to turn the other cheek. Even in the Old Testament, the preeminent commandments were to love God and love men (Mark 12:28-34). Were the soldiers in Saul's army commanded to violate the Sixth Commandment as they carried out God's instructions to kill every man, woman, and child? He never commanded prostitution, which would violate His Seventh Commandment, and He never commanded thievery, which would violate His Eighth, and we know Him to be the same yesterday, today, and forever. It seems very likely, therefore, that participation in war must not be, of itself, a violation of either His Sixth Commandment nor of the principles of conduct laid down by His Son under the New Covenant.

*2. The profession of soldiering, though frequently mentioned in Scripture, is never condemned by it.*

The four centurions mentioned in the New Testament who were professional soldiers are all presented in a positive context, with no suggestion they should leave their profession. Analogies between soldiering and the Christian life are frequently used in Scripture and always in a positive sense (for example: 2 Timothy 2:3-4).

John the Baptist was asked by soldiers: "What should we do [to bear fruit that displays true repentance]?" (Luke 3:8-14) He did not tell them to leave the army – the obvious answer, if to remain was in itself sin. Instead he told them to be honest and good soldiers, refraining from the practice common to soldiers throughout history of using their arms to extort money from the defenseless populace.

*3. The same Christ Who taught non-resistance also used physical violence against the money changers in the temple (Matthew 21:12-13).*

He who said "blessed are the peacemakers," said also: "I am come not to bring peace, but a sword" (Matthew 10:34). The implication here is that being a "peacemaker" does not always mean turning the other cheek to evil. To do what is right will sometimes *cause* conflict. He who

commanded the “turning of the other cheek” when He was slapped by one of the officers at His trial did not meekly turn the other cheek, but replied with a challenge which, though not physical retaliation, was certainly a strong verbal rebuke.

Granted, our Lord did not kill in these instances. *But He did resist evil.* Those who base their pacifism on a literal and total interpretation of the nonresistance principle must modify this principle in light of the rest of Scripture. They are no more consistent in this than those non-pacifists who also interpret nonresistance as meaning something less than “Under no circumstances may a Christian kill another human being.”

*4. The same Christ Who said: “They that take the sword shall perish by the sword,” also sanctioned the carrying of swords by His disciples.*

Peter had a sword in the Garden of Gethsemane (John 18:10). Surely if Christ were teaching pacifism His disciples would long before have dispensed with lethal weapons. In fact, Christ had earlier directed them to provide for their reasonable protection by carrying swords, along with providing for their material needs by carrying a purse (Luke 22:36-38).

*5. Finally, and most importantly, there is scriptural sanction for the proper use of “the sword” –lethal physical force – by human governments.*

In the Old Testament, men of God served with praise in the armies of Israel (for example, David’s mighty men). They also served in secular governments that certainly employed armies (for example: Joseph, Moses, Nehemiah and Daniel).

In the New Testament, Christians are directed to be loyal and obedient citizens of human governments: “Render unto Caesar the things that be Caesar’s” (Mark 12:17). “Submit yourself to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake, whether it be to the king as supreme, or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of them that do well” (I Peter 2:13-14).

Human government is a legitimate, God-ordained institution, one of the main purposes of which

is to bring justice and order into a world of sinful men (Romans 13:1-7). The use of the sword, the symbol of physical violence unto death, is a proper duty of human governments (Romans 13:4).

### **An Inconsistent Argument**

The Anabaptist position – that the non-Christian may rightly and ethically kill in a society of sinful men but the Christian may not – seems to be morally contradictory. Christ has commanded us to live in this present world with all its difficulties. He has ordained human government (using lethal force when necessary) as the practical means to maintain justice and order in society. If this Anabaptist position is true, God is saying to the non-Christian: “You must do the difficult, dangerous and bloody work of the policeman and soldier, but My people may not. They will live as they will in my future Kingdom where there will be no sin, but you non-believers must deal with the problem of sin as it is in the world today. You must do your best to adjust to the practical reality of life in this age. My people will show how one can live when the practical reality has one day changed.”

Has God told us to do this in any other legitimate and necessary secular pursuit? Are we to shun government service because in the Kingdom none but the administrative government will be needed? Are we to never serve as physicians because in the Kingdom there will be no disease? If this argument seems inconsistent and unfair to the Christian, it must seem even more so to the non-Christian!

We are to live as members of two kingdoms, and we are, indeed, to put faithfulness to the Kingdom of God above loyalty to the kingdoms of men. But in this age, before the coming of our Lord, human government has been God-ordained to protect what is right and to punish wrongdoing, to encourage good behavior and to suppress evil behavior. We who are called to be salt in this world are not exempt from doing what God has said other men must and should do.

## **NONRESISTANCE AND THE CHRISTIAN SOLDIER**

Thus we see there are a number of reasons to question the pacifist position. Faced with the reality of sin in the world, and the subsequent necessity for judicious use of force, there seems to be biblical justification for Christian involvement in battle. But if this is so, we must understand, somewhat differently than have the pacifists, some of the biblical passages that seem most directly to condemn killing.

What, in broad terms, is the application of the oft-repeated New Testament principle of nonresistance? *It is a principle for an individual acting as an individual.* "Brethren," Paul wrote, "avenge not yourselves" (Romans 12:19). We must accept personal abuse, even when it is unjustified. But there is an important distinction between seeking private revenge and upholding principles of justice and liberty on behalf of others. As a soldier representing the government, I *may* and *should do* what I *must* *not do* as an individual representing only myself.

Can I love my enemy and kill him? Yes. I'm also to love myself. But if lust, madness or even misguided zeal were to turn me into a murderer who is harming others, I would prefer that my Christian brother kill me than let me continue on my way. If the enemy is a non-Christian, my bullet may send him to an eternity without Christ, but if my bullet doesn't kill him, his will kill others. I must prayerfully make the difficult choice between greater and lesser evils in human affairs, and act on that choice.

### **The Christian Peacemaker**

Should not the Christian be a peacemaker? Unquestionably, he should be. But to be a peacemaker does not mean to be a pacifist. The policeman on the beat, the marshal restoring law and order to a riotous town of the Old West, and the soldiers and marines patrolling the tumultuous streets of Baghdad or Kandahar are all peacemakers. The Christian will not lightly resort to arms, but he must be careful that he isn't like the false prophets of old who said, "Peace, peace when there is no peace" (Jeremiah 6:14; 8:11; 14:13).

The Scripture teaches with repetition, force and undeniable clarity that the Christian is to be a peacemaker – but it does not teach pacifism. What it does teach is that a Christian should “seek peace” and “follow the things that make for peace.” He should not be bold, arrogant, jealous, offensive, teasing, and the like. In short, he should be a peacemaker as opposed to being a trouble-maker. Paul wrote: “If it is possible, *as much as lieth in you*, live peaceably with all men” (Romans 13:18, emphasis added). But if doing right brings resistance, or if justice and mercy demand conflict, we ought not to shrink from our sometimes violent duty.

### **What about “they that take the sword shall perish with the sword?”**

The exact meaning of this verse is obscure. Obviously, it cannot be taken as literal prophecy. Some of the most cruel and criminal men of the sword die by other means. In light of what has been previously discussed, it does not seem possible that this passage is meant to condemn *all* use of the sword. The context of this verse makes suspect any attempt to use it as a conclusive argument for pacifism.

*Most probably, this verse in its generalized sense is meant as a warning to men who live habitually by violence for purposes of personal gain.*

They must expect that they will be subject to similar punishment, either from equally rapacious men, or from the just ministers of God’s wrath --- policemen and soldiers. This may, furthermore, be the meaning of Genesis 9:6: “Whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God he made man.” When we consider this verse in conjunction with commands for execution of murderers in the Mosaic law, Christ’s comment may further suggest what no Christian soldier could deny – that what good may be accomplished by the sword is at best temporary and finite.

### **Christ as Our Example**

Is Christ’s life to be normative? Yes, in its example of total obedience to the Father, but not if we mean by “normative” that all Christians are to do exactly what He did; nothing more and nothing less. Are we all called to be itinerant preachers? Are any of us called to die as a sacrifice for the sins of mankind? Jesus refused to resist His arrest and execution because it was His mission from His Father to go to the cross as a lamb to the slaughter. We don’t know from simple observation of His life what He would have done as a human if He had been drafted, or if He had observed a gang of thugs raping a woman, or if He had been faced as a government leader with the horror of Nazi Germany.

We cannot assume that, because He gave up His own life in obedience to His Father's command, He would ask us to allow evil to triumph on earth without ever resorting to violent resistance. He did not, however, leave us without counsel on these matters. He provided his Word as a guide and the Holy Spirit to be our counselor, "guiding [us] into all truth" (John 16:13). In prayer and study of Scripture we find God's answers to the infinite complexity of human life.

### Trusting God Alone

But why not trust God alone for our defense? Because to do so would be to "put God to the test" (Matthew 4:7). It would be tantamount to demanding a miracle from God without taking the reasonable and responsible steps required to provide for our own security. Do we refuse to use medicine? Do Christian farmers refuse to irrigate their crops? Do we disdain wearing automobile seatbelts?

Unless God has told us that we may not soldier, to refuse to do so in the face of a military threat is not to trust Him, but to test Him. Rather, we ought to be like the Israelites of Nehemiah 4:9, who "...prayed to [their] God and posted a watch day and night to meet this threat." This is not "idolatry" as some pacifists claim, any more than it is idolatry to take penicillin as a defense against pneumonia. It is not, as they argue, trusting in arms instead of trusting in God. It is, rather, trusting in God *while* bearing arms.

We ought to remind ourselves that the primary issue in question is not, "Should I ever kill another to protect myself?" Rather, it is, "Should I refuse to kill even if doing so means I will be allowing others to be unjustly killed, robbed, raped, dragged off to prison, or forced to suffer under a wicked government?" That is the tough question which the pacifist must answer. Pacifism sounds very loving, godly, and self-sacrificing when argued on the front lawn of a Christian college campus, but it can look very unloving when pitted against the harsh realities of life in this world.

## **CONCLUSION**

There is, therefore, much evidence to support the idea that it is proper for a Christian to be involved in military service. The experience of history indicates that many have been so led. That does not mean that Christians in the military have a license to hate, nor do they have a blanket license to kill. As an individual sinner prone to avenge himself and resist personal abuse, the Christian in the military must, like all other believers, restrain himself. He should examine the cause for which his nation fights, and if he concludes that it is evil and unjust he should refuse to participate. Even when he finds the overall cause acceptable, he may at times be led to disobey certain orders that he believes abuse the proper use of force.

The Christian soldier, however, needn't think he sins if he executes his duty, including that of killing, in an honorable manner as an agent of a secular government. In fact, since biblical standards of warfare demand a strictly controlled use of violence, and since violence is always hard to control, there is a particular need for Christian policemen and soldiers whose standards in this area should be higher than those of men without Christ. As Dr. V. Raymond Edman wrote on the occasion of the establishment of Army ROTC at Wheaton College in 1952: "There is a call today for a Joshua, a Gideon, a David, as well as Elijah and Paul."

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Al Shine and his wife, Sandra, live in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. They participate actively in the chapel programs of the U.S. Army War College.

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