

The Sixth Commandment (Part 2): War! (1997)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

Forerunner, "Personal," August 1997

A bomb goes off in a department store, an airport or a parked car. Women and children are killed—passersby whom coincidence brought to that particular spot at that particular deadly time. The phone lines light up at police, radio and television stations with callers eager to claim credit for the slaughter of innocents.

If these militant terrorists were only nihilists, perhaps we could feel a certain compassion for them. But these random assassins are worse than nihilists—they are true believers, so passionately convinced of their righteousness that they judge themselves above and beyond crime, even above sin.

Almost a thousand years after the Crusades, the "holy war" has been reinvented, with pipe bombs and automatic weapons rather than swords. Instead of fighting pitched battles, terrorists detonate car bombs on crowded streets, blow planes from the sky using smuggled explosives, or hijack or kidnap "enemies" in a cold and sinister way like a tiger prowling through a garden party. How long will it be before some implacable revolutionary group detonates a nuclear device, wreaking death and damage on an unimaginable scale, to hold a nation hostage to its demands?

Holy War

Have there ever been more killings in the name of God than in this supposedly secular century? The "jihad," Islamic holy war, has left its mark of fear and bloodshed across the Middle East, and Islamic nations are beginning to threaten the nations of northwest Europe and the United States.

Holy war, however, is not confined to Islam. Upon the assassination of Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, the tenth guru of the Sikhs wrote, "God is the sword, and the sword is God." Shintoism of Japan has its "kamikaze" (divine wind) doctrine that encourages its adherents to seek eternal bliss by consecrating themselves to death in warfare as living bombs. On the streets of Beirut, bullets designated as "Christian" and "Muslim" were fired at Lebanese by their fellow Lebanese. Religion and politics have never been more tragically confused!

Western historians, journalists and politicians concede that "holy wars" exist, but that they are confined to highly passionate, temperamental and undereducated Third World countries. In the West, they say, though we regrettably have wars, they are sensible, necessary and just!

Yet even in a "just war," must not people be stirred to anger and hatred before they can be persuaded to kill? Do not the armed forces have to recruit ordinarily peaceful citizens and then incite and train them to become killers? Does that not produce a frenzy somewhat like that exhibited in Third World "holy wars"?

Technology and bureaucracy create a marvelous disguise for "sensible" warriors. Secretaries of Defense in business suits carry computer printouts to Congress to demand billions of dollars so the country will be prepared to kill. They make calm appraisals of prudent risks and stress legitimate national self-interest. But as matters intensify, such phrases as "evil empire," "rabid fundamentalism" and "antichrist" surface. This is the rhetoric of holy war in our own nation.

Here is a sample of "holy war" rhetoric:

Although slaying and robbing do not seem to be a work of love, and therefore a simple man thinks it is not a Christian thing to do, yet in truth even this is a work of love. The hand that wields this sword and slays with it is then no more man's hand, but God's.

None other than Martin Luther said this!

An embarrassment? Yes, but to destroy entire cities by nuclear weapons, is it not necessary to believe wholeheartedly that we were exterminating forces of evil and so were justified? This idea is what "redeems" war. It is not a sentimental pretense, but an idea that somehow we are participating in the destruction of the forces of evil. An unselfish belief in this notion will cause a person to set it up, bow down to it and offer himself in sacrifice to it.

A Time of War

Former President and five-star general Dwight D. Eisenhower wrote in a wartime letter to his wife, "War is so horrible, so awful, that I constantly wonder why civilization would stand for such a device." Yet we continue to have war.

Over 14,600 wars have been recorded during mankind's history, averaging about 2.6 wars per year. A statistician has determined that in all of history, man has experienced only 245 years of peace. Of man's 180 generations, only 10 have known unmarred peace. Surely what Jesus prophesied in Matthew 24:6, "you will hear of wars and rumors of wars," is being fulfilled!

Our generations have been particularly afflicted. They have seen World Wars I and II, Korea, Vietnam, El Salvador, the Arab-Israeli conflicts, Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran, the Gulf War, the Falkland Islands, not to mention the multitude of civil wars in the Middle East, Africa, Central America, Southeast Asia, the Balkans, the former Soviet republics, India and Sri Lanka. Since World War II, over 100 wars have raged with millions killed!

Conflicting Loyalties

May 8 brought the 52nd anniversary of the end of World War II in Europe, and August 15 will mark the end of the war with Japan. Perhaps it is fitting in the midst of these anniversaries to reflect on some of the factors that enter this business of state-sanctioned, "legalized" murder.

A Christian finds himself in a particularly difficult position over war because of his conflicting loyalties. He knows and wants to obey God's commandment that clearly says, "You shall not kill." Conversely, he sees in the Scriptures that God's people conducted wars and that God seemingly ordered them, assuring victory for His side. Additionally, we feel the pull to protect the empirical self, of patriotism, of the potential loss of life and limb of loved ones and property. When the things we love are threatened, we feel we must rise to their defense!

Yet war between men and nations is totally unnecessary! God shows that no individual or nation need resort to it. It comes down to relationships and responsibilities: first, the individual's *relationship* to God and country, and second, the individual's *responsibility* to God and country.

War involves sin. If so, war is totally illegal! As I John 3:4 says, "Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness." War also involves free-moral agency. God has *not* given man the right to determine righteousness; He has only given him a choice to follow it or not. God has already established what is righteous. If any man—even Moses or David—or any nation makes the wrong choice, it does not make his choice righteous or God unrighteous. Finally, war involves God's purpose. He will carry out His will and plan regardless of man's actions, including his determination to make war.

Sin involves man's relationship with his Maker. According to Isaiah 59:2, sin damages and can even sever that relationship: "Your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear." Crime is offense against man's laws, enacted by human legislative bodies. Which law, according to God's Word, has precedence? In the Bible, God clearly establishes His supreme position, as well as the individual's and human government's relationships to Him.

In Isaiah 40:9-18, God commands Zion (a type of the church) to lift up its voice to reveal Him to the people. In His ensuing description of Himself, God proclaims Himself as the almighty, all-wise Creator. He has such incomparable power and wisdom that the combined might and intelligence of all nations are as nothing before Him. In our childish vanity, we think of ourselves as being of some account, but we are so insignificant that, compared to Him, all humanity combined is less than nothing and worthless! Considering this testimony, whose law should take precedence?

Colossians 1:13-17 describes our relationship to His Kingdom and expands our understanding of our God and Master Jesus Christ's awesome position:

He has delivered us from the power of darkness and translated us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist.

Jesus Christ is not only our Savior but also our Creator. He is the subject of Isaiah 40:9-18, and it is into His Kingdom we have been translated, meaning conveyed or transferred. Paul must mean that this translation is spiritual because God's Kingdom has not yet literally been established on earth. God "calls those things which do not exist as though they did" (Romans 4:17). We are to conduct our lives and represent God before the world as though we were literally a part of it even now.

Philippians 3:20 reinforces this: "For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ." The Kingdom of God is still in heaven and will be established on earth at Christ's return. However, we are already considered its citizens. Thus, our loyalties and submission go to it before everything else.

God's Supremacy Over the Nations

These verses clearly establish our relationship and responsibility to God, but many more show God's supremacy over the nations. Notice the revelation that unfolds from Nebuchadnezzar's first dream:

Then the secret was revealed to Daniel in a night vision. So Daniel blessed the God of heaven. . . . Daniel answered in the presence of the king, and said, . . . "[T]here is a God in heaven who reveals secrets, and He has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days. Your dream, and the visions of your head upon your bed, were these: . . . This is the dream. Now we will tell the interpretation of it before the king. You, O king, are a king of kings. For the God of heaven has given you a kingdom, power, strength, and glory; and wherever the children of men dwell, or the beasts of the field and the birds of the heaven, He has given them into your hand, and has made you ruler over them all. (Daniel 2:19, 27-28, 36-38)

Twice God states through Daniel that He, the supreme Creator and Ruler, gave Nebuchadnezzar his dominion over men. The Babylonian king must have been like most of us, since he apparently needed another similar experience with God to reinforce the lesson:

This decision is by the decree of the watchers, and the sentence by the word of the holy ones, in order that the living may know that the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, gives it to whomever He will, and sets over it the lowest of men. . . . They shall drive you from men, your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field, and they shall make you eat grass like oxen. They shall wet you with the dew of heaven, and seven times shall pass over you, till you know that the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, and gives it to whomever He chooses. (Daniel 4:17, 25)

This theme surfaces again during the reign of Belshazzar:

Then he was driven from the sons of men, his heart was made like the beasts, and his dwelling was with the wild donkeys. They fed him with grass like oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, till he knew that the Most High God rules in the kingdom of men, and appoints over it whomever He chooses. But you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, although you knew all this. (Daniel 5:21-22)

With this firm foundation, we can easily understand how Paul could write what he does in Romans 13:1-2, where he expresses the Christian's responsibility to human governments:

Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves.

Under normal circumstances, we understand this perfectly. But what if obedience to human government would lead us to sin? Acts 5:29 clearly delineates our responsibility: "Peter and the other apostles answered and said: 'We ought to obey God rather than men.'" Comparing the principles involved leads us to conclude that we should obey God without qualification. If our obedience to God causes us to commit a crime against the state, our submission to the crime's penalty also constitutes submitting to human government.

God rules supreme over human government on every level, but as with individuals, He gives governments free-moral agency. They are thus free to reap what they sow. They are free to enact

laws that are contrary to God. In such a situation, a Christian can find himself on the horns of a dilemma. Do we understand this and love God deeply enough to make the choices necessary to maintain our relationship with Him, despite being placed at a disadvantage?

"I Will Cut Them Off"

God's way is the way of love, of being God-centered and having a working outgoing concern for fellow man, including our enemies. It is the way that not only believes in Jesus, but believes, as Jesus says, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). Sin, though, is the way of vanity, self-love, self-centeredness, greed, competition, grasping, taking, getting, jealousy, envy, malice, resentment, hatred, strife, prejudice, rigid intolerance and war. Under the sin way, love of self is balanced with hostility for others, except for the empirical self: one's family, team, club, race, country, etc. In God's way of life, love of self is balanced with love for others.

On the subject of war, God says, "You shall not kill." Men say that is totally impracticable—nations must go to war. Notice, however, what God reveals about it within His relationship with Israel. Exodus 23:20-30 lays an excellent foundation for understanding. God gave these terms as part of the Old Covenant before it was ratified, so Israel accepted these terms knowingly.

Behold, I send an Angel before you to keep you in the way and to bring you into the place which I have prepared. Beware of Him and obey His voice; do not provoke Him, for He will not pardon your transgressions; for My name is in Him. But if you indeed obey His voice and do all that I speak, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries. For My Angel will go before you and bring you in to the Amorites and the Hittites and the Perizzites and the Canaanites and the Hivites and the Jebusites; and I will cut them off. You shall not bow down to their gods, nor serve them, nor do according to their works; but you shall utterly overthrow them and completely break down their sacred pillars. So you shall serve the Lord your God, and He will bless your bread and your water. And I will take sickness away from the midst of you. No one shall suffer miscarriage or be barren in your land; I will fulfill the number of your days. I will send My fear before you, I will cause confusion among all the people to whom you come, and will make all your enemies turn their backs to you. And I will send hornets before you which shall drive out the Hivite, the Canaanite, and the Hittite from before you. I will not drive them out from before you in one year, lest the land become desolate and the beast of the field become too numerous for you. Little by little I will drive them out from before you, until you have increased and you inherit the land.

God says, "I will cut them off." He does not even say at this point He would kill their enemies! God promises to fight for them supernaturally, so they would not need to fight, to shed an enemy's blood. But there was a condition: They had to obey Him.

Forty years and a multitude of negative experiences later, Numbers 33:50-53, 55 describes an entirely different picture of Israel's conquest of the land:

Now the Lord spoke to Moses in the plains of Moab by the Jordan, across from Jericho, saying, "Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: 'When you have crossed the Jordan into the land of Canaan, then you shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you, destroy all their engraved stones, destroy all their molded images, and demolish all their high places; you shall dispossess the inhabitants of the land and dwell

in it, for I have given you the land to possess. . . . But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then it shall be that those whom you let remain shall be irritants in your eyes and thorns in your sides, and they shall harass you in the land where you dwell."

Now, Israel had to do the driving out!

God's and Israel's Patterns

In the following set of scriptures, notice God demonstrating both His and Israel's patterns:

Then it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God did not lead them by the way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near; for God said, "Lest perhaps the people change their minds when they see war, and return to Egypt." So God led the people around by way of the wilderness of the Red Sea. (Exodus 13:17-18)

Does it not appear that God did not want them involved in war?

In the next chapter, Pharaoh's army has Israel seemingly trapped between them, the mountains and the sea. Humanly, this is surely a time to fight in self-defense! It is either fight or die! But Moses tells the people, "Do not be afraid. Stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord, which He will accomplish for you today. For the Egyptian whom you see today, you shall see again no more forever. The Lord will fight for you, and you shall hold your peace" (Exodus 14:13-14).

Exodus 16 supplies an insight into Israel's relationship with God in so many areas, "And the Lord said to Moses, 'How long do you refuse to keep My commandments and My laws?'" (verse 28). Israel's pattern shows they neither trusted nor obeyed God, and they seemed continually on the verge of dissatisfaction. This combination is a ready motivator of war.

A crucial incident occurs in Exodus 17:1-7 that helps explain why Israel went to war. Israel is again dissatisfied. Verse 7 is the critical scripture: "So he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the contention of the children of Israel, and because they tempted the Lord, saying, '*Is the Lord among us or not?*'" Their faith was so weak that, after all the signs God gave in devastating Egypt, fighting for them, parting the Red Sea and supplying them with food and water, they still doubted He was with them and griped accordingly.

Is it any wonder, then, that Moses, at the end of his patience, knowing Israel's chronic lack of faith and fearing they would be slaughtered, gave them what they had already decided (verses 8-16)? So, God allowed them to sin by going to war. This was the turning point—though they had not yet reached Mount Sinai. Nevertheless, after the Israelites had a taste of war, God repeats His promise to fight for them, and in Exodus 24:1-8, Israel accepts His offer.

Deuteronomy 1:19-33 briefly summarizes the incident that occurred just as Israel was poised to enter the land at the end of the second year of their journey. The twelve spies had searched out Canaan, and ten of them gave a negative report.

Nevertheless you would not go up, but rebelled against the command of the Lord your God; and you murmured in your tents, and said, "Because the Lord hates us, He has brought us out of the land of Egypt to deliver us into the hand of the Amorites, to destroy

us. Where can we go up? Our brethren have discouraged our hearts, saying, 'The people are greater and taller than we; the cities are great and fortified up to heaven; moreover we have seen the sons of the Anakim there.'" Then I said to you, "Do not be terrified, or afraid of them. The Lord your God, who goes before you, He will fight for you, according to all He did for you in Egypt before your eyes, and in the wilderness where you saw how the Lord your God carried you, as a man carries his son, in all the way that you went until you came to this place." Yet, for all that, you did not believe the Lord your God. (verses 26-32)

Israel never really trusted God. Breaking the sixth commandment was merely the next step in the process of sin. Having committed the sin of doubt, they went on to commit the sin of war.

God was determined to work out His purpose to give the land to Abraham and his descendants. Israel chose to be a war-making nation, but because God's purpose must stand regardless of what men do, he continued to back Israel in their conquest of the land and ordered wars.

Three Kings of Judah and War

Three case histories, all in II Chronicles, illustrate God's will regarding war. The first involves Judah during Asa's reign (II Chronicles 14). At the time, Asa was a godly king. Having already decided to meet Judah's enemy on the field of battle, he nonetheless appealed to God in fervent prayer for His help. On the basis of Asa's and Judah's obedience, as well as His own purpose being worked out, God responded favorably. The Judean army, with God's help, decisively defeated the enemy.

II Chronicles 20:1-30 involves Judah under Jehoshaphat, another good monarch (17:3). When Judah was threatened by an alliance of at least three neighboring nations, "Jehoshaphat feared, and set himself to seek the Lord, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah" (20:3). Then, before the assembled Jews, he prayed, listing a series of reasons why God should intervene (verses 6-13). God responded by inspiring the prophet Jahaziel to take this counsel to the king: "You will not need to fight in this battle. Position yourselves, stand still and see the salvation of the Lord, who is with you, O Judah and Jerusalem!" Do not fear or be dismayed; tomorrow go out against them, for the Lord is with you" (verse 17). Amazingly, Judah marched out to the battle led by singers (verses 21-22)! When they arrived at the battle site, all the enemy soldiers were dead because they had fallen to fighting amongst themselves. Not one escaped (verse 24)!

Finally, Hezekiah, another faithful king of Judah, had to face the powerful army of the Assyrian king Sennacherib. II Chronicles 32:1-6 describes the preparations made to defend Jerusalem. Hezekiah then gathered the people and encouraged them by reminding them of God's greatness:

"Be strong and courageous, do not be afraid nor dismayed before the king of Assyria, nor before all the multitude that is with him; for there are more with us than with him. With him is an arm of flesh; but with us is the Lord our God, to help us and to fight our battles." And the people were strengthened by the words of Hezekiah king of Judah. (verses 7-8)

Attempting to discourage the people of the city, Sennacherib's representatives came to the walls of Jerusalem and loudly disparaged God as weak and unable to defend them (verses 9-19). Verses 21-22 record God's dramatic response to His promise and the prayers of Hezekiah and Isaiah:

Then the Lord sent an angel who cut down every mighty man of valor, leader, and captain in the camp of the king of Assyria. So he returned shamefaced to his own land. And when he had gone into the temple of his god, some of his own offspring struck him down with the sword there. Thus the Lord saved Hezekiah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem from the hand of Sennacherib the king of Assyria, and from the hand of all others, and guided them on every side.

II Kings 19:35 says 180,000 Assyrians died at the angel's hand!

Just because Israel, God's covenant nation, went to war does not justify our doing the same. Acts 7:38 says, "This is he who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the Angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers, the one who received the living oracles to give to us." The Bible describes Israel as both congregation (church) and state. Though God chose them, they were still a nation of this world and did many ungodly things.

Nor does popular acceptance, group approval or national decree determine what is right. War is absolutely wrong; it is sin. It is a devastating calamity mankind has chosen to practice. In addition, it is needless, as God has shown His willingness to intervene for those who put their trust in Him and obey Him.

"My Kingdom Is Not From Here"

Jesus did not come proclaiming a physical, worldly kingdom, but rather the spiritual Kingdom of God. Upon our repentance, faith and baptism, God promises to impart His very divine nature and life by regenerating and translating the person into His Kingdom by His Spirit (Colossians 1:13; II Peter 1:4).

Jesus, "the firstborn among many brethren" (Romans 8:29), was born to be the king of a divine government:

Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end." (Luke 1:30-32)

Many verses show that we will participate in that same government (i.e., Revelation 5:10), but we have not yet inherited our reward.

During His trial before Pilate, Jesus made a significant statement about our status now and the subject of war:

Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here." Pilate therefore said to Him, "Are you a king then?" Jesus answered, "You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice." (John 18:36-37)

Recall Philippians 3:20, that "our citizenship is in heaven." We are not of this system; we do not fight in the wars of the kingdoms of this world. We are to come out of this world and not conform to its ways so God will not destroy us with it. However, Revelation 19:11-19 shows that when the Kingdom of God is set on earth, we will fight.

II Corinthians 5:20 further defines our position by showing that we are not only citizens but also ambassadors of that heavenly Kingdom. We may love the nation we live in and be subject to its laws and authority, but we must reserve our fullest allegiance for God in heaven and His Kingdom. As ambassadors and sojourners, we do not have the legal authority to involve ourselves in the affairs of the human nation in which we reside.

The issue of war is not as complicated as it might first appear. The central fact is that God has said we must not kill. We will either be obedient to that or we will not. What determines our choice is the measure of our faith in the Bible's clear statements and examples. If we will obey God's commandments and exercise our faith in His promise, He will intervene to fight our battles for us. We never have to resort to killing.