

May a Christian Serve in the Military?

by Lieutenant General William K. Harrison, Jr., USA(Retd.)

As it must to every Christian soldier, this question presented itself to me. It was something that could not be ignored, but had to be solved. As I studied the history of war and military operations I was struck with the horror of war. I think everybody who gives the matter any thought must realize the terrible nature of destructive action of armies. There is no need to describe these things; we all know them. When we think of the conditions prevailing in the world today we cannot pass them off with indifference. I had to solve this question for myself.

As a Christian, I knew that the Lord had told us in the Bible that we should love our enemies and pray for them, that we should return good for evil, that the peacemakers are blessed, that vengeance is His, not ours, that they that take the sword shall perish by the sword, that as far as in us lies we should keep peace with our neighbours. We find also that as Christians serving as living epistles of the Lord, our weapons in the warfare of the soul are not carnal, but rather spiritual. In fact, the only weapon for the Christian in his war against the enemies of the soul is the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. As individuals there is no place for hatred in us. I cannot see myself willingly killing anyone. I don't even hunt, because I don't like to see animals suffer.

On the other hand, I know that I am and have been for years a Christian. I realize that I have no righteousness of my own, that in the judgment of a holy and just God, I had no hope for eternity. I trusted my life to the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave His life on the cross, an offering of His own soul for sin, my sin. On the cross, God laid on Him the iniquity of us all, making Him, who knew no sin, to be sin for us, that we might be the righteousness of God in Him.

He came to this world that He might die for us; all other reasons are secondary. When I trusted in Him, God forgave me my sins, justified me legally in the person of my substitute, Christ, gave me eternal life, and made me a child of God and a member of the body of Christ through the new birth and baptism by the Holy Spirit. There are many other things that God in His infinite love and grace has done for me in and through the Lord Jesus Christ. I know them because His Spirit bears witness with my spirit in this assurance. If there is one thing that I do know it is Him whom I have believed, and am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have confided to Him.

As I started to consider the matter of being a soldier and a Christian at the same time, I recalled immediately those men of the past who were soldiers and yet were men of God: Abraham, who fought the four kings; Joshua, who served the Lord; David, who killed Goliath and then led his armies in war and who then received from God one of the greatest promises ever given to man; and those who in the eleventh chapter of Hebrews are described as having through faith in God subdued kingdoms, waxed valiant in fight, and turned to flight the armies of the aliens. In our own national history all know that George Washington and Robert E. Lee were simple Christians, and yet among the great soldiers of history.

Another thing that I realized was that David, soldier that he was, yet would not kill his worst enemy, Saul, when he had him at a disadvantage and helpless. It is quoted of Lee that he said that never did he pass a day without praying for the Union soldiers.

In the New Testament we find four soldiers, centurions or captains in the Roman army. The Lord said of one of these that he had greater faith than Christ had found in Israel. Another, at the cross, believed in Jesus as the Son of God. To the third God sent Peter to introduce the Gospel to the Gentiles. When this man heard the Gospel he believed and the Holy Spirit was given to him immediately. There is no indication that any of these discontinued his military service, nor is there any command in the New Testament that a Christian should not be a soldier. On the other hand, there is a mandate given by the Lord through Paul that we should remain in the calling in which we are called (I Corinthians 7:20).

I investigated further. I found that the Lord gave Joshua instructions for the capture of Jericho, that He promised the Children of Israel victory over their enemies if they would serve Him, defeat if they did not. These are there to read if anyone desires. In Hebrews, it says that it was by faith that the walls of

Jericho fell. As a soldier I know they would never have fallen that way except by faith. The fact that there were cases in which war was commanded by God to the Israelites and therefore justified is undoubted. In view of God's command, to say that war is invariably sinful is to say that God told Israel to sin, and is therefore an attack on the character of God (James 1:13). On the other hand, what are the conditions under which such war might be legitimate?

Murder and Judicial Death

The fundamental characteristic of war is the taking of human life. We know that the Ten Commandments, in the King James Version says "thou shalt not kill." The Hebrew word, RATSACH, is more correctly translated murder. Thus the commandment should read, "thou shalt not murder," which is the translation of the New American Standard Bible. The same Lord said in the following chapter of Exodus that death should be the punishment for certain crimes. Murder is everywhere in the Scripture recognized as sinful and to be condemned. Judicial death for the purpose of maintaining justice or righteousness is equally well established. This is found initially in the judgment of death on Adam and Eve and the entire race; in the commandment given to Noah that those who shed man's blood should by man be slain; in the flood, where God took the lives of the entire race except Noah and the family; in the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah, and in many other places.

We see the same thing in present civilizations. The death penalty is a necessary part of the penal system although many deny this. Few question the right of police to employ their weapons in enforcing the law, when such employment is necessary. The fact that some policemen may use excessive force or are dishonest, and controlled by dishonest politicians and lawyers, does not mean that the police should have their arms taken from them. Police have had to be armed and trained in the use of their arms, because criminals use such weapons without compunction.

The maintenance and operation of the police power is recognized in the New Testament as well as in the Old. It seems to me rather obvious that, in a community where individual freedom of will exists, order and security can be maintained only by force in the final analysis. Persuasion can go only so far. If a criminal insists on pursuing his criminal way, force is the only known method of protecting the law-abiding citizen.

The military forces of the nation are only an extension of the police system. Its legitimate purpose is to insure the peace and security of the nation from outside aggression and in case of domestic insurrections. Just as policemen must be especially armed and trained, so must soldiers. Navies and armies cannot be improvised overnight.

Whether or not the military forces are used purely for the protection of the nation is a question of policy in the government. The fact that the police may be under a dishonest politician or may be connected with graft does not reduce the necessity for police. The Army and Navy are also the servants of the nation and are used for the purposes of national defence policy.

In connection with purely defensive purposes may be found offensive action. Our nationals, missionaries, and commercial people may be legitimately in some more distant part of the world. Normally the laws of the nations where they are protect them adequately. However, sometimes it becomes necessary to protect them by force. The war has to be fought where the protection is to be afforded. Not only that, but a war once entered into may often be terminated only by the definite defeat of the enemy. The strategic situation may be such that offensive action is necessary. The defensive alone rarely gains the end sought.

Certain New testament passages are quoted by pacifists in support of their position. We are to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44). This is a definite command, to be obeyed. But what shall we do when we have to choose between two loves? For example, should one defend his mother who is about to be attacked by a criminal, or should he allow the latter to commit his vicious attack? And is permissiveness to a criminal act really an act of love toward the criminal? It is evident that exaggerated permissiveness to children is very likely to encourage them to juvenile crime and worse later. "Blessed are the peacemakers . . . (Matthew 5:9)." This also is true, but when our efforts to be at peace fail, must we then submit to the aggressor? The Apostle Paul tells us that we should be at peace with others to the

extent that it lies within us (Romans 12:18). Obviously the aggressor himself removes the possibility of peace unless we surrender. If struck on one cheek we are to turn the other (Matthew 5:39), thus giving the aggressor an opportunity to desist, avoiding a fight. But, if he does not desist and renews the attack, nothing is said about again turning the other cheek. Actually, experience shows that to appease an aggressor whether he be a school-yard bully or an Adolf Hitler, merely encourages him to further and greater aggression. The Lord told Peter that they who take the sword shall perish by the sword (Matthew 26:52). This certainly is historically true as regards nations, but most soldiers, from private to general, die of natural causes. Among nations, in the absence of an effective world government, it is a case of dog eat dog; so also with criminal gangs. Ordinary citizens are or should be protected by the government.

Christ did not allow Peter to defend Him by force because He had come in the world to die for the sins of men in order that they might be forgiven and reconciled to God. It will be otherwise when He comes again in mighty power and glory (Matt. 24:30; II Thess. 1:7-9; Rev. 1:7; 19:11-21).

During the Lord's earthly ministry, He provided for and protected the disciples, but as He prepared to depart, He told them that if they had no sword, to sell their clothing in order to buy one (Luke 2:35-38). Why was this appropriate? Romans 1:18-32 tells us that in order to reveal His wrath against men's rebellion against Him, God has given them up to all of those personal moral evils which cause the troubles in society, among which is war. In Old Testament times, the nation Israel lived in just such a world, and today, so does the Christian.

I therefore believe that the military profession is a legitimate one. I feel no twinge of conscience in the matter, although my conscience frequently bothers me excessively in other matters where I discover I am wrong. On the other hand, I feel that if the Lord had wanted me to leave the Army, He would have let me know and, as a Christian, I trust that I would have been prepared to leave at once. It might also be necessary sometimes for an officer to resign his commission even under persecution if it becomes clear that to remain in the military would be contrary to what he believes right. Such was the situation which faced Lee and other officers at the beginning of the Civil War.

Meeting Objections of Those Who Believe Defensive Warfare is Wrong

There are several points which interest me, things which I have read or heard asserted by those who oppose national defence.

First, there are those who say that wars never settle anything. If by that they mean that war does not end wars and produce a permanently static civilisation, I agree with them. The human race is constantly changing, generations dying, new ones being born. Civilisation is fluid. But I think that war has settled some things, many of them of great importance. It was by war that Lot was saved from the Babylonians. War gave the land of Canaan to the Jews, war took it away from them. War established the Roman Empire, in which there was a century or more of as nearly complete peace as has ever existed in civilised lands. War prevented the Saracens from completely dominating Europe. War gained the American Independence and definitely put an end to slavery. War put an end to Napoleon.

I don't intimate that these results could not have been obtained in a much better way. I don't know of a war which could not have been settled peaceably if men had been peaceably inclined.

The Emptiness of War's Pomp and Glory

Another thing I frequently hear about is the ambition of soldiers for the pomp and glory of war and for such promotion as may be found. There may be some pomp and circumstances in parades and other things done in the training of troops. But I don't know of any pomp and glory in war. It is mostly mud, rain, heat, cold, hunger and thirst, not to speak of the constant danger and death. I don't know any soldier who wants a war. As to promotion, there is very little of that. A few men get reputations, most of us merely work hard. Few people except soldiers can appreciate the moral responsibility which a commander accepts. On his decisions the lives of thousands of men may be lost. Is his decision correct? Is it necessary? The mental strain on commanders is beyond the comprehension of most

people. At the end of the war the temporary rank is often lost. Many of the generals go back to a lower rank. They get nothing out of it except in a few isolated cases.

Another point is the belief that military forces bring on war. That is not true in our country. In the United States, the Military are the servants of the nation. The nation goes to war. We fight it and finish it. The Armed Forces no more start a war than does a policeman. The policeman begins to function when normal rules of conduct cease to function.

There is a lot of talk also about the fact that preparedness starts war. This is another one of those half-truths. The truth is that the lack of preparedness invites plunder and aggression. Preparedness may avoid war. It is practically certain that if the United States had been reasonably prepared in 1916-1917, Germany would never have dared to draw us into the war. They grossly underestimated our capacity.

Of course, there is always the fact that military preparedness leads to international suspicion and ultimately to war. This is because nations do not trust one another, and certainly there is little reason to do so. As a result, the burden of armaments is almost unbearable. When one thinks of what good things could be done with all the money which goes into armaments, it makes one despair of anything good coming out of civilisation.

One of the saddest effects of war is the hurt done to women, children and other non-combatants. This was one of the arguments raised against the use of bombing in order to win the war in Vietnam. Obviously, every possible effort should be made to avoid harm to civilians. Nevertheless, many of them are engaged in active support of the war in various ways. Such persons are a fair target. Wherever there is a military force there are nearly always civilians who cannot or will not leave the combat locality in spite of efforts to warn them. Wherever there is a war support activity, there must be labour, and such persons normally have their families nearby. Among them are the stores and other activities of a community. It is physically impossible to isolate the combat forces and installations from the civil population. This has been the case throughout history. Ordinarily, the best that can be done to save civilians is to get them out of the area to be struck. Further, no ruler can start a war without the obedience of the population. It is that ruler, in fact the nation, which exposes its own civil population to the dangers and suffering of war.

It is obvious that to neglect a military target in order to avoid harm to civilians would permit the enemy to gain far greater military security by placing legitimate targets in the middle of a civilian community. As senseless and sinful as war may be, it is an historical and present reality because it is caused by the unregenerate nature of man. God has given men up to such things (Romans 1:18-32). War must be understood and conducted in a realistic manner if, unfortunately, the government's efforts to maintain peace fail.

Because of widespread discontent with the Vietnamese war, many persons insist that the individual citizen has the moral obligation to dissent publicly and even by violent or non-violent resistance to a particular war. Of course, one should follow the dictates of his conscience, whatever it might cost him. But before using such methods, there are certain things that he should consider. To avoid chaos, society must be organised, that is governed. The government must make the governing decisions. In order to reap the benefits of organised society, the individual must surrender certain freedoms to the government, that is, he should obey the law. Christians are so enjoined (Matt. 22:22; Rom. 13:1-7; I Peter 2:13-16). Acknowledging the authority of the government, the Christian is to pray for rulers (I Tim. 2:1,2). To be lawless or to seek to redress wrong by force, leads eventually to anarchy and dictatorship. Under our constitution, the President conducts foreign policy. He has sources of information and advice not available to the ordinary citizen, and often even not to those in high positions. He alone can and must make the basic decisions. This is and must be the system even though he, like the football quarterback, may decide mistakenly. Individual citizens who in time of war undertake to undercut the war effort should understand that in so doing they inevitably encourage the enemy to hope and work harder for victory, thereby prolonging the war, causing greater losses to our own fighting men, and possibly even gaining a decisive victory.

There are cases when obedience to God requires disobedience to the authority of men (Acts 4:19,20; 5:29). For a Christian to obey a command contrary to the command of God, such as to deny Christ, to

murder, to steal, to make a false report, etc., is surely wrong and not to be excused. Eichman, the murderer of Jews in World War II, claimed that he was not culpable because he was carrying out the orders of the chief of state, Hitler. No Christian should be deceived by any such worthless defence. This writer cannot remember any occasion when he received an order which in conscience he should not obey. There were many whose wisdom he doubted and against which he argued, but the decision was not his to make.

Can Men Do Away With War?

What can be done to stop war? There have been many suggestions. War is a crime, just as murder and highway robbery are crimes. Even though murder is done by one gangster on the person of another it is still murder. Education and reason do not stop crime. Instead, education and reason applied to the conduct of crime give it greater strength and success. The preaching of the Gospel has not stopped crime in the community or war among nations. The civilised nations of the world are those fomenting the wars of the present. The point is that the will to abide by civilised processes must be present. No one makes a nation go to war to gain something. The so-called "have not" nations do not have to take other people's land. They want to take it. The Epistle of James expresses it very well (4:1,2). We can call all of the conferences we want, we can make concessions, too, but does anyone think that the aggressor nations will really be satisfied? Man has been seeking peace since history began, but in his lust has glorified war as a means of plunder and rapine.

I am convinced that before men can do away with wars they must undergo a change of heart. Words mean nothing; the change must be real. Some say war is inevitable. In an academic sense this is not true because we all realise that if nations would be reasonable and obey the Golden Rule there would be no war. But in a practical sense we seem to be no nearer the solution now than nations ever were. People will not be reasonable. The word if is the difficulty.

The Real Cause of War

From a Biblical standpoint the answer is simple. The world is dead in sin. Lust, plunder and war are the natural characteristics of the human race, dead and lost in sin (Romans 1:18-32). Many good Christians seek to eliminate war by dressing up the outside of the cup, seeking to cure the apparent causes of war. The real cause of war is in the sinful heart of man. The Lord said that except a man be born again he cannot see the Kingdom of God. Being born again is a miracle. It comes only when one believes in the Lord Jesus Christ as his personal Saviour and as the Son of God. People believe when they hear the Gospel. Never has the preaching of the Gospel succeeded in converting more than a portion of hearers at any one time. Even at Pentecost in the great city of Jerusalem only 3,000 believed at the most wonderful exhibition of Gospel power in church history. The rapid growth of Christianity in the Roman Empire resulted first in the persecution of Christians, and then ultimately in the decay of spiritual Christian life into the dark ages of medieval centuries. The Protestant Reformation did not produce more than a partial awakening. Today there is an apostasy from the simple, pure Word of God and faith in Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God and the only Saviour.

We are not called to preach the Gospel to save the world from war and crime. We can preach the Gospel all we want to, but only a few believe. Christ said that broad is the way that leads to destruction and many are they that find it, and narrow is the way that leads to life and few are they that find it. The preaching of the Gospel is to them who are saved a savour unto life, unto them who are lost a savour unto death. The scriptures say that God is now taking out a people for His name. I can find no place in the Scripture where it intimates that the preaching of the Gospel of grace will succeed in converting the world. On the other hand, it does say that the Gospel should be preached to all the world as a witness. I think that the present state of civilisation is ample testimony to this completely lost and incurable state of civilisation. Never has the world been in a more unstable condition. If the lessons of the past are ignored, war of terrible proportions is ahead of our much-vaunted and self-satisfied civilisation.

This picture I have drawn seems pessimistic. Many would hold me up as an enemy of peace because I don't agree with their method of gaining it. However, there is a way of gaining peace.

The Bible clearly describes an earthly condition when the desert shall blossom as a rose, when the lion and other animals shall not kill, when the lion shall eat grass like the ox, when venomous serpents will not kill, when there shall be no war, and when men shall learn war no more. It tells us of a time when there shall be no harm done in all the earth because it will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord. It says also that a King shall reign in righteousness and that He shall judge in equity for the meek of the earth and take care of the poor, and that the law shall go forth from Jerusalem. Many teachers have sought to avoid the plain, obviously meaning of these passages, but if I made a business of construing my orders that way, I would long since have ceased my connection with the Army.

I think it should be perfectly obvious that man is utterly unable to save himself. His civilisation is only an expression of himself. He cannot save it. But God has promised that the Lord Jesus Christ Himself will come again, that He will establish a Kingdom on earth by His own power, unaided by insignificant man. We should preach the Gospel of individual salvation in order that such as believe may be translated into His Kingdom, and we should constantly watch for His coming.

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