

TO FIGHT OR NOT TO FIGHT, THAT IS THE QUESTION

...we do not wage war as the world does (II Corinthians 10:3).

Osama bin Laden is dead. Shot by Navy Seals in his home in Pakistan, the world's most famous terrorist was quickly buried at sea. Many Americans cheered with glee as our president announced, "Justice has been done." As followers of Jesus Christ, these events raise difficult questions: What is a Christian response to actions like these? How would Jesus respond? At a deeper level the killing of bin Laden raises the question of when should Christians go to war? On the one hand, we are called to love our enemies, turn the other cheek, and not repay evil for evil. On the other hand, we are called to do justice, protect the innocent and be wise as serpents. Christians through the centuries have responded to the ethical dilemma posed by war by choosing one of three camps:

Activism: It is always right to obey the government (Romans 13:1-7).

Pacifism: It is never right to kill (Exodus 20:13; Matthew 5:38-48).

Selectivism: It is sometimes right to fight... when the cause is just.

Proportionately, most Christians have opted for some form of the third alternative. Finding the activist approach too blind ("My country, right or wrong!") and the pacifist approach too naïve (do nothing while the innocent are murdered?), they have found a way to support war but only when certain conditions are present. John Stott summarizes the criteria that must be met for war to be considered "just"¹:

1. The cause must be righteous. It must be defensive and not aggressive, aiming to secure justice, remedy injustice, and protect the innocent. It must be undertaken only as a last resort, after all attempts at negotiation have failed. There should be a formal declaration by a legitimate authority. The motivation must never be hatred or thirst for revenge.
2. The means must be controlled. There must be no unnecessary violence or wanton destruction. The force used must be proportionately less than that which it was intended to remedy, directed against enemy soldiers and military targets, not civilians.
3. The outcome must be predictable. Like the king in Jesus' parable who "counted the cost" before going to war (Luke 14:31-32), there must be a high probability of achieving the just cause for which the war was begun.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer is a dramatic illustration of someone who struggled with this issue. As a Christian and a pastor, Bonhoeffer lived and preached the ethics of love as outlined in the Sermon on the Mount. But as a German living under the murderous tyranny of Hitler, he could not be passive. After a great struggle of conscience, he became involved in a plot to kill the Führer. He was arrested and executed for "treason." To justify his actions, Bonhoeffer famously used the following example: If a drunken driver were swerving down a main street in Berlin killing pedestrians left and right, would it not be the responsibility of everyone to do all they could to stop the driver from killing more people?

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¹*Human Rights and Human Wrongs.* John Stott. Baker Books, 1999. (pp. 107ff.).