

war against it to take it, you shall not destroy its trees by wielding an ax against them; if you can eat of them, do not cut them down to use in the siege, *for the tree of the field is man's food*. Only the trees which you know are not trees for food you may destroy and cut down, to build siegeworks against the city that makes war with you, until it is subdued. (Deut. 20:19–20)

As one theologian put it, “though *the life is more than meat* [Luke 12:23], yet it will soon be nothing without meat.”

Dismissing Extremes

PEACE EXTREME

Christianity's preoccupation with peace misleads many to a *hyper-peace* position, condemning all warfare. Though Jesus is the Prince of Peace, and though we as individuals must patiently endure contempt (“turning the other cheek”), we cannot infer from this a prohibition of all warfare, for: **(a)** God is described as a mighty warrior (Ex. 15:3), who could never be described by sinful behavior (e.g., a liar, a thief); **(b)** God commanded Israel to engage in war (Judg. 6:11–17; 1 Chron. 14:8–17); **(c)** God gives specific instructions on how to conduct war (Deut. 20); **(d)** God gifts men for war (Ps. 18:34); **(e)** war is a metaphor for the Christian life (Eph. 6; 2 Tim. 2:3), which can never be likened to sinful behavior; **(f)** war can be an expression of our faith in the Prince of Peace (Heb. 11:32–34).

No, Scripture does not agree with categorical pacifism. There is, indeed, “a time for war” (Eccl. 3:8).

VIOLENCE EXTREME

God's special warfare directions to Israel for the conquest of Canaan mislead others to believe that the Bible advocates a *hyper-violence* position. On this ground, then, some urge us to ignore entirely the Bible's guidance on war.

However, Deuteronomy 20:15–18 makes it clear that God intended these laws only for ancient Israel. Israelites were to make a distinction between extraordinary (holy) war against “the cities of these peoples that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance” (v. 16) and ordinary war against “all the cities that are very far from you” (v. 15). In other words, these were *positive laws*—i.e., laws intended

for a particular people for a particular time.

Another positive law in Scripture would be Paul's command to Timothy to bring his belongings from Troas on his way to see Paul (2 Tim. 4:13). Just as none would dare obligate people today to this law (requiring treks to Troas to pick up articles on the way to Paul), neither should we obligate others to God's holy war laws uniquely given to ancient Israel.



EVEN IN WAR Christians seek to be faithful to their Lord, calling on His name. Though the kingdom of Judah beefed up their defenses, God commends them for seeing their ultimate security in Him (2 Chron. 14:6–15); whereas God condemns the kingdom of Israel for doing the same while ignoring Him (Hos. 8:14). We cannot make military might our god (Hab. 1:11; Ps. 33:16–17). Where our hope lies makes all the moral difference.

And Christians seek guidance from Jesus' Word, not from a legal war tradition. They recognize no separation between faith and *biblical* instruction.

I have chosen the way of faithfulness; I set your rules before me. (Ps. 119:30)

Who would want to advocate a position of killing, of destruction, of widowing wives and orphaning children, without being sure it is warranted by God?

With open Bible in hand, Christian soldiers march onward with the cross of Jesus going on before.



A Christ-centered Educational & Apologetics Ministry

By faith,
war

God's Revealed Will
for Warfare

IN SHOWCASING the Philistine's severed head David simultaneously showcased his faith. Moments earlier, in fact, he cited his military creed:

You come to me with a sword, with a spear, and with a javelin. But I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied....The LORD does not save with sword and spear; for the battle is the LORD's. (1 Sam. 17:45-47)

Unlike so much literature on war, whether Christian or otherwise, the Bible does not ignore the demand of reliance on God. It presents faithful David as the exemplary soldier.

Civil representatives, no less than individual soldiers, must also conduct war while trusting in God. As King Asa prepared his defense against an innumerable Ethiopian army, he offered this prayer:

LORD, it is nothing for You to help, whether with many or with those who have no power; help us, O LORD our God, for we rest on You, and in Your name we go against this multitude. O LORD, You are our God; do not let man prevail against You! (2 Chron. 14:11)

As with David, God rewarded the king's faithfulness.

Yet we cannot have faith that we please God if we walk outside His revealed will. Jesus asks how we can call him "Lord" without following His words (Luke 6:46). Thanks be to God that His directions for war are neither ambiguous nor overly general.

God's Rules for Warfare

1. WAR MUST BE DEFENSIVE.

God grants war powers to nations in order to defend their lives, liberty, and property against other hostile nations.* Nations have no moral right to kill, steal, or destroy for national honor, economic gain, quick fixes to domestic troubles, making the world safe for democracy, or stopping the spread of Communism. God condemns Ammon for warfare "in order to enlarge their borders" (Amos 1:13) and Assyria for the same (Isa. 10:5-19). Permission is needed to set foot in another nation's land (Num. 20:14f.; Deut. 2:2f.). Aggressive, offensive wars are, quite simply, "wrong" (Judg. 11:27).

* Other kinds of unjust violence (e.g., murder, terrorism, vigilantism, revolution) are distinct from war, deserving separate discussions.

But Gideon's defense against the Midianites (Judg. 6-8), Jephthah's defense against the Ammonites (Judg. 11), and Samson's and David's defenses against the Philistines (Judg. 13-16; 2 Sam. 5:17-25) receive God's imprimatur (Heb. 11:32-34). (that this does not include defending innocent third parties, see my tract *Messianic Militarism*)

2. WAR MUST BE THE LAST RESORT.

All efforts to avert bloodshed should be attempted, for only fools hastily act on their wrath (Prov. 14:29). Diplomacy may reveal that a misunderstanding has occasioned hostilities. Even in justified retaliations, we should offer terms of peace before attacking (Deut. 20:10-15). "Scatter the nations," prays the psalmist, "who delight in war" (Ps. 68:30).

Time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David...who by faith conquered kingdoms,...became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.

—Hebrews 11:32-34

3. THERE MUST BE A REASONABLE CHANCE OF SUCCESS.

Jesus put it this way:

Or what king, going to make war against another king, does not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is still a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks conditions of peace. (Luke 14:31-32)

Magistrates may not require of their citizens a vain sacrifice of lives, money, or property. Perhaps Jeremiah had this moral principle in mind when he counseled nations to surrender to mighty Babylon (Jer. 27:1-11).

4. THE DECISION OF GOING TO WAR MUST BE BY LEGITIMATE CIVIL AUTHORITIES.

No private citizen or organization can plunge a people into war. God charges civil rulers to protect

the persons and property under their jurisdiction, investing them with His penal sword to wield against evildoers (Rom. 13:1-4)—whether evil committed by domestic persons (e.g., a murderer, Ex. 21:12) or by foreign militaries (Deut. 20). They alone may decide for a people if defense or a negotiation for peace is most reasonable.

And this decision must be public in some sense, either via a formal declaration of war or a visible concentration of forces to rebuff the attack (1 Sam. 17). The will of the rulers must be known by the citizen-defense force to perform their duties and by the merchants to avoid treasonous commerce.

5. COMBATANT VS. NONCOMBATANT DISTINCTION MUST BE KEPT.

God forbids the deliberate killing of unarmed civilians:

And when the LORD your God gives [a besieged city] into your hand, you shall put all its males to the sword, but the women and the little ones...you shall take as plunder for yourselves. (Deut. 20:13-14)

Those not fitted for battle—here "the women and the little ones" (Num. 14:29-31 contrasts "little ones" with soldiers)—are to be spared. Only armed combatants—here "all males"—become legitimate targets. Though in Israel, military service required a minimum age (Num. 1:3), presumably in other lands "all who were able to put on armor, from the youngest to the oldest" would be enlisted as soldiers (2 Kings 3:21).

POWs become noncombatants, requiring proper treatment and wounds addressed (2 Kings 6:22-23).

But the general populace can be objects of deprivation. God allowed whole cities to be besieged (Deut. 20:10-12)—a military blockade designed to starve it into submission (Jer. 52:4-6). Disruption of commerce, of traveling, or of life in general, is entirely permissible.

6. WAR IS NOT TO BE AGAINST THE EARTH.

Militaries must do what they can to protect the future:

When you besiege a city for a long time, while making