

Propositions Concerning the Biblical Teachings on War

Minutes of the Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America, 1971

1. The sixth commandment, “Thou shalt not kill”, must be interpreted in consistency with the command of God to the nation concerning its responsibility in certain specified cases to put the criminal to death, and is more properly translated, “Thou shalt not commit murder.” Gen. 9:6; Ex. 21:14-17,29.
2. God used the theocracy of Israel to destroy the Canaanites by war. The destruction of the Canaanites was a religious service. This was no lust for booty or blood, but a divine duty which must be performed as a judgment upon their wickedness. Gen. 15:16; Josh. 6:16-18.
3. In Matthew 24:6,7, Jesus prophesied that His disciples would hear of wars and rumors of wars, and that nation would rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom. In James 4:1-3, sins of selfishness, un controlled greed and unwillingness to depend on God are given as a source of wars.
4. God used war, and the fearful suffering, desolation and destruction which it brought, as a judgment upon the nation of Israel for her sin. (Lev. 26:25,33; Isa. 1:19, 20; Isa. 48:17, 18, 22) This suggests to us that God will use war as a judgment upon any nation which sins against Him.
5. The promises of God connect peace with righteousness, with men’s seeking after God and His law, and with the reign of Christ over the nations. Psalm 85:9,10; Isa. 32:17, 18; Isa. 2:2-4; Zech. 9:10
6. The Bible makes an important distinction between acts of personal vengeance and hatred of one’s enemy, and the acts of the civil governor as God’s minister, “the agent in executing God’s wrath” against the evildoer. (Murray, Commentary on Romans, Eerdmans, 1964, on Romans 13:4) This distinction can be best seen by a comparison of Romans 12:14-21 with Romans 13:1-7.
7. Jesus’ instruction to “resist not evil” must be seen as referring to the Christian in his personal relationships and not to the authority of the state. (Matthew 5:38-48) The right of the state to resist and punish evildoers is set forth in Romans 13:1-7 and I Peter 2:13,14.
7. God commands those who rule over men to do so with justice and righteousness. (II Sam 23:3; Isa. 10:1-3, etc.) By this principle a war that is fought to satisfy a government’s greed for power or property is condemned by God.
8. The authority which God has given to the civil ruler to “bear the sword” against evildoers may be legitimately used to preserve the security of the nation in the face of attack. In support of this conclusion we would cite the use of war in the Old Testament, the absence of New Testament condemnation of the military and its purpose, and the New Testament declarations already cited concerning the basic authority of the state. In the “Declaration and Testimony”, chapter 30, Constitution of the R. P. Church, (Revised in 1964) we condemn as an error the statement that “It is not lawful for Christians to wage war in defense of liberty, religion, or life.” (error 11)
9. Such specific questions as when a nation determines that its security is being threatened, whether a strong nation ever has the right or obligation to come to the defense of a weaker nation, and whether nations have the right to band together and pledge mutual defense against an aggressor, cannot be clearly answered from Scripture. In Genesis 14 we see Abraham going in armed pursuit to rescue Lot and the men of Sodom. Such actions may, at times, be a reasonable and unselfish extension of the principle of national defense.

10. The right of the government, under certain conditions, to send its citizens into battle and to take human life involves an awesome responsibility. It must be considered in the light of what God says about the value of the life that is made by God in His own image. (Gen. 9:6) The New Testament passage which most clearly establishes this authority (Rom. 13:1-7) also clearly establishes that civil government is God's ordinance and the civil ruler is God's servant. No nation should attempt to exercise such great power over the lives of its citizens without humbly looking to God, and submitting to the authority of His Son over the nation. Psalm 22:28; Psalm 2:10-12; Matt. 28:18.

11. The New Testament calls upon Christians to respect the government's authority and to obey its commands. Matt. 22:21; Acts 23:5; Rom. 13:1-7; I Tim. 2:1,2; Titus 3:1,2; I Peter 2:13-17, In the case of a nation waging war, the citizen is to concede the justness of the common political decision, made in behalf of the nation, unless and until he is sure in his own mind that the decision is unjust, for reasons that he in turn must be ready to declare.

12. A Christian must obey his government in all things except when it commands him to sin. God is the only absolute authority. A soldier in the midst of battle cannot yield his right of conscience in rendering obedience to his superior officers. Matt. 22:21; Acts 4:19,20; Acts 5:29; Heb. 11:23; Dan. 3:16-18; Dan. 6:10.

13. The Christian must be aware of the difficulty of determining the facts in a given situation, in order to apply the principles of God's Word. He must be on guard against being moved by false and misleading propaganda.

Thomas G. Sanders, in *Protestant Concepts of Church and State*, says "Because one's perspective is shaped by the corporate group to which he belongs, in some wars the Christian will not know what to do. He may think that his ruler is acting unjustly, but he may not be sure. In this case the demands of temporal obedience take precedence over one's doubt. God will not hold an individual responsible because he obeyed his lord (ruler) in time of uncertainty."

14. The nation must guard carefully against the great evil of glorying in war. General David M. Shoup, who served as commandant of the U. S. Marine Corps from 1959 to 1963, in *Atlantic* (April 1969) "The New American Militarism", says, "Civilians can scarcely understand or even believe that many ambitious military professionals truly yearn for wars and the opportunities for glory and distinction afforded only in combat. A career of peacetime duty is a dull and frustrating prospect for the normal regular officer to contemplate."

J. D. Hicks, *The American Nation* (Houghton Mifflin Co., 1941), wrote concerning the Spanish American War, "War came in spite of the complete success of American diplomacy, and primarily because the American people wanted to have a war. Young America ...had grown to manhood on a steady diet of Civil War glorification. It envied the boys in blue or gray, and felt cheated that it had had no chance to win distinction for itself in war.... America in the spring of 1898 was ripe for any war, and the country's mood was not to be denied." (p. 313) Professor Hicks' serious charges should warn us against the danger of glorying in warfare.

15. In Amos, chapter 1, God pronounced judgment upon different nations for their "war atrocities." The Ammonites were condemned for having "ripped up women with child in Gilead." (Amos 1:13) The problem of making and enforcing "rules of warfare" appears to be insurmountable, and each war brings with it accounts of almost unbelievable cruelty. Nevertheless, the nation and its citizens must remain determined to eliminate such barbaric evils as the killing of prisoners, cruel and inhumane treatment of prisoners, and needless slaughter of

the civilian population. Even as we protest the atrocities committed by the enemy, we must never permit her standard of morality to determine our own conduct, When we are accused of atrocities of our own, it is not enough to answer that the enemy has done worse. A nation has a responsibility before God to confess and repent of its own sins. Jeremiah 18:7-10; Daniel 9:5-7.

16. The Bible warns the nations against the sin of placing their confidence in their foreign alliances, or in the strength of their own arms. Isa. 8:12, 13; 30:1-5; 31:1; Jer. 17:5. A great military power is in special peril of becoming proud and overconfident. II Chron. 26:15,16. A nation's underlying trust must be in the Lord Himself.

17. A Christian must be continually vocal within his own community and nation to bring the above Scriptural principles to bear on the consciences of men in government. He must do all within his power as a civilian to point the nation to Christ as the supreme King of kings and Lord of lords, who breaks in pieces with the rod of His anger nations which rebel against God. We should pray for peace, work for peace based on righteousness, and act in a public and vocal manner consistent with the Bible's revealed pathway to peace. Psalm 2; Psalm 72; Psalm 110; Isaiah 60:12; Jer. 18:7,8; Matt. 23:37-39; Rev. 11:15.

Recommendations:

1. That the "propositions concerning the Biblical teachings on war" be adopted as a basis for personal and group study within our congregations, as to their application to the conflict in Southeast Asia, and other specific situations.
2. That our Synod confess that the course of the present war and the embarrassment of our nation in the presence of the nations of the world are plain indications of God's displeasure with this nation; we further recommend that we acknowledge our national sin; that we pray for our leaders that God would guide their decisions in the directions of a lasting peace; that we pray for the Church of Christ and the people in Southeast Asia; that we pray for those in military service; that we pray for men who must decide whether or not to go and fight; and that we pray for the prisoners of war and their wives and children.
3. That, because the heartache and sorrow of the Vietnam War will be with this nation and the nation of Vietnam for the next generation, and because the Lord Jesus has commanded us to be concerned for the fatherless, the widows, the sick and the imprisoned, a committee be formed to concentrate on the future ministry in this specific area; that this ministry of mercy be charged by this Synod of 1971 to the Deacons of the Reformed Presbyterian Church