

Would Jesus Have Killed His Enemies?

By Bill Wachtel

In defense of Christian participation in war, some mention Cornelius as having no negative mention in the New Testament. All agree that Christ accepts people just as they are. Cornelius was baptized into the Christian faith. After he was baptized, he was to be taught all that Christ laid down as instructions for his people to follow (Matthew 28:19, 20). Those instructions include the mandate to his followers to be peacemakers, not war-makers (Matthew 5:9, 43-48). We are to follow peace with all men, without which no man will see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14). The weapons of our warfare are spiritual, not carnal/physical (II Corinthians 10:4). As much as it depends on us, we are to live at peace with all men (Romans 12:18-21). To me, this means no matter how others treat us as enemies, we are not to retaliate as enemies to them. Paul recognized that governments bear the sword. He did not however, allow Christians the right to vengeance: "Do not repay anyone evil for evil... Beloved do not look for revenge, but leave room for wrath, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the LORD'" (Romans 12:17, 19). The state, however, is an "avenger for God" (Romans 13:4).

These teachings, of course, are meant for Christians – those dedicated to the will of God and the teachings of Christ. They do not tell rulers how to rule for governments how to govern. The New Testament shows that governments are, per se, an integral part of what Scripture calls "the world." Believers, though "in" the world, are called to be not "of" the world. They are appointed as ambassadors of the Kingdom of God. As such, they are said by the New Testament to have "resident alien" status. They should stay out of the world's wars. If they do not, inevitably they will kill fellow believers as well as their enemies. How can the international church be recognized "by the love they have for one another" (John 13:35). The whole point of Christian witness is destroyed if believers take the lives of other believers. Churches seem to recognize this contradiction of the Christian witness when they do not allow chaplains to bear arms. But why only clergy? Is not every Christian supposed to follow Jesus? Do we really imagine Jesus donning a uniform, firing a gun or dropping a bomb?

Church history reveals that the church of the first two centuries at least agreed on non-combatant status and would not participate in armed conflict. Soldiers in the Roman army, when converted to Christ, chose death if necessary, rather than continuing to fight and kill others. Such was, and sometimes still is, the cost of discipleship. It was only when the church had departed from the original faith, in Constantine's time, and united the majority church to the state, that professing Christians began to join the military. (These are facts of history that are easily verifiable). Their (false) assumption was that the state had become Christian!

One of the great recoveries of the Anabaptists, the "Radical Reformation," was that of pacifism – in contrast to the Lutherans and Calvinists, who continued to support the Roman Catholic view of a Church united with the State. Our Anabaptist forefathers were persecuted bitterly for this stand by both Catholics and Protestants. Most of the "evangelicals" of our day continue in this Protestant tradition of military participation. But are they in fact following the sometimes unpopular obedience demanded by Jesus?

Rulers are empowered to use the "sword" to punish evildoers (Romans 13:1-5). The State may judge Saddam to be a threat to this nation and the world. It makes its decision to declare war on Saddam. This does not mean, however, that Christians are required to take up the sword to help in administering the punishment. Thankfully, our nation recognizes the right of conscientious objection. Some nations do not. Christians in those nations have often been terribly persecuted for that stand, but where in Scripture are Christians promised exemption from persecution?

I hope these thoughts will clarify my views on this subject. I served in the Navy in World War II, and in fact was baptized while in the Navy. It was after my discharge that I began to study the Scriptures and to grow in Christ. Then I came to realize that military service was not meant to be an option for those dedicated to the will of God and to His service as "soldiers for Christ" (II Timothy 2:1-15).