



## Pacifism Vs. Just War: Can A Christian Kill?

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### ABSTRACT

*Present day Christianity has been guided by two schools of thoughts, one is just war theory that supports human killing for a just cause and another one is pacifism that refuses human killing in the name of war. Christian faith gives high value to human beings because they are created in the image of God. In fact, Christians are stewards of other human beings. God is the only life giver who has authority on human life. The Old Testament scriptures of the Bible clearly command that no one can kill the other human being. Jesus Christ came to demonstrate God's love by dying on the cross. He was killed but he did not retaliate with violence. His emotional act of clearing temple (John 2:15) does not promote violence. Non Christian thinkers like Mahatma Gandhi succeeded in his mission by experimenting Christ's teachings of nonviolence to encounter the British. Christian church in India and across the globe should promote peace through the nonviolent ways.*

**KEYWORDS :** Pacifism, Just war, Christian response, Nonviolence

### Introduction

What is the Christian understanding of war and peace? Can Christians kill in the name of just war? These are some of the questions that the church should seriously think. This paper attempts to survey the literature in order to have a comprehensive understanding of the subject, and then it critically evaluates the issue from Biblical and theological perspective.

### Biblical concept on War and peace

The creation story of the Bible narrates that God created man in his own image. This should be the starting point to discuss the question "Can a Christian kill?" God was not silent when Abel was killed by his brother, Cain. God demanded account for his brother's blood. The cry of innocent blood reached to God (Gen 4:10). Today the cry of the innocent blood due to war has been reaching to God and man is responsible for this cry.

The Old Testament helps the reader to understand that God is the only giver of life and he is the only sovereign over human life. Man is a steward who should take care of the whole creation including the mankind. God is a merciful God who forgives and protects human life. When Rahab, the prostitute, acknowledged, the sovereignty of God, she was spared and she became a part of God's chosen people (Josh 6:25). The prophet Elisha rebuked the king of Israel for his intention to kill the enemy who was in his hands and the prophet said, "Would you kill men you have captured with your own sword or bow? Set food and water before them so that they may eat and drink and then go back to their master" (2 Kings 6:22). God is a merciful God who gives value to human beings who are in His image.

The whole New Testament talks about nonviolence. In fact, Christ reinterpreted Old Testament concept of murder, He said, "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment (Matt 5:21-22). Christ himself showed an example by not resisting the evil with violence. He won the enemy by his death but not by sword. The nonviolent teachings of Christ on "Resist not evil, turn the other cheek, go the second mile, love your enemy" (Mathew 5 & Luke 6) are remarkable and dynamic forces that disapprove killing of humans. Christ, in his Divinity, had every right to encounter the wickedness of creation but he did not react in a violent manner. If Christ wanted to use violence as a means to encounter the Roman army he would have called his father to send the army of heavenly angels (Matt 26:52), but he did not do that. He encountered violence with nonviolence.

### The Early Christians' Attitude

The first and second century Christians were willing to be killed by the enemy instead of killing them. "Better to be slain than to slay," said Tertullian (Roberts 23). Even though Christians were persecuted severely, they did not react in a violent way but rather they accepted every kind of persecution and followed Christ's nonviolent teachings

in their Christian practice.

There are two external forces that changed early Christians' attitude toward war and killing. One is "unification of Roman Empire under Constantine." Christianity became an official state religion by the conversion of Constantine. In order to protect Christian religion people had to join in the state army. The second external force is the change in orientation of Christianity toward war.

### The Ideology of Just War

The theory of just war looks at the issue of war from the point of situational ethics. The proponents of just war theory ask, "The most common question in discussions about war and pacifism is very probably, 'What would you do if someone breaks into your home and attacks your wife and children?' (Aukerman 131). It is a serious question that every Christian should think. Should a Christian accept everything silently or should he react? Pacifists look at this type of argument from the Biblical perspective and they suggest nonviolent resistance; while just war proponents suggest some kind of violence to resist the evil because "for them a limited sinning (for which grace abounds) is permissible when a preponderantly good outcome is to be expected" (Aukerman 21).

Just war theory brings several problems. "One problem with the just war theory is that war is no longer as contained an enterprise with relatively reversible consequences" (Massaro and Shannon 126). In the past there is possibility of reconstructing the nations after the war, but now with the entire chemical and biological weapons it's impossible to restore the loss. Just war theory evolved to establish peace with violence but it creates confusion and brings curse on the survivors of the war instead of peace and restoration.

The just war neglects the value of human life. Its proponents always quote the "liberation motif" from the book of Exodus and the Conquest of Canaan by the people of God. They forget that "life is sacred and a gift from God, no individual has the right to take it" (Weaver 815). Jesus gave supreme priority to human life but the proponents of just war neglect Christ's nonviolent teachings. Christ should become the referring point to interpret the ethical issues but not the situation.

Thus just war should not be encouraged because this theory does not have strong theological conviction. Even before Christ's teaching on nonviolence there was an understanding of nonviolence in different religions and teachings but "What was new was the early church's inference from Jesus' teaching that nonviolence is the only way that war itself must be renounce. (Wink 197)." There is no other way that brings justice and peace on earth apart from nonviolence

### The Ideology of Pacifism

Historically there are two models of pacifists within the group of pacifism. One group is called as "obediential or fiduciary (Cahill 261)." This group mainly focuses on the person of Christ in whom they see the nature of God. They give priority to mercy and forgiveness which are

the essential qualities and teachings of Christ. They are more legalistic toward Christ's teachings on nonviolence. According to them "the Christian must obey Christ and leave to him the outcome. Vindication would be meted out at the last judgment (Bainton81)." They bear the pain instead of protesting and reacting in any form.

Another model is called as "empathetic or compassionate." Since human beings are created in the image of God, Christians should have solidarity with all the humans including the enemy. Jesus moved with compassion when he saw the crowds and he was empathetic towards the people (Matt 9:36, 14:14, 20:34, 15:32; Mk 1:41, 6:34, 8:2; Lk 7:13).

In both of these models nonviolence is the main thrust and focus. Christians are called to exercise justice, mercy, peace and restoration in a nonviolent manner but not with violent aggressive spirit to overpower the other. A Christian's life should be centered on Christ's teaching, especially Sermon on the Mount (Mathew 5-7) which demands total obedience to the nonviolent way of life.

### What should be the Christians' response?

The church is called to bring peace in the midst of tensions due to war. The recent terrorist attacks and terrorist activities have been creating tension and threat to the global peace. The church has a great responsibility to represent as peacemaking agent to restore peace on earth. The present day church should emphasis on nonviolence and the church should educate people on nonviolent methods to encounter the evil. The tradition of just war and innocent human killing should be stopped and the global church should work to establish peace through nonviolence.

### Significance of sixth commandment: "You shall not murder" Ex 20:13

The Christian church interprets all other commandments strictly but the sixth commandment has its own reservations. Murder was not taken seriously by the Christians especially from the fourth century. Human killing is strictly prohibited by God. The "modern war, however, by its universal character and the means it uses, involves so much disorder and oppression that it brings no solution and only

increases injustice" (Lasserre 171). In this context the sixth commandment should be taken seriously to give dignity to human life. The sad thing is that there was "no dispensations for adultery; no exceptions for stealing; no conditions made concerning false witness, or the respect due to parents. But there it is: with the sixth commandment alone the Church for centuries has given a restrictive interpretation" (Lasserre 171). Murder was not a serious issue in the holy war tradition. Thus the church should take this commandment seriously to raise its voice for nonviolence.

### Conclusion

Christian faith gives high value to human beings because they are created in the image of God. In fact, Christians are stewards of other human beings. God is the only life giver who has authority on human life. The Old Testament clearly commands that no man can kill the other. God ignores the unintentional killing but intentional killing is strictly prohibited. Christ came to demonstrate God's by dyeing on the cross. He was killed but he did not retaliate with violence. Christ's emotional act of clearing temple (John 2:15) does not promote violence. Killing of human beings is an offensive act whether it is in a war or in any other situation. The first century Christian followed the way of Christ. They experienced suffering but they did not reacted with violence. Hence Christian church should promote peace through the nonviolent ways.

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