INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Welcome back to our class on Christian ethics. This is in fact our last class in this BFL class. Next Sunday we’ll start a new series through the book of 1 Peter. It’s been three weeks since we last met, so let’s quickly review our definition of Christian ethics. Who would like to take a crack at it? Or at least offer part of it?

“Christian ethics is the rational process of making real-life decisions that agree with both God’s character and purposes for creation as revealed through his Word.”

So essentially we are taking God’s truth from his Word and applying it using our reason to apply it to real life circumstances with all of their messiness and complexity. This morning we’re going to talk about the messy and complex issue of war.

In 1928 a group of nations the ratification of the Kellog-Briand pact, something you may have a very hazy memory of from 11th grade World History. The aim of the pact was essentially to outlaw war. It renounced war as “an instrument of national policy.” These were a few of the nations that signed on: the United States, Germany, Belgium, France, Great Britain, Italy, Japan, Poland. That’s basically the list of countries which entered into WWII just a few years later. The attempt to outlaw war failed entirely. In fact, the 20th century probably saw more deaths in war than any other century.

Christian pacifism goes back much farther than 1928. Some of the leading thinkers of the early church thought Christians shouldn’t be involved in war. After all, how can you love your enemy if you’re trying to kill them? Other Christians have argued that war is acceptable under certain circumstances.

Is it ever okay for Christians to go to war? If so, under what circumstances?

THE BIBLE ON WAR
Let’s look at some of the Bible’s teaching on war. The Bible has a lot to say about war. I won’t come close to exhausting the Bible’s teaching on war this morning, but I do want to get us started with a few principles.

**First, God is a god of peace.** Turn to Isaiah 2. In this passage Isaiah is prophesying, I think, about life in the New Heaven and New Earth. **Can I get someone to read Isaiah 2:1-4?**

Isaiah 2:1-4  The word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.  

2 It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it,  

3 and many peoples shall come, and say: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.  

4 He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.

So there will be no more war one day. God is leading us to peace. That is the goal. War might be a necessary evil in this fallen world. But once sin is done with, there will be no war. **How should this condition the way we view war?**

**Second, God is a mighty warrior.** The Bible is full of descriptions of God as a warrior. So, Psalm 24 asks of God, “Who is this King of glory? The LORD, strong and mighty, the LORD, mighty in battle!” But I want to look at a picture of Jesus. Turn to Revelation 19. **Would someone read Rev. 19:11-16?**

Revelation 19:11-16  ¶ Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war.  

12 His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself.  

13 He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which
he is called is The Word of God. 14 And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. 15 From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. 16 On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords.

This is a pretty terrifying picture of Jesus. This isn’t how we typically see him. But Jesus is himself a warrior. **What does this tell us about the morality of war?** God at least is justified in waging war. And he will do so.

*Third, it is acceptable for believers to participate in war under some circumstances.* The wars of Israel in the Old Testament are an obvious example, although those are complicated example by virtue of the fact that Israel was God’s chosen nation, not just some secular nation. But I think this point is still pretty clear, even in the New Testament. Perhaps the best place to look is Luke 3.

**Luke 3:14** 14 Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages."

**What light does this shed on this question of Christians and war?** Jesus doesn’t say that soldiers have to leave their profession. In fact, he seems to endorse their remaining in the soldiering profession so long as they are honest.

Romans 16:20 kind of sums God’s character up. Paul writes, “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.” So God is a god of peace, but he will crush evil finally. In an analogous way, I think Christians are likewise called to be people of peace, but there may be times when we need to confront evil with force.

**JUST WAR THEORY**

So I think we can conclude that Christians are able to go to war, but clearly there are limits. We still have to ask under what circumstances war is acceptable. The Bible doesn’t give explicit instructions on this point. Over the centuries, Christian theologians have addressed this issue through something which has come to be
called just war theory. Proponents of just war theory argue that you are justified in going to war if you have 1) the right to go to war (jus ad bellum); and 2) right conduct in war (jus in bello). So you have to fight for the right reason and in the right way.

I thought it would be useful to look back at some of the ways different figures in Church history have articulated this. So I might be getting into a history lesson for a few minutes, but forgive me. Let me start with Augustine who is really the fountainhead of this tradition.

“Peace should be the object of your desire; war should be waged only as a necessity, and waged only that God may by it deliver men from the necessity and preserve them in peace. For peace is not sought in order to the kindling of war, but war is waged in order that peace may be obtained. Therefore, even in waging war, cherish the spirit of a peacemaker, that, by conquering those whom you attack, you may lead them back to the advantages of peace.” Augustine, Letter to Count Boniface

Where do we see God’s character reflected in this principle? We learn from this that the aim of all war ought to be peace. War is not an end in itself; rather, it’s an occasionally necessary step we must undertake in order to get to peace.

“A great deal depends on the causes for which men undertake wars, and on the authority they have for doing so; for the natural order which seeks the peace of mankind, ordains that the monarch should have the power of undertaking war if he thinks it advisable, and that the soldiers should perform their military duties in behalf of the peace and safety of the community.” (65)

Augustine makes two important points here. He says, “A great deal depends on the causes for which men undertake wars.” For a war to be just it must be undertaken for a just reason. **What would be good causes?** Self-defense and the restoration of peace are good. Wars undertaken to amass wealth or power are forbidden.

He also says that wars must be undertaken according to lawful authority. Romans 13 says that all authority has been established by God. So for a war to be just, it must be ordered by one of these God-ordained authorities—the monarch or government. In other words, even if we thought we had a good reason, First
Baptist Church of Durham cannot go to war. God has given the right to wage war to civil authorities.

Augustine also says that it matters how we conduct ourselves in war.

“What is the evil in war? Is it the death of some who will soon die in any case, that others may live in peaceful subjection? This is mere cowardly dislike, not any religious feeling. The real evils in war are love of violence, revengeful cruelty, fierce and implacable enmity, wild resistance, and the lust of power, and such like.” (64)

War is violent by definition, but we shouldn’t be cruel or love violence. As we read earlier, we should, “even in waging war, cherish the spirit of a peacemaker.”

So to summarize some of Augustine’s points, a just war requires 1) a just cause (self-defense and peace), 2) a lawful authority, 3) just means (no cruelty or love of violence).

Writing centuries later, Thomas Aquinas picked up where Augustine left off. Aquinas lays down three principles of just war.

“In order for a war to be just, three things are necessary. First, the authority of the sovereign by whose command the war is to be waged. For it is not the business of a private individual to declare war, because he can seek for redress of his rights from the tribunal of his superior ... Secondly, a just cause is required, namely that those who are attacked should be attacked because they deserve it on account of some fault ... Thirdly, it is necessary that the belligerents should have a rightful intention, so that they intend the advancement of good, or the avoidance of evil.” Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*

In order for a war to be just, it must be commanded by a lawful authority, provoked by a just cause, and carried out with a right intention. Aquinas doesn’t talk about the means by which war must be carried out—in other words, if you’ve got those three things down, is it okay to put civilians to the sword or massacre prisoners?—but I think he does hint at it.

When we look at the Reformers—Luther and Calvin—we see basically the same attitude. They both follow in the Just War Tradition.
Luther says that War can actually be a good thing:

“What men write about war, saying it is a great plague, is all true. But they should also consider how great the plague is that war prevents. If people were good and wanted to keep peace, war would be the greatest plague on earth. But what are you going to do about the fact that people will not keep the peace, but rob, steal, kill, outrage women and children, and take away property and honor?” Luther, Whether Soldiers, Too, Can be Saved.

Calvin is in line with Just War Theory as well:

“It is the dictate both of natural equity, and of the nature of the office, therefore, that princes are armed, not only to restrain the crimes of private individuals by judicial punishments, but also to defend the territories committed to their charge by going to war against any hostile aggression; and the Holy Spirit, in many passages of Scripture, declares such wars to be lawful.” Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion.

So what are some of the requirements we’ve listed for a war to be considered just?

First, a nation must have a just cause for war. Typically, that means that they’re acting to defend themselves or someone too weak to defend themselves.

Second, war can only be declared by a lawful authority. Private citizens and community groups can’t declare war. God has uniquely given the power of the sword to civil authorities.

Third, war must be conducted with just goals. This is different than cause. It is possible to imagine a war that begins with a just cause but quickly becomes a pretext for selfish ambition. The goal must be justice and restoration of peace, not the acquisition of wealth or power.

Fourth, war must be carried out with just means. Even if all of the other conditions are met, it isn’t permissible to target civilians or torture captured soldiers or indulge in cruelty or lustful behavior.
These are some of the principles of Just War Theory. Modern political theorists and theologians have expanded on these terms (probability of success, last resort), but this is a start.

**What are your thoughts? Do you find this compelling?**

I think Just War Theory gives us helpful criteria that we can use as we think about war. The trick, of course, is how you apply them. You probably have never thought about it in these terms, but over the last decade, our country has been engaged in a national debate about just war theory.

**CASE STUDIES**

I think one of the most valuable ways to think through these issues is with some case studies.

- **Case Study #1:** You graduate college and are offered a job in the tiny and beautiful island nation Warlandia. You move there and fall in love with the place because of the scenery and the fact that the island has no income tax. You even take on Warlandian citizenship. Everything is going great until the President of Warlandia decides he doesn’t like the look of the Prime Minister of the Coconut Republic and declares war. The next day you hear that a national income tax is being instituted to pay for it. Will you pay the tax? Will you allow yourself to be drafted?
  - Romans 13:7 Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.

- **Case Study #2:** You are a pilot in WWII assigned to a bomber squadron. Your commander sends you on a bombing run over a mixed industrial/residential section of Berlin. You know that your mission will kill noncombatants. But you also feel it might be necessary to win the war. What do you do?

- **Case Study #3:** You leave your mother country and settle in a far off colony where you prosper. The home country begins to pass some laws and levy
some taxes that many in the colony consider burdensome and unjust. When representatives of the colony complain, they are ignored. One day, a man rides into town to say that the colony is going to revolt and throw off the rule of the home country and establish a democracy. Do you join the cause? Support it?

- *Case Study #4:*