

ON THE (MIS)USE OF SCRIPTURE FOR WAR

BY THE STAFF OF THE CATHOLIC PEACE FELLOWSHIP

Critics of Christianity are often the first to expose an embarrassing fact: much of history's killing has been done by, or with the sanction of, the scriptures. They have a point. Christians have long been adept at squaring their faith with their wars, and they have done so with the use, or misuse, of scripture. To this day, most of the support for U.S. war making comes from those who describe themselves as "religious," "Christians," as people whose lives are guided by Sacred Scripture.

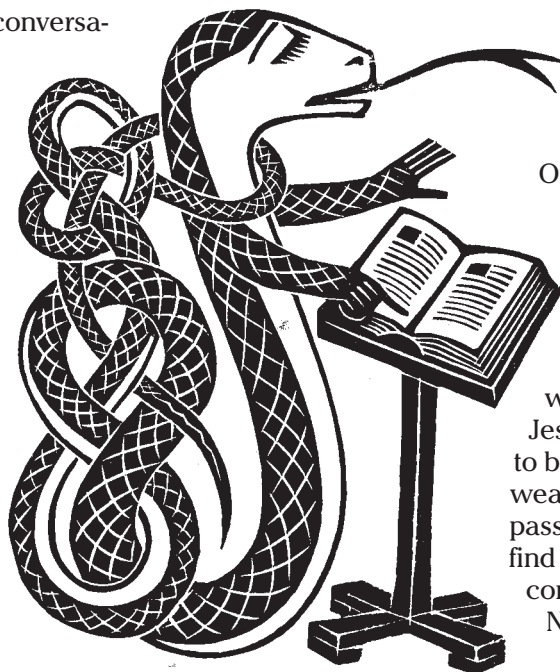
Christians who support war read the same scriptures as Christians who oppose war. But they read it differently. The same sacred text can be used both as a manifesto for peace and as a call to arms. Thus the most important terrain for conversations within the Church is also the most contested. While it is rare for a serious scripture read to invoke Jesus as one who calls for a campaign of violence, it is also disturbingly rare for Christians to find in the New Testament an unequivocal rejection of war. And yet, as the Jesuit scripture scholar John L. McKenzie once said, "if you cannot say on the basis of the New Testament that Jesus was nonviolent, you cannot say anything about Jesus." One way that people avoid this truth is to claim that any text can be read any number of ways, so that no text says anything definitive about peace and nonviolence. The result is that the scripture itself—the norm that norms all other norms, as the Church teaches—loses its authority. And when that happens, other authorities will have their say, authorities such as History, National Security, and The Real World.

In an effort to stir up, and sharpen up, conversations about war and the scriptures, we now bring forward scripture passages often used, or misused, to justify war. We want to debunk such justifications. Consider the following comments on these texts as part of a continuing conversation in which you may well find yourself. Perhaps the next time you are debating about Jesus and war, these seven commentaries will help. We recommend them for use at home, in the office, on the picket line, and in court.

MATTHEW 10:34

"DO NOT THINK THAT I HAVE COME TO BRING PEACE UPON EARTH. I HAVE COME TO BRING NOT PEACE BUT THE SWORD."

Two aspects need to be clarified in this passage. First, the proper understanding of peace. When Jesus says that he does not bring peace to the earth, to what is he referring? Jesus wants to make clear that peace cannot be interpreted as mere comfort, quiet passivity, or naïve calmness. If that is your understanding of peace, then Jesus does not bring it. Christian



comprehension of peace necessarily includes struggle for justice, active opposition to evil forces, and creative solution of the conflicts we face.

Only then "[l]ove and truth will meet; justice and peace will kiss" (Psalm 85:11). In other words, peace is active non-violence, which implies good doses of strength and courage.

The second point has to do with the meaning of the sword.

Jesus is not saying that he has come to bring actual, material, lethal weapons. If we turn to a parallel passage in the Gospel of Luke, we find Jesus saying: "Do you think I have come to establish peace on earth?"

No, I tell you, but division" (Lk 12:51). Here we find a similar puzzle. Is Jesus endorsing

division instead of unity? Not at all. So then, how are we to understand Jesus as bringing not peace but the sword and division?

The answer is found in the letter to the Hebrews, where we read that "the word of God is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword" (Heb 4:12), and then the author goes on to say that it cuts deep, as joint and marrow, bringing judgment to all our inner thoughts and emotions. The sword, then, is the word of God, as is indicated elsewhere in scripture, for example in Isaiah 49:2; Wisdom 18:15-16; Ephesians 6:17; and Revelation 1:16; 2:12. Taken together, these passages indicate that this sword, this

word of God, lays bare our souls, discerns the signs of the times, and identifies what runs contrary to the Gospel. On this score, we should note that just before Matthew 10:34, Jesus warns his disciples that they will face persecution, that they should be fearless in speech, and that their heavenly Father will protect them. And just after this passage, Jesus declares that anyone who loses his life for His sake will find it. The context shows us that everyone who hears the word of God has to make a decision—to accept it or reject it.

Thus the sword is not the kind that is used in wars. It is not made of iron. It is made of something far more powerful: God's word. It creates a division between those who cleave to God's word and those who pass it up, those who stand for it and those who are against it. The question this passage puts to Christians is: Have you been pierced by the sword of God's word?

MARK 12:17

"RENDER TO CAESAR THE THINGS THAT ARE CAESAR'S..."

Oftentimes, only the first half of this verse is quoted: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's." This gives the impression that Jesus wants us to be loyal to the king, the Kaiser, the Fatherland, the nation-state. But then comes the second half of the verse: "and to God the things that are God's." This is the punch-line. It confronts us with the challenge of figuring out what are the things of Caesar and what are the things of God.

The context gives some more specific clues: Jesus is asked whether or not the Jews should pay taxes. In response, he asks for a coin. "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" he asks, and they tell him it is Caesar's. It is then that he issues his puzzling command: "Render to Caesar . . ." The puzzle is solved, as Ireneaus, the second-century bishop of Lyons, pointed out, when we come to see that just as Caesar's image is on the coin, so God's image is on each human being. The coin belongs to Caesar. Each human being belongs to God.

This truth is the keystone of conscientious objection to war. I am made in the image and likeness of God; I

belong to God; therefore, Caesar has no right to hinder my belonging to God. Moreover, just as I am made in the image and likeness of God, so is everyone else; so who am I to take the lives of others?

John Milton once stated, "My conscience I have from God and cannot give to Caesar." And Dorothy Day remarked, "If we gave God all that belongs to God, there would be nothing left for Caesar." Clearly, Mark 12:17 calls for anything but unquestioning service to Caesar. Instead, Christ invites us to discern the extent to which we render all that is God's to God. And it challenges us to live in God's likeness, as revealed to us by Jesus.

LUKE 3:10-14

THE SOLDIERS, TOO, ASKED JOHN THE BAPTIST, "WHAT SHOULD WE DO?"

That this passage is used to show scriptural support for the military demonstrates how tricky scripture can be, in several respects. For one thing, the instructions, "don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely, and be content with your pay," are often taken as advice given by Jesus. In fact, these are the words of John the Baptist who, granted, was a prophet and forerunner to Jesus, but not the Word incarnate.

Moreover, the legitimacy of soldiering is not at issue in these instructions. Rather it is the opposite: the fact that soldiers are seeking advice is one way Luke depicts the Kingdom as open to those of dubious professions. Accordingly, in this scene, John the Baptist says to the Jewish crowds, salvation history's ultimate insiders, "Don't just say,

'we're safe—we're the descendants of Abraham.' That proves nothing." (Lk 3:8) Then we read that the crowd also contained some obvious outsiders, tax collectors, for one, and soldiers. This is in keeping with the overall theme of this particular gospel. Time and again, Luke shows that outsiders, those beyond the normal bounds of acceptability, often hear God's word with more attentiveness than the insiders.

Perhaps we too should ask the question of these outsiders. What should we do? This is the point made by Robert Karris in *The New Jerome Biblical Comm-*



tary, who suggests that the important feature of this scene is not the specific professions of the askers, nor even the specific answers they receive. It is the fact that they asked, they struggled, they wanted to know what to do. And so should we. In this sense, the soldiers are an example that we should emulate—not in their actual jobs, but in their desire to follow God. Moreover, if there is any relevant detail about John's answers to all the seekers, it is the emphasis on detachment from money and the importance of following Jesus' example.

And those who try to stretch this passage into a blanket justification for today's military should also note that John himself was executed on orders of the king, carried out by the king's guards.

LUKE 22:35-38

"...THE ONE WHO HAS NO SWORD MUST SELL HIS CLOAK AND BUY ONE."

Jesus' words here are immersed in a discourse to his disciples about the coming crisis: He said to them, "When I sent you out without a purse, bag, or sandals, did you lack anything?" They said, "No, not a thing." He said to them, "But now, the one who has a purse must take it, and likewise a bag. And the one who has no sword must sell his cloak and buy one. For I tell you, this scripture must be fulfilled in me, 'And he was counted among the lawless'; and indeed what is written about me is being fulfilled." They said, "Lord, look, here are two swords." He replied, "It is enough."

Two key aspects of this text render it impossible that Jesus is arming his followers with actual swords. First, the disciples' literal take on Jesus' words misunderstands (again) his message. "Since Luke narrates in his Gospel that Jesus not only preached love of enemies but also lived that teaching," writes Karris in the NJBC, "and since he narrates in Acts that Paul and other missionaries never use swords, he cannot mean by 'sword' here a lethal weapon." Rather, the sword here serves as a symbol for the danger and crisis to come.

Moreover, the ironic meaning of "It is enough" in verse 38 allows Luke to make a point. Though the Greek *hikanos* can mean "sufficient," it is employed here to mean "enough of this!" This sentiment is driven home in the scene that follows in verses 47-53. Upon his arrest, Jesus rebukes a disciple for using a sword to cut off the ear of the high priest's servant. Rather than applaud the disciple for faithful obedience to his instructions, Jesus again echoes verse 38, responding "Stop, no more of this!" And in contrast to the slash of the sword, "he touched the servant's ear and healed him."

JOHN 2:15

"MAKING A WHIP OUT OF THE CHORD, HE DROVE THEM ALL OUT OF THE TEMPLE."

This passage is often used to justify Christians going to war. After all, the logic goes, Jesus himself took violent action in the cleansing of the Temple; so too Christians can follow in His footsteps in taking up arms to defend themselves. But this was not a case of Jesus defending Himself. Rather, it was a case of Jesus fending for the integrity of the Temple worship, which had been profaned by the moneychangers who had turned His Father's house into a den of thieves. Moreover, it was not a case of Jesus opposing the moneychangers with lethal action. Rather, it was a case of simply chasing them from the outer portion of the Temple.

It does seem that Jesus was angry, which might be troubling inasmuch as anger is a sin. But, as Aquinas points out, there are two kinds of anger. On the one hand, there is impassioned anger, which is anger properly speaking, whereby reason takes a back seat to the passions which have seized irascibly on some object of the sensitive appetites. Here, anger is directed by the passions and has the character of sin. On the other hand, there is a kind of righteous anger, which is directed not by passion, but by reason setting itself against vice and sin (*Summa Theologiae* II, 2, 158, 1, 2). In this scene, commonly known as the cleansing of the Temple, Jesus exhibits righteous anger, as is indicated in the note that he is acting in accord with Psalm 69: 9: "Zeal for your house has consumed me." This anger is not sinful. To the contrary, His anger is displayed for our benefit, so that we attend to the command not to worship strange gods (Deuteronomy 12:3). It was an instance of divine pedagogy.

Time and again, this passage has been used to trip up conscientious objectors in interviews to determine their sincerity. What about the cleansing of the Temple? The answer is simple. In that episode, Jesus was calling for the right worship of God; for me, the right worship of God entails not taking the life of another, for life is not mine to take. In any case, this is no justification for participating in war, particularly in modern war which is waged not for God but for the state. This episode does not lay any basis for any theory of just war. At best, it provides a basis for a theory of just cleansing of temples.

ROMANS 13:1-7

"OBEY THE CIVIL AUTHORITIES"

Far from an admonition to Christians to participate in the Roman Empire and its wars of conquest, Paul was advising the young Church in Rome to live out their Christian calling in a radically new way, a way grounded in love and suffering.

Romans 13:1-7, a small part of this large letter, presents the Christian's relationship with authority as one of nonresistant subordination. This nonresistant subordination is based upon the belief that all authorities have their place in God's instituted order for creation. Such a place in God's order in no way suggests that governments are somehow blessed by God or carry out God's will. For Paul, all governments are used by God in the order of creation. Just as in the Old Testament, God uses the governments in Assyria or Babylon, so now in the New Testament, God uses Rome. Christians, therefore, must simply tolerate governments with the indifference of a pilgrim people who believe that such earthly institutions are fleeting—not unlike Jesus' indifference before Pilate in John 18.

If we look at this passage in context, we see that rather than encouraging Christians to participate in governments and their wars, Paul seems actually to be challenging the notion of Christian participation in any government and war. Just before this passage, in Romans 12:19, Paul tells Christians "never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God." And then in Romans 13:4, civil authorities are said to have that power of bringing about vengeance. This means, as John Howard Yoder notes in *The Politics of Jesus*, that the civil authorities are not Christian. Rather, Christians are to maintain a posture of indifference to worldly powers, the kind of indifference that frees them to love as Christ loved.

This last point is important when it comes to the issue of conscientious objection to war. In obedience to civil authorities, conscientious objectors have traditionally accepted legal punishment for the crime of loving as Christ loved. With this in mind, we can see



that Romans 13:1-7 fits in well with the verses before and after it. As Yoder also points out, Romans 12 begins with a call to nonconformity, inspired by the mercies of God, and this refusal to conform to the world brings forth a new form of life in and through Christian community, one that is grounded in selfless service and dedication to the common good. And Romans 13:8, a verse that immediately follows this passage, shows that this form of life is based on love.

In this view, the instruction that we should obey all civil authorities can only mean that we should endure their power and discipline. And it can never mean that we should obey civil authorities when that means disobeying God. For as Aquinas taught, civil law, or as he called it "positive law," is truly law only when it conforms to the natural moral law as revealed by God (*Summa Theologiae* I, 2, 96, 4). Or as Pope John Paul II observes in his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, "From the very beginnings of the Church, the apostolic preaching reminded Christians of their duty to obey legitimately constituted public authorities (cf. Rom. 13:7; 1 Pete 2:13-14), but at the same time it firmly warned that 'we must obey God rather than men' (Acts 5:29)."

EPHESIANS 6:11

"PUT ON THE FULL ARMOR OF GOD."

One is almost rendered speechless when this passage is used to justify warfare. It is obvious, in the plain sense of the text, that "armor" is used here as a metaphor for the life-and-death battle that Christians must wage against Satan. Indeed, we should be fully equipped, not to wage physical war against human enemies, but to wage spiritual war against the principalities and ruling forces who are masters of the darkness of this world (Ephesians 6:12).

Thus the belt Christians wear around their waists is the belt of truth. The breastplate is that of uprightness. The shoes on their feet are their eagerness to spread the gospel of peace. Their shield is that of faith. And their helmet is that of

salvation. (Ephesians 6:14-16). It is also important to note that this letter was written while Paul was in

chains. Even as he was held in custody of the Roman Empire, he understood himself to be an ambassador of the gospel (Ephesians 6: 19-20). The fight he fought throughout his life was a fight for the Lordship of Christ, to Whom he witnessed even in Rome (Acts 28).

What are we to take from these political and military metaphors? Exactly what Paul wanted us to take from them. We too are engaged in a similar battle. We too are to be truthful, faithful, upright, which in God's mercy will bring us and those to whom we minister the salvation for which we all long. It is a battle that will continue until the Day of the Lord (Philippians 1:10). Until that day, we must put on the armor of God, which begins with prayer. For the ancient wisdom of the church teaches us that war originates in our disordered passions, and that we can attain peace only when we overcome our sluggish and selfish spirits, and begin to live as Christ lived, for others and for God. Thus the road to peace opens up before us each morning as we rise and give glory and praise to God. And as we retire each night, we pray that God protect us from the Evil One, send his Holy Angels to dwell with us, so that we may rise again and put on our shoes, that is, our eagerness to spread the gospel of peace.

CONCLUSION

We offer these seven little commentaries as an exercise in reading the scriptures in accord with Christ's teaching and example of nonviolent peace-making. As Paul says in I Corinthians 10:11, everything in the scriptures is written down for our instruction. But this does not mean that everything there is immediately apparent. The Word of God is mysterious, puzzling, complicated, and demanding. It takes faith to read the scriptures rightly, and it takes work to embody the truths found there. The scriptures can be put to terrible misuse. But they can also be used for the greater glory of God. In this day and age, in this time of war and rumors of wars (Mark 13:7), there is perhaps no greater gift than we can give to our church than the message that the scriptures bring us in the Sun—that is, the Son—that has come from on high to visit us, to give light to those living in darkness and the shadow of death and to guide our feet into the way of peace (Luke 1:78-79).



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