

Wars and Military Conflicts from a Biblical Point of View: A Pentecostal Perspective

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ABSTRACT: The issue of wars and military conflicts is one of the most significant social challenges confronting humanity today. The establishment of the United Nations aimed to protect future generations from the consequences of warfare by maintaining international peace and security. Regrettably, whether we realize it or not, we are part of a violent world where war and armed conflict still permeate our world today, and the number of armed conflicts and wars is alarmingly high. War is a problem that has both old and new connotations. The studies conducted so far to establish the number of armed conflicts and wars differ from one researcher to another, but their numbers are very high. These conflicts are characterized by brief interludes of peace, significant direct and collateral casualties, substantial economic losses, and far-reaching consequences, leaving deep scars on those directly affected and their descendants (Jongman 2005, 2-3). This study endeavors to analyze the Christian perspective on war, addressing questions related to the attitude of Christian and Pentecostal believers toward contemporary and topical issues concerning war and armed conflicts.

KEYWORDS: War and armed conflicts, compassion, preservation of human life, Christian viewpoints, pacifism, activism, selectivism, self-reflection

1. Introduction

From a biblical perspective, wars and military conflicts are often seen as a result of human sin and rebellion against God's plan for peace and harmony. The Bible teaches that God desires all people to live in peace with one another (Hebrews 12:14) and that violence and warfare are not part of His original design for humanity (Rotaru 2012, 5). However, the Bible also acknowledges that in a fallen world, conflicts will arise (Matthew 24:6) and that sometimes it is necessary to defend oneself or others against aggression. In the Old Testament, for example, God commanded the Israelites to engage in warfare against hostile nations in order to protect themselves and establish their homeland.

Pentecostals believe that through the Holy Spirit, individuals and communities can experience a radical transformation that leads to a new way of living in harmony with God and with one another. From a Pentecostal perspective, it is important to remember that the ultimate solution to conflict and violence is not found in military might or political power (Ephesians 6:12), but in the transformative power of God's love.

Therefore, while war and military conflict may be a reality in our world, Pentecostals believe that our ultimate hope and trust should be in God's power to bring about lasting peace and reconciliation.

2. Approaching war from a Biblical perspective

The Bible provides a wealth of information regarding war, but a clear understanding of the positioning of the two testaments is vital. In the Old Testament, from the book of Genesis chapter fourteen, it is evident that God supports the use of force for the defense of the innocent, as demonstrated in Abraham's fight for Lot's release. Subsequently, in Deuteronomy 1:6-8 and Joshua 6:2-3, the nation of Israel was granted possession of a land by God as a judgment for the sins of the previous inhabitants. The Jewish people, comprising a single nation, arose over four hundred years of Egyptian slavery, and God, in His sovereignty, granted them the land of Canaan as their own, establishing them as the people of God.

The biblical accounts of 2 Chronicles, chapters 20 and 32, and 1 Samuel 13, 14, provide insights into the involvement of God in military affairs. The former narrates how God

intervened in the battles of Jehoshaphat and Hezekiah, offering tactics and military power to His people in the face of armed confrontations. In the case of Hezekiah, an angel of God was dispatched to inflict a loss of one hundred and eighty-five thousand soldiers upon the Assyrian enemies. Similarly, the latter account reveals that God approved and initiated wars waged by Saul against the Philistines and the Amalekites. In this regard, God commanded the complete destruction of the Amalekite nation. Likewise, in the book of 2 Samuel 15, David fought against the Philistines, continuing the precedent set by Saul. These accounts illustrate the extent of God's intervention in military affairs and the divine support bestowed upon His people during times of war.

It is interesting to see how the New Testament differs from the Old Testament in terms of the identification of the people of God. In the New Testament, the people of God are made up of redeemed individuals from all nations and continents, rather than being limited to a particular nation. The Apostle Paul, in the book of Ephesians 6:11-17, explains this transition and the change of the battlefield from earth to interplanetary cosmic space. He also describes the real enemies of man and the Church, who are the devil, the demons, and their authority structures. Paul provides the most effective armor that soldiers need to ensure success. Furthermore, in Matthew 5:38-48, Jesus Christ teaches us the attitude we should have when there is a possibility of confrontation. He encourages us to yield and not resist those who harm us. Instead, we are to do good to them as much as we can. This is a powerful message that highlights the importance of love and compassion, even when dealing with our enemies.

The Gospel of Luke contains several passages that discuss the role of soldiers in the Christian faith. Luke 3:14 elucidates the teachings of John the Baptist, who, in response to questions posed by some soldiers, exhorts them to obey the commandments and express gratitude. In Luke 7, the story of a centurion who, based on his faith, Jesus healing his servant is recounted. Additionally, the book of Acts 10, describes Cornelius, a God-fearing centurion who, despite his position, lives a pure life. Peter is dispatched to Cornelius to share the Christian faith with him. The Bible is silent on the question of these individuals' fulfillment of their military duties, instead emphasizing their faith, which motivated them to present themselves before God and Jesus, His Son. Remarkably, neither Peter nor Jesus asked them to give up their military service during these encounters.

It is noteworthy that in Romans 13, the apostle Paul urges individuals to submit to authority, as ultimately, they submit to God, who is the ultimate authority. Moreover, prominent philosophers such as Thomas Aquinas and Augustine posit that the primary function of government is to exercise authority over malevolence and safeguard and conserve human life (Copan 2022, 23-25). It is evident that any government's topmost concern should be the protection of its citizens from harm and the preservation of human life (Sproul 2014, 7-8). The study of war in the context of the Old and New Testaments is essential due to the paradigm shifts and variations between them. In the Mosaic religion, as presented in the Old Testament with regard to the people of Israel, the state was theocratic and governed by God through kings, who were anointed. The priesthood and kingship appeared to be merged without any clear demarcation. In contrast, the situation in the New Testament was distinct, and even in the early days of Christianity, the relationship between the Church and the state was a concern among believers because of the Church's missionary status and the spread of Christianity among various nations, peoples, and secular tribes. Therefore, it is imperative to analyze the topic of war in both contexts to gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of the subject (Sproul 2014, 4).

With a desire to understand the viewpoints of Christians on the topic of war, I embarked on a quest to investigate the stance of Pentecostal Christians, whom I personally identify with. After thorough research, I have determined that there are three distinct categories of opinions, which I will elaborate on below.

3. Pacifism

Pacifism in the Pentecostal context takes shape around the period of the First World War, arguing the incorrectness of believers' participation in armed conflicts (Peachey 2013, xi). It has as its source the holiness group of Quakers and Mennonites. The statement made by the Church of God addressed the reality of war, stating that it is wrong to kill people and, that war is merciless, describing it in graphic terms and then reinforcing it based on the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ in the Bible by loving our enemies and not you would kill, arguing that the purpose of war is not to reconcile with God, but in contrast, pacifism (Peachey 2013, xv). The Pentecostal creed from the very beginning included a peace-making message.

It is strongly recommended that individuals who identify as faithful, particularly those who are young, engage in constructive dialogues with individuals who have been delegated church authority within their community prior to making the decision to pursue a career in the military. Such conversations may provide a space to discuss concerns related to individual conscience, which is inherently linked to one's spiritual identity. By engaging in this pre-decisional process, individuals may be able to make more informed and thoughtful decisions about their career path (Peachey 2013, xvii).

Military service entails not only the risk of personal injury or death but also of causing harm to others, a reality that challenges the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ as recounted in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5, and Revelation 13:10. As such, believers are encouraged to engage in self-reflection and seek guidance from authoritative church figures when considering a military career, particularly in relation to matters of conscience that are intimately tied to one's spiritual identity. Pacifism represents a rejection of all arguments for activism, and as such is a vocal critic of such activities both from a biblical and social perspective. Its proponents argue for the adoption of a non-violent approach to conflict resolution, citing a moral imperative to avoid causing harm to others (Beaman 2013,230-234).

In the words of John Wesley, a peacemaker is driven by an overwhelming love for God and humanity, which cannot be contained within the confines of family, friends, or limited belief systems. Instead, the peacemaker transcends these boundaries, seeking to spread love and do good to all, including neighbors, strangers, friends, and even enemies (Beaman 2013, 51). Let us all strive to be peacemakers in our own lives and spread love and kindness wherever we go.

From a biblical perspective, pacifism is based on the sixth commandment of the Decalogue, which states, "Thou shalt not kill!" (Exodus 20:13) Additionally, the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:39, which encourage non-resistance towards those who do evil, are often cited as supporting evidence. The fundamental belief of pacifism is that killing is always morally wrong, and deliberately ending someone's life, regardless of the circumstances, is unequivocally unethical (Kenyon 2019, 10-80). Crime has the same wrongful status in any society and context because all humans were created in the image and likeness of God. The Lord Jesus Christ motivated the believers to love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them (Matthew 5:44) and taking the life of another person is an action that is in contradiction with His principles of Christian love preached, based on hatred and is proven to have a non-Christian foundation (Copan 2022, 36-38).

In the Bible, Jesus Christ teaches us that using physical force to resist evil is wrong. Instead, he encourages us to use spiritual principles of love to overcome evil. He asks us to redirect all judgment and revenge to God who judges with righteousness. This message is conveyed in Matthew 5:39-41 and Romans 12:19-21. In Matthew 10:35, Jesus is speaking in spiritual terms, explaining the result of the consecration of new converts to him. This consequence is not the purpose of his coming, but rather a result of the opposition of unbelievers. Similarly, Ephesians 6:12 reminds believers that we do not have to fight physically, but rather spiritually. We are called to fight against the spirits of evil in the heavenly places.

The pacifist argument posits that war is inherently immoral and antithetical to the social good. This assertion is supported by a range of compelling social arguments that underscore the deleterious impact that war has on human societies. Specifically, pacifists contend that war begets cruelty, starvation, and death, and therefore cannot be considered a legitimate means of resolving disputes between individuals or nations (Beaman 2009, 55). The ethical implications of military technologies, military service, and the war industry are also called into question in this context. Those who are involved in these pursuits must grapple with the moral consequences of their work, which may involve direct or indirect contributions to the taking of human lives (Beaman 2013, 33). As such, the conscience of individuals who work in these fields is a critical consideration in discussions surrounding the legitimacy of war and its attendant industries.

The Pentecostals, influenced by the Assemblies of God and Anabaptists, are dedicated to social justice and peacekeeping, much like other denominations that seek to improve their followers' lives while preserving their religious beliefs. Although Anabaptists are not a denomination, their traditional values have had a significant impact on Pentecostals. In his book, *The Naked Anabaptist*, Stuart Murray highlights that Anabaptism reflects the practices of the early churches and is a natural expression of what it means to follow Jesus in a post-Christendom culture. This culture is one where the church is no longer compromised by its association with wealth, power, status, and control (Beaman 2013, 40-41).

Many conflicts throughout history have been driven by human dissatisfaction and greed, particularly the desire to acquire land and wealth. The aftermath of war cannot be comprehensively measured, as there are intangible factors that are beyond human understanding and can only be evaluated by a higher power. The sorrow and suffering endured by those who have been harmed or lost loved ones is immeasurable, compounded by the inhumane acts of violence and brutality that are often left unpunished.

Throughout history, it has been demonstrated that wars often lead to the emergence of subsequent conflicts, as evidenced by the First and Second World Wars. Even in cases where wars do not officially persist, they may continue to simmer and escalate without ever achieving a permanent resolution. Unfortunately, recent conflicts have shown a tendency to transform into more widespread and intense hostilities (Zmuk 2022, 1-6). The legacy of war can create animosity between generations and inspire a thirst for revenge that could potentially lead to even greater devastation than the initial conflict.

4. Activism

This perspective on war asserts that patriotism is justified by providing evidence in support of participation in armed conflict. Proponents of this viewpoint often cite Romans 13 to argue that the authority of the state is derived from God, and therefore, it is a biblical duty for believers to heed and participate in any such conflict in which their state is engaged.

According to the Bible, civil administration forms in a state or country are bestowed by God to ensure order and prevent disorder (Geisler 2010, 220). Additionally, the Bible teaches us that man was given dominion over all of creation from the beginning of time, as stated in Genesis 1:28. However, following the fall, a hierarchy of dominion emerged in which man's authority was placed above that of women.

It is believed that due to humanity's transgressions, the growth of iniquity on earth necessitated the delegation of divine authority to governments to maintain order and safeguard the innocent from aggressors (Hauerwas 2012, 70-77). This notion of divine rule extends beyond the people of Israel and has been referenced in the book of Daniel, which states that God governs the kingdom of humanity and grants power to whomever He chooses. This principle applies even in the present era, where it manifests in varying degrees of authority, including capital punishment (Geisler 2010, 221).

The New Testament confirms the teachings of Jesus Christ regarding the relationship between the government and its citizens. Jesus Christ recognized the authority of the civil government, as evidenced by his instruction to "render unto Caesar what is Caesar's" (Matthew 22:21). Thus, He recognized that the power of the government derives from God. This recognition of divine authority is further exemplified in Christ's response to Pilate, where He acknowledges that Pilate's power over Him is granted from above (John 19:11). The Apostle Paul, in his writings, urged believers to pray for those who occupy positions of authority, emphasizing the need for submission and obedience to government. For instance, in his letter to Timothy, he urged believers to pray for kings and all who are in high positions, so that they may lead peaceful and quiet lives (1 Timothy 2:2). In his letter to Titus, he similarly urged submission to authorities, urging believers to be obedient and ready for every good work (Titus 3:1). These teachings highlight the importance of recognizing and respecting the authority of the government. They also underscore the importance of being good citizens and praying for those in positions of authority. By doing so, believers can contribute to the maintenance of a peaceful and just society. The Apostle Peter's exhortation to obedience to the authorities in 1 Pet 2:13-14 is not incongruous with his call to submit to God. This dual emphasis is intended to encourage Christianity to embody obedience to both earthly and divine authority. It is a reminder that faith can be expressed through practical means while still paying respect to those in positions of power.

It is truly enlightening the insights into the teachings of the New Testament. The significance of obedience and submission to the authorities appointed by God is a recurring theme throughout the Bible. The likes of Paul, Peter, and Jesus Christ Himself, all urge believers to demonstrate reverence and offer prayers to those occupying positions of authority, acknowledging that their power is divinely bestowed. Notably, Romans 13, underscores the importance of adhering to the government's laws, even in times of conflict, as a means of upholding God's justice and averting chaos and instability.

Biblical activists hold a prominent view regarding the interpretation of Romans 13. They posit that in times of armed conflict, faithful citizens have a duty to adhere to military service, even if they disagree with the government's actions. The rationale behind this stance is that disobedience in such situations would contribute to an even greater evil, leading to revolution, anarchy, disorder, and chaos. In their estimation, supporting the government in this way serves the cause of divine justice.

Geisler, citing Plato, raises several social arguments in his discourse. He reminds Socrates, who was facing a death sentence and had declined escape suggestions, of five reasons for complying with an unjust government. According to Geisler, the government is the mother of humanity and its educator, and the governed have a responsibility to obey. Moreover, they have the liberty to depart from their government, and without it, societal disorder would ensue. These five perspectives serve as the foundation for activism (Geisler 2010, 222-224).

5. Selectivism

Scholars hold varying perspectives as to whether certain wars are justifiable, with selectivism being one such view. This school of thought posits that some wars are worth engaging in, while others are not, and seeks to provide a satisfactory alternative to Christian ethics. Selectivism aims to strike a balance between activism and pacifism, by establishing criteria for determining what constitutes a just war and who is responsible for authorizing it (Geisler 2010, 228-229). According to most scholars, only defensive, patriotic wars can be deemed justifiable. This conclusion has been upheld for centuries, with some scholars citing the teachings of Thomas Aquinas, the 13th-century philosopher.

One of his primary conditions was deeming defensive wars as justifiable while condemning aggressive wars. However, this perspective could only be applied once all

diplomatic avenues for a peaceful resolution had been exhausted and all potential solutions and compromises had been explored. At that point, defensive warfare would be considered a last resort (Hauerwas 2011, 25-41).

The second condition proposed by Thomas Aquinas was to ensure that the intention behind any action was honest and aimed at creating peace and justice for everyone involved. Unjust intentions, such as conquest and domination, as well as economic and ideological motives, were to be excluded. He also emphasized that the decision to participate in a war or armed conflict should be made by the governing authority of a state, rather than by an individual with a high position or influence, who might declare war based on personal considerations. According to his reasoning, the sword was given by God to the governments of countries for the purpose of using it against people in conflict with the law, and not to individuals (Rom 13:4).

According to a proposed set of criteria for a war to be considered righteous, it must be conducted fairly and with limited objectives aimed at establishing peace through the use of minimal military force. The concept of a righteous war is contingent upon a set of criteria proposed by Thomas. First and foremost, it must be waged justly, with objectives limited to the establishment of peace. To this end, military forces must be used minimally to avoid endangering or destroying the economy of the country in question, as outlined in Deuteronomy 20:19-20. The primary purpose of the war should be to support the livelihoods of those who survive it, and the use of chemical, biological, or mass destruction weapons should be avoided. Furthermore, non-combatants, including children, women, the elderly, and civilians, are to be granted immunity, and it is considered a punishable offense to attack or destroy any of these groups. A righteous war is one that is conducted fairly, with the goal of establishing peace using minimal force, and without causing unnecessary harm to non-combatants.

According to Geisler, in a world where evil prevails, the use of force is crucial to restrain evil individuals, and therefore, law enforcement and military forces are indispensable. Failure to resist evil or defend the innocent is deemed morally wrong. Similarly, witnessing an act of cruelty towards someone without taking any action is morally inexcusable. Essentially, not resisting evil is a sin of omission and can be as evil as sins of commission (James 4:17). Geisler cites an example of a husband who fails to protect his wife and children from a violent intruder. Any nation that fails to safeguard its citizens against malevolent aggressors is morally remiss (Geisler 2010, 235-236).

6. Conclusions

As previously demonstrated, I have discerned three distinct perspectives on war: pacifism, activism, and selectivism. While the first two are in direct opposition, the third blends elements of both. While pacifism maintains that war is never justifiable, activism asserts that obedience to one's country and participation in any armed conflict is always necessary. Pacifism asserts that war is inherently immoral. Activism, on the other hand, maintains that it is always necessary to abide by the laws of one's country and participate in any military conflict. Finally, selectivism advocates for participation in war only under specific criteria, such as in the context of a just war (Copan 2022, 15-17).

As a devout Christian, one cannot condone activism that goes against the core principles of the Bible and is morally incorrect (Rotaru 2014b, 61-63). This belief is supported by historical examples, such as the refusal of midwives to harm Jewish children (Exodus 1), Daniel's unwavering commitment to worship God (Daniel 6), and the steadfastness of his three companions in defying a royal decree to worship the king (Daniel 3). These instances serve as evidence of divine approval for those who stand up for what is right, even in the face of adversity.

Pacifism also comes with its insufficiency that lies in its neglect of certain clear circumstances discussed in the Bible that justify self-defense (Exodus 22), defense of the innocent (Genesis 14), and capital punishment (Genesis 9:6). It is essential to consider these instances on a case-by-case basis and determine a course of action that is in accordance with one's own moral and ethical beliefs.

Both sides present arguments and have their own justifications to support their respective decisions. Two opposing viewpoints exist, each with their own reasons and justifications. Activists contend that the Bible states that the administration of a country comes from God and is entrusted with the sword, while pacifists believe that believers should embody peacefulness, abstain from endorsing warfare, and not give their consent to war.

The principle of selectivism asserts that the resort to war is only permissible provided that all attempts at peaceful resolution have been thoroughly exhausted. This doctrine is grounded in the invocation of divine authority (Rotaru 2014a, 23-34) over the governance of nations, thus encouraging obedience to a clean conscience. It is fundamentally opposed to the implementation of oppressive, immoral, and unethical commands by governing authorities. In essence, selectivism represents a form of selective pacifism that emphasizes the pursuit of peace as a priority over the use of violent means to achieve political objectives.

Offering theological resources to individuals receiving education in Pentecostal institutions worldwide is crucial in allowing them to thoughtfully examine topics such as nationalism, patriotism, war, and other topics that can stir up division. A fellowship for Pentecostal peace could prove invaluable in advocating for the importance of peacemaking as a fundamental aspect of a Spirit-empowered existence and inspiring instruction on this subject (Beaman 2013, 186).

As scholars, our mission is to uphold the principles of peacemaking and justice-seeking as a genuine and essential part of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity. We firmly believe that the teachings of Jesus Christ hold relevance in all aspects of the world, including its tensions, crises, and brokenness. Our aim is to showcase that the pursuit of peace and justice, as demonstrated by Jesus and his followers, is both theologically sound and biblically mandated. We believe that with the guidance of Jesus and the power of the Spirit, achieving peace with justice is a realistic goal (Beaman 2013, 189-190).

At the core of our beliefs is a Christocentric/Christomorphic approach to our priorities and decision-making. We hold that the Holy Spirit's gifts and graces are present and active in our lives (Acts 2:39), and that the anointing of the Spirit calls us to follow in Jesus' footsteps (Luke 4:18). While the world's approach may differ, we strive for Spirit-filled peacemaking and justice-seeking, trusting that Jesus is with us every step of the way (John 16:33) (Beaman 2013, 190). At our core, we believe that it's not enough to simply hold convictions - we must also take action. As individuals grounded in our faith and driven by a desire for peace and justice, we strive to unite our communities in pursuit of these goals, drawing inspiration from the teachings of Christ (1 Cor 6:18-19) and the rich history of New Testament and Pentecostal Christianity (Acts 9:31). Similarly to the members of PCPJ, we are committed to reclaiming this legacy and sharing it with others, starting with our own church communities and radiating outwards to the rest of the world (Romans 15:13, Acts 1:8) (Beaman 2013, 190-191). As adherents of the teachings of Jesus Christ, we acknowledge that we have a responsibility to both enact justice and exhibit mercy (Micah 6:8), act as agents of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:11-21), and cultivate an environment of peace (Matthew 5:9).

The pursuit of integral peace, as well as the vocation and practice of peacemaking, are crucial aspects that the Church of God should endeavor to undertake. Opposing all forms of violence that distort and disfigure the purpose of God may be another way in which the Church can recover its "subversive memory." It is pertinent to remember that during the early years of its existence, the Church of God had a calling and practice of peacemaking and non-violence, which ran counter to the prevailing societal norms. Faithful to its Pentecostal

identity and historical legacy, the Church must continue to advocate for peace, publicly denounce the perpetrators of violence and killings, and not justify the political and military actions of today's empire in the name of religion. In light of the above, the Church of God must understand that no human empire, military force, economic power, or religious system can attain the stature of the Kingdom of God. Therefore, it is imperative that the Church cast its lot for peace and work towards building a world where every human being can live with dignity and in harmony (Beaman 2013, 255).

It is indeed accurate that faith can manifest through practical means (Rotaru 2017, 545-550) while maintaining respect for those in positions of authority. These teachings hold relevance not only in religious scenarios but also in business and academic settings where power structures exist. Establishing an ethical and moral foundation is crucial for prospering in such environments, and embracing these principles can contribute to a fairer and more equitable society (Rotaru 2016, 29-43).

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