

123 What Are Christians Fighting For?

By John Jones

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Introduction

And David said to Solomon: "My son, as for me, it was in my mind to build a house to the name of the Lord my god; but the word of the Lord came to me, saying, 'You have shed much blood and have made great wars; you shall not build a house for My name, because you have shed much blood on the earth in My sight. (I Chronicles 22:7)

Why did the Lord disqualify David from building the temple on the basis that he'd shed much blood?

I mean, isn't this the same God who told Saul, through the prophet Samuel, to attack Amalek, and utterly destroy them.

...The same God who slew the firstborn of Egypt when he delivered the nation from slavery.

At the start of Psalm 144 David even says:

Blessed be the Lord my rock, who trains my hands for WAR, and my fingers for battle...

How can we make sense of God telling David that he was not to build the temple because of war, when God's hand was clearly behind David's wars?

It seems kind of paradoxical.

I'm going to suggest that we need to start by understanding that, with Israel, God separated out to himself a nation, ...AS OPPOSED TO INDIVIDUALS from ALL nations (as is the case with the church).

So God had to build them as a NATION, protecting and establishing them in the midst of a fallen and violent world. And this involved warfare!

But, while God has been behind war (either offensively or defensively) many times in the Old Testament, I believe that his words to David convey something very important.

They convey that war is not his perfect way. That the heart of God is for peace.

In a fallen world he may have to be the righteous judge and make war, but his heart is for peace.

This is clearly shown forth in what God will ultimately bring about on the earth. He will judge the nations in the tribulation and pour out his wrath upon them for all their evil, yet in the final state of things there will be no war. There will not even be death nor crying any more, for this former state of things will have passed away.

Prophecy tells us that one day God will make his home amongst men, and his perfect way of peace will prevail.

So, we understand that with Israel God was building a nation, and by doing so in amongst a fallen world conflict and war was an inevitable part of his dealings.

But what about Christians?

What are God's purposes concerning us?

And where should Christians stand when it comes to war?

To provide some degree of answer to this I'm going to look at:

- The nature of the new covenant, and what it means to be a citizen of God's kingdom
- The pattern of the early church
- The change that occurred from the time of the Roman Emperor Constantine
- Some aspects of the situation today

The new covenant

OK, so starting with some thoughts about the New Covenant, the covenant that we as Christians live under.

You may have noticed that the Sermon on the Mount is a pivot point between the old Mosaic covenant and the new covenant. What is the essence of this change in covenant?

I think it would be fair to say that it is a change from following RULES to applying the deeper PRINCIPLES behind the rules. Ultimately it's about having God's LAW written on our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

And this is what Jesus came teaching. The ways of the kingdom of God, where kingdom citizens have the perfect law of righteousness in their hearts. A law which supercedes the laws of Moses because it is straight from the heart of God WITHOUT any acceptance of compromise with the fallen nature.

You may think "surely the law of Moses did not compromise with the fallen nature", but Jesus tells us that it did.

Under Mosaic law in Deuteronomy 24 it says that a man could write his wife a certificate of divorce, and yet Jesus says in Mark 10:5 that it was because of the hardness of their heart that God allowed this, but that from the beginning it was not so – that what God has joined together man should not separate.

In other words, although this was allowed under the Mosaic covenant, it did not reflect God's perfect way.

Let's read the actual words in Matthew 5. Jesus says:

"Furthermore it has been said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' 'But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife except for sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery. (Matthew 5:31-32)

So Christians, as citizens of Christ's kingdom, really do follow a HIGHER law than that of Moses when it comes to marriage. A law that is aligned with God's heart and HIS perfect way, just as things were in the beginning before the fall.

And just as Jesus in the new covenant teaches a transition from an imperfect Mosaic law concerning marriage, to a new kingdom teaching which reflects the true heart of the Father on the matter, so also he also does the same concerning war.

He starts by saying:

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' (Matthew 5:43)

When the Jews were told to Love their neighbor in Leviticus 19:18, the application was limited to their "brother". In other words to their fellow Jews. Now later in the story of the Good Samaritan Jesus greatly expands on this original concept of neighbor.

But now, in Matthew, he takes them from loving their fellow Israelites and hating their enemies to the perfect ways of God when he teaches, saying to them:

"But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, "that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. "For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even tax collectors and sinners do the same? (Matthew 5:44-46)

Just as with marriage, he shows us the kingdom way, the Father's perfect way...the New Covenant way.

And why does he direct us towards this new, vastly higher, indeed this perfect, law?

Because under the New Covenant we are no longer servants, but sons. Children of God's household. Fellow heirs with Christ. So because we are no longer servants but sons we are called to take on the very nature of the father... not just to follow a set of rules as a servant does.

We are to love our enemies that we may be sons of our Father who is in heaven, just as the verse says.

Besides, unlike the Jews under the Mosaic covenant, the new covenant is nationless. Jesus knew that the citizens of his kingdom would come from ALL nations.

Now, I've based quite a bit so far on the Sermon on the Mount, so I really need to address the fact that some theologians in effect write-off the whole Sermon on the Mount. They do this by saying that it was for the Millennial Kingdom which was to be ushered in at that time ONLY IF Israel accepted Messiah; but that because of Israel's national rejection of Messiah both the Millennial Kingdom AND it's kingdom principles were put on hold.

Now, it's true to say that the ushering in of the Millennial Kingdom could in a way be seen as being put on hold; but the principles? I don't think so.

Let's look at what Jesus said concerning the coming of the kingdom that he was preaching:

In Luke 17 it says:

Now when He was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, He answered them and said, "The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, 'See here!' or 'See there!' For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you." (Luke 17:20-21)

It's completely clear isn't it?

Jesus knew the kingdom would not be ushered in straight away in its complete and visible form, but that the kingdom of God would start in the hearts of believers.

Thus it's obvious that the principles were also meant to start in the lives of the kingdom people; who are the pilgrim citizens of a kingdom in mystery – a kingdom that exists only in its people for now (though will be materially established on the earth at some future point).

However, clear as this really is, in a bid to separate themselves from the high calling of kingdom citizenship, Christians throughout many ages have sought to intellectually distance their doctrines from Christ's kingdom teachings. Only "radicals" and "non-conformists" have sought to be kingdom citizens amongst a fallen world right here and now.

The early church

But it's not even as cut and dried as that. Christians often seem to choose whether to be kingdom citizens, or citizens of this present world, on a case-by-case basis.

...even which covenant they are under on a case-by-case basis.

For instance, while heartfelt giving is encouraged in the New Testament, legalistic tithing requires going back to the Old Testament and the OLD covenant.

Likewise prosperity doctrine, while doing its best to put some pretty weird twists on the New Testament, gets its best ammunition from the Old Testament – in other words from the OLD covenant.

The matter of war goes even further down this path, since to date I've NEVER heard a New Testament justification for war. When the issue comes up it's like we just forget which covenant we are under and leap back in time to God's dealing with a physical earthly nation (Israel).

Not only do we as Christians have the teachings of Jesus on loving one's enemies, but we have two other powerful witnesses of the true Christian way.

- The epistles in the New Testament
- And the records of the early, pre-Constantine, church.

To start with the epistles. Let me be clear that they contain NOT A SINGLE MENTION of Christians supporting any of the empires military endeavors or political power struggles, or even of supporting the patriotic movements of the Jews themselves.

Can you imagine Paul toting an AK47?

Of course not, that's a Russian rifle. Surely if Paul was around today he'd use a good western rifle. Maybe something more like an American M14 or M16.... I'm being facetious. You see how stupid it all sounds. How do you both shoot the gentiles and be the apostle to the gentiles?

Does it make any more sense to divide the role? To have some Christians shooting them while others preach to them? Such thinking belongs to the Catholic crusades, NOT the true body of Christ.

The only hint of tacit acceptance of Christians going to war in the whole of the New Testament is that when soldiers asked what they should do in their situation Jesus didn't command them to resign, but told them to not intimidate anyone for money but to be content with their wages.

It may be relevant to understand that these soldiers often weren't in a position to be able to resign, and in Israel were largely in a policing role, however I accept that this may not be a completely answer.

Still, if the New Testament says nothing to ACTIVELY support Christians going to war, the history and actions of the early church sound out resolutely against it.

Let's look at just a few representative quotes from early church writers:

Justin Martyr wrote:

"We who formerly murdered one another now refrain from making war against our enemies"

Tertullian wrote:

"Can it be lawful to make an occupation of the sword, when the Lord proclaims that 'he who uses the sword shall perish by the sword'? And shall the son of peace take part in battle when it does not even become him to sue at the law?"

Arnobius, an apologist in the third century wrote:

"We have learned from His teaching and His laws that evil should not be repaid with evil. That it is better to suffer wrong than to inflict it. And that our own blood should be shed rather than to stain our hands and our conscience with that of another."

The following excerpt is from a collective response to Roman pressure for Christians to take part in the empires wars:

The more anyone excels in holiness, the more effective in his help to kings, even more than is given by soldiers who go out to fight and slay as many of the enemy as they can. To those enemies of our faith who would require us to bear arms for the empire and to slay men, we reply, "Do not the priests who attend [your gods] ...keep their hands free from blood... If, then that is a praise-worthy custom, Christians too should engage as the priests and ministers of God, keeping their hands pure... By our prayers we vanquish the demons who stir up war... In this way we are more helpful to the kings than those who go into field to fight for them.

And here's an excerpt from the book entitled "Will the real Heretics please stand up" on how the early church handled the matter of being soldiers:

Generally speaking, the church did not permit a Christian to join the army after his conversion. However, if a man as already a soldier when he became a Christian, the church did not require him to resign. He was only required to agree never to use the sword against anyone. One reason for this flexibility was that the Romans did not normally allow a soldier to leave the army until his time of service was completed.

Of course history is complex and it's hard to verify how universal or localized this judgment was. As we saw earlier Jesus only commands soldiers not to shake people down for money, but didn't comment on the issue of them going to war.

The Constantinian change

But, whatever minor ambiguity, it seems reasonably clear that the early church shunned the sword in favour of the gospel. When did all this change?

Like so many things, the source of its change of its change can be traced back to the Roman Emperor Constantine.

Let me read a summarized account of the life of Constantine that I've put together, because it tells us a lot about changes that followed in the church.

Born in the area now known as Serbia in around 272AD, he was the son of Constantius, a Roman officer of the Imperial bodyguard who later became a Caesar, or junior emperor of part of the empire, under Emperor Diocletian. His mother was a Greek of low standing and may not have actually been married to his father.

Constantine was educated in the court of Diocletian as heir presumptive of his father, but was also in a sense being held as a hostage to ensure the loyalty of his father

He witnessed the political beginnings of Diocletian's "Great Persecution" of Christians which commenced in the year 302, though was probably not involved in it.

After the abdication of Diocletian Constantine was in danger from Emperor Galerius, whom Constantine was able to persuade (at the end of long night of drinking), to permit him to return to his father; permission which he made use of that very night before Galerius awoke and changed his mind. Thus Constantine joined his father in France in 305AD and together they crossed into Britain and spent a year trying to subdue various tribes of the Picts, (or what we would call Scots).

After the sickness and death of Constantius in 306, Constantine took his father's place to the great anger of Emperor Galerius from whose court he had fled a year before, though to avoid war Galerius accepted Constantine's position as a co-emperor.

In 310 a jealous Caesar Maximian rebelled against the Emperor Constantine, proclaiming himself as Emperor. Although his quest quickly failed and he was caught and committed suicide, his son Maxentius soon carried on his rebellion creating a civil war between the parts of the empire he controlled and those controlled by Constantine.

It was during this campaign, just prior to the battle of Milvian Bridge in 312 that Constantine apparently had a vision. He looked up to the sun and saw a cross of light above it, and with it the words "In this sign conquer". Initially unsure of the meaning he had a dream the following night in which supposedly "Christ" explained to him that he should march under the sign of the cross against his enemies. Thus Constantine adopted the symbol of the cross on standards born by his troops and under this new sign rapidly conquered the remaining armies of Maxentius, entering victoriously into Rome only two days later where he was met with enthusiasm. (Constantine appears throughout to have been a relatively popular emperor amongst the people).

In 313 Constantine met with emperor Licinius in Milan to secure an alliance by the marriage of Licinius to Constantine's half sister Constantia. During their meeting the emperors agreed to the "Edict of Milan", officially granting full tolerance to Christianity and all religions in the empire. Thus Christianity was now legalized and Christians were granted restoration of all property seized under the persecution of Diocletian.

Was Constantine now a Christian? Let's follow his story a bit more before we decide.

Shortly after this meeting Licinius was challenged by a rival, whom he defeated making Licinius emperor of the entire eastern half of the Roman Empire. Relations between Licinius and Constantine deteriorated from about 314, and a series of civil wars between them commenced. This culminated in the great civil war of 324, which had strong religious overtones with Licinius championing the ancient Pagan faiths, while Constantine continued to march under the sign of the cross. Constantine ultimately gained victory on the 18th of September 324 and became the sole emperor of the Roman Empire.

Thus Constantine's influence expanded into the East, where amongst other things he rebuilt the city of Byzantium which was then renamed to Constantinopolis (Constantinople in English).

There is no doubt that Constantine claimed to be a Christian, however it is worth noting that he also retained the title of Pontifex Maximus right through to his death. This was the title emperors held as head of the pagan priesthood (and has been carried down from these roots as a title of popes).

Can a Christian also be the head of a pagan priesthood? Apparently this was not a problem for Constantine.

Throughout his rule he patronized the church financially, built grand basilicas, granted privileges to clergy and promoted Christians to high office. However he did not patronize Christianity alone, for there are records of him recognizing gods like Apollo, Diana and Hercules. Also in 321

he instructed Christians and non-Christians to unite in observing the “venerable day of the sun”, and his coins still carries symbols of the sun cult until 324.

This history is the beginning of the MERGING of Christianity and paganism, which over time became what was called the “Holy Roman Empire”, or what we know as “Catholicism”.

And one of the worst effects of Constantine’s supposed Christianity was that he carried over the role of emperor as head of the priesthood into Christendom.

He presumed on himself the authority to meddle with church affairs, as though as emperor he was automatically head over the church too. Given his great patronages of wealth and favor many went along with this, though to their credit many others did not.

It is no wonder that some Christians claimed that the devil had only changed his tactics, from persecuting the church to taking it over from the inside. From about this time there is increasing division between those who continued with the “state sponsored church” and those who broke away from it.

This division carried down though the ages, and it was a terrible one. The official “Catholic” church became the persecutor, and the murderer, of countless biblical believers for around a thousand years.

Even many of the early reformers failed to make a break with this unholy union of church and state. And as a result found themselves repeating the Catholic persecutions of radicals and evangelicals.

(Jews also suffered greatly at the hands of this terrible new form of Christendom)

How does all this history relate though to the issue of Christians and war?

Well it goes a long way towards explaining the massive change that came over the church from that time. A change that affected how many Christians viewed money, property, the relationship of Christians to government and the role of Christians in war.

Simply put, prior to this time Christians did not engage in the wars of empire; after this time they did.

Was this a step forward or a giant leap backwards for the church?

Have we ever fully recovered the kingdom way of the early church?

Today

What about these days? Where are we in today's church?

How many US evangelicals felt supportive of Bush as a supposedly "Christian" president and supported him in tragically useless wars in the Middle East?

George Bush, really another Constantine. An emperor on the world stage who claimed to be a born again Christian, yet never resigned his membership of the satanic secret society he was inducted into as a young man. When asked about his membership of Skull and Bones on TV he didn't even try to deny his membership, or even attempt to relegate it to the past. In fact all that he had to say was that since it was a secret he couldn't talk about it, and tried to laugh the whole thing off.

Allow me to read this excerpt from a book entitled 'The myth of a Christian nation' by Gregory A. Boyd:

Shortly after the Gulf War in 1992 I happened to visit a July Fourth worship service at a certain megachurch. At center stage in this auditorium stood a large cross next to an equally large American flag. The congregation sang some praise choruses mixed with such patriotic hymns as "God Bless America." The climax of the service centered on a video of a well-known Christian military general giving a patriotic speech about how God has blessed America and blessed its military troops, as evidenced by the speedy and almost "casualty-free" victory "he gave us" in the Gulf War (Iraqi deaths apparently weren't counted as "casualties" worthy of notice). Triumphant military music played in the background as he spoke.

The video closed with a scene of a silhouette of three crosses on a hill with an American flag waving in the background. Majestic, patriotic music now thundered. Suddenly, four fighter jets appeared on the horizon, flew over the crosses, and then split apart. As they roared over the camera, the words "God Bless America" appeared on the screen in front of the cross.

The congregation responded with roaring applause, catcalls, and a standing ovation. I saw several people wiping tears from their eyes. Indeed, as I remained frozen in my seat, I grew teary-eyed as well - but for entirely different reasons. I was struck with horrified grief.

Thoughts raced through my mind: How could the cross and sword have been so thoroughly fused without anyone seeming to notice? How could Jesus' self-sacrificial death be linked with flying killing machines? How could Calvary be associated with bombs and missiles? How could Jesus' people applaud tragic violence, regardless of why it happened and regardless of how much they might benefit from its outcome? How could the kingdom of God be reduced to this sort of violent, nationalistic tribalism? Has the church progressed at all since the crusades?

Indeed, I wondered how this tribalistic, militaristic, religious celebration was any different from the one I had recently witnessed on television carried out by Taliban Muslims raising their guns as they joyfully praised Allah for victories they believed "he had given them" {against the Russians} in Afghanistan?

Hmmm, interesting thoughts aye!

I know exactly how he feels. When I attended Promise Keepers in 2008 I experienced much the same atmosphere.

I might have wondered if I was at a Christian meeting or an army recruitment drive. The theme was "Leave no man behind", a motto borrowed from the US army rangers. At the door I passed tanks, APC's and howitzers. The presenters all wore army fatigues and had dog tags around their necks. If this wasn't bad enough, through the day they played a number of clips from worldly war movies espousing schmaltzy American values. One of the video clips shown had a very inappropriate quip with Mel Gibson saying something like 'And Lord, please disregard our enemies heathen prayers and help us blow them to hell'.

Unbelievably inappropriate! Promise Keepers even had army recruiters on hand so that we could actually join the army, go to somewhere like Afghanistan, and literally blow our heathen enemies to hell.

Is this the masculinity of the bible?

As I raised before, can you see Paul or Peter or John, running round with machine guns and hand grenades? Surely they were outside this world's politics. If anything they wanted to get right in among the heathen, even at peril to themselves, to tell them about how they could be saved from the pit of hell. Thomas preached the gospel across heathen lands all the way to India, but what would they have thought of his witness if he came behind a destroying "Christian" army?

When will Christians DISCERN the difference between the Crusader way and the way of the citizens of God's kingdom?

What kingdom is this that we have been taught to fight for? It is the kingdom of wood, hay and stubble, the kingdom of this world that shall be judged and swept away. The kingdoms of this world that SATAN offered Jesus if he would just bow down and worship him.

When I express all these things it's not uncommon for people to say to me something like, "What about WW2?"

Hmmm, exactly! If no Germans who called themselves a Christian had supported national aggression then I doubt Hitler would have mustered the support he needed to start it.

It's like the fall itself, once the perfect order is broken you then end up dealing with a downward spiral of escalating consequences from which it is hard to pluck oneself.

But I do actually believe that many Christians who served in WWII, did so with a good conscience. How can I possibly say this given what I've said so far?

Because the misunderstanding regarding Christians and warfare was, and is, so ingrained in our culture that in a sense they did it in innocence; not understanding the results of a compromise that started 1600 years beforehand.

In Roman days the early church existed under both tolerant and despotic Caesars, and did not fight to support either in their rivalries. So Christians would have done well not to be pitched into battle, even at times no doubt against their very own brothers in Christ, as the great worldly powers vied for supremacy.

...there were however Christians who were conscientious objectors in WW2, and were greatly ridiculed for it.

My own thought is that there is only one military position a Christian could occupy in good conscience, and that's the position of medic. I'd still have some concerns with the idea of being under military command; however a medic whose heart was not to support war but, just to help those suffering could probably serve in good conscience.

Now, there's another thing I want to raise with this whole subject of war, and that's the Orwellian element.

Is there a greater purpose behind the continual stirring up of wars than just the circumstances of the day?

Consider this quote from Orwell's book, 1984:

It does not matter if the war is not real, or when it is, that victory is not possible. The war is not meant to be won. It is meant to be continuous. The essential act of modern warfare is the destruction of the produce of human labor. A hierarchical society is only possible on the basis of poverty and ignorance. In principle, the war effort is always planned to keep society on the brink of starvation. The war is waged by the ruling group against its own subjects. And its object is not victory over Eurasia or Eastasia, but to keep the very structure of society intact.

Does it matter to the internationalist elite if a war is not winnable? If America has to walk out of Vietnam... Iraq... Afghanistan?

In the meantime tax dollars go to weapons manufacturers, and the government sinks deeper and deeper into debt to the banks, enslaving future generations of tax payers to endless interest on loans that can never be repaid. You see Orwell's fictitious scenario of a future of perpetual war, and the reasons for its perpetuation, really may be closer to the truth than we'd immediately think. Just the money flow alone really does help maintain the position of the world's monetary and military-industrial elite.

But is war doing something else too; performing another high level role in the world? Think, does not war also serve to break down societies and cultures in order to ultimately bring them all into a uniform world system?

Certainly at the start of, or leading up to end times, wars will almost certainly be a major agent of bringing together the empire of the beast. Will Christians fight in those wars too? Will they kill to establish the evil empire of Revelation 13?

Yes, the way Christianity is going, at the very least the apostate church will, but I fear that even some of the true church may get caught in a terrible terrible deception.

We really need to do some soul searching and ask if, in effect, Christians have ended up often with the same mentality as Muslims; treating those who die in battle as God's martyrs for a Holy War? All too often this seems to be the case.

I want to conclude with Jesus words to his apostles when he sent them out to teach and to do good in his name. It was specifically directed at them, yet I believe we could safely apply them to ourselves. He says:

Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves. (Matt 10:16)

I really hope that as we go forth as sheep in a violent and fallen world of wolves, that we will be wise in our choices

...that the bearers of the gospel may be harmless indeed, and not destroyers of the testimony through violence (as the Crusaders were).

...and that we may be true children of light who shine forth in a dark place. God's children and true citizens of his kingdom.

About The Author

John Jones

John has been a keen Christian since his conversion in 1993. Alongside working and raising a young family he has been involved at different times in helping with prison ministry, youth work, and a variety of both informal and church based ministry. Convicted NOT to go to Bible College in 2004, John remains convinced that the power of true Christianity lies in the body of Christ all working together, rather than in a professional “ministering class”.

From 2003 John started keeping a journal of his thoughts about aspects of the Christian life. A selection of these became the “Thoughts from John’s journal” section of **christianity.org.nz**. Later he started writing longer articles and after being given the domain name christianity.org.nz, utilized this to both publish his own thoughts online and offer opportunity for other biblical believers to do likewise.

While John broadly categorizes himself as an “evangelical” he is always keen to interact with and learn from other groups of believers. His blog Evangelicals and Plain Folk came out of one of these rich cross denominational fellowship experiences.

From about 1995 John started studying prophecy in his spare time, initially just to understand for himself the teachings of the church he was attending (which taught a classic evangelical, pre-millennial & pre-tribulation rapture based view of prophecy). While most of this really did make good sense, parts of it never quite added up. Thus the process of trying to dig out the truth from scripture became a 13 year quest for truth, and one that ultimately ended up including the examination of many different denominational perspectives on the topic. Eventually emerging from this with a fairly clear perspective on what constituted the clearest, least overworked, most directly word-based view, he also wrote the eBook entitled Prophecy and End Times. Released in September 2009 it aims firstly to introduce the core elements of end times prophecy in the simplest way possible, and secondarily to open up some fresh thinking on certain aspects of the evangelical prophetic perspective.

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