

# Bible Study Center Seminar

## Topic: “Should Christians Go to War?” A Look at the Early Christian Attitude to War

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This is a 3-part Seminar dealing with the topic of Christian participation in war. The study will begin with an introduction to the topic and a look at the teachings of Jesus. We will consider statements Jesus made possibly for and against Christian participation in war. Then we will look at teachings from the New Testament and the early church fathers first expressing disapproval of war and then statements which might show an approval of Christians fighting in war. The goal is to establish the what Jesus taught related to this important topic and see how the church applied those teachings for the next 300 years!

Each session of the seminar is designed to span 2 hours, from 6:00 PM to 8:00 PM and will break down into an initial 10-minute introduction/review, followed by a 40-minute lecture, with a 20 minute snack/visitation break, followed by another 40-50 minute lecture.

The flow of topics covered in the seminar are as follows:

**Session 1A = Statements of Jesus Inconsistent with the Lawfulness of War for Christians**

**Session 1B = Statements of Jesus and other Considerations Apparently Legitimizing Warfare for Christians**

**Session 2A = Early Christian Disapproval of War**

**Session 2B = Early Christian Acceptance of War**

**Session 3A = Early Christian Acceptance of War, continued**

**Session 3B = Summary & Questions**

This outline is based on the text of

[The Early Christian Attitude to War](#) by C. John Cadoux (London, 1919).

It quotes extensively from the book itself with no references.

There may be minor changes to update the language and spelling.

Because of the large number of references, please refer to the footnotes in the original.

The full text of the book can be found in several formats on-line at: <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/cadoux-the-early-christian-attitude-to-war>

I would like to thank Dr. Cadoux for his diligence and thoroughness in dealing with this important topic.

# Introduction

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War is a terrible thing. That is a fact that cannot be denied. Throughout the history of humanity, millions upon millions of people have been brutally slaughtered by their fellow-man. Whole civilizations have been wiped out, and whole landscapes have been forever changed in the wake of an advancing army.

But it appears that, horrible as it is, war is sometimes necessary. When evil men rise up and threaten to destroy society as we know it, those with the power and will to defend their way of life stand up to restore order. When tyranny and oppression leave people crushed and hopeless, there are those who come together to avenge the wrongs and bring freedom to those living without hope.

War is often viewed as a necessary evil in the battle against sin in this world. But into this world of sin and strife, a man came. A man sent from above, coming down from heaven to set mankind free from sin and death. His name was Jesus. He did not come in force with his armies before him to punish and destroy. He taught people the truth about peace and love and meekly and quietly went to his own death at the hands of his unjust accusers.

To the Christian, these facts are undeniable. But Jesus also taught his followers about loyalty, justice, and submission to authority. How far then should we go in following his example of non-violence and non-resistance? How can we balance our desire to be like Christ and our obligations to society? This is really the heart behind our question, "Should Christians go to war?"

For well over a thousand years, the majority of the Christendom for one reason or another has replied, "Yes." But yet this question has not gone away. This should not be surprising. The horrors of war are such that any person ought to think very carefully on this question before coming to a decision. And even the most dedicated of soldiers is troubled by the awfulness of it when given time to reflect.

Because this question is so important, every Christian must take the time to examine the evidence and make a decision for themselves. To go about this, we will first examine the teachings of Jesus and see what we can learn. What if anything does he say on the topic of war? What commands and examples does he give that would lead us to rule out Christian participation in war? And what considerations are there that might allow a Christian to take up arms and fight?

After determining the position of Jesus, we will go through the records of the early church starting with New Testament writers and then through the writers of the first three hundred years or so of Christianity to see how they interpreted and applied the teachings of Jesus. In what ways did they express disapproval for warfare? And in what ways was war accepted by our early brothers? Then we can try to apply what we've learned to our present situation and hopefully come up with an informed answer to the question, "Should Christians go to war?"

With this in mind, let us begin!

## I. The Teaching of Jesus

The New Testament does not record any explicit teaching by Jesus to his disciples on the subject of war. The circumstances of those times explain his silence on the subject:

- Jesus lived and worked among Palestinian Jews.
- Very few soldiers there compared to the number of civilians
- Jews could not be forced to serve in the Roman Army
- Jesus' disciples were very unlikely to be drafted into the service of Herod or the small temple guard at Jerusalem

Also, much of Jesus' teaching and his practical life do not make sense unless he regarded acts of war too bad to be allowed for himself and his disciples.

## A. Statements of Jesus Inconsistent with the Lawfulness of War for Christians

### 1. "You will not kill."

- This is the first of several Mosaic commandments that Jesus deals with in the Sermon on the Mount. He reinforces or replaces all of them with stricter limitations. ("Whoever is angry...", Matthew 5:21-26)
- He says 'Acts of homicide' (φόνοι) are one of the evil things that comes from a man's heart making him unclean (Matthew 18:18-20)
- The Law of Moses permitted both war and capital punishment. The Hebrew word in the Ten Commandments almost exclusively means "murder" and is never used for manslaughter in warfare. But is used for murderers being executed according to the law (Numbers 35:27-30).
- The Greek word used in the Gospels is a more general word for "killing" and is used for killing in war in classical Greek & the Greek Old Testament
- There is an ethical similarity between murder and killing in war, and Jesus commonly extended teachings of the Jewish Law into areas where they were usually not ought to apply (adultery, divorce, neighborly love, etc.).

### 2. **Non-resistance teaching** of the Sermon on the Mount

"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you **do not stand against the evil one**; but **whoever strikes you on the right check, turn to him the other also**; and to the one wishing to take you to court and take your tunic, let him have your cloak also; whoever forces you (to go) one mile, go with him two. Give to the one asking from you, and from him who wishes to borrow from you, do not turn away. You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you **love your enemies and pray for the ones persecuting you**, so that you may become sons of your Father who is in heaven, because he raises his sun on evil and good and rains upon the just and the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what extra do you do? Do not even the nations do the same? Therefore you be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." - Matthew 5:38-48

- These teachings are difficult to obey which has led many people to try and find a way to escape from them
- Does Jesus intend us to follow the "spirit of the law" but not the letter?
  - This usually ends up in ignoring both the spirit and the letter
  - Even if the spirit is more important, can doing the exact opposite of the 'letter' here still be following the same spirit?
- Are these 'councils of perfection' which are only valid in a perfect society? If things were perfect, there wouldn't be wrongs to endure or enemies to love!
- Perhaps this teaching only governs personal feelings and actions and not our duty to participate in society's restraint and punishment of wrongdoers.
  - But Jesus shows society's authorized court of justice assisting in the persecution ("to the one wishing *to take you to court* and take your tunic, let him have your cloak also")
  - The Mosaic law of "an eye for an eye" was **not a means of personal revenge**. It was a **public punishment** designed to prevent wrongdoing and was to be **carried out by the community**, not the individual. (See Deuteronomy 19:16-21, Leviticus 24:17:23, and Exodus 21:22-24)
  - Jesus quotes this law for the sole purpose of forbidding his disciples to apply it.

### 3. **A refusal to advance his ideals by political or coercive means**

- The Jews wanted their own independent nation, and were looking for a Messiah who would remove the Romans and bring back the kingdom of David.
  - Jesus refused to be made a king (John 6:15)
  - He did not try to free John the Baptist or punish Herod for his death (Matthew 14)
  - No record is mentioned of him punishing Pilate for the death of the Galileans whose blood he mixed with their sacrifices. (Luke 13:1-3)
  - He never used physical force or threat of injury to make people do good or stop them from doing wrong. (We will address a possible objection to this in the next section)
  - He says peace-makers are happy because they are children of God and that the gentle will inherit the earth. (Matthew 5:3-12)
  - He demanded forgiveness for all sins as the condition of receiving divine forgiveness for one's own sins. (Matthew 6:12-14)
  - His own behavior on the last day of his life is the best comment on his teaching:
    - He does not try to escape
    - He offers no resistance to the cruelties inflicted upon him
    - He offers no insults or threats and forbids his followers to strike a blow in his defense.
    - He only mildly rebukes the traitor Judas and his captors.
    - And while he was being crucified he prayed for God to pardon his enemies, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do."
4. He expresses ***disapproval of how the gentiles exercise authority***
- "You know that those who are considered to rule over the nations (gentiles) lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But **it is not so among you**; but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all. For the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life (as) a ransom for many." - Mark 10:42-45
- Rulers of nations generally maintain their authority through military might and penalties for wrongdoing in the law.
  - The apostles are not to follow their example, though. Instead they are to follow the example of Jesus who came to serve and give his life for others.
5. Four incidental sayings of Jesus
- "***Neither do I condemn thee, go and sin no more.***" (John 7:53–8:11)
    - This story of the adulterous woman being brought to Jesus for judgment is not in the oldest Greek manuscripts of John, but may still be an accurate account of the event.
    - The penalty for adultery under the Law of Moses was death, but Jesus sets aside the death penalty and has mercy on the woman
    - This incident shows Jesus' determination not to use physical violence in the punishment of wrongdoers.
  - "***Flee into the mountains.***" (Mark 13:14-20)
    - Jesus here is talking about the coming destruction of Jerusalem and defilement of the Temple by the Romans.
    - He tells his followers to flee the coming attack instead of resisting it.

- ***“Put your sword back into its place, for all who take the sword, will perish by the sword.”*** (Matthew 26:51-54)
  - Jesus here forbids the use of the sword, even in the defense of others.
  - It seems unlikely that Jesus meant this only to apply to the events leading up to his death and sacrifice:
    - First, Jesus expresses a perfectly general truth making it likely that his prohibition is meant to be a general rule of conduct.
    - Second, if Jesus' death was meant as a sacrifice to save people from their sins, would it be right for his followers to later fight and destroy their enemies without giving them every chance to repent?
- ***“My kingdom is not of this world. If it were...my servants would fight so I would not be handed over to the Jews.”*** (John 18:36)
  - When Pilate asks Jesus if he is a king, he responds that his kingdom is not like other kingdoms.
  - We can see again that it was necessary for him to be handed over to the Jews and to be killed, but does his death change anything about his kingdom or whether his servants would fight?

Taken together, these things create a *strong body of evidence* for the belief that *Jesus refused to use physical violence to stop or prevent wrongdoing*, including that used by the society and those in authority as opposed to the individual, and that he *did not permit his disciples to use it either*. Thus, **participation in warfare would be inconsistent with Christian principles of conduct.**

### ***B. Statements of Jesus and other Considerations Apparently Legitimizing Warfare for Christians***

There are several passages in the Gospels which, to many people, show that Jesus did not always avoid violence or disapprove of war, or at least that his feelings do not apply to his followers today. A careful study must be done to see if any of these passages make up a valid objection to the conclusion we reached in the previous section.

1. ***“Whoever ‘forces’ you (to go) one mile, go with him two.”***
  - The objection here is that the word translated 'forces' is a technical term for *the requirement of service by the State*, and that Jesus required his disciples to comply even with a demand for military service.
  - But military service is not the question here, only general state-labor:
    - The technical term used here referred originally to the postal system of the Persian Empire, the ἀγγαρός was not a soldier or a recruiting officer but the king's mounted courier.
    - The later usage of this word always seem to refer to forced labor or service in general, not to service as a soldier. This word is used for Simon of Cyrene being forced to carry the cross of Jesus.
    - The Jews were exempt from service in the Roman legions and so could not be forced into military service
2. There is ***no mention of any disapproval of serving in the military***
  - Very few recorded conversations with soldiers, but when a gentile centurion at Capernaum asked him to heal his servant, Jesus did so without saying anything about the man's being a soldier. He even complimented his faith in believing that Jesus could heal the servant at a distance with only a word.
  - This does not go against our previous conclusion. At best it is an argument from silence, and considering how much Jesus must have said of which we have no record at all, we cannot be sure he said nothing against military service at this time to his own disciples.

- We should also consider that he was a gentile stranger (Jesus was sent to the Jews), and according to Luke's narrative, he was not even present but spoke to Jesus through a messenger.
3. Jesus **expelling the traders from the Temple courts**
- This is often thought of as the one time that Jesus set aside his non-violent principles and used a whip to drive people out of the temple.
  - All four gospels record the incident (Matthew 21:12ff; Mark 11:15-17; Luke 19:45ff; John 2:13-17), but the 'whip of cords' is only mentioned in the Gospel of John.
    - For what it's worth, most critical scholars feel that John's gospel is the least historically reliable because it places the cleansing of the temple at the beginning of Jesus' ministry instead of the final week, but I personally believe John to be accurate in timing and details.
    - The wording of John's gospel only means that that the whip was used on sheep and cattle, not people. (John 2:15, "And making a whip of cords, he drove all out of the temple the sheep and the cattle.")
    - The word used to describe Jesus' action against people is the same in all four accounts, ἐκβαλλω.
      - It literally means "to cast out"
      - Also used for Jesus being sent into the wilderness, of him expelling mourners from Jairus' house, of God sending workers into his vineyard, of a man taking a splinter from his eye, a house owner bring things out of his store, a man taking money from a purse, and a shepherd sending sheep out of the fold.
      - Here it needs to mean no more than an authoritative dismissal.
      - It is impossible for one man to drive a crowd out by force or threat, but a passionate and respected teacher with authority and a powerful presence could easily expel a crowd with an authoritative command.
  - "In any case, no act even remotely comparable to wounding or killing is sanctioned by his example on this occasion."
4. Jesus spoke of **the wars of the future**
- Jesus spoke about wars that would come in the future as nation rose against nation and kingdom against kingdom and about the destruction of Judea and Jerusalem.
  - At the same time, he often speaks of the judgment of God coming upon mankind.
    - He describes a king who sends his armies and destroys the people who murdered his slaves, burning their city, another king who executes the citizens that do not want him to rule over them, and other kings and masters who punished their slaves with varying levels of violence.
    - These seem to prove that Jesus believed that God, under various circumstances, punishes sinners very severely and that he would soon punish the Jews through a terrible war with Rome that would result in the almost complete destruction of their nation and their way of life.
  - If God would use the Roman army in this way, can we assume that Jesus would want his followers to act in the same way under certain circumstances?
    - For one, these descriptions are found in parables where the exact interpretation is often hard to find besides the idea of a coming divine

punishment. These parables are often one-sided and do not mention the important aspect of God's love.

- The differences between God and man are very great. His power, love, knowledge, and authority ensure that his decisions are always just, man does not have that luxury.
- In the Jewish war, God's wrath came through 'unenlightened gentiles' who saw nothing better to do than crush a rebellion; Christian disciples might have a different duty.
- The Hebrew Scriptures show us that God has often used foreign foes to punish his people, but that did not mean the foes were innocent.
- Jesus wants us to imitate God, but only truly asks us to copy the gentle side of God's dealing with sinners and not the punitive side.

#### 5. His *illustrative allusions to war*

- The metaphor about two kings going to war is meant to show the importance of counting the cost of discipleship (Luke 14:31-33)
- Jesus' statement that he did not come to bring peace, but a sword (Matthew 10:34) simply means that there will be a deep dislike of Jesus' followers by their fellow-men. The sword is a metaphor for a lack of agreement and harmony.

#### 6. "***And let him who has no sword sell his cloak and buy one.***"

- In Luke's account of the Last Supper, Jesus reminds his disciples of how they didn't lack anything when he sent them out before to preach even though they brought nothing with them. Then he tells them that now if they have a purse or a bag they should bring it and adds: "And let him who has no sword sell his cloak and buy one. For I tell you that this which has been written must be accomplished in me, 'And he was counted with the lawless.' for the thing concerning me has an end." When they show him two swords he says, "It is enough." (Luke 22:36-38)
- Why would Jesus tell his disciples to buy a sword unless he expected them to use it?
  - One fact is that two swords is obviously not enough to arm and protect twelve men.
  - Jesus himself tells us why they should buy a sword—to fulfill the prophecy about him that he would be counted with the lawless.
  - But the first time Peter used the sword he brought with him, Jesus told him not to use it. But the prophecy had already been fulfilled, as far as the guards were concerned, Jesus was part of a group of lawless, armed rebels.

#### 7. His *recognition of the civil governments of his day*

- Jesus refers to Pilate's authority over him as "from above" (John 19:11)
- He spoke of the Law of Moses (with its harsh penalties and capital punishment) as 'the word of God' (Mark 7:8-13)
- He called 'judgment' (possibly the administration of justice) one of the more important parts of the law and rebuked the scribes and Pharisees for neglecting it. (Matthew 23:23)
- He was completely obedient to the Jewish Law.
- He paid the Temple tax though he thought himself exempt. (Matt. 17:24-27)
- He told his disciples to comply with the State's demand for forced labor

- He made no active opposition to the governments of his day, and submitted meekly to the official measures that led to his death.
  - He refused to be made a king over Galilee which shows a certain respect for King Herod. (John 6:15)
  - Doesn't all this, especially that he told the people to 'Give to Caesar what is Caesar's,' mean that he expected the his people to serve in the military when the government demands it?
    - The question Jesus was answering was not about military service (the Jews were exempted from that). It was about paying taxes.
    - "To part with one's property at the demand of another person does not make one responsible for all that person's doings, nor does it imply a readiness to obey any and every command that that person may feel he has a right to issue."
    - Jesus also says 'Give to God what is God's'. There are clearly some areas where Jesus intended his people not to follow Caesar or give into his demands. Peter and John understood this when they told the Jewish leaders, "If it is right before God to listen to you rather than God, you judge." (Acts 4:19)
8. The idea that ***obeying Jesus' non-resistance teachings would destroy the peace and well-being of society***
- It is often assumed that if the right to use force is taken away, the society would fall apart. There would be no order.
    - The idea goes that if good people were to follow the literal teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount that it would encourage people to do evil and riot because there would be no consequences.
    - Instead of the kingdom of heaven, we would have a paradise for thieves and criminals.
  - While this idea seems plausible, the logic behind it is flawed:
    - Jesus did not expect everyone in the world to accept and follow his teachings, much less just one nation. His teaching was meant for the small, but growing group of his personal disciples. It is a law of the Christian community.
    - While Jesus' disciples do not use force, that does not mean they are idle or useless in the struggle against evil. "***The point is that the principles of Jesus, as a general policy, so far from leaving human sin unchecked, check it more effectively than any coercion or penalization can do.***" (p. 48)
    - The growth of Christianity involves two parts:
      - A gradual shrinking of the number of people who use violence to stop wrong doing
      - And a gradual shrinking of the number of people who need to be forcibly restrained by violence or the threat of it.
      - Together these two things lead not to "utter social disorganization" but instead slowly and surely to "greater social security."
9. The ***interim ethic*** theory
- Lastly, some people frankly admit that Jesus' teaching did not allow for the use of force or arms, but say that Jesus only taught that because he expected the existing world to quickly come to an end and the Kingdom of God would be set up.



- They say that modern Christians do not have to follow those teachings because the future did not turn out like Jesus thought it would and we have other obligations.
- Dr. Wilhelm Herrman says in his *Essays on the Social Gospel* (pp. 217ff): “As a result of that frame of mind whereby we are united with Him, we desire the existence of a national State, with a character and with duties with which Jesus was not yet acquainted; we will not let ourselves be led astray, even if in this form of human nature various features are as sharply opposed to the mode of life and standpoint of Jesus as is the dauntless use of arms.”
- The problems with this theory:
  - There is no proof that Jesus was obsessed with the expectation that the world would be ending within that generation and based all his teaching on that.
  - Quite the opposite, “where He gives the ground of His command, as in the case of loving enemies, forgiveness, and seeking the lost, it is the nature of God that He dwells upon, and not anything expected in the near or distant future.” (J.A. Halliday)
  - Herrman says that Jesus' teaching about loving enemies and his statements about peace are not explained by his idea of an approaching end. But he doesn't say why they are excepted or how obeying them could go alongside with “the dauntless use of arms”.
  - This theory has a practical motive—people “*desire* the existence of a national State”. Herrman confesses, “Thus Jesus brings us into conflict with social duties to which *we all wish* to cling.” (p 163, italics added)
    - But is it not more important for us to follow the teachings of Jesus than to follow after our desire for a national state of which Jesus spoke nothing about?
    - We have already shown that the idea that Christian non-resistance will lead to anarchy and the downfall of organized society is unfounded.
- Seeing all of this, there is no reason to disobey our Lord's prohibition of the infliction of injury upon our neighbor.

“The interim-ethic theory is, as we have said, the last fortress of militarism on Christian soil. Driven from that stronghold, it has no choice but to take refuge over the border. Its apologists eventually find that they have no option but to argue on grounds inconsistent with the supremacy of Christianity as a universal religion or as a final revelation of God. Most of the arguments we hear about ‘the lesser of two evils,’ ‘living in an imperfect world,’ ‘untimely virtues,’ and so on, reduce themselves in the last analysis to a renunciation of Christianity, at least for the time being, as the real guide of life.”

## II. Forms of the Early Christian Disapproval of War

### 1. The Condemnation of War in the Abstract.

- While the New Testament was being written, there was no real occasion to comment on the wrongfulness of war. The few references to wars and battles are probably not military conflicts, but just general references to strife and disagreement.
- Aristides about the Greeks: “for if their gods did such things, why should they themselves not do them? thus from this pursuit of error it has fallen to

men's lot to have continual wars and massacres and bitter captivity." He discredits Ares and Herakles because of their warlike character.

- Justin said evil angels and demons "sowed murders, wars, adulteries, excesses, and every wickedness, among men."
  - Athenagoras gives the usages of unjust war—the slaughter of myriads of men, the razing of cities, the burning of houses with their inhabitants, the devastation of land, and the destruction of entire populations—as samples of the worst sins, such as could not be adequately punished by any amount of suffering in this life. He also says that Christians cannot endure to see a man put to death, even justly.
  - Tertullian says that when Peter cut off Malchus' ear, Jesus "cursed the works of the sword for ever after." He criticizes the gentiles' greed of gold in hiring themselves out for military service.
  - Cyprian talks about the "wars scattered everywhere with the bloody horror of camps. The world," he says, "is wet with mutual blood(shed): and homicide is a crime when individuals commit it, (but) it is called a virtue, when it is carried on publicly. Not the reason of innocence, but the magnitude of savagery, demands impunity for crimes."
  - The Didaskalia forbids the receipt of monetary help for the church from "any of the magistrates of the Roman Empire, who are polluted by war."
  - Arnobius roundly denies that it was any part of the divine purpose that men's souls, "forgetting that they are from one source, one parent and head, should tear up and break down the rights of kinship, overturn their cities, devastate lands in enmity, make slaves of freemen, violate maidens and other men's wives, hate one another, envy the joys and good fortune of others, in a word all curse, carp at, and rend one another with the biting of savage teeth."
  - Lactantius says of the Romans: "If any one has slain a single man, he is regarded as contaminated and wicked, nor do they think it right that he should be admitted to this earthly dwelling of the gods. But he who has slaughtered endless thousands of men, deluged the fields with blood, (and) infected rivers (with it), is admitted not only to a temple, but even to heaven."
  - In criticizing the definition of virtue as that which puts first the advantages of one's country, he points out that this means the extension of the national boundaries by means of aggressive wars on neighboring states, and so on: "all which things are certainly not virtues, but the overthrowing of virtues. For, in the first place, the connection of human society is taken away; innocence is taken away; abstention from (what is) another's is taken away; in fact, justice itself is taken away; for justice cannot bear the cutting asunder of the human race, and, wherever arms glitter, she must be put to flight and banished...For how can he be just, who injures, hates, despoils, kills? And those who strive to be of advantage to their country do all these things."
  - It is clear from these passages that early Christians had a very strong dislike and disapproval of war, both because of the division it caused and the suffering and bloodshed that came with it.
  - **They also show how closely warfare and murder were connected in the Christian mind. Christians would have no part in war because of the deadly sin that it involved.**
2. The Essential Peacefulness of Christianity.
- "Peace, of course, meant a number of different things to the early Christian. It meant reconciliation between himself and God...the stilling of turbulent passions and evil desires in his own heart...the harmony and concord that

normally reigned within the Christian community...the reconciliation of Jew and gentile...immunity from annoyance and persecution at the hands of pagans...freedom from the distractions, toils, and dangers of actual war.”

- Peace is often mentioned without reference to the military calling, but the fact that Christianity is so closely tied to peace, even in a vague sense truly affects the Christian attitude to war, especially when we consider the many direct and explicit allusions to peace in the military sense.
- Paul, for instance, tells the Romans: “If possible, as far as lies in your power, be at peace with all men”
- Similarly, the author of Hebrews: “Pursue peace with all (men).”
- Matthew quotes the words of Jesus: “Happy are the peace-makers”
- Luke tells us that at the birth of Jesus the host of angels sang: “Glory in the highest to God and on earth peace among men whom He favors,” and represents Zacharias as praying God “to guide our feet into (the) way of peace.”
- Clement of Rome prays specially for the rulers: “Give them, Lord, health, peace, concord, stability, that they may administer without offense the government given to them by You...Lord, direct their counsel...in order that they, administering piously with peace and gentleness the authority You gave them, may find favor with You.”
- Ignatius exclaims: “Nothing is better than peace, by which all war of those in heaven and those on earth is abolished.”
- Justin told the Emperors that the Christians were the best allies and helpers they had in promoting peace, on the ground that their belief in future punishment and in the omniscience of God provided a stronger deterrent from wrongdoing than any laws could do.
- “And many peoples shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; and He will teach us of His ways, and we will walk in His paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. And He shall judge among the nations, and convict many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning-knives; nation shall not lift sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” (Isaiah 2:3ff; Micah 4:2ff)
  - The early church believed that it was the fulfillment of this prophecy about the abolition of war
  - It is quoted and applied by Justin, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, Eusebius, and others.
- Clement of Alexandria says of the Christians: “We are being educated, not in war, but in peace”
- Arnobius says tell the pagans that wars have diminished since Christ came saying, “For since we—so large a force of men—have received (it) from his teachings and laws, that evil ought not to be repaid with evil, that it is better to endure a wrong than to inflict (it), to shed one’s own (blood) rather than stain one’s hands and conscience with the blood of another, the ungrateful world has long been receiving a benefit from Christ, through whom the madness of savagery has been softened, and has begun to withhold its hostile hands from the blood of a kindred creature.” He goes on to say that if reasonable men would listen to the “healthful and peaceful decrees” of Christ that the whole world would be living in tranquility.
- Some argue that the people making these statements about peace did not have any political responsibility.

- “The opinions of the Christians of the first three centuries,” says Lecky, “were usually formed without any regard to the necessities of civil or political life; but when the Church obtained an ascendancy, it was found necessary speedily to modify them.”
  - While these statements don't deal directly with the problems that war and criminal justice are meant to combat, it should be considered that the attitude and conduct they suggest might be a better solution to those problems than the world has ever known.
  - The changes in the Church's position were not simply because of her new views and experiences, but largely because of a serious relaxation of her early moral purity!
3. The Christian Treatment of Enemies and Wrongdoers.
- We can learn a lot about the early Christian attitude to war by looking at how serious they were about Jesus' teachings on love for all and forbidding retaliation against a wrongdoer.
  - They obeyed Jesus' teachings about love and non-resistance in very a close and literal way and actually refused to take criminals and other wrongdoers to court or participate in warfare. This fact shows us that:
    - Jesus' teachings were not only for a perfect society
    - They were not just about 'spirit' and attitude, but also outward actions
    - They applied to both private and public relationships of life
  - ***“And when we consider that these same simple-minded Christians...did more for the moral purification of the world in which they lived than perhaps has ever been done before or since, their principles will appear to be not quite so foolish as they are often thought to be.”***
  - The Apostle Paul writes to the Thessalonians: “May the Lord make you to increase and abound in love towards one another and towards all...**See that no one repays to anyone evil in return for evil**, but always pursue what is good towards one another and towards all.” (1 Thes. 3:12 & 5:15)
  - To the Galatians: “As then we have opportunity, let us work that which is good towards all.” (Gal 6:10)
  - To the Corinthians: “What (business) is it of mine to judge outsiders?... outsiders God will judge.” (1 Corinthians 5:12)
  - To the Romans: “**Repay to no one evil for evil**...If possible, as far as lies in your power, be at peace with all men. **Do not avenge yourselves, beloved, but leave room for the wrath (of God); for it is written: ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord.’** But if your enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink; for by doing this you wilt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not conquered by evil, but conquer evil with (what is) good...Owe no man anything, except mutual love: for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the Law. For the (commandment): ‘You will not commit adultery,’ ‘You will not kill,’ ‘You will not steal,’ ‘You will not covet,’ and whatever other commandment there is, is summed up in this saying: ‘You will love thy neighbor as thyself.’ **Love does not work evil on a neighbor: love therefore is the fulfillment of the Law.**” (Romans 12:17-21 & 13:8-10)
  - In 2 Timothy 2:24f we read: “The servant of God ought not to fight, but to be mild to all, a (skilled) teacher, patient of evil, gently correcting his opponents —God may possibly give them repentance (leading) to a knowledge of truth, and they may become sober again out of the snare of the devil”

- “Remind them...to be ready for every good work, to slander no one, to be not fighting, reasonable, displaying all gentleness towards all men.” (Titus 3:1-2)
- In the Epistle of Peter: “Honor all men...For unto this were ye called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example in order that ye might follow in his footsteps...who, when he was reviled, did not revile in return, when he suffered, did not threaten, but entrusted himself to Him who judges righteously...Finally, let all be...humble, not returning evil for evil or abuse for abuse, but on the contrary blessing: for unto this were ye called, in order that ye might inherit a blessing...For it is better, if the Will of God wills, to suffer for doing right rather than for doing wrong: because Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order that he might bring us to God.”
- We can see easily how much influence Jesus’ teachings and way of life had on his apostles and that generation of Christians
- While repeating Jesus’ teaching about love for enemies and non-resistance, the Didache says: “This is the way of life: first, you will love the God who made you, second, your neighbor as yourself: and all things whatever you would not want to be done to you, do not do to another...You will not plan any evil against your neighbor. You will not hate any man; but some you will reprove, on some you will have mercy, for some you will pray, and some you will love above your own soul...You will not become liable to anger—for anger leads to murder—nor jealous nor contentious nor passionate, for from all these things murders are born.”
- A practical example of the true and regular Christian treatment of sinners and paganism, is a beautiful story told by Clement of Alexandria about the aged apostle John. It appears to be historically true, but, even if fictitious, it is still ‘in character’ and serves evidence for the approved Christian method of grappling with heathen immorality. The story is briefly as follows:
  - John, while visiting the Christians in some city saw in the church a young heathen man, and having a good feeling about him, entrusted him to the bishop’s care.
  - The bishop took the young man home, taught and baptized him; and then, thinking him secure, neglected him.
  - With no mature Christian watching out for him, bad companions got hold of him, and slowly corrupted and enticed him into evil ways and finally into the commission of a great crime.
  - He then went to the mountains with them as their leader, and committed acts of bloodshed and cruelty.
  - Some time after, John visited the same city again, and, learning what had happened, called for a horse and guide, and eventually found his way unarmed into the young captain’s presence.
  - The young man fled away in shame; but the apostle followed him calling out: “Why, my child, do you flee from me, your own father, unarmed and old as I am? Have mercy on me, my child; fear not. You still have hope of life. I will give account to Christ for you. If need be, I will willingly endure death for you, as the Lord endured it for us. I will give my life for yours. Stand; believe; Christ has sent me.”
  - The youth stopped, looked down, threw away his weapons, trembled, and wept. When the apostle approached, the young man embraced him, and started confessing his sins and weeping.
  - John assured him of the Savior’s forgiveness, and, falling on his knees, and kissing the right hand which the youth had concealed in shame, convinced him to be led back to the church.

- There the apostle spent time with him in intercessory prayer, prolonged fasting, and multiplied counsels, and did not leave until he had restored him to the church, ‘a trophy of visible resurrection.’
- Ignatius writes to the Ephesians: “And on behalf of the rest of men, pray unceasingly. **For there is in them a hope of repentance, that they may attain to God. Allow them therefore to become disciples even through your works.** Towards their anger be gentle; towards their boasting be meek; against their abuse set your prayers; against their error be firm in the faith: against their savagery be mild, not being eager to imitate them. Let us be found their brothers in reasonableness: and let us be eager to be imitators of the Lord, (to see) who can be most wronged, who most deprived, who most despised, in order that no plant of the devil be found in you, but in all good character and self-control you may remain in Jesus Christ as regards both flesh and spirit.”
- The author of the so-called second Epistle of Clement reproves his readers for not being true to these principles: “For the gentiles, hearing from our mouth the words of God, are impressed by their beauty and greatness: then, learning that our works are not worthy of the things we say, they turn to abuse, saying that it is some deceitful tale. For when they hear from us that God says: ‘You will have no thanks, if ye love only those who love you; but you will have thanks, if you love your enemies and those that hate you’—when they hear this, they are impressed by the surplus of goodness: but when they see that we do not love, not only those who hate us, but even those who love us, they laugh at us, and the Name is blasphemed.”
- “We,” says Justin, “who hated and killed one another, and because of differences in customs would not share a common hearth with those who were not of our tribe, now, after the appearance of Christ, have become sociable, and pray for our enemies, and **try to persuade those who hate us unjustly, in order that they, living according to the good suggestions of Christ, may share our hope of obtaining the same reward** from the God who is Master of all.”
- Justin goes on to quote some of Jesus’ teachings from the Sermon on the Mount and says, “For we must not resist: **nor has God wished us to be imitators of the wicked, but has told us by patience and gentleness to lead all men from the shame and lust of evil things.** And this we are able to show in the case of many who were once on your side. They changed from being violent and tyrannical, conquered either through seeing the consistency of (their Christian) neighbors’ life, or having noticed the strange patience of fellow-travelers when they were cheated, or having experienced it from those who they have done business with.”
- Athenagoras says about Christians “(For them) it is not lawful, when they are struck, not to offer themselves (for more blows), nor, when slandered, not to bless: **for it is not enough to be just—and justice is to return like for like—but it is required for us to be good and patient of evil.**”
- Eirenaios makes the point that Jesus wants us not only to be “good givers and sharers, but even givers of free gifts to those who take away what is ours.” Instead of being sad that we are being taken advantage of, “we rejoice as if we gave willingly, doing our neighbors a favor” instead of just meeting their demands. He says if we regard everyone as our neighbor, we will never raise our hand to take vengeance.
- Apollonius told the Roman Senate that Christ “taught us to put our anger to rest...to increase our love for others...not to turn to the punishment of those who wrong us...”
- Clement of Alexandria speaks about forgiveness and says that the mature Christian “not only thinks it right that the good (man) should leave to others the judgment of those who have done him wrong, but he wishes the

righteous man to ask from those judges forgiveness of sins for those who have trespassed against him; and rightly so.”

- “Above all,” he says elsewhere, “Christians are not allowed to correct by violence sinful wrongdoings. For it is not those who hold back from evil by compulsion, but those who hold back by choice, that God crowns. For it is not possible for a man to be good constantly except by his own choice.”
- Tertullian refers to the command to love enemies and not to retaliate, and reminds the pagans that Christians are willing to be slaughtered, and will not go to war because they follow the teaching that “it (is) more lawful to be killed than to kill” He says, “**The Christian does not hurt even his enemy**”
- In his writing on patience, he quotes the words about turning the other cheek, rejoicing when cursed, leaving vengeance to God, not judging, etc., and insists on the duty of obeying them in all cases. “**It is absolutely forbidden to repay evil with evil.**”
- He calls the Christian the son of peace, for whom it is not right even to go to law, and who does not avenge his wrongs.
- Origen says that “the Lawgiver of the Christians (has) forbidden the destruction of man” and so it is never right for one of his own disciples to fight against a man ‘however unrighteous he may be’ because he did not wish for his divine laws to allow the destruction of any man whatever.
- He also points out that if the Jews obeyed the laws of the gospel, that they would have to change their ‘civil economy’ because “For it would not be possible for Christians to make use, according to the Law of Moses, of (the) destruction of (their) enemies or of those who had acted contrary to the Law and were judged worthy of destruction by fire or stoning”
- He says that if the Jews were not allowed to fight their enemies or serve as soldiers or punish murder, adultery, and other crimes, then their nations would have been destroyed whenever their enemies turned on them.
- But he points out that God did not want the Jewish state to continue and so destroyed their city and their temple and began expanding the Christian religion day by day, “so that it is now preached everywhere with boldness, and that in spite of the numerous obstacles which oppose the spread of Christ’s teaching in the world. But since it was the purpose of God that the nations should receive the benefits of Christ’s teaching, all the devices of men against Christians have been brought to nothing; for the more that kings, and rulers, and peoples have persecuted them everywhere, the more have they increased in number and grown in strength.”
- These statements of Origen are important:
  - They clearly show that even in the middle of the third century the ‘hard sayings’ of the Sermon on the Mount were still followed as the only proper way of living for Christians.
  - They show how those sayings of Jesus affected the Christians’ feelings towards war
  - And they show that there is a place for ‘sub-Christian’ ethical standards in the world.
- Cyprian lays it down that “when an injury has been received, one has to refuse punishment and forgive it.”
- Lactantius says, “And so no exception at all ought to be made to the (command of God) that it is always wrong to kill a man, whom God has wished to be a sacred creature.”
- An interesting part of this discussion is that none of these writers seem to make an exception for the defense of others.

- Tertullian even takes it for granted that if someone will not avenge his own wrongs, then he will not avenge the wrongs of others.
  - This idea goes against the spirit of modern Christianity
  - Many Christians who would never go to war otherwise, feel they must do so if it is to defend the weak and powerless.
  - First of all, the Christian must try to prevent others being wronged, but the question is “**Which is the right method for him to use—the gentle moral appeal or violent physical coercion?**”
    - With either choice there is a possibility of failure
    - If a Christian can not use violence to defend himself, doesn't the Golden Rule require him to defend others in the same way.
    - While a man might feel obligated to use force to defend a woman being attacked in his presence, what about the ones down the street that he cannot see? Evil is all around us, physical violence can only go so far in stopping it
    - The Christian life, example, and teaching is a much better method of controlling wrongdoing than physical force.
  - Christians suffered horrible things at the hands of their persecutors for hundreds of years.
  - Would anyone seriously argue that their suffering would have been less, or the world a better place, if from the very beginning Christian men had acted on the principle that it was their duty to defend others by force and bloodshed?
    - When Sabina was sentenced to the brothel, no Christian knight came to save her. She simply answered the threat saying: “The Holy God will see about that.”
    - Cowards could have never endured tortures like that.
    - The only explanation is that these people were simply devoted to following the teachings of their Master and in doing so were changing the world for good more than anyone before or since.
4. The Christians' Experience of Evil in the Character of Soldiers.
- John the Baptist, Jesus, James, Peter, and Paul were all abused and killed by soldiers.
  - Beginning with Nero in 64 A.D., Christians were officially persecuted by the Roman government more or less until the time of Constantine.
  - Soldiers were the Roman police, and would have been responsible for the torture and execution of any Christian brought up on charges against the empire.
  - Christians were burned at the stake, put to the rack, covered in boiling oil. They were beaten and flogged, crucified and beheaded.
  - Churches were destroyed by the Praetorian Guard who “came in battle array with axes and other instruments of iron.”
  - In Phrygia, for instance, soldiers burned the whole population of a small town which happened to be entirely Christian.
5. The Christian Refusal to Participate in War.
- All the evidence up to this point leads us to believe that Christians would generally refuse to serve as soldier. The little information that we do have seem to agree with that expectation.



- Aside from Cornelius and one or two soldiers who may have been baptized with him and the jailor baptized by Paul in Philippi, “we have no direct or reliable evidence for the existence of a single Christian soldier until after 170 A.D.”
- Tatianus condemned war as murderous, and, as Harnack says, “was undoubtedly opposed to the military calling.” He wrote: “I do not want to be a king: I do not wish to be rich: I decline military command: I hate fornication.”
- The heathen philosopher Celsus urges Christians to take part in civil government and to give the Emperor their strength and “fight for him and serve as soldiers with him, if he require it, and to share military command with him.” He argues that if everyone behaved as the Christian, that the Emperor would be left alone and the empire would fall to the barbarians. This clearly shows that Christians as a rule did not serve in the army or the civil government.
- The first reliable evidence of Christians in the army comes from the time of Marcus Aurelius (161 – 180 A.D.) Harnack says, “It is not therefore surprising that until (the time of) Marcus Aurelius, a question of military service did not exist in the churches: **the baptized Christian did not become a soldier**; and those who were caught by the Christian faith in the camp had to see how they could come to terms with their military profession.”
- We find a turning point in the time of Tertullian who makes it clear that there were a considerable number of Christians serving in the Roman army. However, even in his time, there was still a strong unwillingness of many to serve in the army, and he details some of the reasons why.
  - Remember his statement that Christians would go to war if it weren't for the teaching that said it is more lawful to be killed than to kill.
  - He says about being a magistrate, “And so let us grant that it is possible for anyone to succeed, in whatever office (he may happen to hold), in going on under the mere name of the office, without sacrificing, or lending his authority to sacrifices, or contracting for sacrificial victims, or assigning (to others) the care of the temples, or seeing after their revenues, or giving shows at his own (expense) or at that of the public, or presiding at them when they have to be given, or making a proclamation or an edict for any solemnity, or even swearing (oaths), or—as regards (his magisterial) power—judging anyone on a capital or criminal charge—for you might allow (him to judge) about (questions of) money—or condemning (anyone), binding anyone, imprisoning anyone, or torturing (anyone): if it can be believed that these things are possible.”
  - Later he says, “But how will a Christian make war—nay, how will he serve as a soldier in peacetime—without the sword, which the Lord has taken away? For, although soldiers had come to John and received the form of a rule, although also a centurion had believed, but the Lord afterwards, in disarming Peter, ungirded every soldier.”
  - “And shall he, who is not the avenger even of his own wrongs, administer chains and imprisonment and tortures and executions?”
  - “Of course, the case is different, if the faith comes (later to someone already) in military service...all the same, when faith has been accepted and signed, **either the service must be left at once, as has been done by many, or else (one will have to make many objections), lest anything be committed against God**”
  - **“No necessity of sinning have they, whose one necessity is that of not sinning”**

- Idolatry was a big problem for Christians serving in the army, but the bloodshed and violence of it were just as bad
- Several of these writers point to the ‘alternative service’ that Christians provide to the society even though they are not officially involved in public affairs.
- There are church orders from the third century and later from several parts of the empire that forbid Christians to serve as soldiers or magistrates unless they put aside the sword, leave the service, and repent.
- Origen argues that even the pagans do not require their priests to serve in the army or shed blood, but they are to be kept from those things so that they can offer the sacrifices to their Gods.
- He says then that Christians “should do their military service as priests and servants of God” keeping their hands pure and praying to God on behalf of those “who righteously serve as soldiers and of him who reigns righteously.”
- Later, “And Christians benefit their countries more than do the rest of men, educating the citizens and teaching them to be devout towards the God of the State”
- Though he speaks of just wars, the context shows that he is taking about wars waged by non-Christians.
- Origen’s view of the Christian’s duty in regard to war is put as clearly as words could make it: **once someone accepted Christianity he had to put away the use of arms.**
- His relative justification of the wars of non-Christians cannot be made a ground either for doubting his seriousness, or for accusing him of inconsistency in maintaining it.
- Lactantius explicitly rules out both military service and capital charges on the ground that, involving homicide, they are a violation of justice.
- “And so it will not be lawful for a just man to serve as a soldier—for justice itself is his military service—nor to accuse anyone of a capital offense, because it makes no difference whether you kill with a sword or with a word, since killing itself is forbidden. And so, in this commandment of God, no exception at all ought to be made to the rule that it is always wrong to kill a man, whom God has wished to be regarded as a truly sacred creature.”

### III. Forms of the Early Christian Acceptance of War

1. The Use of Military Terms and Phrases to Illustrate the Religious Life.
  - The apostle Paul is the first to use military metaphors for the Christian life.
    - He speaks of the armor of God
    - Weapons of righteousness on the right and the left
    - He calls men his ‘fellow-soldiers’ and other ‘fellow-captives’
    - He compares human warfare and the Christian’s struggle against evil angelic powers.
    - He tells Timothy to be a good soldier of Jesus Christ and that those enrolled in the military do not get mixed up in civilian affairs
  - But Paul twice goes out of his way to make it clear that he is not referring to earthly warfare:
    - **“Though we walk in the flesh, we do not serve as soldiers according to the flesh;** for the weapons of our military service are not those of the flesh, but powerful through God for the demolition of

strongholds, demolishing theories and every rampart thrown up against the knowledge of God”

- Again, “**our struggle is not against flesh and blood**, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the world-potentates **of this darkness, against the spiritual forces** of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the armor of God,”
  - Military language like this is used by many writers, but starts to become more frequent in the middle of the third century, especially during times of persecution.
  - Military metaphors were very common in the Latin writers, and the fact that ‘paganus’ which originally meant a civilian as opposed to a soldier, came to be used to non-Christians.
  - While some people did misunderstand these metaphors and began to apply them literally, they were only meant to express the reality of purely spiritual warfare and cannot lead us to believe that Christians were okay with the use of physical violence and arms.
2. The Wars of the Old Testament and of Hebrew History.
- It is interesting to note how easily early Christians were able to keep their code of conduct separate from the one of the Old Testament in their minds and not see any contradiction between them
  - The Scriptures were divinely inspired
  - They recorded a history that had been divinely controlled
  - Whatever was told about and approved of by the authors of those Biblical books was sacred and not open to debate or criticism.
  - But yet no early Christian would assume that he could do whatever he read about in the Old Testament.
    - Concubinage and prostitution are two good examples.
    - Paul does not criticize Abraham, and
    - The writer of Hebrews praises the faith of Rahab
    - The wars of the Old Testament were treated in much the same way.
  - Early Christians did not see any conflict between the warlike habits of the ‘great men of old’ and their own peaceful principles
    - Mentioned as the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11 are “Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets, who by means of faith subdued kingdoms...escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, routed armies of foreigners.”
    - Many Christian writers saw these old wars and people as symbols and foreshadowing of Christ and the cross.
  - As people later started to question those simple beliefs, problems developed:
    - Markion, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, developed the theory that the wars and judgments and penalties of the Old Testament came not from the Supreme Being (the good God and Father of Jesus), but rather a lower Deity, the “just God of the Jews”
    - Reacting to this idea the orthodox Church began looking for warlike characteristics in the God of the New Testament to show that there was still only one god. This put the central peacefulness of the Gospel in danger

- Harnack says, “It will however always remain a credit to the Marcionite Church, which long maintained itself, that it preferred to reject the Old Testament, than to tarnish the picture of the Father of Jesus Christ by mixing in traces of a warlike God.”
- Tertullian and others shows that Christians were using the Old Testament to justify bearing arms.
  - The arguments were not always the most intelligent.
  - Besides the wars of Joshua and the Israelites, Christians appealed to the fact that Moses had a rod, Aaron wore a buckle, and John the Baptist wore a leather belt!
  - Other Christians justified going to the public shows because David danced before the ark and Elijah was the charioteer of Israel.
- **Once Christian participation in warfare became a problem, the fact that they believed the wars of the Old Testament to be justified prevented a unanimous decision against it.**
- Many, like Origen, considered the OT wars as parables and allegories describing spiritual life
- But on the whole, all orthodox Christians considered those old wars to be the will of God and that his will for the ancient Hebrews was different than his will for them. Thus they followed the teachings of Jesus.

### 3. Apocalyptic Wars.

- In addition to wars in the past, Jews and Christians both looked forward to a time when God would come and punish the wicked and reward the righteous and the Messiah would set up a new divine kingdom.
- Jesus spoke of wars that would come.
- The Apocalypse is full of images of war.
  - The opening of the first, second, and fourth seals all bring on disastrous wars.
  - Christ is pictured as the conqueror with a sharp two-edged sword coming from his mouth.
  - A great conflict is mentioned where he will defeat the Beast and the kings of the earth in a terrific slaughter.
  - Later there is mention of wars against Gog and Magog and the destruction of all the enemies of God
- One writer after another discusses these ideas and looks forward to the coming destruction of evil with the return of the Messiah
- But the Christian did not see himself as an earthly warrior fighting for the Messiah’s victory.
- They believed those wars would be fought by angelic armies, or that it should all be understood spiritually and figuratively.
- “It was not until the time of Constantine that the success of Christianity appeared to be bound up with a military victory.” And it was only much later that a ‘holy war’ was finally proclaimed in the name of Christianity.
- History shows that the idea of a warrior Jesus coming back to conquer his enemies never turned the Christians of the first three centuries into ‘warlike revolutionaries.’
- But again, the idea of that warrior-Christ was coming in the future played a part in preventing a ‘unanimous and uncompromising rejection of warfare’ as a part of Christian life.

#### 4. The Jewish War of 67–71 A.D.

- This war was a special case of the apocalyptic wars we just mentioned. Unlike the others which would presumably take place in the distant future at the end of the age, this war and the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple were prophesied by Jesus as coming within a generation.
- According to Eusebius, shortly before the siege of Jerusalem (70 A.D.) all of the Christians left Jerusalem because of a revelation that they received and crossed the Jordan settling in Pella of Perea and took no part in the fighting
- “The unanimous verdict of Christians who wrote after 70 A.D. was that (this war)...was a divinely ordained punishment inflicted on the Jewish nation for its sin in rejecting and crucifying Christ.”

#### 5. War as an Instrument of Divine Justice.

- War was often seen by the early Christians as a punishment by God against sinful and unjust nations. The Jewish war just referred to is a good example.
- Clement of Rome speaks of God and quotes the threat from Isaiah: “If you are unwilling and will not hear me, the sword will devour you.”
- Tertullian recounts how God often used the surrounding nations to punish Israel when they turned from his laws, especially to idolatry
- Cyprian, in answer to the pagan complaint that the frequency of wars, famines, plagues, droughts, etc., was due to the Christians, urges that “those (calamities) happen, not because your gods are not worshiped by us, but because God is not worshiped by you.”
- The belief that God has used to war to punish his people and those who have been guilty of great sins does not mean that the believer ought to take part in that punishment himself.
- If that were true, then the fact that God has used plagues and persecutions to punish his people would mean that Christians would be right to help spread a plague or persecute his fellow Christians.
- That conclusion is obviously absurd which leads us to believe that the Christian idea of war being used by God to punish sin certainly does not mean that the Christian may take part in it with an easy conscience.
- But the simple fact remains that God himself, in the Christian view, did bring about wars. Therefore the Christians cannot reject war ‘in every sense and universally’.

#### 6. The Functions of the State.

- The Church as a whole adopted the view that the State was a useful and necessary institution, ordained by God for the security of life and property, the preservation of peace, and the prevention and punishment of the grosser forms of human sin.
- Paul told the Romans: “there is no authority except from God, and those who exist are ordained by God...For rulers are not a terror to the good work, but to the evil. Do you desire to have no fear of the authority? Do that which is good, and you will have praise from the same, for he is a servant of God to you for good. But if you do that which is evil, be afraid, for he doesn’t bear the sword in vain; for he is a servant of God, an avenger for wrath to him who does evil...For this reason you also pay taxes, for they are servants of God’s service, attending continually on this very thing.”
- Peter says to submit to every human institution for the Lord’s sake and to honor the Emperor.

- This idea of the civil government being instituted by God is brought out in most of the writers from our period: Clement of Rome, the Fourth Gospel, Polycarp, Athenagoras, the apocryphal Acts of John, Theophilus, the Acts of Apollonius, Eirenaeus, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Minucius Felix, Origen, Dionysius of Alexandria, the Didaskalia, the Clementine Recognitions, Lactantius, and Eusebius.
- It is absent from Cyprian and Arnobius.
- This view frankly recognizes the rightfulness of judicial penalties, even the death penalty, as part of the government's God-given responsibility
- Eirenaeus says that magistrates "wearing the laws as a garment of justice, will not be punished or questioned for what they do justly and lawfully."
- He says earthly rule was set up by God for the benefit of the gentiles, that men would not destroy themselves, but would establish laws to control wrongdoing.
- Tertullian tells the Romans to follow their own laws and only use torture until a confession is obtained, and that if wrongdoer is marked for a due punishment, it would not be lawful to fight for his acquittal or deny his crime.
- He even says about the gladiatorial fights, "It is a good thing when evil-doers are punished. Who but an evil-doer will deny this?"
- Origen points out that persecution is a misuse of the power which God has given to the government for a good purpose, in this case to punish evil men and praise the good.
- He says that the Holy Spirit has given a place for human law in many things, and that "it appears that the earthly judge fulfills a very large part of the law of God."
- Christians often complained about the corruption in the system of justice and recognized the need and value of good administration.
- Cyprian complained that, not only are the innocent often condemned in the law-courts, but the guilty do not even perish with them.
- Lactantius tells Constantine that it is his task "to correct misdeeds" and to remove the evil men themselves from the State.
- Later he says, "Take away anger from a king, and not only will no one obey him, but he will even be cast down from his high rank."
- The the government was ordained by God and was right to issue judicial penalties, this implies in some sense the rightfulness of war.
- Eirenaeus mentions 'the military arts' among human activities generally recognized as useful.
- Clement of Alexandria says that generalship, like legislation and the administration of justice, is one of the usual departments of the royal office
- Origen speaks of the Emperor's soldiers as "those who render military service righteously."
- Lactantius criticizes Maximinus Daza as ignorant of military affairs.
- He describes with satisfaction and gratitude to God the victories of Constantine and Licinius over Maxentius and Daza respectively
- The closing chapters of his Church History and the whole of his later Life of Constantine are full of grateful and even flattering eulogies of the ruler who had overthrown the persecutors by force of arms and thereby secured peace for the Church.

- It made sense then that those Christians who regularly prayed for the Emperor as a guardian of law and order should also pray for the success of his soldiers who kept back the barbarians and administered justice.
- While prayer for the rulers begins very early in Christian literature, prayers specifically for the armies are not mentioned until the time of Tertullian, though he refers to them as the standard practice.
- Evidence clearly shows that Christians believed that God ordains civil governments for the purpose of restraining sin through force and penalty
- But they also believed that a Christian must never inflict an injury on his neighbor no matter how wicked he may be
- How can we reconcile these two facts?
  - Being appointed by God to do something does not guarantee the righteousness or innocence of the one doing it
  - The Beast in revelation was given authority over the people and saints, but he was not righteous
  - God uses the wickedness of some to punish or correct others
  - In the thoughts of Paul and the early Fathers the “just ruler who as the servant of God enforces the laws, punishes wrongdoers, and wages war against the unrighteous” is always a pagan ruler and so not expected to obey all the Christian laws of conduct.
  - Not all the servants of God are necessarily Christians.
  - This relative justification of coercive government and war is not a model for Christian conduct and does not justify a Christian leaving behind the teachings of Christ.

- If someone objects to this justification on the grounds that it leave all the dirty work of society to non-Christians, it is right to remind him that:
  - First, early Christians endured much more hardship and danger than any magistrate, executioner, or soldier.
  - Second, they had their own method of repressing crime, more thorough and effective than the method of the State.
  - Their power to reduce the need for the use of the sword increased directly in proportion to their numbers and their zeal.

All of these ways in which Christians ‘accepted’ war did not require their participation in it. But this fact was not always obvious to them and their words and conduct were not always consistent with the sworn principles of their faith. This led some of them to serve in the army, but aside from that there are a few real cases of ‘apparent compromise’ that should be discussed.

- Paul’s demand for his legal rights and his appeal to Caesar concerned only his personal immunity from injustice and did not involve punishment of his accusers or enemies
- There are some other cases in his life that we might question his principles, but it would be very hard to measure his actual inconsistency, if any.
- Many Christians pleaded, protested, and appealed to pagan magistrates, but in all the early cases, the Christians were always the defendants and did not ask for the punishment of their enemies.
- Origen prayed for the Emperors victory though he would not fight alongside them. But if someone recognizes that one warring party is better than the other, they might wish for it to prevail even though neither is acting in a Christian way.

- We don't know how many Christians served in political life, held office as magistrates, or brought suits to the pagan courts, but it is clear that this was very rare before the middle of the third century.
- In 272 A.D. A synod of Christian bishops appealed to the Emperor Aurelianus to eject the bishop, Paulus of Samosata, from the church of Antioch. He had been condemned as a heretic years earlier, but kept his place under the protection of Zenobia, Queen of Palmyra.
- Around 280 A.D. Christians were appointed as governors over some provinces.
- After the triumph of Constantine most of the barriers were taken away. The clergy were not to shed blood or administer justice outside the church and a few like mind Christians joined also held back.
- But it soon was taken for granted that the average Christian was free to serve in the civil government as much as the average pagan had before.

#### 7. The Christians' Experience of Good in the Character of Soldiers.

- The many accounts of soldiers who treated the Christians with kindness or who acted with faith and respect show the good impression that they made on the minds of Christians in their day.
  - Soldiers who came to John the Baptist
  - The Centurion in Capernaum, the one at the cross of Jesus, and Cornelius in Caesarea
  - Sergius Paulus, proconsul of Cyprus
  - The man who lead James to the judgment-seat, confessed himself a Christian and was beheaded with him
  - The jailor at Philippi
  - Those soldiers who cared for Paul, particularly the centurion Julius
- There are accounts of soldiers treating imprisoned apostles with kindness
- And others who while leading them to death, defended Christian maidens from insult by the crowds
- Some allowed friends to visit the prisoners or gave them special privileges.
- Many soldiers became Christians because after seeing the gentle and loving nature of the people they were persecuting. Many of them were promptly martyred.

#### 8. The Participation of Christians in Military Service.

- From the New Testament:
  - The converts of John the Baptist, the centurion of Capernaum, and the centurion at the cross were not disciples of Jesus at all.
  - Sergius Paulus does not seem to be a full convert to Christianity in the regular sense.
  - The man who lead James to his execution was promptly martyred and so did not have to make a choice whether to continue in the army or not
  - Cornelius, the one or two soldiers with him, and the jailor in Philippi are the only real cases of Christian soldiers in New Testament times.
  - The New Testament and earliest Christian writings do not express disapproval of these men continuing in their service—assuming that they did continue—or of the military calling in general.
  - These few cases make it possible that there may have been soldier-converts in the Church from the earliest times.



- But as a matter of fact there is no trace of the existence of any Christian soldiers between these cases mentioned in Acts and, say, 170 A.D.
- About 174 A.D. the Legio Fulminata contained a considerable number of Christian soldiers.
  - This means that the conversion of soldiers of Christianity must have been going on for some time, but we don't know how long.
  - It is often said that these men were not criticized for their position by their fellow-Christians. But,
    - Celsus's disapproval of Christians in general objecting to military service came only a few years after this
    - And considering that the Church's later position would tend to destroy records of earlier strictness, it would not be safe to make that conclusion from silence.
- Julius Africanus appears to have served as a soldier for the Emperor Severus in 195 A.D., but the fact that he wrote an encyclopedia which included not only instructions for poisoning food, wine, wells, and air but a section on aphrodisiac secrets, which was full of obscenities, show how little Christian morals had touched him.
- Clement of Alexandria tells those who came to the faith while they were soldiers to "Listen to the (heavenly) General who orders what is righteous," but never expressly forbids Christians from serving.
- There are several stories of soldiers converting to Christianity after while doing the horrible work of persecution. Though many of them were soon martyred, we don't know how many would have or did continue in the army.
- It is important to notice that the writings of Tertullian (198-211 A.D.) are **the oldest pieces of evidence for the existence of Christian soldiers who joined the army after conversion.**
- All of the Christian soldiers mentioned before this period may well have been converted when already in the army. This at least would have been the more normal case.
- Soldiers were very often persecuted and martyred in the in the middle of the third century.
- Harnack: "The number of Christian officers and soldiers gradually increased (after the Edict of Toleration around 260 A.D.) so much so that the military authorities...made allowance for (Christianity), and looked on quietly while Christian officers made the sign of the cross at the sacrifices. Moreover they also dispensed silently with their attendance at these sacrifices."
- In 295 A.D. a Christian soldier on trial is asked why he will not serve, the proconsul said to him: "In the sacred retinue of our lords Diocletianus and Maximianus, Constantius and Maximus, there are Christian soldiers, and they serve (as such)."
- In 303 A.D. the Emperor Galerius began to use abuse and threats to get Christians in the army to desert their faith.
- In 299 A.D. the general Veturius attempted to purge his troops of Christian soldiers, most of them retired from service, but some were put to death.
- Christian soldiers were some of the first victims in the persecution of 302 A.D. One of them, Julius, asked the judge why he was on trial claiming that in his 27 years of service he had never come before the judge, he had gone out on seven campaigns, never stood behind anyone, and fought as well as any.
- The Christians of Armenia took up arms and defeated the Emperor Maximinus Daza when he tried to force them to abandon their faith.

- At the battle of the Milvian Bridge, Constantinian troops “actually bore in that battle the sign of the cross upon their shields and in their standards: they took part in the bloodshed of the battle, and doubtless joined in their leader’s confident boast that he had conquered by virtue of that same sign.”
- This and later battles were seen as struggles between Christianity and Paganism
- How many Christian soldiers were there?
  - There were clearly more soldiers in the armies at the end of the third century than in the middle.
  - That the Emperors tried to purge the Christians from their ranks around 300 A.D. tells us that the percentage of Christians could not be high.
  - **No ruler would readily deprive himself of a tenth, or even a twentieth part, of his military power.**
  - Even at this point, Christian opinion was far from unanimous on the issue of Christian military service.

## IV. Summary and Conclusion

Now comes the time to put all of our evidence together and make some conclusions.

1. From the very beginning, Jesus lived and taught to his disciples principles of conduct that ruled out all use of violence and injury against others.
2. This clearly implies that a Christian should not participate in war.
3. His principles were meant only for the small but growing group of his followers and not for the ‘whole of unredeemed humanity.’
4. His teachings of ‘non-resistance’ have a positive counterpart in the power of love to overcome sin and do not make those who follow them helpless or useless in the struggle against sin, but actually more effective.
5. We saw that the various attempts to get around these principles all rest on various false assumptions.
6. The early Christians took Jesus at his word, and understood his frequent instructions on gentleness and non-resistance in their literal sense.
7. They closely identified their religion with peace.
8. They strongly condemned war for the bloodshed it involved.
9. They believed that Christianity fulfilled the Old Testament prophecy which foretold the transformation of the weapons of war into the implements of agriculture
10. They declared that it was their policy to return good for evil and to conquer evil with good.
11. With one or two possible exceptions no soldier joined the Church and remained a soldier until the time of Marcus Aurelius (161–180 A.D.). Even then, refusal to serve was known to be the normal policy of the Christians—as the reproaches of Celsus (177–180 A.D.) testify.
12. In the time of Tertullian (say 200–210 A.D.), many soldiers had left the army on their conversion; and his writings are the earliest record we possess of any Christians joining the army when already converted.
13. While a general distrust of ambition and a horror of contamination by idolatry entered largely into the Christian aversion to military service,
14. The sense of the utter contradiction between the work of imprisoning, torturing, wounding, and killing, on the one hand, and the Master’s teaching on the other, created an equally fatal and conclusive objection.

15. The Church-Order framed probably early in the third century and widely circulated in the East required magistrates and soldiers to abandon their calling before baptism, and excommunicated the Christian who insisted on joining the army.
16. Origen, who did not believe Christian duty was limited by some approaching apocalypse, took it for granted that Christians generally refused to serve in the army, and that they did so, not in fear of idolatrous contamination, which does not seem to have been a difficulty when he wrote (248 A.D.), but because of bloodshed; and he defended them for doing so in a series of acute arguments that have never since been answered.
17. No Church writer before Athanasius (350 A.D.) ventured to say that it was not only permissible, but praiseworthy, to kill enemies in war, without the qualification—expressed or implied—that he was speaking of pagans only.
18. The conditions of the early Christians kept them from the need to apply these ideas for a long time. Jews and slaves did not serve in the army and the Emperor had all the volunteers he needed.
19. Because there had been no definite ruling, and there was no real opportunity to apply one for a long time, other factors began to affect Christian thought on the matter.
20. It was not like adultery, which was condemned even by pagans. Or like idolatry because it did not concern members of society in general.
21. Military service was bound up with the police system that maintained law and order.
22. Christians were fond of speaking of the Christian life itself as a warfare and of themselves as soldiers of Christ.
23. Scripture taught them to think with reverence and esteem of the warriors of old as men acting with the approval and under the guidance of God.
24. Many of them looked forward to a great military triumph of Christ over his enemies at the end of the age.
25. In the meantime, they could think of war as a means of divine chastisement.
26. They regarded the great victories of the Romans over the Jews in 67–71 A.D. as a divine punishment of the Jews for their treatment of Christ.
27. They were taught to think of the Emperor as appointed by God for the purpose of checking sin and maintaining order—tasks which they knew he could not fulfill without using soldiers.
28. While none of these things are inconsistent with a Christian prohibition against using arms, they create complications that prevent a unanimous declaration against war.
29. This meant that at any time after the start of Christianity, the existence of Christian soldiers was at least a possibility.
30. Many members of the Christian Church were of a very simple, unintellectual, and unreflective type of mind and sometimes came to illogical conclusions.
31. At the same time, the church was slowly growing less strict in her moral purity and becoming more and more like the world around them.
32. The Apostolic counsel: “Let everyone remain in the calling wherein he was called” might easily be used by a soldier especially considering that withdrawing from the army because of a change in religion had its own dangers.
33. Soldiers who were used to their grim duties and had always considered it to be honorable might easily overlook the facts about their position.

34. Christian toleration, the few number of cases, the joy at have a 'banner in the devil's camp', and the ignorance of the horrors of battle would all lead to an acceptance of Christians staying in the army.
35. If a Christian can remain a soldier after his conversion, it would follow that a Christian could become a soldier. If there can be one, there can be many.
36. Even after Constantine's rise to power, the church did not immediately abandon her 'anti-militarist leanings'.

"During the period when the conditions of life in Empire and Church relieved all but a very few of the need of making a personal decision, with the result that the problem in its different bearings dawned on the Christian mind only fragmentarily and by slow degrees—during that period, I say, the simplemindedness of some, the worldliness of others, and the charitable tolerance—not necessarily the approval—of the rest, were already silently determining what the result was to be."

"The consequence was that when the triumph of Constantine suddenly called upon the Church to come down definitely on one side of the fence or the other, she found that a free decision was no longer open to her...Official Christianity was now committed to the sanction of war," and a proper discussion of the problem based on its merits was impossible for centuries to come.

"It is difficult to resist the impression that the Church took a false step when she abandoned her earlier and more rigorous principles..."

Is there any difference in the church today that would truly invalidate the early Christians' testimony against war?