

CHRISTIANS, WAR, AND CIVIL GOVERNMENT

By

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A question often asked is what the Bible says about war and whether or not it is right for a Christian to fight in a war. How does a Christian reconcile the biblical exhortation to remain peaceful and nonviolent with the citizenry responsibility of defending his or her country in war? In answering these perplexing questions, we must be careful to distinguish between what God says of civil governments and individuals. Long before the Mosaic Covenant was given or the nation of Israel was established, God gave Noah an important parameter of civil government, which is to execute justice by punishing the evil doer. God said:

Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image (Gen. 9:5–6).

The fact that this command was given at the beginning of the establishment of human society makes it applicable even to modern societies for executing justice and restraining evil. Grudem notes: “Careful biblical interpretation would not limit the principles in Genesis 9:5–6 to the time of the Old Testament only or to the nation of Israel only, for neither limitation is supported by the context in which these statements are found.”¹ Societies comprise the rich and the poor, the weak and the strong, the just and the unjust. Scriptures mandate that just and swift punishment should be rendered by civil governments to defend its citizens, especially those who are poor and weak (Ps. 82:2–4). Governments must administer swift punishment as a deterrent of crime (Eccl. 8:11).

The apostle Paul argues that governments are appointed by God to serve as His ministers and as “an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil” (Rom. 13:4). They are God’s appointed authorities to administer justice and to give praise to those who are good (Rom. 13:1–7). This does not mean that governments and rulers always behave in a way that is pleasing to God (Dan. 4:27; Luke 3:19). While Christians are not allowed to take personal vengeance when wrong is done to them, they should let their civil government administer the divine “wrath on him who practices evil” (Rom. 12:19; 13:4). The apostle Peter echoes a similar sentiment regarding the role of the government. He writes:

Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to the governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good (1 Pet. 2:13–14).

God has established the human government for the purpose of protecting its citizens and administering justice in the land. He is displeased when governments fail to carry out this important responsibility (Isa. 1:17; 21–23; Zech. 7:10). This governmental responsibility also extends to protecting citizens from the attack or invasion by an external enemy (Judg. 2: 13–15). Needless to say, sometimes nations wage unjust wars against other nations motivated by lust and selfishness (James 4:1–3). Such wars are never justified. On the other hand, a war may be justified if it is waged for a just cause such as defending the nation from an enemy attack. John Calvin maintains: “Both natural equity and the nature of the office dictate that princess must be armed not only to restrain the misdeeds of private individuals by judicial punishment, but also to defend by war the dominions entrusted to their safekeeping, if at any time they are under enemy

1. Wayne Grudem, *Politics According to the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 78.

attack.”² A case can also be made for a just war if it is declared by a legitimate, recognized, and competent government (Rom. 13:1) for the cause of justice and peace (Prov. 21:3) and as a last resort after exhausting all reasonable means of resolving a conflict. Clearly, there is a divinely approved time for war and a time for peace (Eccl. 3:1–9). The psalmist says, “It is God who arms me with strength, and makes my way perfect. . . He teaches my hands to make war, so that my arms can bend a bow of bronze” (Ps. 18:32, 34).

Although Scriptures support a government to engage in just wars, some hold that a Christian can never justify going to war. To support this view, they often cite passages such as Exodus 20:13 and Matt. 5:39. When these passages are examined in their proper context, we find that they have to do with individual behavior; they are not a prohibition imposed on civil governments. In Exodus 20:13, the command not to murder relates to premeditated murder and unlawful death caused due to carelessness or negligence. The Hebrew word (*ratsakh*) used in this text is never used for killing in a war. Moreover, capital punishment for unlawful murder is clearly authorized in Scriptures because man is made in the image of God (Gen. 9:6; Lev. 24:17; Num. 35: 30-34).

We read in the Bible God commanding Israel to go to war against its enemies (Deut. 20:1). John the Baptist did not admonish soldiers to leave their profession, but to be content with their wages (Luke 3:14). Cornelius, a Roman Centurion, came to faith in Christ and continued to serve as a soldier (Acts 10:1, 44–48). Jesus gave approval for a king to go to war against another nation when necessary (Luke 14:31).

In Matthew 5:39, Jesus said, “But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.” This instruction, in its context, applies to one’s individual behavior as a follower of Christ and not to civil governments. As mentioned earlier, Paul explicitly states that it is necessary for a civil government to “bear the sword” for maintaining law and order (Rom. 13:1–7). Jesus, in fact, instructed His followers to carry a sword for the purpose of self-defense against robbers (Luke 22:36).

Grudem argues that this “turn the other cheek” verse is not to be understood as an absolute requirement in every situation, but as an illustration of what a Christian behavior would look like in the life of a Christian.³ In Matt. 5:42, Jesus said, “Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away.” If we were to follow this rule absolutely without exception, then “any one beggar could bankrupt any Christian simply by repeatedly asking for more and more.”⁴ While giving to the poor is expected of us, we are also required to be good stewards of God’s resources (Luke 16:10). Clearly, Jesus expected us to apply these rules of conduct judiciously and consistent with all of Scriptures.

While Christians are expected to submit to governmental authorities (Heb. 13:17; 1 Pet. 2: 13), they may disobey a civil government when obedience means disobedience to God’s explicit command (Ex. 1:17, 21; Matt. 2, 8, 12). When Peter and John were told by the Sanhedrin not to preach the Gospel, they answered: “For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard . . . We ought to obey God rather than men” (Acts 4:20; 5:29). Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego disobeyed the command of Nebuchadnezzar when they were commanded to bow to the golden image (Dan. 3:13–27). They said, “Let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up” (Dan. 3:18). From these and other passages we glean biblical principles for conducting in a manner worthy of the Gospel, keeping in mind that the Holy Spirit who indwells us will always lead us into all truth.

2. John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 2:1499.

3. Grudem, 82.

4. *ibid.*