

## CHRISTIAN RESPONSES TO VIOLENCE

### SESSION ONE; GOD AND VIOLENCE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

“Blessed are the peace-makers”, Jesus said, and that commitment to forgiveness and reconciliation is seen by many church people to be essential in the Christian Gospel. It is therefore jarring to some to realize that God is portrayed in some portions of the Bible – particularly the Old Testament – as condoning and even commanding violence.

#### I. The Conquest of the Promised Land

God’s promise of a land for the Chosen People begins with the story of Abraham in Genesis 12: “Now the LORD said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. <sup>2</sup>I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup>I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed’.”

Unfortunately, while the land is promised by God to Abraham and his descendents, when the children of Israel arrived after their miraculous release from slavery in Egypt, it was already occupied by other peoples who had lived there for many generations. Therefore the Promised Land had to be taken by force. Much of the Book of Joshua is devoted to this story of conquest, and it seems clear from the beginning that God was not only sanctioning but commanding the ensuing slaughter. Jericho was conquered first, and all the inhabitants, men and women alike, were killed (6:21). The same thing happened at Ai (6:26), and the king of Ai, who was captured, was summarily hanged. All this was seen as acts done by the command of and to the glory of God. In fact, in Joshua 11 God actively participated in the battle by sending giant hailstones on the enemy, which killed more men than did the Israelites’ weapons.

Some smaller nations tried to avoid this kind of devastating holy war by making a peace treaty with the Israelites, but the price demanded was that they would eternally be Israel’s slaves (Joshua, chapter 9). It took many years for these wars of conquest to finish, but even when they were ended the Book of Joshua tells us that God himself had driven out the peoples from their lands so that the Israelites could have them (13:6)

#### QUESTION:

1. Does God – the Creator of all that is – really favor some people over others? Why or why not?
2. What does being “The Chosen People” really mean?

#### II. The Prophetic Punishments

The second form of divine violence is seen in the punishments God wreaks upon those who do not follow divine law. According to Leviticus 26:14-39, these punishments include sickness, defeat in time of war, and famine. In fact, the famines will be so great that parents will be reduced to eating their children!

In Amos chapters 1 and 2 God promises to send terrible punishments upon surrounding nations for their war atrocities, but Israel and Judah are to be punished because they have allowed economic injustice against the poor. But in the book of Hosea, the worst sin of all is identified: the Israelites have been unfaithful to God, like a wanton wife chasing after other gods. The penalty for such infidelity is death: (Deuteronomy 22:22–24) "If a man is discovered committing adultery, both he and the woman must die. In this way, you will purge Israel of such evil."

Other crimes for which God's Law in the Torah prescribes the death penalty includes:

(A) Religious crimes - sacrificing to other gods (Exodus 22:20), offering a child sacrifice to Moloch (Leviticus 20:1-5), false prophecy (Deuteronomy 18:20-22), necromancy – calling up the spirits of the dead (Leviticus 20:22), witchcraft (Exodus 22:18), blasphemy (Leviticus 24:10-16), working on the Sabbath (Exodus 31:14)

(B) Sexual Practices - rape of an engaged women in a field where no one could hear her (Deuteronomy 22:25-27), consensual adultery with an engaged woman (Deuteronomy 22:23-24) or a married woman (Leviticus 20:10), marrying one's mother-in-law (Leviticus 20:14), incest with one's father's wife or one's daughter-in-law (Leviticus 20:11-12), male-on-male intercourse (Leviticus 20:13) and bestiality, with both the human and the animal to be executed (Leviticus 20:15-20). Also, if a bride cannot prove she was a virgin before her wedding night, she may receive the death penalty (Deuteronomy 22:20)

(C) Other Crimes: Murder (Exodus 21:12-14); hitting a parent (Exodus 21:12-14), cursing a parent (Leviticus 20:9), a son disobeying his parent (Deuteronomy 21:18-21), kidnapping (Exodus 21:16), disobeying the decision of a court (Deuteronomy 17:8-13), and false testimony in a lawsuit (Deuteronomy 19:15-21)

#### QUESTIONS:

1. Do you believe God punishes us for wrong-doing? Can you name some examples?
2. Are God's punishments a form of violence?

#### III. The Psalms

Psalm 94:1 identifies God as a God of Vengeance. Psalm 58 goes into more detail, praying that God will break the teeth of wrong-doers, and exulting that the righteous shall wade in the blood of sinners. Psalm 109 is intensely personal, asking God to totally destroy those who have lied about the writer.

Perhaps most shocking is Psalm 137, written after the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. This Psalm prays destruction on Judah's enemies, even promising that those who dash out the brains of their babies on the rocks shall be blessed.

In all of these Scriptural passages, God takes violent steps when one of two things happens: either God's honor has been offended, or Israel's well-being is at stake. How are we to interpret these passages?

One way is to see them not as commandments or actions from God, but as human projections on God. It is easy for us to so passionately wish some things to be that we would claim God wants them as well. How much more so would that be true for a people who believed themselves to be chosen as God's especially favored nation!

We see this tendency to attribute human emotions and actions to God in all nations and religions. The Crusaders went to war saying “Deus Vult! God Wills It!” European settlers in North America often took Indian lands and lives, believing this was their divinely-given Manifest Destiny. In the Middle East today there are fanatics who willing give their lives to wreak destruction in the name of Allah.

Another possible response to these Scripture passages is to say that religious understanding evolved through the many centuries of the making of the Bible. It is widely believed that the earliest parts of the Old Testament were developed when folks were more primitive in their thinking. In this scenario Jesus is seen as the one who most fully reveals a corrected understanding of God as compassionate and forgiving.

Both of these responses have some validity, but there are also problems. One, of course, is the tendency to pick and choose those Biblical passages with which we are most comfortable and dismissing the rest. Another problem is that we may be committing the same error, imposing our desired picture of God onto the Divine Mystery. Perhaps God is much greater than our imaginations

#### QUESTIONS:

1. How do you understand the Biblical passages attributing violence to God/
2. How may we reconcile the Justice of God with the Mercy of God?
3. Are Christians ever justified in being involved in violence? When? Why?

#### CLOSING PRAYER:

**From earthquake and tempest; from drought, fire, and flood;  
from civil strife and violence; from war and murder;  
and from dying suddenly and unprepared,  
Good Lord, deliver us. Amen. [BCW, 788]**

## CHRISTIAN RESPONSES TO VIOLENCE

### SESSION TWO; GOD AGAINST VIOLENCE IN THE BIBLE

Christians typically through the ages have been against violence, but there are great differences among them about such subjects as war, capital punishment, and even self-defense. Moreover, each faction can find passages in the Bible to support their viewpoint. In the first session of this series, we examined some of the passages, primarily in the Old Testament, that seemed to show God sanctioning and even commanding violence, particularly in the holy wars of the Conquest of the Promised Land, and in punishing those who offended God's sovereignty.

In this session, we wish to consider some of the passages in Scripture – both Old and New Testaments – that speak to God's vision of peace. The stage is set in the two remarkable stories of Creation in chapters one and two of Genesis. As Jerome Creach shows in his recently-published book "Violence in Scripture", other cultures in those days had creation stories showing the gods making the universe through wars, battling evil beings intent only on destruction. The Hebrew stories, on the other hand, show God creating all things peacefully and orderly.

In the first chapter of Genesis, God creates the universe in an orderly fashion, step by step, through his commands. In fact, it seems that God thinks all things that are into being. Logical reasoning, not war-like anger, is the agent of creation. In this process human beings are created "in the image of God"; that is, they are endowed with divine capabilities of reason and imagination, not that they might be involved in wars and acts of domination, but that they might continue to carry out God's intention of creation.

An important aspect of God's creating work is putting things in order and in relationship with one another. The divine mandate to humans, therefore, is to "tend the garden"; that is, to help things grow together. There may be times when destruction is part of the task, but it is for the sake of pruning – improving the garden – rather than simply wreaking violence.

Apparently this stewardship involves even non-violence toward animals. The man and woman are given permission to eat the fruit of the ground and trees – except for the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. There is no mention of eating meat, even by animals. Humans and animals are to be vegetarian.

The second story of Creation (Genesis 2:4ff) has significant differences from the first story, but continues the vision that humans are created to continue God's work – for instance, to name the animals, which is using words and reasoning as God did in creating the universe in the first place. And when God punishes Adam and Eve for their transgression, it is done not angrily but to protect the divine order of things.

Creach goes on through his book to argue that the many examples of God's involvement in violence - through the Old Testament in particular – are not done to destroy so much as to restore the original vision of a just and whole creation. God's acts are restorative, not retributive.

For example, when God sends plagues upon Egypt as part of the campaign to free the Hebrews in captivity, and when God destroys the Egyptian army in the Red Sea, the divine violence is aimed to achieve justice and wholeness, not simply to cause bloodshed and heartache for the Egyptians, who are also God's children.

A primary example of God's vision for the universe is found in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17). These are basic rules for building and maintaining community, as relevant today as they were thousands of years ago – and as difficult to apply, especially as we now live in an interdependent global community. The Commandments begin with having a unifying vision: recognizing God as the center of life. They then go on to insist on mutual respect as the necessary ingredient for living together: respect for the ties of marriage, for family relationships, for integrity in the legal process, and for the property of others.

In the middle of the Commandments, however, is a seemingly simple rule: "Thou shalt not kill." The problem is, the Old Testament is full of other commands from God to kill. Numerous portions of the Law prescribe capital punishment for a number of sins, ranging from adultery to children "talking back" to their parents. Furthermore, there are various passages telling of God's command to totally wipe out communities and nations that resist the "Chosen People."

Most scholars today, particularly Jewish scholars, agree that the word translated "kill" in the King James Version should more properly be translated "murder". Therefore many modern versions translate this verse as "You shall do no murder". This would exclude legal executions, self-defense and acts of war; it would apply primarily to criminal acts against another in one's own tribe or nation. Christian thought, however, has extended that circle to include all humanity, since all human beings are considered children of God and therefore persons of sacred worth.

Jesus, in fact, offered an even more stringent understanding of the commandment against murder: to hate another person is tantamount to murder in God's eyes. One's inner attitude can therefore be as dangerous to one's own soul as a violent act would be harmful to one's victim.

#### QUESTIONS:

1. Do you agree with Jesus that hatred is tantamount to murder? Why or why not?
2. How can we combine justice and reconciliation toward a wrong-doer?
3. If you were to write Ten Commandments for the modern world, what would you say?

Closing Prayer:

**O God, bring our nation and all nations to uphold justice and equity, that poverty, oppression, and violence may vanish and all may know peace and plenty; in the name of Jesus Christ, the ruler of all. Amen. [BCW, 694]**

## CHRISTIAN RESPONSES TO VIOLENCE

### SESSION THREE; THE NEW TESTAMENT AND VIOLENCE

We've noted that the words of Jesus seem to contradict those passages of the Old Testament in which God is depicted as sanctioning and even commanding violence. Indeed, much of the New Testament seems determinedly anti-violent. But that may not convey the whole message of the New Testament, which is more nuanced than seems at first evident.

A key passage for discussion is found in Matthew 5:38-48:

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'<sup>39</sup> But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also;<sup>40</sup> and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well;<sup>41</sup> and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.<sup>42</sup> Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

<sup>43</sup>"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'<sup>44</sup> But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,<sup>45</sup> so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.<sup>46</sup> For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?<sup>47</sup> And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?<sup>48</sup> Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Jesus modeled this instruction in his own life, even to the point of death on the cross. He based this notion of non-violence on God's nature: this form of living marks us as God's children. In so doing, Jesus presented the ultimate truth about violence: it is an affront to God's sovereignty, an act of rebellion as serious as Adam and Eve's sin of disobedience.

The Old Testament certainly sanctioned violence as a legitimate self-defense against violence; in the words of a popular current saying, "the only thing that can stop a bad man with a gun is a good man with a gun." Jesus' commandment seems to challenge this idea. His followers are to break the circle of violence by refusing to participate in it. Jesus reiterated this idea in a number of ways, for instance saying that following him means to take up a cross (Matthew 16:24). This was all too vivid a metaphor for a conquered people for whom crucifixion was a public spectacle. In fact, in 6 A.D., when Jesus was a child, the Romans crucified 2000 rebels at one time in Sepphoris, Galilee.

Why would Jesus offer such a radical idea? Some authors point out that the inhabitants of Judea and Galilee in Christ's time lived under the harsh authoritarian rule of Rome. They were, for the most part peasant farmers and townspeople, untrained in the ways of war and lacking the weapons of the Roman legions. They were certainly outnumbered; resistance to Rome would unquestionably end in disaster, as every rebellion proved to be. Perhaps, then, Jesus' counsel for non-violence was simply prudent: "You can't win, so don't start the fight. And if the fight comes your way, duck and cover – don't try to resist."

## QUESTIONS:

1. Does Jesus' emphasis on non-resistance to evil mean that one cannot protect himself? How about protecting others, such as one's family?
2. Are there ways of resistance that do not involve violent actions?

Yet Jesus certainly didn't shrink from a fight. By entering Jerusalem as he did on Palm Sunday and cleansing the Temple, he was posing a challenge which the Sanhedrin couldn't ignore. And, since the Jewish legal system couldn't impose the death penalty, Roman military power would inevitably be called in. Jesus was no fool; he was raising a red flag which could only end in death. Yet he also calmly refused to retaliate against those who tormented him. In fact, when Simon Peter tried to protect him the night of his arrest, Jesus rebuked him, told him to put his sword away, and restored the severed ear of the man Peter had cut off (Luke 22:49-51).

Interestingly, Matthew, Mark and Luke report that at his trial Jesus did not complain at his mistreatment, but John tells us that when one of the Sanhedrin guards struck him in the courtroom, Jesus challenged the judges to restrain such actions (John 18:19:23). There may well have been regulations against mistreatment of a prisoner, and Jesus was appealing to those rules.

Paul affirms Jesus' emphasis on non-violence in Romans 12:14: "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them." This notion seems to have been the standard for Christians through at least the first three centuries of the Church. In fact, it is said that when Constantine was converted and became the first Roman Emperor to be a Christian, he had his entire army baptized, and each man upon going into the water was careful to hold his fighting arm up so as to not have it baptized, for it would mean he could no longer fight in war.

## QUESTIONS

1. If Christians in the early Church thought that following Christ meant that one could not be a soldier, how do we justify our modern-day support of the military?
2. What is the justification for supporting our police forces, who may sometimes have to resort to violent methods in protecting the community?

It could be pointed out that some of Jesus' other sayings certainly seem violent enough. For instance, there is Luke 12:51-53:

<sup>51</sup>Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!  
<sup>52</sup>From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three;  
<sup>53</sup>they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

Some interpretations of this passage indicate that these words are simply a matter of Jesus stating the facts: he was a divisive character – so divisive that he was crucified as a trouble-maker. But the words are disturbing: "I did not come to bring peace on earth."

In other passages Jesus speaks of God's coming judgment, in which evil-doers will be thrown into a fiery place (see the parable of Dives and Lazarus, for example, in Luke 16:19-31). This picture is amplified in other New Testament books, such as Revelation (see Revelation 20:14b-15 "This is the second death, the lake of fire; <sup>15</sup>and anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.")

Perhaps the most startling image in Revelation is found in chapter 19, where the Word of God, the Lamb that was slain, dressed in a blood-stained robe, rides his horse against the forces of evil and slays them all with the sword that comes from his mouth. There could not be a stronger statement of God through Christ using violence to defeat evil! It certainly seems at the opposite end of the spectrum from praying for one's enemy and turning the other cheek.

Far more numerous in the New Testament are passages that encourage a Christ-like devotion to non-violence. A remarkable short epistle in the New Testament is Paul's letter to Philemon. Apparently Philemon's slave Onesimus had run away. We have no evidence that he did so because he was mistreated, but the law would allow his owner to punish him in any way he wished, even to the point of execution, if he was caught. Onesimus somehow wound up with Paul, and apparently became a Christian. Paulo had to send him back, but paved the way with this small letter.

In it Paul reminds Philemon of how much he owes the apostle, who brought him to faith in Christ. He then says that he has Onesimus with him, and that he would prefer to keep the runaway, whom he regards as a son, but that he respects Philemon so much that he is sending Onesimus back. Then, Paul proposes something incredible: that Philemon receive Onesimus back not as a slave but as a brother in Christ!

Paul subtly adds the force of public pressure: he addresses the letter not only to Philemon but also to the church that meets in his house (naming some of the members), and ends by naming his companions who have already read the letter. He promises to repay Philemon for any costs the defection of his slave may have cost – although it is probable that Paul had no funds with which to do that, and may even by that time been in jail himself. And he finishes by saying he looks forward to visiting Philemon, when he certainly would check on how the owner treated Paul's adopted spiritual son.

The Letter to Philemon doesn't overtly attack the custom of slavery, but it does sound its death knell, for how can you treat as a slave someone as a brother or sister? Even more, how could you justify any act of violence against a brother or sister?

For Christians, the primary commandments remain as Jesus said in Matthew 22:36-40: to love God with all one's heart, mind, soul and strength, and to love one another as Christ loves us. This is the test of our Christianity. As I John 4 says "7 Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup>Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. <sup>9</sup>God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. <sup>10</sup>In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. <sup>11</sup>Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. <sup>12</sup>No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us."

QUESTIONS:

1. What are some ways we can bear effective witness against violence today?
2. Jesus in several passages seems to contradict the Old Testament (“You have heard it said... but I say unto you...”) Does this mean there are parts of the Bible that are not inspired Scripture?
3. How can we reconcile the picture of God as being against violence with the picture of God’s violently punishing evil-doers?

CLOSING PRAYER:

**Almighty God, you have made us and all things to serve you, now prepare the world for your rule.**

**Come quickly to save us, so that wars and violence shall end, and your children may live in peace, honoring one another with justice and love.**

**Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.** [Book of Common Worship (BCW), 175]

## CHRISTIAN RESPONSES TO VIOLENCE

### SESSION FOUR; ATTITUDES TOWARD VIOLENCE IN THE CHURCH

The relationship of Christianity and violence is the subject of controversy because some of its teachings advocate peace, love, and compassion, whereas other teachings have been used to justify violence and hatred. Peace, compassion and forgiveness of wrongs done by others are key elements of Christian teaching. However, Christians have struggled since the days of the Church Fathers with the question of when the use of force is justified. Such debates have led to concepts such as just war theory. Throughout history, certain teachings from the Old Testament, the New Testament and Christian theology have been used to justify the use of force against heretics, sinners and external enemies.

In his *Letter to a Christian Nation*, critic of religion Sam Harris writes that "...faith inspires violence in at least two ways. First, people often kill other human beings because they believe that the creator of the universe wants them to do it... Second, far greater numbers of people fall into conflict with one another because they define their moral community on the basis of their religious affiliation..."

But Christian theologians point to a strong doctrinal and historical imperative within Christianity against violence, particularly Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, which taught nonviolence and "love of enemies". For example, J. Denny Weaver in *Violence in Christian Theology* asserts that Jesus' pacifism was "preserved in the justifiable war doctrine that declares all war as sin even when declaring it occasionally a necessary evil, and in the prohibition of fighting by monastics and clergy as well as in a persistent tradition of Christian pacifism."

Among common examples cited in allegation that Christianity is a violent religion, J. Denny Weaver lists "(the) crusades, the multiple blessings of wars, warrior popes, support for capital punishment, corporal punishment under the guise of 'spare the rod and spoil the child,' justifications of slavery, world-wide colonialism in the name of conversion to Christianity, (and) the systemic violence of women subjected to men". Weaver describes the counter-argument as focusing on "Jesus, the beginning point of Christian faith,... whose Sermon on the Mount taught nonviolence and love of enemies; who nonviolently faced his accusers unto death; whose nonviolent teaching inspired the first centuries of pacifist Christian history and was subsequently preserved in the justifiable war doctrine that declares all war as sin even when declaring it occasionally a necessary evil, and in the prohibition of fighting by monastics and clergy as well as in a persistent tradition of Christian pacifism

In his book *Christianity and Violence*, Miroslav Volf asserts that Christian churches suffer from a "confusion of loyalties". He proposes that "rather than the character of the Christian faith itself, a better explanation of why Christian churches are either impotent in the face of violent conflicts or actively participate in them derives from the proclivities of its adherents which are at odds with the character of the Christian faith." He believes that "(although) explicitly giving ultimate allegiance to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, many Christians in fact seem to have an overriding commitment to their respective cultures and ethnic groups."

## QUESTIONS:

1. If war is sometimes a “Necessary evil”, is it still a sin?
2. Sam Harris contends that religious people wage war because they think their Creator wishes it, and because they define their moral community on the basis of their religious community. How would you answer him?
3. Are there signs that many American Christians put their loyalty to country ahead of their allegiance to Christ?

## THE EARLY CHURCH AND PACIFISM

In the first few centuries of Christianity, many Christians refused to engage in military combat. In fact, there were a number of famous examples of soldiers who became Christians and refused to engage in combat afterward. They were subsequently executed for their refusal to fight. This commitment to pacifism and rejection of military service is attributed to two principles: "(1) the use of force (violence) was seen as antithetical to Jesus' teachings and (2) service in the Roman military required worship of the emperor as a god which was a form of idolatry."

Three famous figures in the early Church expressed well this Christian commitment to pacifism. Origen asserted: "Christians could never slay their enemies. For the more that kings, rulers, and peoples have persecuted them everywhere, the more Christians have increased in number and grown in strength." Clement of Alexandria wrote: "Above all, Christians are not allowed to correct with violence the delinquencies of sins." Tertullian argued forcefully against all forms of violence, considering abortion, warfare and even judicial death penalties to be forms of murder.

## QUESTIONS:

1. If Christians are not allowed to use violence to guard against crime and an enemy attack, what would happen to society?
2. If Christians refuse to protect themselves and their nation, should they depend on fellow citizens (who may or not be non-Christians) to defend them?

## THE MEDIEVAL CHURCH: JUST WAR AND HOLY WAR

The change came when Constantine became the emperor of the Roman Empire in 312 C.E. and the idea of a “just war” came into play. At first, this doctrine dealt with when to wage a war and how such a war should be waged. In the past two hundred years, a third element has been added: how to achieve a just peace, along with the prosecution of war criminals.

The principles of “just war” are:

1. A just war can only be waged as a last resort. All non-violent options must be exhausted before the use of force can be justified.
2. A war is just only if it is waged by a legitimate authority. Even just causes cannot be served by actions taken by individuals or groups who do not constitute an authority sanctioned by whatever the society and outsiders to the society deem legitimate.

3. A just war can only be fought to redress a wrong suffered. For example, self-defense against an armed attack is always considered to be a just cause (although the justice of the cause is not sufficient--see point #4). Further, a just war can only be fought with "right" intentions: the only permissible objective of a just war is to redress the injury.
4. A war can only be just if it is fought with a reasonable chance of success. Deaths and injury incurred in a hopeless cause are not morally justifiable.
5. The ultimate goal of a just war is to re-establish peace. More specifically, the peace established after the war must be preferable to the peace that would have prevailed if the war had not been fought.
6. The violence used in the war must be proportional to the injury suffered. States are prohibited from using force not necessary to attain the limited objective of addressing the injury suffered.
7. The weapons used in war must discriminate between combatants and non-combatants. Civilians are never permissible targets of war, and every effort must be taken to avoid killing civilians. The deaths of civilians are justified only if they are unavoidable victims of a deliberate attack on a military target.

After World War II, with its use of nuclear weapons, theologians and ethicists have increasingly argued that just war principles no longer can be applied. Atomic bombs and their modern successors – particularly when used on large cities - will inevitably bring civilian deaths.

## HOLY WAR

In the Middle Ages, a new development came in Christian thought about violence: the concept of “holy war”. In 1095, at the Council of Clermont, Pope Urban II declared that some wars could be deemed as not only a just war, but could, in certain cases, rise to the level of a holy war Jill Claster in her book *Sacred Violence* characterizes this as a "remarkable transformation in the ideology of war", shifting the justification of war from being not only "just" but "spiritually beneficial”.

The Christian concept of Holy War moved a culture formally dedicated to fulfilling the injunction to 'love thy neighbor as thyself' to a point where it sanctioned the use of violence against the alien both outside and inside society. The religious sanctioning of the concept of "holy war" was a turning point in Christian attitudes towards violence; Pope Gregory VII then made the Holy War possible by drastically altering the attitude of the church towards war. Hitherto a knight could obtain remission of sins only by giving up arms, but Urban invited him to gain forgiveness 'in and through the exercise of his martial skills'.

A Holy War was defined by the Roman Catholic Church as "war that is not only just, but justifying; that is, a war that confers positive spiritual merit on those who fight in it" By the 12th century, Bernard of Clairvaux wrote: "The knight of Christ may strike with confidence and die yet more confidently; for he serves Christ when he strikes, and saves himself when he falls.... When he inflicts death, it is to Christ's profit, and when he suffers death, it is his own gain.”

Increasingly, stories of violence in the Bible were used to justify total war. The Biblical account of Joshua and the Battle of Jericho was used to justify the genocide of Catholics during the

Cromwellian conquest of Ireland. Daniel Chirot in his study entitled *Why Some Wars Become Genocidal and Others Don't* interprets 1 Samuel 15:1-3 as "the sentiment, so clearly expressed, that because a historical wrong was committed, justice demands genocidal retribution." This understanding was also used by New World settlers against Native American tribes.

QUESTIONS:

1. Would a "holy war" be justified to protect a helpless minority against a genocidal regime—such as to protect European Jews from a Nazi Holocaust? Or to defend America after Pearl Harbor from a Japan seemingly devoted to our extinction?

CLOSING PRAYER: (Note: the non-bold parts may be led by different members of the group)  
**The Promise of God's Reign**

Arise, shine, for your light has come; and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you,  
*though darkness covers the earth and dark night is over the nations.*

**Refrain: The Lord will be our everlasting light; and God will be our glory.**

But upon you the LORD will rise, and the glory of the LORD will appear over you.  
Nations shall come to your light; and rulers to the brightness of your dawn.

**Refrain: The Lord will be our everlasting light; and God will be our glory.**

No longer will violence be heard in your land, nor ruin or destruction within your borders.  
You will name your walls Salvation, and all your gates Praise.

**Refrain: The Lord will be our everlasting light; and God will be our glory.**

No more will the sun be your light by day, nor by night will you need the brightness of the moon,  
for the LORD will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory.

**Refrain: The Lord will be our everlasting light; and God will be our glory. Amen.**

[*Book of Common Worship*, 581]

CHRISTIAN RESPONSES TO VIOLENCE  
SESSION FIVE;  
ATTITUDES TOWARD VIOLENCE IN THE CHURCH - 2

THE CONCEPT OF NON-VIOLENT RESISTENCE

The Middle Ages also brought a resurgence of the early Church's commitment to pacifism. In Europe various Anabaptist groups insisted that one could not use violence even to protect his own life. Many of their adherents were slaughtered by Lutherans, Calvinists and Roman Catholics. Descendants of these groups are among us today as Mennonites, Amish and the Church of the Brethren.

In England in the 1700s John Woolman led a number of Christian pacifists to form the Society of Friends, often called the Quakers. They not only refused to engage in war but refused to pay that portion of their taxes that would fund the military.

In this century, Mohandas K. Gandhi captured world attention with his non-violent challenges to societal injustices, first in South Africa and then in India. His form of pacifism was not withdrawal from any kind of engagement with a sinful world, but an active confrontation with officialdom that often led to violent repression by police and military forces, and incarceration. But for Gandhi and his followers, suffering violence and imprisonment was itself a form of witness, and a moral victory.

A classic example of Gandhi's teaching was shown in the Salt March of 1930. In a tropical climate, the use of salt is important to all people for survival itself. The British who ruled India at the time, however, closely controlled the salt trade and levied taxes on it. Gandhi led his followers to an ocean beach, where they began heating the sea water and drying salt out of it. The British sent troops in, unsuccessfully, to break up the protest, which only led to more Indians joining in. Then the British arrested and imprisoned Gandhi and his closest followers, which only led to more Indian support. Finally, the British had to give in and not only release Gandhi but also abolished their salt tax.

In the U.S., Gandhi's theories and example became the inspiration for the Civil Rights movement, most notably led by African-Americans like Bayard Rustin, A. Philip Randolph and Martin Luther King, Jr. Beginning with the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955 and continuing with non-violent confrontations in cities like Birmingham and Selma, King became the public face of groups like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. As with his mentor Gandhi, King and his cohorts courted opportunities to be jailed, knowing that this would prick the consciences of many other Americans and lead to the eradication of discriminatory laws and policies.

QUESTION:

1. Is it ever justifiable for Christians to break the laws of their nation or state?
2. What are the rules that should govern non-violent resistance?

## CHRISTIAN REALISM

**Christian Realism** is a philosophical perspective developed by the American theologian in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Niebuhr argued that the Kingdom of God cannot be realized on earth because of the innately corrupt tendencies of society. Because of the injustices that arise on earth, a person is inevitably forced to compromise the ideal of the kingdom of heaven on earth. Niebuhr argued that human perfectibility was an illusion, highlighting the sinfulness of humanity at a time when the world was confronted by the horrors of experiences such World War II, the reigns of both Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin, and the Holocaust. The movement was in part a reaction to the Social Gospel movement. Numerous political figures have been influenced by Christian realism, such as Martin Luther King Jr., Hillary Clinton, Jimmy Carter, Barack Obama, Madeleine Albright, and John McCain.

Christian Realism exerted a strong influence on American foreign and domestic policy in the Cold War era. Many members of the neoconservative movement have claimed to inherit Niebuhr's philosophy; however others argue that neo-conservatism neglects Niebuhr's commitment to social justice

Niebuhr's) emphasis on sin startled a generation, brought up on optimistic convictions of human innocence and perfectibility. Nothing had prepared Americans for Hitler and Stalin, the Holocaust, concentration camps and gulags. Human nature was evidently as capable of depravity as of virtue.

Traditionally, the idea of the frailty of man led to the demand for obedience to ordained authority. But Niebuhr rejected that ancient conservative argument. Ordained authority, he showed, is all the more subject to the temptations of self-interest, self-deception and self-righteousness. Power must be balanced by power.

Niebuhr maintained that elements of self-interest and pride lurk even in the best of human actions. He also recognized that a special synergy of selfishness operates in collectivities like nations. His critique of Americans' belief in their country's innocence and exceptionalism — the idea that we are a redeemer nation going abroad never to conquer, only to liberate — is still relevant today.

## QUESTIONS

1. Do you agree that modern war cannot be just? Why or why not?
2. What can counter violence other than violence?
3. \What is your Christian response to violence?

CLOSING PRAYER: (A litany)

Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers." We celebrate and give thanks for the life and witness for those who through the ages have been brave to answer Christ's call to peace-making:

**Who proclaimed a vision of all people living together, and bore witness to the power of nonviolence,**

We gather, to remember their words, their commitment, and their lives - and to rededicate ourselves to addressing the evil of violence -

**Which claimed their lives and continues to plague our country and the world.**

About 32,000 Americans die by guns alone each year in the United States; 60% are by suicide, 36% by homicide, and nearly 4% by accidental shootings, often in the home.

**And we grieve.**

Eighty-seven people on average are killed by guns every day, including eight children;

**And our hearts break.**

Guns kill some 1,000 people each day in the developing world;

**And we mourn.**

An American child is twelve times more likely to die by a gun than are the children who live in all twenty-five industrialized nations combined;

**And we weep.**

The annual economic cost of gun violence in America is estimated to be \$174 billion. Medical costs, decimated families, the court system, our jails and prisons, and security measures in airports, schools, and public buildings all contribute to this sum;

**And sorrow sweeps over us.**

Since John F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, more Americans have died by gun fire within our own country than American servicemen and women who were killed in all our wars since the Revolution;

**And we pray.**

Faced with such violence,

**We grieve for those are killed and those whose lives are forever changed; we seek to comfort for those who have lost loved ones; we pray for a change of heart for those who resort to violence.**

Faced with gun violence, may we:

**Educate; Organize; Advocate; and in all the ways we can, work for that day when weapons of destruction are transformed into instruments of healing.**

May it be so.

**May we so do.**

(Written by The Rev. W. Mark Koenig, Coordinator, Presbyterian Peacemaking Program, with revisions. Statistics are from the Centers of Disease Control, the Pew Research Center, and the U.S. Census Bureau)