

Christ and the Sword

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With regard to the nations of the world, I do not question the right and the necessity of a self defensive war. Neither do I question the matter with regard to *this* nation, the United States, insofar as it is a nation of this world.

Even genuine followers of Christ must, when those in their care are under attack, fight back.

The matter changes somewhat when it is an individual follower of Christ under attack. It is less clear that one, to save the *self*, can be truly Christ like in the fight. But this diverges from my principal topic here.

Christians, as true and faithful followers of the Lord Jesus Christ; Christians, obedient to the teachings and the works of Jesus as they are remembered in the four Gospels; Christians, students of those Gospels, approaching them with hearts sincerely open to what they say, not with hearts already intent to find a particular, chosen thing—Christians cannot as *Christians* support a war which is not clearly self defensive. To advocate it, to initiate it, is in that moment to turn from Christ Jesus.

One *may* of course be turning from the New Covenant to Old Covenants—from the New Testament to the Old Testament—in order to find support for the support of an aggressive war. One may, in that case, be Biblical. But not Christian. Between God and us, things changed at the coming of the Christ.

He told them this parable also: "No one tears a piece from a new garment and puts it upon an old garment; if he does, he will tear the new, and the piece from the new will not match the old. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; if he does, the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. Luke 5:36-38

Read the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew chapters 5 through 7) to recognize that the newness which Jesus brought *into* the world and *to* those who would follow him in the world was not a dismissal of the old law, but a radical intensification of what had been said to the people of old. "I say to you," Jesus said over and over again, astonishing folk because he spoke as one who had authority! That is, he didn't quote others as a foundation of what he was about to say (as did the best rabbis); rather, he quoted the old in order to leap beyond what had been said, and he offered, thereby, a way of life, a way of living and behaving in the world, a way as distinct and as visible *to* the rest of the world as a light on a

stand in a house.

We have loved that last image, as well as: "A city set on a hill cannot be hid." But then we have too often built a city vastly different from the one Jesus here calls forth.

We are meant to be different! We are meant, in fact, to be a conundrum to common ways and conventional thought. We are meant to represent Jesus, by the sweet infusion of his Spirit in our hearts and minds and hands. It is how Christ continues to be available to the wide world, which he loves as ever he loved it before.

But we fail if we look just like the rest of the world. We fail our task, we fail our Lord, and we fail the world itself, who may then lose sight of that Lord.

And regarding this particular matter of going to war, of supporting a war of aggression, of persisting passionately to declare it "right," Christians are failing the very person of Christ.

In all the Gospels, Jesus speaks only of one weapon of war: the sword. Swords are raised against him—during his arrest on the Mount of Olives. A spear appears—to pierce him in the side. And in the Book of Revelation, the glorious, reigning Christ actually uses a sword, but only as the ineluctable utterance of truth, for it is the sharp two-edged sword that issues from his mouth.

Otherwise, Jesus speaks of the "sword" either as a metaphor, or as a fearful prophecy, or as a real thing indeed: the thing that must *not* be used.

1. A metaphor: Read Matthew 10:34-39

Many early Christians believed that a sign of the true Messiah had been given in Micah 7:6. Jesus quotes that verse here in order to show the difficult rift which will occur between those who follow him and those who don't follow. Attachment to Jesus will be (must be!) greater than all the lovely attachments this world offers, family in particular! When one gives her whole heart, her entire self, to the Lord, it will be as if a sword had cut through the bonds that once held her to her parents.

In fact, to take up the cross, which means specifically to follow the Lord even to such sacrifice as was his, which means to be prepared to be assaulted by the world (and family) for sustaining beliefs and behaviors unpopular to others—to take up the cross, I say, is to be evidently Christian, to be that light which illumines a house, to *be* the spirit of Christ here and now.

So which of your decisions, Christian, are of the world? And which are of your Master? And which can possibly approve a war of aggression?

2. Both prophecy and metaphor: Read Luke 22:31-38

There is a severe "sifting" coming not just for Peter, but for all the disciples who share this last supper with Jesus. After he has completed his mission, rising not only from the dead but from this worldly existence into heaven, their lives will

become terribly difficult. "Prepare," says Jesus. "Become as travelers who must go through angry territories and dangerous places. Take the purse, take the bag, take the sword of all travelers who must protect themselves."

This is prophecy. Jesus knew what the Apostles would suffer and the early martyrs. The Apostle Paul makes a list:

Imprisonments, countless beating, often near death. Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I have been beaten with rods; once I was stone. Three times I have been shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren...

2 Corinthians 23ff

It is also metaphor, for Jesus is warning the disciples to be equipped *in every way* for the long journey through this world into the next.

Does such equipment advocate—or even permit—attack? War? Clearly: No. Is he asking the disciples to protect him when, in the next hour, he will be arrested by angry people? No.

First, pay close attention to the Isaiah passage which Jesus quotes in verse 37. Jesus quotes a piece of this whole: "Because he poured out his soul to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors." (Isaiah 53:12; but read that entire chapter!) Jesus expects to die. The swords are not for him.

Nor are they for any sort of revolt or aggressive attack. For when the disciples bring forth two swords (perhaps believe Jesus to have meant something like a fight) he responds with a dismissive, "It is enough." Two swords among twelve. That enough of such equipment.

3. The flat reality of the thing, the sword and warring:

Read Matthew 26:51-52; Luke 22:49-51; John 18:10-11

In every case Jesus rebukes the use of the sword. There are two reasons for the rebuke, one regarding himself and his work, the other regarding human behavior in general. It is to the latter we look this once when Jesus actually speaks about the use of swords.

The former reason is that the prophecies and Christ's own mission must be fulfilled. No, not even the legions of angels, the hosts of old heaven, will intervene. And so it was; and so it had to be.

But Jesus didn't *have* to use that moment in the extremes of grief and enmity—that moment when his enemies were about to overwhelm him—to teach a little lesson. But he did. Therefore the lesson must be of paramount

importance: "Put your sword back in its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword." It is, in the end—*in the end*—a futile enterprise. It will destroy people on the way; it will destroy the destroyers in the end. And at the very end of everything, the behaviors which place people now apart from the leadings of our Lord will have led those same people to a place where the Lord will not be, ever, or at all. Except they recognize their sin. Except they confess

their sin, turn, and return to the Merciful One, merciful to those repenting, merciful to everyone. Merciful to *everyone*. For his sword was not in his hand. It was in his mouth.

Damned difficult, isn't it?

But he who calls us to be different, to be light, is himself the source of power. What he asks he empowers.

4. Prophecy: Read Luke 21:5-24

Here is found once again why it is that Jesus (in the very next chapter, but we saw it a few paragraphs above) warns the disciples to prepare for hard times ahead. But he is prophesying *both* times immediately at hand in his day, *and* times at the end of time, the eschaton.

Verses 9 through 11 speak of the end-time, what precedes the Lord's return in glory to reign over all. They do not speak to our day! Our day is scarcely different than many a day in all the bloody centuries that have come before us, since Christ! Do not repeat the church's tired but regular error about the Apocalypse. Time after time speakers, writers, leaders, readers, people of good will and charlatans want to declare that they have the knowledge not even Jesus had: "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only." It is both arrogant and false to apply Biblical prophecies regarding the parousia to this day and to these deeds and these wars and these nations. And even if one *did*, that one could not, in the name of the Coming One, take up arms and fight.

Verses 12-19 speak to the disciples and the early generation of Christians. If we can contrive them also to apply to us, once again the admonition is not to fight, but to talk, "For I will give you words and wisdom," that in the end we will be given life.

It is in the next verses, 20-24, that Jesus uses the word "sword." Again, it is prophecy; but this particular prophecy as been, grievously, fulfilled. In the year 70, when Rome surrounded Jerusalem and destroyed it in much the way Nebuchadnezzar destroyed it nearly 600 years before.

I return to the matter at hand.

You may find good reason for national war. You may presently support the policies of our present government regard the war in Iraq and its necessity. But you cannot do so from a position truly Christian, truly of the Lord Jesus Christ.

If you wish to involve your religion in your politics, be absolutely clear about your religion! For politics must needs deal with this world only; but religion binds the worlds together, and where your real faith is, there will your self be too. The unexamined soul is likelier to have bound itself to the world than to the Christ! Be careful that religion is not used to justify positions and attitudes already held; true religion, true grace, is an act of God: for it is God in Jesus who justifies us, who makes us, in spite of our betrayals of his Spirit, righteous, forgiven, and then seeks the proof of his good work in *our* good works thereafter. Our transformation. To be like Christ.

I have two purposes in this essay.

1. To cry out unto Christians—before we go to the polls to vote—the unfortunate and the un-Christ like nature of the war in Iraq. It cannot be condoned.
2. But this second reason is by far the greater one: to persuade Christians to examine with a most humble sincerity the actual nature of your faith. How much do we make the Bible obey us? How much do we obey the Christ of the Bible?

My first reason deals with massive and terrible events in this world. But this world isn't forever. Christ is.

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