

The Testimony of the Early Church Fathers On Violence and War

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Early church history reveals that, while the first Christians respected the governing authorities, they in no way condoned violence and bloodshed, even through the use of military force.

Consider these words by renowned church historian, Kenneth Scott Latourette: ***“For the first three centuries, no Christian writing which has survived to our time condoned Christian participation in war. Some Christians held that for them all bloodshed, whether as soldiers or as executioners, was unlawful. At one stage in its history the influential Church of Alexandria seems to have looked askance upon receiving soldiers into its membership and to have permitted enlistment in the legions only in exceptional circumstances.”*** (A History of

Christianity, pp. 242-243)

According to Paul Ramsey, a leading 20th century American Christian ethicist: ***“For almost two centuries of the history of the early church, Christians were universally pacifists.”*** (Ramsey, War and the Christian Conscience, xv.)

Ramsey goes on to explain the basis for this pacifism in the early church: **“How could anyone, who knew himself to be classed with transgressors and the enemies of God whom Christ came to die to save, love his own life and seek to save it more than that of his own enemy or murderer?”** (Ramsey, War and the Christian Conscience, xvi.)

While commenting on Jesus’ disarming of Peter in the Garden of Gethsemane, early church father, Tertullian wrote: **“How shall a Christian wage war? Nay, how shall he even be a soldier in peacetime without the sword which the Lord has taken away?”**

Origen, one of the most important Christian writers and thinkers in the early 3rd century Greek church wrote: **“We Christians no longer take up sword against nation, nor do we learn to make war anymore, having become children of peace for the sake of Jesus who is our leader... To those who ask us where we have come from or who is our commander, we say that we have come in accordance with the counsels of Jesus to cut down our warlike and arrogant swords of dispute into plowshares, and we convert into sickles the spears we formerly used in fighting. For we no longer take sword against a nation, nor do we learn anymore to make war, having become sons of peace for the sake of Jesus who is our commander.”** (Origen, Against Celsus, 8.73; 5.33)

Similarly, Justin Martyr, who was put to death in Rome in the year 165 AD for his faith, wrote: **“We who were filled with war and mutual slaughter and all wickedness have each**

and all throughout the earth changed our instruments of war, our swords into ploughshares and our spears into farming-tools, and cultivate piety, justice, love of mankind [humanity], faith and the hope which we have from the Father through the Crucified One.” -Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho

Regarding Christian participation in the military, Tertullian wrote: **“To begin with the real ground of the military crown, I think we must first inquire whether warfare is proper at all for Christians... Shall it be held 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 the battle when it does not become him even to sue at law? And shall he apply the chain, and the prison, and the torture, and the punishment, who is not the avenger even of his own wrongs? Shall he carry a flag, too, hostile to Christ?”**

Apparently, while the shedding of blood in warfare was prohibited, there was some allowance for early Christians who served the state in a protective police function.

According to an official early church document focused on the apostolic church order, called the Canons of Hippolytus: **“A soldier of the civil authority must be taught not to kill men and to refuse to do so if he is commanded.”**

As Ronald Sider notes, **“A constant stream of Christian writers in the second and third centuries --- Tatian, Athenagoras, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Cyprian, Minucius Felix, Lactantius -- all unanimously condemned Christian participation in war.”** (Sider, *The Scandal of Evangelical Politics*, 201.)

Later, St. Basil thought that soldiers who killed in battle, while following legitimate orders from the state, should refrain from taking Communion for three years as a sign of their repentance.

Early Christians were opposed to involvement in the military for many reasons. Several of these reasons were summarized by Adolf von Harnack when he wrote: **“The shedding of blood on the battlefield, the use of torture in the law-courts, the passing of death-sentences by officers and the execution of them by common soldiers, the unconditional military oath, the all-pervading worship of the Emperor, the sacrifices in which all were expected in some way to participate, the average behaviour of soldiers in peace-time, and other idolatrous and offensive customs — all these would constitute in combination an exceedingly powerful deterrent against any Christian joining the army on his own initiative.”** (John Cecil Cadoux, *The Early Christian Attitude to War*, 105)

QUESTIONS

Given these facts, what type of attitude do you believe the American church should have toward the U.S. military?

Do you think that early Christians were wrong to avoid entangling themselves in the world’s military disputes over territory and natural resources? How about today?

Would you describe these early followers of Christ as being out of touch with reality?

Were they foolish to obey the words of Christ and His Apostles, even in the face of death?

Was their love for their enemies motivated by moral recklessness or political naiveté?

Were they foolish for failing to ‘conform to this world’ instead of uncritically embracing the prevailing view of reality promoted by the Roman culture?

Or could it be that their understanding of reality was more advanced than that of many modern Christians who are willing to kill their enemies without regard for their eternal state?

Even later influential theologians, Martin Luther and John Calvin, both taught that Christians were to lay down the sword and strive for nonviolence at all times.

In his commentary on Matthew 26:52, Calvin writes: ***“By these words, Christ confirms the precept of the Law, which forbids private individuals to use the sword. And above all, we ought to attend to the threatening of punishment which is immediately added; for men did not, at their own pleasure, appoint this punishment for avenging their own blood; but God himself, by severely prohibiting murder, has declared how dearly he loves mankind. First, then, he does not choose to be defended by force and violence, because God in the Law forbade men to strike. This is a general reason; and he immediately descends to a special reason. But here a question arises. Is it never lawful to use violence in repelling unjust violence? For though Peter had to deal with wicked and base robbers, still he is condemned for having drawn his sword. If, in such a case of moderate defense, an exception was not allowed, Christ appears to tie up the hands of all. Though we have treated this question more copiously under Matthew 5:39, yet I shall now state my opinion again in a few words. First, we must make a distinction between a civil court and the court of conscience; for if any man resist a robber, he will not be liable to public punishment, because the laws arm him against one who is the common enemy of mankind. Thus, in every case when defense is made against unjust violence, the punishment which God enjoins earthly judges to carry into execution***

ceases. And yet it is not the mere goodness of the cause that acquits the conscience from guilt, unless there be also pure affection. So then, in order that a man may properly and lawfully defend himself, he must first lay aside excessive wrath, and hatred, and desire of revenge, and all irregular sallies of passion, that nothing tempestuous may mingle with the defense. As this is of rare occurrence, or rather, as it scarcely ever happens, Christ properly reminds his people of the general rule, that they should entirely abstain from using the sword.”

Regarding the question of whether Christians should go to war with the Muslim Turks back in the 16th century, Luther says Christians should not ***“fight against the Turk in the name of Christ... as though our people were an army of Christians against the Turks, who were enemies of Christ. This is absolutely contrary to Christ’s doctrine and name. It is against his doctrine because he says that Christians shall not resist evil, fight, or quarrel, nor take revenge or insist on rights (Matt. 5:39).”***

Luther’s stance that Christians should follow the model of Christ shines through when he writes: ***“Christ says that we should not resist evil or injustice but always yield, suffer, and let things be taken from us. If you will not bear this law, then lay aside the name of Christian and claim another name that accords with your actions, or else Christ himself will tear his name away from you, and that will be too hard for you.”***

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the weight of evidence from both the New Testament epistles and from the writings of the early church fathers — and even some Protestant reformers — confirms that Christ's message of nonviolence was embraced during the first three centuries of church history and continues to this day in the hearts of those who strive to follow the example of Christ.

But this general commitment to nonviolence and subservience to the governing authorities has not always been the hallmark of the Christian church over the past 1,700 years. Indeed, over the past several centuries, those who claim the name of Christ have often been the most violent in their fight against their enemies as well as 'unjust' governments,' which have often been perceived to be one and the same. From the development of 'just war' theory to the Crusades and from the killing fields of the Protestant Reformation to the Christian-on-Christian bloodshed of the American Revolution, Christendom has left a bloody wake that should be closely examined in the light of scripture.