

Question: What is the Church's stance regarding just war? (Part I of II)

Part I will look at the role of Christianity throughout the history of war, and the development of just war.

Answer: Jesus preached radical peace and love to both our neighbors and our enemies, "But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you." (Luke 6:27-28) For Jesus, violence as repercussion was never an option. He taught contrary to his own Jewish tradition and those who had grown up living by the Mosaic Law who believed an, "eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." Instead of an eye for an eye Jesus said, "Do not set yourself against the man who wrongs you. If someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn and offer him your left. If a man wants to sue you for your shirt, let him have your coat as well. If a man in authority makes you go one mile, go with him two." (Matthew 5:38-42) Does this mean that Jesus was a complete pacifist? It might be surprising that strict pacifism can promote violence. For purposes of this paper, strict pacifism means, those who are being oppressed simply "close (their) eyes to what is happening and try not to get involved." (*Seeds of Peace*, 101) Jesus knew that those who close their eyes to injustice and take no action become the gates in which unrighteous leadership and tyranny take over. Strict pacifism is categorized by individuals who do not get involved in a just cause that they believe in for fear of the repercussions that may follow. This point alone makes it crystal clear that Jesus was not a strict pacifist. Jesus bravely took on the responsibility of speaking out against the unrighteous acts of the people around him. For Jesus and his early followers, the responsibility to speak out and defend did not carry with it hate or violent action. Jesus truly loved those who regarded him as an enemy. His way of responding to the unjust of his society was not by being a pacifist but by being actively involved in a nonviolent way. Nonviolence is different than pacifism in that one is actively participating in speaking out against evils that are taking place. Being oppressed the way Jesus and his disciples were, it would have been easy for them to retaliate against violence with the use of violence. In fact, by today's standards, if Jesus would have resorted to violence he would have been just in his cause. Instead, Jesus chose nonviolence as a lifestyle. (*Seeds of Peace*, 113) This radical stance of nonviolence led him to the ultimate sacrifice: his own life.

Surprisingly different than the mindset and actions of its founder, the Church has not always preached the radical nonviolent approach towards its enemies. In the first two hundred years of Christian development, Christians for the most part lived their lives avoiding being a part of military service and conquest. Unfortunately though, the explanation for this seemingly nonviolent action may not be related to Jesus' teachings at all. Instead, the early Christians likely did not get involved with conquest and war because they believed Jesus would return to earth in their lifetime. (See Paul's letters especially 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18 and 1 Thessalonians 5:1-5) Since Jesus' return meant the end of the world as they knew it, early Christians did not want to take part in the affairs of a fading world. (*Seeds of Peace*, 135) .

Origen (185-254) a well known Christian apologist (an apologist is one who defends the Christian faith against outside attacks) had a unique outlook on the absence of Christians from military service. He wrote that instead of fighting with the emperor in wars, men and women of Christ should offer "prayers, intercessions, and supplications for the emperor." (*Seeds of Peace*, 137) As Christianity became more and more popular throughout the empire, the role of the Christian in sustaining the empire increased. After Constantine became emperor in 313 AD and declared Christianity legal, Christians began becoming active participants in military service and began to feel they had an obligation to defend the empire from outside attacks.

It was not until Augustine of Hippo (354-430) that the first just war theory was developed. With the sack of Rome in 410 by Alaric the Visigoth and several other extenuating circumstances regarding unrest in the failing Roman Empire, Augustine felt the need to address the subject of war and how in certain situations it could be justified within a Christian context. Even in the tumultuous time that Augustine lived in he believed that warfare should be limited and was only justified under very stringent circumstances (we will see that these discretionary tactics are somewhat arbitrary). (*Augustine Encyclopedia*, "War" 876) Augustine believed that just wars were those that "avenge injuries" or to rectify things that another entity had "wrongly seized." (*Augustine Encyclopedia*: "War" 875) Augustine also taught that as *individuals*, Christians should be completely nonviolent but as members of society it was their responsibility to join in defense of the empire if attacked. (*Augustine Encyclopedia*, "War" 875) For Augustine, a paradigm shift had come in the understanding of the Roman Empire and Christianity: saving the empire meant saving Christianity. (*Seeds of Peace*, 139) Instead of using the teaching of Jesus as his guide, Augustine turned to Old Testament texts for source examples. Augustine knew that if he were to develop a just war theory, his examples would not be drawn from the New Testament message of radical peace and nonviolence. Augustine turned to Moses' wars and what he understood to be righteous vengeance against sinners. (*Augustine Encyclopedia*, "War" 875) Augustine believed that military involvement against heretical religious factions was a just form

of military action because through correction of the heretics (often correction by death), Christians who had the correct teachings (like Augustine), were looking out for the heretics own best interest. (*Augustine Encyclopedia*, “War” 875)

Next week I will take a look at the Church’s modern understanding of just war and the future outlook of the subject.