

"The teaching and life of Jesus is the most important place Christians should go when deciding how to approach the ethics of war and peace. Pacifists claim Jesus was a Pacifist, and if they are right that would settle the question. But they are not right. Jesus was not a Pacifist himself, and he did not teach a Pacifist ethic for his disciples or anyone else to follow." — an excerpt from this essay

By Daniel R. Heimbach, Senior Professor of Christian Ethics at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

I was born of missionary parents in the midst of war during the Communist revolution in China, and my life has been touched by war in significant ways. I am also a born again Christian, a true follower of Jesus Christ, and a moral theologian who specializes in understanding and teaching ethics. So this topic is one I have thought much about, and not just based on training and research but drawing from experience as well.

The short answer to why I am not a Pacifist is that Jesus was not a Pacifist and what Jesus taught, and what the rest of the Bible teaches, does not align with Pacifist teaching. That for me is the bottom line. Of course I have interests and loyalties as an American that are different from people living in other nations. But my ethics relating to war is not determined by these differences. When it comes to the ethics of war and peace between nations, all that matters to me, or that should matter to anyone else, is how a situation aligns with objective moral reality. And, while human reason is able to analyze this reality, the reality itself is fixed by the Moral Ruler of the Universe who is none other than Jesus Christ himself.

I do not enjoy war and am all too familiar with its horror. In fact I sincerely wish I could embrace Pacifism. That would be easy for me to do. Pacifism is very popular among others in my professional class and embracing it would result in a lot of personal affirmation and praise. I cannot do that with integrity, however, simply and only because I am convinced beyond doubt that, when the Bible is accepted as the inerrant, authoritative, and plenary Word of God written, it cannot be reconciled with Pacifist ideology. I do not think Christians should go around starting wars. But I do believe the Bible teaches that God expects, and in fact requires, morally responsible rulers sometimes to use deadly force to defend weak and innocent people against unwarranted aggression, and also requires rulers to use coercive power where necessary to correct specific acts of injustice—taking care when they do these things to keep what they do within well defined moral boundaries.

What I have just described is the ethic of Just War, which is an ethic of war and peace between nations quite different in attitude and approach to the ethic of Pacifism. The main difference between these opposing approaches is that Pacifism is a perfectionist social ideology impossible ever to achieve before Jesus comes back to establish a perfect world, and Just War is a form of moral realism that recognizes we do not yet live in a socially perfect world. Unlike Pacifism, Just War is an ethic consistent with a sober understanding that we live in a wicked world filled with wicked people, and that by God's choice this will continue to be the case until God himself removes all need for war by utterly removing all sin from the world. This also is consistent with humbly accepting the fact that only God can do this and we cannot.

The teaching and life of Jesus is the most important place Christians should go when deciding how to approach the ethics of war and peace. Pacifists claim Jesus was a Pacifist, and if they are right that would settle the question. But they are not right. Jesus was not a Pacifist himself, and he did not teach a Pacifist ethic for his disciples or anyone else to follow.

Jesus certainly is the Prince of Peace (Is 9:6; Lk 1:79). But the sort of "peace" Jesus offers the world is the peace of reconciling sinners to God. He did not launch a movement to remove all weapons of war or to disband all armies in a still very sinful world. He did not announce a program for pursuing civil non-violence no matter what happens in a wicked world. Pacifists read civil non-violence into every mention of "peace" in the New Testament. But that is hardly ever what the original human authors or the Holy Spirit were addressing.

In the one place Jesus did clearly address "peace" in the civil non-violence sense—the sort of "peace" Pacifists have in mind—he firmly and absolutely denied he was teaching an ethic of Pacifism. In that passage Jesus very clearly explains to his disciples, "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace (in the civil non-violence sense) on the earth, I did not come to bring peace (in the civil non-violence sense) but a sword" (Mt 10:34). Jesus also assumed that morally responsible kings must sometimes go to war, and when they do they ought to apply the Just War principle of not sending troops into battle where there is no chance of success (Lk 14:31).

While Pacifists make much of the fact that Jesus rebuked Peter's use of the sword in the Garden of Gethsemane, I as a responsible moral theologian am not free to read into what Jesus said anything that in any way contradicts what Jesus himself said to his disciples (including Peter) just an hour or so earlier that same evening. Before leaving the Upper Room, Jesus told his disciples that after he left this earth (still future when Jesus rebuked Peter in Gethsemane)

they should carry with them and be prepared to use weapons of deadly force to defend as necessary against attack (Lk 22:36). This does not mean Christians should enjoy fighting or should go around stirring up wars. But neither does it mean Christians may never use deadly force or should never participate in fighting wars for any reason.

Finally, we must not forget that Jesus of the New Testament is also God of the Old Testament. Because the character of God never changes (Ps 102:27; Mal 3:6; Jas 1:17), this means the moral character of Jesus cannot be different than it always had been and always will be without variation. So, if God in the Old Testament approved Just War (as in Deuteronomy 20 and Amos 1), then so did Jesus in the New Testament. This is an important part of the essential doctrine affirmed about Jesus in the book of Hebrews, which is that “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb 13:8).

I believe that Jesus of the New Testament is God of the Old Testament. I believe that the moral character of Jesus in the New Testament is unchanged from what it was in the Old Testament. I believe that as God did not teach Pacifism in the Old Testament so Jesus did not teach Pacifism in the New Testament. And so we end where we started. I am not a Pacifist simply and only out of fidelity to the life and teaching of Jesus Christ himself as faithfully witnessed and recorded in the Bible itself.

Daniel Heimbach is Senior Professor of Christian Ethics at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. He has authored or contributed to fourteen books and published over sixty articles and book reviews. He also chairs the Christian ethics section of the Evangelical Theological Society, is series editor of the B&H Christian Ethics Series, is a referee for the Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society, is a contributing editor for the Journal of Faith and War, and reviews manuscripts for P&R Publishers.

From 1989 to 1991, Dr. Heimbach served as the White House Associate Director for Domestic Policy and as Deputy Secretary of the Domestic Policy Council. Then from 1991 to 1993 he served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Manpower. Dr. Heimbach graduated from the United States Naval Academy, served in the Vietnam War, drafted the moral framework used by President George H. W. Bush in leading coalition forces during the Persian Gulf War,

and has delivered expert testimony on military issues to Congress, lectured on the ethics of war at the Marine Corps University and led a seminar on war ethics for senior scholars at the United States Naval Academy.