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**Judging the just war.**

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Howard J. Loewen

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### Does the Theory Match the Bible's Vision?

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*During World War II the US Navy desperately needed chaplains. Hence someone suggested that they recruit men directly from theological seminaries and put them into the chaplaincy without any previous pastoral experience. It was a mistake they never repeated. But I was one of the forty they recruited.*

*Within a week after graduation I was in the Navy. And in a few months I was in the South Pacific, assigned to the First Marine Division. Being in a war posed no theological problems for me. Reformed theology had long since eased my conscience with its "just war theory." I felt that my participation with the marines— trained for assault operations— was pleasing to God. I carried no weapon, so would not personally do the enemy any harm. Besides, I was an evangelical, and those marines needed the gospel of Jesus Christ. My burden was the possibility of their dying without the knowledge of his salvation.*

*Our first operation was against a Japanese stronghold (Cape Gloucester, New Britain). On Christmas Eve (1943) I gathered with quite a few Marines on the deck of our LST. The assault was scheduled before dawn the next day. We sang some carols. I read the Christmas story, spoke of God's condescension, and we prayed. All were inwardly "ruminating the morrow's danger." So far as the Marines were concerned it was to be "Merry Christmas to the Nips!"*

*A day or so later I was advancing along with some others over the area that had been hotly contested. It was raining. I recall the mud, the debris on the battlefield and the stench of human flesh rotting in the tropical heat. Then to my right I saw what had been an enemy strongpoint. The treadmarks of one of our tanks went right over it. It had been crushed and some bodies were scattered about.*

*My attention was particularly drawn to what had been a Japanese soldier, lying in the mud. His head was missing. The sight was altogether revolting. I turned aside, but then found myself almost unconsciously drawn back to him. For what caught my attention, and what piqued my curiosity was a little book halfburied in the mud alongside where his head should have been. I had to see what that book was. I can still recall the revulsion and the smell as I forced myself to reach down and grasp the book.*

*You guessed! It was a Japanese New Testament. Had this horrible refuse been my brother? I was greatly troubled. A verse of Scripture came to mind: Galatians 6.10, "As we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of faith." What was I, a Christian, doing there at Cape Gloucester? Somehow, the "just war theory" on that day and in that place seemed like so much unwarranted nonsense. And you can be sure that I've not been the same since! (Arthur Glasser, Professor of Missions, Fuller School of World Mission, June 25, 1985).*

In chapter 11 we measured two war realities of our time against the just war theory (JWT). In this chapter we will turn the tables slightly and judge the JWT by its applicability and by the vision of the Bible.

The JWT does have moral value. Its intention is to limit violence, even though there is little evidence of its effectiveness. In the history of the church the JWT has usually functioned to justify war rather than to judge it.

Yet it is better to have some kind of restraint on the conditions and means of war than none at all. In a world that will always be riveted with violence and war it is still possible to hope that the JWT could be used to steer the church and society toward more peace. That is one of the challenges today for Christians who hold this view.

Perhaps the present dangers of nuclear and revolutionary wars can help the JWT become an ethical instrument to reject rather than justify war. Could it direct people toward a biblical perspective that judges all wars in a nuclear age to be wrong? A consistent application of the JWT criteria today renders both nuclear and revolutionary wars unjustifiable—more clearly so than with regard to other kinds of war in history.

Above all, the church and society must be strongly encouraged actually to *use* the JWT. Perhaps this would lead the church back once again to the prophetic position of the early church regarding war and peace—namely, a biblical pacifism.

Yet on the whole the JWT has not and does not sufficiently represent a thorough-going Christian ethic. The following criticisms demonstrate its serious inadequacy as the ground for Christian actions and attitudes toward war and peace in our day.

#### INADEQUATE FOR THE THE REALITIES OF WAR

##### *Mass destruction*

The horror of modern warfare makes JWT ineffective. Although JWT condemns any use of weapons of mass destruction, it breaks down completely when weapons are designed to destroy nameless civilians indiscriminately. Therefore, the technology of modern warfare alone puts the JWT out of date.

Similarly, the technology and tactics of modern guerrilla warfare make the criteria of JWT virtually impossible to apply. The widespread and massive destruction of such warfare, and the even more serious destruction of the established authorities seeking to squelch revolutions, violates every rule of the JWT.

##### *International Christians*

Christians should not and cannot be involved in killing other Christians. Christians are one in the body of Christ. The long history of warfare in the “christianized” west has repeatedly violated this fundamental truth. Christians have repeatedly killed each other.

Now, in the nuclear age, this killing can be increased in geometric proportions. If then we apply the JWT rules we would have to condemn all wars in which Christians participated—past, present and future. In the same way, revolutionary warfare increases many times over the reality of Christians killing Christians.

### *Official condemnation*

Never has a body of bishops or a major denominational body officially condemned a war. Since its beginning in the fourth century the JWT has remained a theory. It has never really worked. The implementation of the JWT criteria represents a history of failure.

However, there are some signs today that official religious bodies and leaders are willing to take positions against the nuclear threat based on the JWT. Unfortunately, this emerging pacifism is frequently cancelled out by a corresponding willingness on the part of northern hemisphere Christians to support and justify counter-revolutionary violence in the southern hemisphere in the name of justice.

### *Moral function*

The JWT has seldom been used as a tool for moral guidance. Until recent times, proponents of the JWT usually have been able to justify the wars of their own nations. The theory was originally formulated to show that some wars might be an exception to the gospel, yet it has become a tool to justify every war that comes along.

In addition, nations serve as judges in their own cases during the threat of war. Therefore, who is to say that all alternatives have been exhausted? The JWT implies that there will be truthful presentation of all the facts by a nation to its people before and during war, allowing Christians to make informed judgments. However, this has never happened.

Finally, the JWT simply has too many loopholes. Proponents can find ways to justify any war. For the appeal of the JWT to be credible, its criteria must be stated more clearly and firmly, and its effectiveness demonstrated in actually limiting war.

*Self-righteous justification*

The JWT assumes that one side will be just and the other unjust. Yet in times of war, without exception, both sides claim their cause to be just. Perhaps we should conclude from this that no nation can be just. There is much that is unjust on both sides.

The injustice on both sides is only heightened when today there are two super-powers each sufficiently armed to annihilate human civilization. Each has self-righteously driven the other to the point of mutually assured destruction.

*Fusing church and society*

The JWT was born in a church established and supported by the Roman Empire under the emperor Constantine. It therefore has a conservative bias regarding the relation of the church to the state. Its vision of church-state relations is one which links together the church and society in such a way that the church is supportive of the state.

In this environment the church can justify the use of force to bring about its desired ends for society. It comes to see war as a police function which maintains peace and order and resists violence and tyranny.

The JWT continues to function with this understanding of the Constantinian vision. This is true whether it is the church in the northern hemisphere joined to a capitalist society which can justify nuclear war, or whether it is the church in the southern hemisphere joined to a Marxist movement which can justify revolutionary wars in the name of Christ.

Both the classical just war and the contemporary just revolution waged in the name of Christ exemplify the Constantinian orientation of the JWT which fuses church and society as ethical agents of change in a questionable way.

*Natural law tradition*

The JWT is too extensively grounded in the natural law tradition

of the Greeks and Romans. Reliance on natural law means that you appeal to that point of view in society which makes the most political sense. That is true whether one lives in a Constantinian, capitalist or communist society.

To be politically realistic, people appeal to that which makes the most sense in the context of a given society. Therefore Christians—whether in ancient or modern society—have justified war in terms of defending the world and culture in which they lived because that made the most sense to them and they had the most to gain from it.

The origins of the JWT in this natural law tradition have provided the basis for the Christian church invariably and uncritically to support wars fought by nation states or national movements.

This kind of strong reliance on national politics has overshadowed the primary source of authority to which Christians and the church claim to appeal in judging questions of war and peace—namely, biblical revelation.

Must not the origin of the Christian position on war come from the Bible? Does not the teaching of Scripture, and that of Jesus Christ in particular, clearly challenge the very basis on which the JWT is built? Is not the biblical vision of peace and the early church's witness to peace a sign of the true biblical and theological position for our age?

These questions focus the most fundamental criticism against the JWT—that it is not sufficiently biblical and theological in its orientation.

#### FALLS SHORT OF THE BIBLE

The assumptions of the JWT are not rooted deeply enough in the biblical vision of the gospel of peace and salvation. Therefore the moral power of the JWT has eroded during the present time. The Christian politics of medieval Europe and modern America, which have nurtured this tradition, have essentially collapsed. As a result the JWT increasingly has become an inadequate moral instrument to deal with the most profound ethical issue of our nuclear age.

*The sinfulness of human nature*

One of the major weaknesses of the JWT is its understanding of human nature. On the one hand, it tends to use the argument of the fallenness of human nature to justify the use of force to contain violence. On the other hand, it appeals to enlightened human reason in applying the criteria of the JWT so that fighting a just war is possible.

What is not sufficiently clear in the JWT is that warfare has its roots in the fallness of human nature, and that war itself is the climax of rebellion against God and humanity. In the Bible sin as disobedience, violence as an outcome of deep insecurity, and warfare as an expression of human hatred are very closely related. The rapid escalation of violence from Adam to Cain to Lamech to Noah to Nimrod in Genesis supplies convincing evidence of this sinfulness.

Today the murder of Abel by Cain has the possibility of being magnified to include the entire human race. The JWT does not sufficiently contribute to the recognition that modern societies have produced a nuclear Cain. Nuclear weapons provide a devastatingly clear picture of human cursing and murdering. The human heart, not God, is the root of all destruction. The inner attitude of collective hatred has led to the self-righteous building of murderous weapons that can annihilate an entire population of Abels.

*The sovereignty of God, the warrior*

The JWT does not sufficiently affirm that God has entered the arena of human conflict as a warrior to eliminate violence rather than justify it. God has chosen to participate in the sinful history of humanity in order to defeat the evil forces contributing to violence, injustice and chaos. The holy wars of God recorded in the Bible are fought toward this end. Thus God fights both for and against Israel. Here the sovereignty and lordship of God the warrior are demonstrated. The focus is on *his* involvement and control in war rather than on human involvement and control.

God's wars in biblical history are ultimately fought by the Word

of God, by miracle, and by faith, not with sword and armies under human control. When Israel begins to replace her dependence on God as warrior with an idolatrous dependence on the nation and the king as warrior, she comes under the judgment of God, and the Lord fights—that is, brings judgment—against her.

The JWT does not sufficiently recognize the idolatry of national sovereignty. The nation state has become one of the main gods of our civilization. There exists a tendency, deeply rooted in our culture, to preserve that god at any cost. The JWT frequently has contributed to this idol worship.

The idolization of the nation state and the bomb increasingly propel us toward self-destruction. The JWT does not have a sufficiently realistic grasp of the fact that the nation state is an agent of the principalities and powers of this world. Modern rebellious and idolatrous states are now willing to sacrifice any number of human beings on the altar of the god of national sovereignty.

If the false god is not clearly identified in the assumptions of the JWT, neither is the nature and way of the true God. Accordingly, in the JWT the reality of God's judgment regarding the warring ways of the nations is severely minimized. What the JWT does not recognize is that God's judgment is a far more awesome threat than the menace of a nuclear enemy or a revolutionary movement.

The illusions by which nation states live are foolishness in God's eyes. The JWT does not bring this perspective to bear on today's nuclear situation. Instead it has contributed to the development of the bomb which reflects the colossal self-righteousness of nuclear nations.

From the perspective of the biblical vision, the judgment of God lies in allowing these nations to head toward self-destruction. As in the days of Noah, God may choose to let this rebellion be limitless, even to the point of self-annihilation and ultimate separation from God himself. The JWT is not an adequate moral instrument to see us through the nuclear age.

*The kingdom of Christ, the Lord*

The JWT operates from assumptions that do not adequately take into account the vision of God's kingdom as manifested in Jesus Christ and the apostolic church. God entered the fray of human history to reverse the increase of violence and to establish a vision of peace. The substance of this vision involved establishing one community of God's people where peaceful living would provide an alternative to the injustice, violence, and warring of sinful humanity.

Thus in Jesus Christ, God entered into the brickyards of human society to reverse the curse of Cain and to release his people from bondage. In Jesus, God continues to be the warrior contending against the principalities and powers of evil. This Jesus resisted evil by loving the enemy and preaching the gospel of peace. He came to inaugurate a new kingdom, a new spiritual and social community of people.

Jesus Christ conquered the temptation to be an international leader, yet his new kingdom community ultimately posed a threat to the Roman Empire itself as it proclaimed, taught and imitated the way of the cross, the way of humility and service. This was the nonviolent way of Jesus who has absorbed and who will absorb the violence of the nuclear and revolutionary Cain. He was and is the supreme defense of us all. We look to his defenselessness on the cross as a model and to his resurrection as a source of power.

Jesus Christ as victor and victim stands with all the victims of humanity in the nuclear age and holds back doom while offering hope. Out of that victory Christians must call together a faithful remnant of God's people who will say a resounding "NO" to nuclear destruction. Such a people will bear witness to the fact that the very attitude which drives the nations toward nuclear war speaks a big "NO" to the gospel of Jesus Christ in our time and provides an occasion for God's judgment.

But the members of the kingdom of Christ must also resist frantic activity which simply draws people into a survivalist movement in the face of the nuclear threat. Likewise, they must resist a fatalistic pessimism that is resigned to accepting the inevitable. For the kingdom

of God speaks a message of resurrection hope. Its members must call people everywhere to repentance for attitudes and actions that betray our rebellious nature. That is the mission of the church of Christ. It must speak and live a gospel that states that Jesus Christ is victor over the rebellious powers.

Christians must reckon with the day of the Bomb and the bullet, but they must not be overcome by it. We must pray that the evidence of Christ's triumph might be present even after such an unthinkable event. That will be the most difficult of all times to live the way of the cross. Yet the church will be called upon to suffer with the Lamb.

The War of the Lamb is the only justifiable war. All other wars only lead the human family deeper into the cycle of revenge and murder. The JWT has not been able to break that cycle. It has only led us more deeply into it. For it has not adequately understood the fundamental conflict between the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of the anti-Christ, and the victory of the former over the latter. The only defense for Christians today is to continue to pray "thy kingdom come here on earth."