

# **Christ Presbyterian Church**

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**John Crosby**

**"Glad You Asked - War and Peace: 'Can Christians Get Out of the Battle?'"**

**Matthew 5:38; Romans, 13**

As Albert Einstein said, "As long as there are nations, there will be war." As long as there are brothers and sisters, there will be fighting. We have tried to live faithfully in the midst of that. We are not going to solve that in the next 25 minutes but what we would like to do is this: I will take 20 minutes or so and talk about these Scriptures and the idea of war and pacifism. Then I'd like to turn it into a dialog and have 10 minutes or so where you would ask questions. We've got here on the ground floor and one up in the balcony so if you would like to come to one of the microphones and ask a question, that would be great. If you would feel more comfortable writing down your question, there will be a staff person holding each one of the microphones.

Probably half a dozen of you asked questions like this in our Glad You Asked series. The Problem of War: "Is war a Christian response to conflict or not?" "So much of the fighting in the world has religious overtones, and yet we read God as love: Thou shall not kill." "How do we reconcile the Prince of Peace we claim as Lord while seeing the example of the Israelites taking the land by force?" Not small questions.

Greg Boyd, a local pastor, found out how hard it is to talk about loyalty to country and loyalty to the Kingdom of Heaven when he did a series on war and peace — a quarter of his congregation left. It's especially tough when it's not academic, when our children or parents or sisters or brothers or friends are fighting.

I just received a prayer card written by young person who was shot in Afghanistan and is coming to Minnesota to recover. He asks for prayer for his healing.

I have been in contact with one of the 42 people related to our congregation who are in the services. A young man, Josh, who is serving in Helmand Province as a Marine and I go connect with emails every once in a while. He last wrote, "John, things going well here. Extremely hot, 117 degrees yesterday. Currently at Camp Leatherneck, Central Helmand Province, base of operations. Sand storms are miserable. Think of a Minnesota blizzard but a khaki color with hot sand blasting you in the face. Being over here has definitely strengthened my faith and relationship with the Lord. Working out under the stars at night is my time to talk and pray. I've seen so much. It doesn't get easier. The hardest part for me is watching the casket pass in front of me and thinking of how I know a family is going to be getting a knock on the door that will change their lives. Have to run now. Thanks for the email. If you see Bonnie, my mom, give her a hug for me."

We're not going to solve this in 20-25 minutes but I believe God wants to speak to us about the most important things in our lives. Let's look at these passages and offer two pointers and three *so whats* and then talk together.

The first thing I'd like to point to is that you should not kid yourself. If you are a follower of Christ, a God-believer, a Christian, a Jew, don't kid yourself; your view of war and peace is shaped at least as much by your past and your culture and your citizenship as it is by your faith in the Scriptures. I know this from personal experience. A lot of times when you want to know what people think about war, ask them which is your war? For a lot of people at the 9:30 service, , their war was World War II. For me and for many of you, our war was Vietnam. So my father, a proud World War II vet, and I, as I finished high school and went into college in the middle of the draft of Vietnam, would have increasingly loud, angry, bitter fights where I tried so hard to be respectful to this man whom I loved, who was so wrong, and he tried so hard to believe that I still really was his son. Then toward the end, he started to get bitter at the way our government was treating kids like me who had the courage to fight but it was years before we could talk about it.

I came out of college pretty committed to the idea that if I was going to follow Jesus. If I was going to follow Jesus, it probably meant that I needed to believe what was read, turn the other check, and be a pacifist. I got my seminary degree, went to my first church in Chicago, started work on a Ph.D. and wanted to go to the University of Notre dame because John Howard Yoder, the leading Mennonite pacifist scholar of the 20th century, was there, and I wanted to work under him. Then under the laughter of God I ended up being transferred to the National Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C. My first funeral was for an admiral and my second was for a colonel. Over the next 2-1/2 years I had the privilege of talking to all kinds of faith-filled soldiers from privates to the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff. I understood more and more clearly how they wrestled with the Biblical text and prayed about how God would want them to do this; so for a while my head was a ping-pong ball. Don't kid yourself. Unless you have closed your mind, you are shaped by your past, by your parents, by your friends, and by the news at least as much as you are by the Scriptures. Just accept that.

The second thing is that I think God speaks to us, but I think God speaks to us in a sense of that there is one Christian position. I just don't think any of you know what it is. I don't think there is one position that all Christ followers will come to on this issue. There have been, over the two thousand years we have been whacking away at this and have been whacking away at each other about this, four primary positions about war and peace inside the Christian community. I can go through it really quickly.

The first one is *the realists*. The realists are the people who whether they are secular, pagan, or Christian are the ones who say, "Yes I believe in God, and I believe God is love, but I believe God has put me in this world to live with my mind as well as I can," and faithful Christians have said, "I have my faith and I have my obligation as a citizen."

Bismarck of Prussian military fame was a devout Christian and he said, "I take off my bishop's mitre and I put on the role of governor and become a realist. This war is good. This war is to be avoided. This one we will fight. This one we will not." Right after the Church started, it was oppressed by Rome and for three centuries the church was small and persecuted. At the end of that time, one of the emperors became a Christian, either because of politics or faith, and inside

the next generation or fifty years, all of the Roman Empire was supposed to become Christian. Sometimes in the course of weeks they would go into a village and the whole village would become Christian. Part of that is that they would be baptized, sometimes by the dozens or by the hundreds. They would go into the river, into the baptismal waters, as sinners and come up Christians but, especially in Europe, many people would go into the baptism waters and leave their hand out of the water because this was the hand that the king commanded they use for the sword so all but the sword was baptized. Others would say that what usually happened was that they would all go to the riverside, bend down into the water, and one person would have their hand out of the water, but it wouldn't be to hold a sword, it would be to hold their wallet because God could have everything else. Ever since we have struggled with the question: Realistically, how do I do this?"

The second position that the church has taken is at the opposite end of the extreme. The early church was so struck by the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount that they believed they were called upon to be *pacifists*. They would allow for the exception of soldiers from other faiths, or no faith, or soldiers who converted but, by and large, the early church resisted going to war, often at great personal cost. By the time of Constantine that started to change but the church was still primarily pacifist up till that point.

The third position that Christians have taken over the years is as *the crusader*. As Christians came to be a voting block, a huge constituency that saw evil in the world and felt that God was calling them to oppose it. They read the Old Testament and saw God sending people to war so when they saw the enemy or when they saw evil, they rose and opposed it, whether that was the Crusades or the Inquisition. Force was used to do God's work. We might call those people today, not Crusaders but jihadists, holy warriors.

The fourth position is the most common expression of our attitude toward war and peace. Ever since the fifth century when St. Augustine looked around and tried to combine his deep faith with a view of a world at war, he called for a position that evolved into what is called *just war*. There are times when the war is just and Christians are free to participate. I think this is the most abused of all these positions as it is the most easily manipulated or turned into a sound bite. Augustine said that some people will see this as an accommodation to a fallen world and the need to battle evil. Others will see it, as Augustine did, that war could be harsh love to bring the erring back to salvation. Most of you, would be somewhere in that camp so let me spend a little more time on the just war. The reason that I say that it is ignored or manipulated is because very few of you would be articulate about what the six conditions of a just war are. I don't expect that at the end of the next seven minutes you will be able to do that either but you will at least know that saying, "I believe in a just war" doesn't mean you can just go to war.

The six conditions for a just war are these:

First, for the Christian, a just war has to have a just cause. In other words, somebody needs to be able to publically articulate why we are doing this and that could not be because we want to get rich or because we hate them. It would be things like, you could repel attack; you could address ancient wrongs, or you could regain land or prisoners who were taken. Just cause. What is the just cause of this?

Second, it could only be a just war if it was called legitimately by the authorities. Rebellion is not considered to be a just war.

Third, if you were going to go to war, you had to be able to clearly articulate what the objectives of the war were and they could not be reprehensible. So, for instance, your objective could not be for the annihilation of another person. It could not be, for example, for the conquest of the American Indian, shuffling them off of their land. That would not be called a just war.

The fourth condition was that you could not go to war unless all others means have already been exhausted. Churchill: "To jaw-jaw is always better than to war-war."

The fifth condition, you had to have a legitimate chance of success. This was actually directed at the kings and the princes, who out of pride or survival might want to take their country to war, but we have 60-year-olds who send 20-year-olds to war. In other words, the king was not allowed to just randomly sacrifice people for his or her pride.

The sixth, and the one I think is most important for us today, is that war that is done has to be proportionate in means. In other words, you cannot drop an atomic bomb to settle a dispute and you have to resist other intrinsically evil means. Back then it would have been torture or today it might be poison or land mines. If you wanted to have proportionate means, you had to protect civilians.

This is the biggest difference between the *war* that you have grown up with and the *wars* that have been occurring from Biblical times. The Civil War was still primarily fought between soldiers. Eighty-five percent of Civil War casualties were soldiers. People could come and watch the battle. Between then and the First World War, the idea of a *total* war started to come into being, civilization against civilization, a concept that is new. So those six marks of a just war are not meant to be a check list but are meant to say, war is awful. If the Christian is going to participate, they will have to weigh these things before war is waged. End of lecture.

One of the questions I was sure was going to be asked is, what is your position? So I thought I would give my response. My position is that I don't think you can be a realist and act as if God has left the building. I think your faith has to come with you. I also don't think that today you can be a Crusader because God very rarely says, "John, kill them all." So I think of the other two options I, reluctantly, have come to the place where I have left my pacifist moorings and have come to believe that God, at times, under the right circumstances, calls even Christians to resist evil and protect the innocent and that it is not an accident that the person that Jesus commends most strongly in the whole New Testament is a soldier, "I haven't seen faith like this anywhere else." Six times He interacts with soldiers and never tells them to stop being soldiers so I reluctantly have become a just war person.

Three *so whats* and then I want to hear your questions. First *so what*. So let's not confuse our side with God's side. Remember Lincoln? One of his generals says, "Let's pray that God is on our side." He said, "No, no, we should pray that we are on God's side." And then in the Second Inaugural Address, that powerful thing, "Both [sides] read the same Bible and pray to the same God....The prayers of both could not be answered...." And they were not. There were very few times in human history where we were called to fight outside the gates of Auschwitz or Dachau or Buchenwald when it's clear about evil and good. Sometimes to our shame, we realize we will not fight because we don't have a dog in the fight and then a million Rwandans are killed because nobody will stand up. Let's not confuse our side with God's side.

No. 2, let's recognize the temptation of patriotism, especially in times of war. Let's recognize the temptation of patriotism to overweigh the prior and primary call of the Gospel. "My Kingdom is not of this world," says Jesus, but He is still my King. I love America. I love Jesus more. There is a need for Christians to be involved in this, whether you are kids or grandparents, to be involved in the process. That means you need to be informed by Scripture. May I say, if you are going to recognize the temptation of patriotism, you need to read about the other side. Those of you who believe that God calls us to defend the innocent against evil and pick up the gun need to read Dr. King and need to struggle with William Sloane Coffin. Those of you who are pacifists, and sometimes are pretty righteous about it, need to read Daniel Bell, whose book *Just War as Christian Discipleship* is powerful and compelling. Grapple with that.

Third, I think if you are going to talk about being a peacemaker, you need to see that peacemaking begins at home, today. You are called to be an agent of reconciliation in your home or it means nothing if you are trying to do it across the world. You are called to be an ambassador of reconciliation at school or at work or it's just platitudes. You are given the opportunity *today* to be a peacemaker in your neighborhood rather than the spreader of gossip or petitions. You are not to be the one suing but mediating. Blessed are the peacemakers, *whatever* that might mean. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, I feel like we've thrown a lot into the air, and I pray that You will blow away the chaff and let the seeds of Your good Words sink into our hearts and heads. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Now I'd like to hear your questions (questions in bold followed by John's reply):

**"Does a strong America help or hurt the Christian cause?"** I think that's a great question. As the only superpower left, our power is felt all over anyway, I guess what I would suggest is that our very power calls us to do more soul searching and have more humility and do more peacemaking *before* we do the war or fight. That said, I think there is some truth to idea that deterrence is often what stops the bully from taking over so I would not at all dismantle the Armed Forces that we have.

**"If asked, would I have had a problem blessing the Enola Gay, the plane that dropped the first atomic weapon?"** Terrible choice. Senator Mark Hatfield is one of the foremost Christian senators of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He was a pacifist and on a ship just outside Tokyo waiting to invade. He was forced into this by his conscience as a just warrior but he was bitterly opposed afterwards to the use of the bomb. He said, "I would be dead without the use of the bomb." He said, "Even when it looks intensely black and white, it often is *not* intensely black and white."

I would say, having used the bomb once, it *is* immoral to use it again unless you could target the bomb on completely military targets and not have 95 percent of the casualties become civilian. That said, I believe that President Harry Truman thought about this, talked about this, prayed about this decision, and weighed hundreds of thousands of *these* lives and hundreds of thousands of *those* lives.

This actually is a good place to discourse for just second and say, war and conflict forces terrible choices, terrible places. Bonhoeffer is an example. Dietrich Bonhoeffer is a German theologian who opposes Nazis, speaks up against them, had to flee to America, and comes

back to Germany to organize resistance to the Nazis. He comes to believe that war is evil but that the sin of Hitler calls for him to do the sin of killing Hitler. He said, "For me, what sin will I allow to last longer in the world?" He participates in a plot to assassinate Hitler and is caught and put in prison and killed.

In my seminary ethics class, we talked about whether Bonhoeffer was right or wrong. Is it right or wrong to drop the bomb? I took a course on the theology of Helmut Thielicke. Never heard of him? Don't worry. Thielicke said that most of the time we are between the 40-yard line in our knowing what is right or wrong. It is pretty easy to decide. Sometimes we are at the goal lines where it is almost impossible to know whether you have any good choices left or not. Thielicke said, "When forced to choose, *pray* and choose." He said, "As wisdom decreases, grace increases. As terrible decisions must be made, God's grace covers those who struggle to make those choices faithfully." I don't think that's a perfect answer. I think sometimes the invasion has already taken place. Your hand is at steering wheel and you realize that the car has already gone off the cliff and your options are not what they were 20 minutes ago. You are forced to chose tough things. Sorry....

No question, just a statement from one of you: **"As Christians we must pray that the Lord will save us from three things, the cowardice that dares us not to face the truth, the laziness to be content with half-truth, and the arrogance that thinks we know all the truth."** Then a Sam Adams quote, **"We may look to armies as our best defense, but virtue is our best security."**

**"Why do I think that Christians are so divided in the descriptions of and decisions about what is a just war and whether this is a just war or not?"** I'd say part of it starts with the prophet Isaiah. Remember Isaiah says, "Woe is me for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips." And then he goes on to say, "I have seen the living God." His lips were clean so that for a time, he was able to speak clearly. I think almost none of us see clearly or speak clearly because we are all people of unclean lips and that is to say, I think this needs to be approached with humility.

I think one of the reasons for our differences on just war is that I believe that Josh Benson, the young marine I quoted at the beginning, is feeling that, as a Christian, what he is doing is acting as a peacemaker. I believe that my brother Zacharias, a Palestinian Christian, oppressed in Israel, believes that he is on the just side of that war as well. How can both of these men be right at the same time? They come from radically different positions because of where they are brought to.

**(Unintelligible question on recording)** I think in some ways what we are talking about here—bear with a little theology for just a second—is that the way you view this issue can often be described as Anabaptist in orientation or Reformed in orientation. Anabaptists, by and large, believe that we are called to be a holy people even when that calls us to separate from the world. Yoder and many of the Mennonites are strong Anabaptists, both separatists and calling for a holy response in an unholy world. I respect that hugely, but I have come to embrace a Reformed position, which is that I believe that God is calling us to work toward the Kingdom here on earth as agents of His holy will and to engage in a broken world. That, it seems to me, calls us to the full spectrum of participation in our society, transforming through our *engagement* rather than witnessing through our *disengagement*. Both I think are faithful responses.

**“Scripture tells us, ‘If My people would pray and humble themselves, God would heal their land.’ Why in your opinion do His people, us, not fully believe that we actually have God’s power behind us? That would include war, Gulf oil spill, famine, etc.”** Well, I think some of that question is very heartfelt and good. I believe that a lot of that is true. I think sometimes you and I know the moral thing to do and don’t have the courage to do it. I think most of the time on this particular issue we are at different places and see the same thing through different eyes. Part of the reason that the church does not have a pure response is because the church is looking at this through a very different lens. I have come to accept that and, as a result of that acceptance, feel that God is calling us to His supernatural presence, His Spirit of love and reconciliation, His desire for us to walk in faith, not knowing where we will end up and our need to treat all those, especially those who would disagree with us, graciously and generously and humbly.

**(Unintelligible question on recording)** I believe we are called to serve. I think that is part of the Romans 13 passage that was read today. We are called to participate. For instance, I am all up for a mandatory 18-month to 30-month nationwide service. I think that would be a great thing for our country. With options to serve in different ways, I would encourage my daughters to do that. I am not trying to duck your question. I do think that I would call my kids to serve in the military if they feel called to do that and I would fully respect them if they chose to make their service in the service as conscientious objectors. We are blessed to be in a country where that is a possibility, where we can still serve and register our conscientious objection to the use of violence. Other Christians in other parts of the world are not nearly as fortunate and have to decide these issues with terrible consequences one way or the other.

Thank you. Let’s pray.

Lord Jesus, we do not claim to have the truth, but we believe that You are the truth. We do not claim to be perfectly at peace but believe that if we follow You, You lead us to life. I pray for all those for whom this is not a theoretical exercise today that You will prepare us to act with courage and humility and with wisdom in the sense that we are all Your children. In Your great Name. May God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit call you who are the children of God to be peacemakers. And all God’s people said,

(All): Amen

*The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.*