

## Can A Christian Serve In The Armed Forces?

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On September 11, 2001, I was holding a gospel meeting in another town. The local preacher and I were enjoying our time together and getting better acquainted. The news came on of the terrible tragedy about the planes crashing into the towers and the Pentagon. Like most Americans we were shocked and horrified. We could not believe that such a thing could happen and did happen on American soil. As we began discussing the events that had transpired and what our country's response to such acts of terrorism would be, my preacher friend said to me, "I'll put the green back on and go over there and fight." And then he asked me, "wouldn't you?" And my response caught him off guard, I believe, when I answered, "No!" I quickly added that I would go if called upon and do what I could do, but I would not be engaged in combat. As we began to give our sides to the warfare issue it was very clear that we had diametrically opposite views. But here is the interesting point: we both believed, in the long run, that we each had the right to our view as long as we did not make our view binding on others. We agreed that we were still brothers, and I believe, became even closer in appreciation of each other. We had shared something with each other that not too many people are willing to talk about. We both agreed that each one must decide in their own heart what they can conscientiously do or refrain from doing during time of war. I believe that is where this issue should be decided, with the individual.

### Reasons for My Changing View

I grew up during the Viet Nam War. I fully believed that I would be drafted to fight in that war as soon as I graduated High School. During those days the armed services were able to draft people into service, and numbers were drawn each year that represented birthdays, and that was the order in which you were drafted. When I was a freshman, my number was in the 200's. When I became a sophomore my number was in the 100's. My junior year my number was in the 80's. My senior year my number was six. I thought full well that my number was up and I would get that letter from the Defense Department, like so many others did, informing me of when I should report for duty. But the year I graduated from High School they stopped the draft. And there has not been a draft since. Young men turning eighteen still must register with selective service, but the draft is not being utilized at this time. Yes, during that time I would have gone and "done my duty," which would have included combat. But I have had a change of mind.

In the mid to late 70's I had a change of heart on this issue. I was in preacher training school and my life had changed. I no longer believed that it was my "duty" to go overseas and kill the enemy. I did have a desire to go overseas, but to teach the gospel. More of a seek and save mission than a search and destroy mission. This belief was solidified in my mind through a debate we had among our class at preacher training school over the carnal warfare issue. Our class was divided right down the middle with five students on each side. I have heard that another class tried to debate the issue, but it was halted after the two sides nearly got into a fist-fight. Such was not the case with our class. Without bitterness and insults, well maybe a little harmless fun, we were able to discuss what we believed the Lord wanted us to do in war time. I don't believe we changed anyone's beliefs, but we firmed up our own. Again, each side agreed that the individual should decide what they can conscientiously do or refrain from doing.

## The Original Question

The question for this topic is whether or not a Christian can serve in the armed forces. And my immediate answer is, "Yes!" That might be confusing to some because often times the "pacifist position" is believed to teach that we are against being involved in war completely. Perhaps there are as many pacifist positions as there are non-pacifist positions. My idea of the pacifist position is that I believe in supporting my country, but not in combat and taking other people's lives.

To get a better understanding of the issue, I decided to talk to an enlistment officer in the town where I live. After discussing the issue with him, my conclusion is that things have changed in the military. This Staff Sergeant informed me that only about 20% of the armed forces is combat. There are many areas of service, such as: service and support; medical; computer; office, etc.. He stated that a recruit could choose a field of service and if he was a conscientious objector, one who does not believe in taking another person's life, all he had to do is choose a particular field where he/she can serve without engaging in actual combat. Yes, a person can be a conscientious objector and still serve in the armed forces. The recruit must go through basic training, which includes becoming totally familiar with the maintaining and using of a weapon. But the recruit could also decide whether or not he/she would go into the field of combat. You see, we are thankful that in the United States one is not required to serve in a combatant way; he/she can request some other way to serve their country and still be subject to the powers that be, and loyal, and an asset to their nation.

## Have the Armed Forces Changed?

The recruiter told me that the armed services have changed. It is more in the field of protecting and helping. The idea of combat being just about killing is no longer the case. This recruiting sergeant was involved in Desert Storm, and said that they could not even fire their weapons at the enemy unless the enemy shot first. Even if the enemy shot over their heads they could not return fire. The enemy also had to be identified first, and then, if they commenced with hostile fire, they could then engage. The sergeant said that, in Desert Storm, the enemy was poorly clothed, fed and armed, and they willingly surrendered, realizing that they were better off as our prisoners than in their own army. And of course, we gave them food and help.

Have the armed services changed? I am not the one to answer that question for a lack of experience. But I know that my perception of it has changed. Again, my answer to the question: Can a Christian serve in the armed services? is yes! And many do. And if the draft was started again and my number came up, I would serve in some capacity without being involved in combat. If you believe you can serve in a combatant way, as my preacher friend I mentioned at the beginning of this lesson, that is between you and God.

## The Old Testament and War

Many make the argument that under the Old Testament dispensation the people of God engaged in wars with divine approval. There are more than thirty-five references in the Old Testament in which God commands the use of force. In the New Testament, it is said that the author of Hebrews extols the historical conquerings of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David and

Samuel – men who became mighty in war and who put foreign armies to flight (Hebrews 11:30-34). It is also said that this argument is the first response and also one of the most definite facts of the issue.

I do not believe that the correlation between Old Testament battles and common warfare today is correct. In the majority of the battles of the Old Testament it was the people of God fighting the enemies of God. Who was the leader of God's people? God, and He was the One who gave them victory. The whole situation of "church and state" was different then. The government was God! God led them in those battles. He allowed them to destroy the Canaanites. He gave the orders against the Philistines. Many times God won the battle without the people doing much of the actual killing. Read the account of Elisha in Second Kings chapter six. Is this what we are talking about with warfare today?

### **Who Are God's People Today?**

When God was leading the people in combat in the Old Testament you can truthfully say that to fight against God's people was to fight against God. Can that be said today of any nation? The only people that belong to God today are those who make up His church. Does one particular nation today belong to God? Are our national interests in line with the cause of Christ? I believe that God still blesses our nation through His providence, and I continue to offer my prayers in that direction. But our first allegiance is to the Kingdom of God which has members in every nation. It would be difficult for me to don the uniform and train for combat and remember the universality of the church. I read of a young man who attended Oklahoma Christian College from Tokyo. He studied with some of the young men from school and was baptized in Christ. He returned home to Japan after graduation. Should war between the United States and Japan again come, what should this young man and the boys who brought him to Christ do if they meet on the battle field?

During the Civil War, James A. Garfield and T.B. Larimore fought on different sides. Garfield was commissioned a Lieutenant-colonel, and formed the 42<sup>nd</sup> Regiment of the Ohio Volunteer Infantry. These crossed the Ohio River into Kentucky to slay Confederates, some of whom were members of the church as he was. He led his troops all the way to Corinth, Mississippi. In the Southern Army was Larimore, also a member of the Lord's church and a gospel preacher. If those two men of God personally met in battle it is doubtful that they felt like exchanging in a holy kiss, or of praying together. It is hard during combat to remember the universality of the Lord's church.

### **Soldiers in the New Testament**

Some point to the mention of soldiers in the New Testament as justifying Christians being soldiers (i.e., Acts 10, Cornelius). Again, I believe that Christians can serve their country in the armed forces without violating their conscience in regard to combat. Do you suppose that Cornelius "of the Italian band," after becoming a Christian, had he been transferred back to Italy and had been ordered to draw his sword on Paul's exposed neck, what would he have done? If Peter died the same day in the same way at the same place, as has been alleged, would Cornelius have slain the man who brought him to Christ? Paul and Peter were slain for being enemies of the state.

We read of the Philippian Jailer in Acts chapter eight. Here we read of him guarding prisoners when he is shown the gospel and becomes a Christian. We do not read anything else of his life after that. Did he remain a soldier? If he had been transferred to combat, would he have killed Christians? We know nothing of his life after conversion, and that is the same with Cornelius. I can't see using these two men or anyone else for that matter as soldiers in the New Testament justifying Christians engaging in combat today.

### **Justified Wars**

Some say it is wrong for a Christian to help his nation in a war of conquest, but wrong for him not to help in a war of defense. Who is qualified today to decide which war is justified? Or whose side is justified? Because a nation has an inherent right to defend its existence from unlawful aggression, it cannot be said that war is never justified. But again, to what involvement should the Christian have?

Whose side was justified in the Civil War? Was the war in Viet Nam a justified war? Who defines the type of war? Napoleon said he never fought an aggressive war, but only for defense. The Japanese said they were being encircled by Western Imperialism, and only struck the first blow at Pearl Harbor in a defensive war. Consider for just a moment that we are Japanese citizens and our nation has declared a defensive war. Was it justified? Americans say no, but what do the Japanese say? And who is right? Anyone who attempts to define a defensive war or a just war is likely to hear those on the other side making opposite claims.

### **Conclusion**

As I mentioned earlier in the lesson, I am thankful that in the United States one is not required to serve in a combatant way; he/she can request some other way to serve their country and still be subject to the powers that be, and loyal, and an asset to one's nation. I believe this is a personal matter, and that every Christian must decide in his own heart just what he can conscientiously do or refrain from doing during time of war. Christians will want to be a part of the solution to the problem, and not be a problem themselves. We will want to be the salt of the earth, and shine as Christ's light (Matthew 5:13-16).

This has been a difficult lesson for me to do, mostly because there are not many Scriptures in this lesson. As stated several times in this lesson, I believe a Christian may serve in the armed forces. The subject of whether a Christian may serve in combat, in my mind, is a matter of opinion and not a matter of doctrine. Any point that I made in this lesson that may seem to be against those who take the non-pacifist position is not meant in that fashion. They were brought up because they are the difficult arguments that I have wrestled with in making my decision. I have taken my position and do so with a clear conscience. I hope that you can do the same. I believe that you have the right to your decision on this matter of opinion. I pray that you will allow me mine.