

The SCRIPTURE STANDARD

SUPPLEMENT

The US and British-led war with Iraq is over so far as military conflict is concerned and it will probably not be long before our media put the war genie back into its bottle and move on to the next news story. Equally, for Christians the moral and ethical dilemmas with which we have been faced over recent months can safely return to the backburner for the time being at least.

However for many Christians, the last few months have possibly represented their first exposure to the issues surrounding war. Older Christians have no doubt rehearsed the arguments many times over, but young Christians in particular may well remain uncertain, even now, about their response to the 'war' question.

The following personal statement, by Dr. Perry Cotham, about the issues raised by the recent conflict was printed on the web site of the Christian Chronicle. Bro. Cotham has in the past preached at several campaigns in the UK and may well be known to some of you. Even though the military action has now concluded, I feel the statement, albeit written from an American perspective, presents a balanced and thoughtful résumé of the issues involved and is worthy of printing in full for the benefit of readers of the SS. For example, for readers in the UK, where there is I suspect a stronger 'pacifist' tradition than in the US, Bro. Cotham's description of the basis for a 'just war' might provoke thought. You choose to use the article, as a basis for general discussion, for providing teaching to your young people or just to set against your own view of these matters. Because the conflict is over, our reading of the article is somewhat retrospective, but I hope it helps.

I am indebted to the publishers of the on-line version of the Christian Chronicle for their kind permission to reprint the article (please note that the paragraph breaks are mine – Editor). Their Web site can be viewed at: www.christianchronicle.org.

ONE CHRISTIAN'S PERSPECTIVE ON INTERNATIONAL ISSUES, THE CHURCH, AND THE WAR WITH IRAQ

(Perry C. Cotham)

Throughout Scripture, it is clear that how people resolve their conflict is a matter of grave importance. There are definite, clear guidelines on how conflict is resolved in interpersonal relations. As for some divinely-ordained pattern for nations to resolve their biggest differences, and even what role Christian citizens should play vis-a-vis their government, those issues have been matters of intense debate over the centuries by intelligent and committed Christians since the fourth century, if not earlier.

Several developments have driven my concern. One is a call for prayers in my local congregation's bulletin that Saddam Hussein's heart might be changed. Another was the reception an e-mail message which argued that if one million people pray for Saddam Hussein to abdicate the presidency we would avoid war; and the request that the message be sent to ten other prayer warriors. (My first thought was a question: Is praying for Saddam Hussein's removal the only way to avoid war?) There is absolutely no doubt that Scripture enjoins us to pray for those in authority who make such big decisions which impact citizens of their own nation and of other nations, some even thousands of miles away. Undoubtedly, there are many Christians deeply concerned about world peace, perplexed about our role (both as a nation and as individuals) in fostering world peace and justice, and who cope with anxiety about their lives in this nation in general and about terrorism specifically. My deep conviction, at least at this point in time, is that a preemptive strike against Iraq with the clear intention of evicting their leader and his ruling party and destroying any military strength, network, and weapons Iraq now possesses is not morally justifiable, at least in terms of the immeasurable cost to us as a nation. I understand, I think, the arguments of those who call for a preemptive military strike and this seems to have been the unwavering position of President Bush for the past several months. I have attempted to keep my mind open to all possible arguments and supporting evidence.

Does the Church have a voice and a message to these people about their perplexity, their anxieties, and their uncertainties as citizens? I answer categorically in the affirmative. There is a trap we can fall into, of course. The Church must not become a partisan political or lobbying organization. The Church does not endorse one party or one candidate over another. The Church does not pretend to have access to confidential intelligence documents or materials or to be an expert in international affairs. And yet the Church must also avoid the trap of silence and irrelevance to the truly significant contemporary events and developments that shape our lives. We Christians have a responsibility to be salt, light, and leaven in the world and through our leaders speak a prophetic word from the Lord about kingdom values and kingdom ethics and thus fully equip and arm our sisters and brothers for their battle against the principalities and powers of this present world.

The following are some concerns and issues that I believe could be treated in some forum in our Churches:

1. The human and economic cost of war.

Church leaders and teachers can remind all members of the tremendous cost of wars. Millions upon millions have been killed in wars. Students of our Civil War know something of the tremendous human cost of that bloody, fratricidal conflict. In World War I, 39 million died (30 million were civilians). In World War II, 51 million died (34 million were civilians). Since World War II, according to one source, approximately 150 wars of all levels of length

and intensity have been fought with the result of an estimated 16 million killed. Most of us know much about the Vietnam War from having lived through it. I think the vast majority of Americans look back upon that conflict as a terrible waste of American (and also enemy) human life sacrificed to prove that the U. S. does not want to lose a war and will not back away when national pride is invested. Our young children, teenagers, and young adults need to hear something of the terrible cost of war. The victims range from unborn and small infants to people in their 90's. Unfortunately, the sanitized visions of war that get displayed in some (by no means all) movies can depict war as exciting, romantic, and heroic. These visions may seem thrilling and adventuresome, but for most people directly impacted by war there is little but death, destruction, injury, and suffering on a gargantuan scale. Some victims nearly starve to death, others can die of wounds, some die of disease, some die quickly by dismemberment, and others die slowly with intense pain.

None of this even includes the astronomical economic cost of war. Our preparation to fight Iraq has already been costly, and there is an estimate that an actual war in the Middle East would cost taxpayers one trillion dollars. Historically, preparation for war has entailed literally trillions of dollars in the past century. While economics pales compared to the human costs of war, it is fair to consider the cost. I must agree with Sara Ruddick that War is both the quintessential expression of violence and its most attractive representative. There is also the sad reality, despite the heroic sacrifices of so many during war time, that armed conflict does not really solve intractable problems or make nations any safer for very long. For example, World War I laid the foundation for World War II. World War II laid the foundation for the Cold War, which laid the foundation for Korea and Vietnam. Wars in Palestine have not created peace, especially if we understand that true peace is more than the absence of armed conflict. So, no matter how many wars we fight, we will still live in a fallen, imperfect world. Thus the question emerges. Is it wise and right to fight this particular war? I recall in January 1991 when the first George Bush was asking Congress for permission to militarily engage Iraq to remove their Red Army from Kuwait. The President promised that Congressional permission for armed conflict would bring both a fast conclusion to fighting (and it did) and a new world order. Surely the escalation of terrorism in the western world was not intended as part of the new world order.

2. The Christian, the nation and war.

Our people need to be informed, or reminded in many cases, of the various positions on the issue of Christians fighting in a war for their nation. For some of us, like myself, who have been around a while, we have heard the time-honored arguments, pro and con, on a Christian's right or obligation to participate in military activity for one's nation. There may be many others, certainly including our youth, who have not been educated on this issue. True, the issue is controversial, but I believe it can be expounded with reasonable objectivity.

The Christian's right to bear arms can be explained convincingly to most people. One can argue that from Old Testament narratives that God is not totally opposed in all circumstances to his people killing others for some national, spiritual, or moral purpose. The teaching in Romans 13 on a nation's right to wield the sword reinforces the government's right to maintain law and order and surely this applies to an international community as well as in local community. Whether Christians can join their nation in fighting wars to maintain law and order has been debated in our fellowship since the days of David Lipscomb, with most Christians contending it is their right and obligation. Whilst the pacifist or nonviolent resistance position is held by a small minority, it, too, has an honorable heritage in Christian faith and practice, and I sincerely believe that all of our members need to hear it explained and even defended by fervent proponents. There has been a strong tradition in pacifism, beginning with the left wing of the Reformation (the

Anabaptists, Menno Simons who led Mennonites, the Quakers, etc.), and, as you know, between the world wars in the twentieth century within the ranks of Restoration Churches, even the Church of Christ. The case for renouncing violence, whether rooted in a literal application of the discipleship demands of Jesus or in some humanitarian idealism (as in Gandhian thought), merits explanation and even defense by those who so fervently hold a pacifist position.

3. The 'just war' doctrine

The just war (selectivist) doctrine needs explanation to the entire church family, too, in my opinion. I separate this doctrine for special concern because I believe that many Christians cradle the notion that any war in which the United States fights is a just war. Compartmentalized thinking about war encourages people to think of our enemy as being totally evil and our nation as totally righteous and good in all our ways. Put succinctly, just war doctrine posits a strong presumption against the use of deadly military force. I personally do not believe that a preemptive strike against Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq constitutes an application of historic just war doctrine. And any newly-minted U. S. doctrine of pre-emptive warfare, a policy we would hardly approve for some other nation such as North Korea, constitutes a scary policy for many of us.

Stated briefly, just war may be morally waged whenever:

- (a) a nation responds to an attack (or a clearly impending attack) that has entailed great human loss or threat of loss (Apart from possible skirmishing over the No Fly zone, Iraq has not fired a shot at us since the last Persian Gulf War);
- (b) a nation has persistently attempted with incredible patience to resolve conflict by exhausting every reasonable peaceful means;
- (c) a nation waging just war avoids unwarranted attacks on civilians;
- (d) a nation waging war follows the principle of proportionality, i.e., that the benefits of war must greatly outweigh the evils and costs of war;
- (e) a nation fighting just war must act with the right attitudes (quest for international justice and not vindictiveness) and careful distinction must be made between combatants and non-combatants. I certainly know that our U. S. military would not seek to wage war in ways that do not respect international rules of fighting, especially not aiming weapons at civilian targets. I believe the military and its supporters want to fight with the right attitude and for the right purpose. I do not, however, see strong evidence that we as a nation are under a clear and present danger (to use Oliver Wendell Holmes words in the Schenck case) of being attacked by Iraq and Saddam Hussein. Yes, most sadly, there may always be that clear and present danger and threat of terrorism here in our homeland.

Perhaps the strongest case for a preemptive strike on Iraq is that the Iraqis have been producing the chemical-biological weapons that Al-Qaida would love to get its hands on and the only barrier separating the two parties is Hussein's word or intention. The other evening at Vanderbilt University I heard Mary Matalin counter those who call for presence of a smoking gun before acting by saying, "You don't have a smoking gun until the trigger is pulled and the gun is fired. And, of course, no one defends Saddam Hussein as a basically good yet misunderstood human being; he seems to epitomize evil and malice. That point conceded, however, I offer an opinion I have held for many months. A preemptive strike against Iraq or any other Islamic-based nation is more likely to stir anti-American hatred and spawn terrorism on our homeland that puts our citizens at even greater risk than if we do not attack Iraq. Our leadership and diplomats need to ask why some major U.S. allies do not support us in the plan to wage war, and ask what price will be paid in terms of our image and respect in the world community. Again, those are my concerns and opinions, and intelligent citizens have strong reasons to differ.

4. The Church and international relations

My final concern is the immense complexity of international relations and the ever-present temptation to self-delusion, even on a national scale. How easy it is to see any international situation through the lens of Americanism! During the Vietnam era, J. William Fulbright warned Americans of the arrogance of power. This well-meaning perspective on international issues blinds us to some realities: that our nation can be wrong, inconsistent and very selective, and/or unwise in its foreign commitments; that our nation can denounce the development of deadly weapons in other nations but not the fact that we not only have developed so many of our own weapons of mass destruction but have also been the world's biggest arms dealer in recent world history (we even supplied Iraq with weapons some twenty years ago when Hussein's regime fought Iran); that it is the nature of nations at war to transform the nationalistic and/or economic reasons they wage war (whether about territory, resources such as oil, political control, or whatever) into moral idealism which facilitates an uncritical patriotism and national support on the home front for waging the war; that a ruling power or administration may work subtly to entice the support from the religious community and its leaders for any given war; that perhaps Christian sisters and brothers need to pray for the hearts of all leaders who either deliberately or precipitously lead their nations to war to be changed by God rather than just the hearts of our enemies and foes.

Yes, let us pray for all those who are in political authority of all nations. I do that daily and I encourage others to join me. We pray for them because we have been enjoined by Scripture to do so. We pray for world leaders because they make decisions that impact the lives of so many, which help create the environment in which the kingdom of God on earth must operate. And we may pray for them because, in all humility, they most surely have information about world conditions and expertise in diplomacy that we do not possess and for which we have not been trained to assess. And yet, as church leaders, we can also inform our members of the complexity of international affairs, of the humanity of our leaders, of the true nature of patriotism and civil liberties. These include the right of peaceful protest and access to non-sensitive vital information; of the doctrine of two kingdoms, and our first allegiance to our Heavenly King; of our need to use whatever tools (whether the vote, the right to stand up and speak, or whatever) to summon people to authentic discipleship and kingdom values.

Also, as the Church, we may well have a message that political and policy-making leaders need to hear. Jesus once delivered a message to Herod, Paul addressed Governor Felix and King Agrippa, and Nathan delivered a pointed declaration to King David. Political leaders have an expertise not possessed by most religious leaders, and yet spiritual leaders are entrusted with a message that political leaders need to hear and heed, especially in summoning the nation to genuine humility and dependence on the sovereign God of all nations. We may rejoice that our President George Bush is a man who publicly proclaims his faith in God and lets it be known that he believes in the efficacy of prayer. Surely, President George Bush wants to take the right action for America and he surely seeks to leave a legacy that is noble. Let us pray that he receive a measure of God's wisdom to guide him in using the tremendous power at his disposal to impact world peace and national security. My friend and former student David Sampson, now on the President's staff in the Commerce Department, perceives that the President's faith is genuine. The influence of a godly leader in a fallen world is incalculable.

On the other hand, we may remind ourselves of the temptation that any political leader faces to use God and religion for political purposes. As in Old Testament times, any nation's leader be it King, Prime Minister, President could orchestrate piety into some political strategy. To use God for human purposes, however noble, is idolatry. Another possibility, just as real and just as dangerous, is that organized Christianity may be drawn

so closely to the throne of power that the healthy tension that should exist between the political and faith communities is threatened. The critical faculties of the Church may then become blunted, and its witness to the nation and world weakened.

Blessed are the peacemakers

The tasks of Christian discipleship alluded to herein are not easy, nor can they be assumed in a know it all pride that discounts those who contend for other positions. The reason people disagree on issues of war so intensely is because each side is seeing something which is real and important, something the other side does not see as clearly or does not value as highly. This disagreement can be a strength and a value because it helps keep the other side honest, at least to the extent that they truly listen to each other. True enough is an irony: sometimes the only way to preserve peace is to prepare for war and the only way to regain peace is to fight for it.

So, no, we do not turn the pulpit or the church classroom into a social or political debating society. We do not ask our worshipers to choose sides, to become hawks or doves, Democrats or Republicans. And yet, in some appropriate way, we, in a divine institution that is transnational and transcultural, lend support to the deep values of the grace of God and the love of Christ, the brotherhood of all humanity, peace on earth and good will toward all, international justice and peace, reconciliation after human brokenness, and binding up the wounds of the hurt and wounded.

The entire example and message of Jesus, the Prince of Peace, affirms and encourages peacemakers. We recall that upon peacemakers Jesus pronounced one of several blessings in his Sermon on the Mount. Whatever our position on the current Iraqi issue, we may concur on the tragic nature of war, the ultimate breakdown of communication and civility, and the indispensability of actively pursuing a genuine peace. And we certainly support our U. S. troops and their families at home wherever and however they may be deployed. While devout Christians have long differed and will continue to do so, let us encourage healthy dialogue on this vital subject in the spirit of tolerance, humility, and Christian love. Let us keep before us the ancient vision given Isaiah, **"They shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and the spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more."** And may we proclaim that ultimate, true peace is an individual's peace with God that overcomes any event in this world and this life!

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