Christians, War and Military Service:

From the New Testament to Emperor Constantine



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By R.A. Baker

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Introduction

Many Christians would be surprised to learn how divisive the topic of pacifism can be in the church. Like me, many grew up with the Christian flag and the U.S. flag in their sanctuaries. For some is quite surprising to be confronted by a dogmatic Christian Pacifist and to be challenged that true Christians do not serve in the military and should not cheer for (openly support) the military. Yet for some Christians in the Free Church movement this is not simply a secondary doctrine.[1]

This difference of opinion in the modern church reflects the history of Christianity. The pacifist branch of the Church typically portrays the early church as closer to the teachings of Jesus and thus, pacifist. We will see in this article that we have conflicting evidence in the New Testament. We will also see that while some early church fathers strongly urged Christians to refrain from military service, some fathers did not hold this view. The evidence shows that both the New Testament and the early church give a fairly positive presentation of the military.

On a personal level I do not find fault with those who hold a pacifist view, but I strongly disagree with a dogmatic presentation that questions the faith of a person who does not hold to a pacifist viewpoint. Like many other doctrinal positions, the Church has always had tension on this issue.

It is not my intention in this article to argue against pacifism. I am not qualified as a theologian and I am not inclined to argue for a particular theological perspective. I fully agree with the idea that Jesus came to establish a kingdom that is "not of this world," that the Prince of Peace brings a kingdom of peace, and that we are to reflect this view. Having said that, I see tension within the biblical text on the issue of how we are to respond in various situations: personal safety, self-defense, military involvement and the support of the nation-state. Anytime the topic of Christians and the military comes up the subject of pacifism must be addressed. Throughout this study I will address pacifist arguments I have had presented to me in conversation and in my readings on the topic.

I am an historian and I approach both the biblical text and early church documents from an historical-critical posture. In this article my intention is to present the historical data from the New Testament and from the early church. I will offer my opinions and interpretations of this data mainly in the Conclusion.

I. Definition of Christian Pacifism

Christian pacifism is a philosophical/theological position so utterly committed to the Kingdom of God that one would not only refuse to bring physical harm to another person, but even the thought of bringing such harm is rejected. No violence is accepted as justified except perhaps police action to protect someone.[2]

This is consistent with the thinking I have encountered in my interactions with Christian pacifists. They reject all violence or use of force, even self-defense. A Christian pacifist will generally agree that nation-states typically need and should have a standing military, but they do not think a true Christian should serve in any military capacity. While some will admit the viability of a Christian serving in a non-combat role, most are convinced that a Christian should not serve in the military in any capacity.[3]

There are many degrees within the larger group calling themselves "pacifists," but on the whole, the Christian pacifists I have interacted with over the past 30 years have each claimed that Christians in the early church, specifically prior to Emperor Constantine (311-337 AD), did not serve in the Roman military due to their pacifist theology.

Our study begins by looking at the teachings of Jesus which is where the pacifist stance begins.

II. The "Peace" Sayings of Jesus

Those who hold to a pacifist view of Christian faith begin with various sayings of Jesus:

> *Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*
>
> *Matt 5:11,12*

> *You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also*
>
> *Matt 5:38,39*

> *You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...* *Matt 5:43,44*

> *My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place.*
>
> *John 18:36*

> *"Put your sword back in its place," Jesus said to him, "for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. Do you think I cannot call on my Father,*

and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?

Matt 26:52,53

There are more sayings in the gospels that agree with these, but we have listed enough to show the basic tone. It is also important to understand that there are a few Jesus sayings that seem to point in the other direction and these should be considered as well. For example,

Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. *Matt 10:34*

Then Jesus asked them, "When I sent you without purse, bag or sandals, did you lack anything?"
"Nothing," they answered.
He said to them, "But now if you have a purse, take it, and also a bag; and if you don't have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one...The disciples said, "See, Lord, here are two swords."
"That's enough!" he replied.

Luke 22:35-38

There are other texts that could be presented that seem to contradict the basic tone given in the first set of "peace" sayings. To list a few: the cursing of the fig tree, the rebuke of demons causing a herd of pigs to run off a cliff (thus destroying someone's means of financial support) and a fairly violent "cleansing" of the Temple (*Matt 21:12-13*).

I do not think these few passages negate the "peace" sayings of Jesus, but I do think the pacifist must explain these sayings that seem to contradict the others. There are explanations and interpretations that can be offered to

explain these discordant texts, but the point here is to show that ALL texts must be interpreted, even the "peace" sayings. Typically the pacifist will admit that Jesus does not intend for His followers to pluck their eye out or cut their hand off (*Matt 5:29-30*) as it might seem in a literal reading of the text. If this text is not to be taken literally, then it should be admitted that other statements made in the same passage (The Sermon on the Mount) must be interpreted as well. In this light it appears that to demand a literal reading of the "peace" sayings is overly simplistic.

In addition to these discordant Jesus sayings and actions, there are other texts and data in the New Testament that point in the opposite direction of the basic pacifist reading and interpretation of the "peace" sayings. I will not be presenting an argument against a pacifist reading of the "peace" sayings,[4] but I do want to present the evidence that appears to conflict with a strict pacifist reading.

III. The New Testament on the Military and War

As mentioned above, Christian pacifists typically argue that military service is not appropriate for a true follower of Jesus. Due to this position, we would expect to find clear passages or exhortations in the New Testament against military service or at least a negative portrayal of the military. In fact, what we find is a positive view of soldiers and military service in the New Testament.[5]

Passages on the Military

Luke 3:14

When Roman soldiers come to John the Baptist asking "What should we do?" John did not tell them to resign from their military service, but to be content with their wages and not to extort from people.

Mark 12:13-17

In one of several passages where the Jewish leadership was attempting trap Jesus, He is asked about paying taxes to Rome. In this text he makes the famous statement, "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar." In this account given by Mark the text ends, "...they were amazed at him." Why were they amazed? As a nation the Jews despised the Roman Empire and paying taxes to that Gentile empire was repugnant to the average Jew. Rome's power was based mainly on their military power. This is a perfect

opportunity for Jesus to denounce war and the military, yet He does not.

Luke 7:1-10
Jesus heals the daughter of the Roman centurion with no indication of displeasure for his military service.
When Jesus encounters the woman caught in adultery He tells her to "sin no more." (*John 8:1-11*) When He encounters the Rich Young Ruler He tells him to "sell all that you have, give it to the poor..." (*Mark 10:17-22*) It would have been perfectly consistent for Jesus to denounce military service or make an ethical statement against war and the military, yet He does not.

Acts 10
Peter shares the gospel with Cornelius, a Roman centurion. Like the encounter above with Jesus and the Roman soldier, Peter says nothing that can be taken as a negative. In fact, both Peter and the Jerusalem leadership did have hesitation, but it was because Cornelius was a Gentile, not due to his military life.

Acts 27-28
In these chapters we have Luke's account of Paul being taken to Rome by Roman soldiers. In this narrative, a Christian prisoner being guarded by Roman soldiers, neither Luke nor Paul make a single ethical comment against war and military service.

Romans 13:1-7
In this very well known passage of Paul's letter to the church in Rome, located in the capital of the empire, Paul gives an unequivocal exhortation to Christians to support

the government. This reflects the word's of Jesus, "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar."
In this passage Paul says:
- God establishes government
- to rebel against government is to rebel against God
- rulers bear the sword (this is a reference to either the death penalty, the ability to strike someone with violence to keep the peace, or both)
- government is God's servant (agent of wrath)
- government is there to bring punishment to criminals
As stated above, it must be remembered that the Roman Empire (like any empire) held power by military might.

Philippians 1:13 and *4:22*
Paul refers to believers in the household of Caesar. Although this technically may not be military, servants and administrators around Caesar always included some soldiers.

1 Corinthians 9:7; *Philippians 2:25; Ephesians 6:13-17* and *2 Timothy 2:2-3* - Paul uses soldiers and the military as a positive analogy.

Hebrews 11 - the "Faith Hall of Fame"
These are references to the Old Testament, but this New Testament writer is using stories of armies, warriors and killing as positive examples.

> *By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the army had marched around them for seven days.... And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets, who through faith*

> *conquered kingdoms...who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies.*
>
> *v30,32-33,34*

Next the writer alludes to *2 Maccabees Ch 5-7*:

> *Women received back their dead, raised to life again. There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection...they were killed by the sword...the world was not worthy of them...living in caves and in holes in the ground.*
>
> *Heb 11:35,37,38*

We will come back to this use of *Maccabees*, but here we simply note the Maccabean revolt involved armed conflict and was celebrated by the Jews as courageous.

War Images of Jesus

Christians holding to a pacifist position will have to grapple with a few passages in the New Testament that use war images of Jesus. The Church has always seen these as apocalyptic passages, referring to the "the end of the age." While this is certainly true, it needs to be remembered that these passages flow from the "son of man" text in *Daniel* chapter 7, also a war passage.[6] There is a warlike aspect to these texts which must be acknowledged.

In *Matthew 24* Jesus makes the obscure reference, "Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather" which speaks to dead bodies typically seen after a major military battle.

For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather....
Then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven. And then all the peoples of the earth will mourn when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory.
Matthew 24:27-30

God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might...
2 Thess 1:6-9

Although this passage does not appear to be a war passage at first glance, when we read about Jesus coming on the clouds with his angels or the myriads of heaven we are reading the language of apocalyptic war.

When we come to John's *Revelation* we are again confronted with obvious apocalyptic writing, but many of the texts in this biblical book are clearly warlike. Jesus is depicted as a warrior:

I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and wages war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns...dressed in a robe dipped in blood,

and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Coming out of his mouth is a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. "He will rule them with an iron scepter." He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty...The rest were killed with the sword...and all the birds gorged themselves on their flesh.

Rev 19:11-15,21

The immediate reaction is to say these images are apocalyptic and cannot be used as normative for the Christian. These texts are warlike, but speak of "spiritual war." I certainly agree, but we must also acknowledge that these violent images directly contradict the "peace" sayings of Jesus in the gospels.

I do not want to be misunderstood on this point. I am NOT saying that Jesus intended to promote or communicate violent action or an attitude of violence, nor am I saying that this is what any of the inspired writers intended. But we must acknowledge this violent picture of the resurrected "Son of God" coming back to wage war against his enemies. Jesus is coming back to tread "*the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty*." The "love your enemies" and "turn the other cheek" from the Sermon on the Mount is not found in these passages.

Jewish Military History

Jesus is not recorded to speak negatively about any of the military exploits in the Old Testament. This would not have been difficult within the context of His ministry. He

could have simply stated that God at one time had wanted His people to engage the enemy in warfare, but that now (and forevermore) God does not condone military and war.

The Jews of Palestine in the first century were keenly aware of the Maccabees and the armed revolt against the Seleucid Empire from 167-160 BC. The history of these wars is known through the *Maccabees* documents in what is now called the Apocrypha and also through Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews*. These documents were included in the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint (LXX). It was the LXX cited by New Testament writers to reference Old Testament texts. The Maccabees were Jewish "freedom fighters" and their stories were historical documents highly regarded by first century Jews.[7]

Neither Jesus nor any New Testament writer says anything negative about the Maccabean revolt. As we have already seen, the writer of NT *Hebrews* celebrates military victories and alludes to texts in *2 Maccabees*.

"Sins" and Signs of Ungodliness

There are several places in the New Testament where the writer is listing sinful behavior and attitudes that contrast Christians with unbelievers:
Romans 1:29-30; Galatians 5:19-21; 1 Timothy 1:9-10; 1 Peter 4:3,15; Revelation 21:8 and 22:15

If serving in the military was considered a serious sin (a "mortal" sin or as the writer in 1 John 5:16 says, "a sin that leads to death") it would be included in at least one of these listings.

Pacifists would argue that several of these listings include "murder," one of the 10 commandments. A "murder" has always been defined as a premeditated act. While pacifists want military service to be the same as "murder," it was not the case in the Old Testament, and the New Testament does not make this distinction. Military service, or "war" never appears in any New Testament listing of "sins."

Conclusions from the New Testament

Some of these are arguments from silence, normally not a form of good evidence, but these are several highly similar examples. Each argument from silence strengthens each and every argument.

What we see in the New Testament is a lack of any clear prohibition of military service or war. Instead we get a positive representation and, in the historical context, this was mainly the Roman military. The New Testament story begins with the "peace" sayings of Jesus, but concludes with violent images of a Messiah-warrior and the vultures of *Matthew 24* eating the dead.

I am not using any of this evidence to argue FOR violence and war, or to say that God is pleased for Christians to participate in war and to kill people. It is important, however, to realize that first century Jews would read these warlike texts differently than we do. We immediately read these texts as *spiritual warfare*, the violent end of the world. This view would not fully reflect the mindset of the first century Jew living in Palestine.

We can at least glean apocalyptic war from these war texts of the New Testament. First century Jews looked forward to a return of a David-like Messiah warrior figure who would marshal his troops to throw off Roman rule and establish Israel's place among the nations again. This is apocalyptic for us, but this vision was not completely other-worldly for the first century Jew. This thinking seems to be part of the Christian view moving forward, but with the next world (the new age) added to the mix.

The history of Israel cannot be adequately presented without a significant emphasis on their military presence and exploits. First century Jews would not have had an immediately negative view of Israeli military armies and war - the writer of *Hebrews* makes this clear. *Hebrews* also gives the Christian more reason to use Old Testament military as part of the "faith" foundation.

In the light of all this evidence it is difficult to use the "peace" sayings of Jesus as a basis for a strict pacifist theology. While the "peace" sayings do urge the individual Christian to eschew personal revenge, they do not clearly lay out a doctrine against Christian military service.

IV. Evidence from the Early Church

Christian pacifists point to numerous early Christian writers and their comments against the military, war and murder. There is a consistent problem with using the early church fathers on almost any issue: they contradict each other from region to region; they contradict each other from one century to the next - the early church was not monolithic. There are early fathers who change their views over time or contradict their own prior opinions - Origen contradicts himself in *Against Celsus* on at least one topic.[8] Tertullian changes his mind over the course of his career as he moves away from the "catholic" church, joins the Montanist movement and then splits from them as he continues on an evermore strict trajectory. If a reader does not have a basic historical framework it is easy to misunderstand the fathers and fail to see the tensions and nuance.

Christian pacifists are typically not trained in early Christian history or patristics (the study of the early church fathers). This leads to a lack of knowing or understanding (oftentimes both) the historical context within which early Christian writers operated.[9]

Evidence of church fathers speaking against Christians serving in the military are typically found in fairly random comments (with a few exceptions: one treatise by Tertullian which will be covered below). There are very

few lengthy comments on this issue. While the pacifist advocates say this lack of comment is due to an obvious stance against war and Christian service in the military, the few examples we have cannot fully support this position. While several fathers make comments against murder and war in general, only a few clearly state that Christians should not serve in the military. It is an interesting fact that even though a few early fathers take a stand against Christians serving in the military, there is far more clear evidence that after the middle of the second century a growing number of Christians were serving as soldiers.[10] In other words, while a few leaders offer a negative tone on the topic, it seems this stance was not the majority opinion among early Christians.

Evidence from Various Fathers

Tertullian (cir. 160-220 AD) is the first early father to make any significant comment about the Roman military with reference to the service of Christian soldiers. It must be remembered that Tertullian lived in North Africa, a region which had experienced brutal military activities. In general North Africans were not fond of Rome and loathed Rome's military power - Tertullian followed in this mentality. Christian Pacifists love to quote the fiery Tertullian. In his *Apology* he says that Christians pray for the empire and for the emperor's success:

> *Without ceasing, for all our emperors we offer prayer. We pray for life prolonged; for security to the empire; for protection to the imperial house; for brave armies, a faithful senate, a virtuous people, the world at rest, whatever, as man or Caesar, an emperor would wish.* - *Apology* 30.4

Tertullian says Christians pray "without ceasing" for the success of the Emperors AND their armies. Tertullian knew full well that the "security" of the empire rested on God's sovereignty, but acknowledged the need for the strength of the "brave armies." I do not remember my pacifist colleagues encouraging this kind of prayer nor have I seen them citing this particular text.[11]

Tertullian also admits that Christians are found in all areas of Roman life, including "the very camp," referring to military camps.[12] In another writing Tertullian makes a famous reference to Christian soldiers during a battle in 173 AD:

> *Marcus Aurelius also, in his expedition to Germany, by the prayers his Christian soldiers offered to God, got rain in that well-known thirst. When, indeed, have not droughts been put away by our kneelings and our fastings? - To Scapula* 4.6

Eusebius relates this same story, giving additional details:

> *It is reported that Marcus Aurelius Caesar, brother of Antoninus, being about to engage in battle with the Germans and Sarmatians, was in great trouble on account of his army suffering from thirst. But the soldiers...kneeled on the ground, as is our custom in prayer, and engaged in supplications to God. This was indeed a strange sight to the enemy, but it is reported that a stranger thing immediately followed. The lightning drove the enemy to flight and destruction, but a shower refreshed the army of those who had called on God, all of whom had been on the point of perishing with thirst.*[13]

Later in his life Tertullian becomes bitterly opposed to the Roman Empire, opposed to the "catholic" church and to Christians serving in the military. He had probably seen and heard terrible things during the persecutions of Severus (cir 200-203 AD). What becomes clear, however, is that his frustration is not mainly with war, violence and killing (although that is certainly part of his concern) - he is concerned with the idolatry in the military camps and knows that Christians would be tempted or pressured to engage in idolatry. The Roman military was a very religious subset of the Roman Empire: most commanders engaged in worship of some kind prior to battle, hoping to gain victory with the help of their particular god(s). It makes sense - soldiers see death around them during battles - they would be anxious for the gods to be on their side.

Prior to a battle the commander would call his men to pray and to make sacrifice, hoping his/their gods would grant them victory. We will see later that Emperors or commanders might have an animal sacrificed and have a pagan priest "read" the entrails for prophetic insights into what the outcome of the battle might be and who would be victorious.

It is important to keep this religious/historical context in mind as we read these early fathers and their comments against war and the military. Wars, Roman expansion through force, persecution of Christians and civil wars with fairly high death tolls all figure into the comments made by church fathers.

Tertullian's treatise *On the Crown* is the first full treatment of Christians in the military and is a preferred text for

pacifists. In this work on war and military service, Tertullian tells the story of a Christian soldier who refuses to wear the appropriate headdress with his fellow soldiers. When it is clear that he refuses to wear his headdress he is mocked, stripped of his commission and imprisoned to await death. Tertullian tells this story to show how the obedient Christian should respond to the idolatry in the military and thus to military service.

Not only is the young man in question already a Christian in this account, but Tertullian tells us there were other Christians in the camp,

> *...he brought trouble on the bearers of the Name, he, forsooth, alone brave among so many soldier-brethren, he alone a Christian. - On the Crown 1.6*

While it is clear that Tertullian does not think a faithful Christian can serve as a Roman soldier, his story indicates that Christians were indeed serving. Tertullian writes this treatise as an exhortation against Christians who were already serving in the military.

Three things are important to remember when considering Tertullian's *On the Crown*: first, Tertullian had a drastic change in his views from the late 190's. By the time he leaves the "catholic" church and joins up with the Montanists his tone against Roman society and the worldly church he left behind becomes extreme. Secondly, Christian soldiers were not always made to offer sacrifice. Some commanders did not push this issue.[14] Lastly, we know Christians were serving under Marcus Aurelius in significant enough numbers that their worship practices

were known. And even in the treatise where Tertullian is arguing against military service we see Christians in the very unit being presented.

Clement of Alexandria (cir. 150-215 AD) makes several passing comments about military life without any negative tone, implying that he has no ethical issue with a Christian serving in such a way. His comments are not clear enough for either side of the issue.

This illustrates an important point: Clement of Alexandria writes three large volumes (and other smaller works) where he comments on many aspects of everyday life, theology, biblical commentary, philosophy and ethics...yet he never singles out military service as an urgent sinful issue for the Church. He writes quite extensively on what kind of shoes the Christian should wear (yes, Clement comments on many mundane things) stating that we should avoid fancy shoes. Clement prefers no shoes or very plain ones, but "for a man bare feet are quite in keeping, except when he is on military service." *Paid* II.118.2

Origen of Alexandria (cir. 182-254 AD) offers comments on Christians serving in the military. In *Against Celsus* 8.72-75, Origen argues against the attacks leveled at Christian faith by the philosopher Celsus. One argument of Celsus is that Christians are not loyal Romans and are therefore seditious. Like Tertullian, Origen did not think a Christian should give an oath of allegiance to the Emperor. Again like Tertullian, Origen indicated that Christians should pray for the emperor and for his success in battle.[15]

Pacifists argue that the early fathers were against wars and killing - this is a simplistic reading. All of the fathers denounced murder (one of the Ten Commandments). Some did not think Christians should be involved in killing even to punish criminals. Most (if not ALL) of the fathers saw the military as part of Paul's *Romans 13* view that the government "does not bear the sword in vain." Tertullian and Origen both viewed the Roman Empire as an overall positive setting for the Church to reach the world, thus they believed that praying for the general peace of Rome was the duty of every Christian. While some Christian fathers did not want Christians to participate in bearing the sword, both Tertullian and Origen clearly advocate for Christians to pray for Roman military success.

Hippolytus of Rome (cir. 180-236 AD) is very similar to Tertullian: *Apostolic Traditions* makes it clear that someone must not take the military oath, which as we have seen takes on an aspect of idolatry.

> *A military man in authority must not execute men. If he is ordered, he must not carry it out. Nor must he take military oath. If he refuses, he shall be rejected. If someone is a military governor or the ruler of a city who wears the purple, he shall cease or he shall be rejected. The catechumen or faithful who wants to become a soldier is to be rejected, for he has despised God.*
>
> - *Apostolic Trad.* 16.9-11

This seems fairly clear until you read it closely: the text admits that Christians are serving/can serve in the military

with certain cautions and disciplinary actions if they participate in killing or taking an oath to the Emperor. It must always be remembered that when a church father, pastor, or church council canon prohibits something it is due to the fact that the particular behavior was already happening. If no Christians ever served in the military there would be no reason for these statements in the *Apostolic Tradition*. Here we have in the first statement, *"A military man in authority must..."* thus the writer knows that Christians are indeed serving. His intention is to make the restrictions clear regarding who is allowed to be a catechumen (a candidate for water baptism after which the believer would be allowed to partake in the Eucharist). So the writer is saying that there were Christian soldiers, but they have restrictions on them and are not allowed full status in the church.

Cyprian of Carthage (cir. 200-258 AD) uses military metaphors constantly and has a disgust for the bloodshed involved in the various political struggles for power, battling Germanic invaders, and the intensity of the Decian persecution, yet he never says anything against Christians serving in the military.[16]

We know Christians were in the military at this time because Eusebius quotes a letter of Dionysius of Alexandria depicting Roman soldiers confessing their faith and being martyred.[17]

Mortal Sins

Roman persecution of Christians led to an interesting problem in the early church referred to as "Second Repentance."[18] In short, during intense times of persecution some Christians failed the test of fidelity by either denying their faith, performing a nominal sacrifice to Caesar or his pagan god, or handing over sacred text to be burned. Staying true with a good confession of faith could lead to imprisonment, torture or death depending on the circumstances.

During these intense persecutions there were some believers who "lapsed," or backslid in their faith: going back to sinful living. When the persecutions ceased and the local church began meeting openly again many of these lapsed Christians would return seeking forgiveness. The term "Second Repentance" comes from the dynamic of when can a Christian who has committed serious sin (*after* having been baptized) find forgiveness and be readmitted to the fellowship of the faithful? This raised all kinds of complicated questions and actually led to many of the serious conflicts in early Christianity.[19] Here we are only concerned with the doctrine that developed regarding degrees of sins.

The early second century document known as *The Shepherd of Hermas* deals with this issue. In the midst of this document "serious" sins are listed:

> *Adultery and fornication, lawless drunkenness, wicked luxury...extravagance of wealth and boasting and snobbery and arrogance, and lying and slander and hypocrisy...These actions are the*

most wicked of all in the life of men...Listen also, therefore, to the things that follow them...theft, lying, robbery, perjury, greed, lust, deceit, vanity...
Shepherd of Hermas 38.3-5

The division of sins here is not entirely clear, but flows from the concept in *1 John 5:16* "a sin that does not lead to death" and "a sin that leads to death."

Tertullian gives a much clearer presentation, dealing with this issue in at least two treatises (*On Penitence* and *On Purity*). Tertullian appears to be against the concept of "Second Repentance" taking a stricter stance, yet as one continues to read Tertullian you find a more balanced view.

Some bishops in the early third century church began granting absolution (forgiveness) of sins for penitent adulterers. Tertullian responds with *On Purity*, a scathing rebuke of a lax church stance on sin and forgiveness:

It is a fact that there are some sins which beset us every day and to which we all are tempted. For who will not... fall into unrighteous anger...strike another or, out of easy habit, curse another...In the management of affairs...how often we are tempted! So much so that if there were no pardon in such cases, no one would be saved. For these sins, then, pardon is granted through Christ who intercedes with the Father. But there are also sins quite different from these, graver and deadly, which cannot be pardoned: murder, idolatry, injustice, apostasy, blasphemy; yes, and also adultery and fornication...For these Christ will not intercede with the Father a second time.
On Purity 19

In this discussion Tertullian is discussing the *1 John 5* text. He admits a tension existing in this biblical text and he does show some ambiguity in his position. The point, however, for this study is to show that military service is not mentioned either by *The Shepherd of Hermas* nor by Tertullian when listing serious sins (mortal) or lesser ones. It can certainly be argued that these lists are not thorough, and it could also be argued that Tertullian implies military service when he mentions "murder" and "idolatry," but it is interesting that in such documents where these writers take the time to list specific mortal sins they do not list military service. One would expect this "sin" to be named unless as argued above, the issue was specifically that military service was unacceptable due to the pagan worship common in the army camps.

Archaeological Discoveries

New evidence is shedding light on this topic through recent archaeological finds. In 2005 near a prison in Israel, the remains of a Roman fort was discovered. Archeologists conducted a dig, uncovered the fort and found a Christian chapel, located within the walls of the Roman outpost. Coins found in the excavation help to date this fort to around 230AD as the latest date and could have been initially constructed as early as the 190's. This church included a table for the Eucharist elements, several inscriptions recognizing donations from military officers and a mosiac floor depicting two fish, an early Christian symbol (shown below being cleaned at the site).[20]

Among a few other inscriptions written in Greek, one reads:

> *Gaianus, also called Porphyrius, centurion, our brother, has made the pavement at his own expense as an act of liberality.*



This clear inscription shows that Christian soldiers worshiped in this prayer hall.[21]

In addition to the church structure found in Israel, other physical evidence exists all over the land that was occupied as the Roman Empire: a number of Christian gravestones have been found identifying the deceased as soldiers. The earliest is a gravestone of a Christian who served in the Second Parthian Legion and is dated 201.[22] A survey of gravestone epitaphs shows that Christians serving in the military prior to the fourth century was not uncommon. The fact that Christian statements were openly used for these men on their gravestones is just another indication that the Christian community celebrating their death was not opposed to military service.[23]

The third century was a very difficult time for the Roman Empire with wars against foreign armies, constant battles on the borders against barbarians and numerous internal battles for power including military coups. In addition, the empire experienced a plague that lasted for twenty years.

This reduced the number of young men in the population which pushed commanders to use more aggressive methods for drafting and keeping soldiers. It appears that during the third century some commanders were willing to make accommodations for Christians, allowing them to refrain from pagan sacrifices and other behavior most Christians avoided. This allowed them to retain more soldiers at a time when the demands on the military were increasing. We know this because at the beginning of the fourth century Diocletian demanded that all men being promoted had to pay homage to an image of the emperor,[24] one indication that these demands had been loosened during the third century. Diocletian's edict was done to promote a religious revival which he hoped would also neutralize the growing influence of Christians in the army. As a result of this edict some Christian soldiers were disciplined and some even martyred.[25] This leads to our next data point of historical evidence for Christians serving in the Roman military: Military Martyrs.

Military Martyrs

We have numerous accounts of Christian soldiers being singled out and executed specifically due to their faith. It is important to note that many accounts of Christian soldiers coming under scrutiny came from a vocal refusal (perceived as stubborn) to sacrifice to a Roman god, swear to Caesar or to wear a particular piece of military gear with religious symbolic meaning. These accounts begin to surface in the third century and many of them contain some legendary elements, thus cannot be counted as 100% historically reliable. Having said this, the numbers of such accounts do serve as historic data pointing to the presence of Christians

serving in the Roman military.[26] In addition, this further confirms previous points: Christians were serving in the military; their vocal opposition illustrates the problem of pagan religious practices was the issue with Christians serving in the military. A direct quotation of Shean is a good way to close this section:

"In all of these martyr accounts, the specific reason cited by the soldier is his refusal to be involved with pagan ritual. Nowhere is there any statement regarding the immorality of war and violence, indeed, in some cases, the Christian God is a military asset for the Roman army in battle."[27]

The First Christian Emperor

As was stated in the Introduction, pacifists many times will point to the influence of Constantine as the turning point: Christians kept themselves separate from the government and the military until Constantine. While few written sources addressing this topic have survived, the actions of the kingdom of Armenia is an interesting case. According to early traditions, Christianity came to the region of Armenia in the first century.[28] In the third century Rome was in conflict with the Parthians. Geographically Armenia was positioned between the two larger empires. At some points during the conflict Rome occupied parts of Armenia and at other times the Parthians had the upper hand.

In 301AD Emperor Trdat declared the kingdom of Armenia to be a Christian nation. Towards the end of the Diocletian persecution Maximin Daia, the Caesar of the east, attempted to extend the persecution into Armenia. According to Eusebius, when Maximin's troops attempted

to enforce his decrees the entire Armenian nation rose in armed revolt and pushed the Roman troops out of their territory.[29]

While many claim Constantine to be the first Christian Emperor and the one responsible for leading Christians to merge military service with Christian zeal. This claim historically belongs to Armenian Emperor Trdat of the early fourth century.

Lactantius and Eusebius

By the time we get to the fourth century and read Lactantius and Eusebius we begin to get much clearer explanations of military, warfare and homicide. These are two important bishops during the reign of Constantine. Both men witnessed the terrible persecution of Christians under Diocletian. Both knew Constantine on a personal basis and served him in some fashion, and both leave fairly detailed writings documenting the history of their time. It is apparently easy for some people to sit in judgment of Eusebius and Lactantius for their support of Constantine and his battles. As readers of history we need to appreciate the historic context: Christians had been enduring intermittent persecution for more than 200 years, then an intense round of bloodshed and torment under Diocletian followed by a vow to wipe Christians off the earth.[30]

Suddenly an emperor appears on the scene, invites Christian bishops to travel with him, refuses to worship pagan gods, signs an edict restoring property to Christian churches that had been taken or destroyed by prior Roman emperors, and making it illegal to persecute Roman citizens

for *any* religious beliefs. But as a few years pass he goes further: he has Christian bishops in his administrative staff, uses Christian bishops to serve as judges in the legal system, opening the courts to the less fortunate,[31] worships in Christian churches and makes monetary donations to bishops and to the building of churches.

While we have the benefit of knowing the history that followed Constantine, these men did not. If they were mistaken to think God had ordained Constantine (and the Roman government) to protect and promote the faith, the modern reader must at least keep the historic context mentioned earlier in clear sight. Lactantius and Eusebius could not know the actions future emperors would take and how a government sponsored Christian religion could get off track.

Lactantius speaks of Roman emperors mostly as evil men until Constantine. He appears to credit God for the military victories of Constantine.[32] Lactantius is clearly against the violence that takes place in the arena, the Roman games and the gladiators:

> *For he who reckons it a pleasure, that a man, though justly condemned, should be slain in his sight, pollutes his conscience as much as if he should become a spectator and a sharer of a homicide which is secretly committed. And yet they call these sports in which human blood is shed... I ask now whether they can be just and pious men, who, when they see men placed under the stroke of death, and entreating mercy, not only suffer them to be put to death, but also demand it, and give cruel and inhuman votes for their death, not being...*

contented with bloodshed....They are even angry with the combatants, unless one of the two is quickly slain... *Divine Institutes 6.20*

Lactantius also speaks strongly and critically against killing and war. He has read and cites both Tertullian and Cyprian on the issue - he echoes both of these earlier fathers. However, Lactantius is conflicted. He approves of the war in the Old Testament and he seems to be in favor of the battles fought and won by Constantine as ordained by God:

The hand of the Lord prevailed, and the forces of Maxentius were routed....This destructive war being ended, Constantine was acknowledged as emperor, with great rejoicings, by the senate and people of Rome.

How the Persecutors Died 44

Lactantius gives us his account of how the "Great Persecution" started under Diocletian and, without apology, tells his readers that Christians were serving in the court of the emperor and in the military. Diocletian was conducting sacrifices and having his pagan priests attempting to "read" the future from the entrails of a sacrifice when,

...some attendants of his, who were Christians, stood by, and they put the immortal sign [of the cross] on their foreheads. At this the demons were chased away, and the holy rites interrupted. The soothsayers trembled, unable to investigate the... entrails of the victims....
Then Diocletian, in furious passion, ordered not only all who were assisting at the holy ceremonies, but also all who resided within the palace, to

> *sacrifice, and, in case of their refusal, to be scourged. And further, by letters to the commanding officers, he enjoined that all soldiers should be forced to the like impiety, under pain of being dismissed...*
>
> *How the Persecutors Died* 10

According to Lactantius, the Diocletian Persecution started with Christians serving in the government and in the military.[33]

In his introduction of these events at the end of Chapter 9 he refers to the Christian victims as "the just," indicating no disapproval of their service.

Eusebius is also an interesting character. After enduring the Great Persecution under Diocletian he presents the coming of Constantine as something like the 1,000 year reign. Eusebius also tells us that Christians were serving in governmental positions and in the army before Diocletian. (*Church History* 8.1) He mentions that some Christians were allowed to refrain from sacrifice (8.3) apparently being shown preferential protective treatment. [34]

Emperor Constantine

There is no need to cover the evidence during the reign of Constantine. Nobody disputes that Christians served under Constantine. Most Christian pacifists point to a "Fall" of the Church theory as the reason for early Christianity disregarding the pacifism of Jesus. Usually this "Fall" is traced to the false "conversion" of Constantine, a growing interaction of the Church with the government,

Christians openly serving in the military, and finally Constantine using force against Church leaders.

We cannot fully address Constantine here,[35] but the evidence we have already looked at shows at least contradictory evidence that the early Church was a pacifist movement. What we know is that Christians were already serving in governmental positions and in the military long before Constantine. We also know that the Armenians, led by Trdat who had claimed his nation as a Christian one, used force to repel Roman persecution, again prior to Constantine.

While actions under Constantine certainly began a new chapter in the history of the Church, many of the objections listed by Christian pacifists and critics of Constantine do not hold up under scrutiny. Having said this, any troubles that may have started in the reign of Constantine grow worse under his sons and under later Christian emperors.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the historical data does not support the claim that the early church was a pacifist movement. Despite the clear "peace" sayings of Jesus, the evidence from the New Testament as a whole does not support a strict pacifist interpretation.

There is not a single denunciation of the military in the New Testament: not from Jesus, not from the early historical record of Acts and not in any of the letters. There are a few negative references towards the Roman Empire, but nothing of a categorical statement against military service. In fact, most military references are somewhat positive. The "peace" statements of Jesus do not appear to be directed at the Jewish history of military conflicts, the institution of the military or even against the concept war. The context of the Sermon on the Mount where most of the "peace" sayings are recorded, seems to be directed to the level of the individual, directing His followers not to seek Old Testament type revenge:

> *You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person.* *Matt 5:38*

Jesus does not make a single negative comment about the military history of the nation of Israel: not one comment

contrasting His goals with the wars of Joshua, Gideon, Samson, Saul, the great King David or the Maccabees.

The historical data from the early church is also somewhat conflicted. There are several early writers who condemn killing and the violence of the Roman Empire. A few early writers denounce Christian involvement in the Roman military, but upon closer inspection it becomes clear their main concern is the pagan religion commonly practiced within the military camp.

While only a few early writers say anything clear on the subject, there are numerous historical data points showing that Christians did serve in the Roman military. The earliest evidence comes in the 170's under Emperor Marcus Aurelius, but there must certainly have been Christians serving prior to this period. There are passing comments in writings, but more importantly churches have been discovered within military forts with inscriptions thanking Christian soldiers and gravestones identifying Christian soldiers.

The evidence indicates that from one period to the next, Roman commanders were willing to accommodate their Christian soldiers in order to keep them in service. The overall evidence shows, as with other issues, that *some* Christian leaders were against military service while *some* were not.

Under Constantine the situation in the Church gets more complicated, but cannot be fully blamed on the "Christian" Emperor. Like many Christians living in almost every era, Constantine wanted to see unity in the body of Christ, but

what he found was conflict between various leaders. He was the Emperor and had the ability to do something about the conflicts. Some of his decisions turned out to be less than perfect - some came with very bad unintended consequences.

The evidence shows that the changes under Constantine with respect to Christian involvement in government and in the military was not new, but was just an increase in what had already existed.

All of the evidence indicates that the New Testament and the early church expressed some tension with respect to war, killing and Christians serving in the military. In other words, there has always been a conflict of opinion within Christianity. We have always had differences of opinion on important topics. Many of us raised our children in church teaching them *both* the "peace" sayings of Jesus *and* the great Old Testament war stories of Jericho, Samson killing the Philistines, and the story of David and Goliath. Some might take the time to explain to their six year old how these conflicting concepts can be resolved - perhaps some Christian pacifists refuse to use the Old Testament stories.

But why do we teach our children these "great" war stories at all? As we have seen, the writer of *Hebrews* recounts these stories and these heroes are part of our "faith" history. The Church has always held these characters in high esteem partly because the roots of Christian faith came out of the Jewish tradition. This is partly why the early Christians had no problem with the apocalyptic warrior Jesus returning to earth to tread the winepress of God's wrath.

We teach our children both sides of the story and we trust that as they mature they will think about the tension and learn to embrace the apparent conflicts. Our faith contains many points of conflict or paradox and answers are often not easy. All Christians worship the Prince of Peace.

Peter Leithart sums up this thought, "In short, the story of the church and war is ambiguity before Constantine, ambiguity after, ambiguity right to the present." [36]

Finally, I cannot say it better than Christopher Jones, a Ph.D. student at Columbia University:

> *There was no golden age of a pacifist church avoiding the worldly entanglements of politics, only to trade its soul to Constantine for earthly power.... The pacifists are reaching back for a mythical past that never existed. There has always been disagreement on the issues of war and the legitimacy of the state, and there likely always will be so long as the world breeds overreaching governments and discontented citizens.* [37]

Endnotes

[1] The Mennonite Church has 24 Articles of Faith. Articles 10,22 and 23 contain clear comments on pacifism: "we do not prepare for war, or participate in war or military service," Article 22; ""Peace and justice are not optional teachings, counsel that Christians can take or leave," Commentary on Article 22. See [http://mennoniteusa.org/confession-of-faith/]. The "Free" Church is typically seen as the group of Protestant denominations that renounce any connection (thus "free") to church government (bishops, etc. like the Roman Catholic Church, Anglican Church or Orthodox Church) or the secular government. This designation is typically applied to Anabaptists, many Baptist groups and some Pentecostal/Charismatic groups. Many of these groups claim they are not a denomination, which is also a characteristic of the "Free" Church. To learn more about this movement historically, Williams, D.H., *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism* (Eerdmans 1999).

[2] Cahill, Lisa Sowie, "Love Your Enemies: Discipleship, Pacifism, and Just War Theory," (Augsburg Fortress 1994), p.2.

[3] As I have argued on my web site, to be 100% consistent a Christian should not only reject military service, but should not do anything in support of the military: provide food service, work on their cars or houses or do any contract work for the military installations or any government agency for that matter. A Christian should not work for any company that does anything in the defense industry: Boeing, Raytheon, IBM or Microsoft (the military uses computers).

[4] While there is a legitimate methodology for explaining why I do not read strict pacifism in the Jesus "peace" sayings, it is not the purpose of this presentation. I will address this in another article.

[5] I will not be addressing specific Old Testament texts in this study. Most pacifists argue that to bring OT texts into the discussion is not valid since Jesus represented the beginning of a new covenant. I agree with this stance in almost all discussion of Christian doctrine. Having said this, I will briefly mention the OT a bit later when discussing a NT writer that references military exploits of the OT.

[6] There is much debate in biblical scholarship over the *Daniel 7* "son of man" text and it's influence on Jesus, the gospel writers and NT *Revelation*. This is not an area of expertise for me. A good text to consult on this topic: *The Book of Daniel: Composition and Reception*, Vol.2, editors, John J. Collins, Peter W. Flint, Cameron Vanepps (Brill 2001). What is for more settled is the religious theme of apocalyptic war in the Jewish literature: *Daniel,*

Maccabees, *Enoch,* the *War Scrolls* of the Dead Sea Scrolls, *Revelation* and various gnostic texts.

[7] In addition to the writers of *Hebrews*, some scholars think Paul may have been alluding to a practice based on *2 Maccabees* 12:41-42ff in his reference to baptism for the dead, 1 Cor 15:29.

[8] In *Contra Celsum* I.7 Origen argues against *secret* teachings in the Christian tradition (probably oral traditions concerning baptism, the Eucharist and the Holy Spirit - this is a highly contentious topic for modern scholars) while in VI.6 he clearly says that some teachings of Jesus were spoken "privately...and has not been recorded...these matters ought to be described...orally."

[9] Read my reviews and criticism of David Bercot who has published *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* (Hendrickson Publishers 1998) and *Will the Real Heretics Please Stand Up* (Scroll Publishing 1989) for an example, [www.churchhistory101.com/feedback/david-bercot-reviews.php].

[10] Many data points cited in this section come from the excellent study on this topic by John Helgeland, "Christians and the Roman Army from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine," *ANRW* 2.23.1 (1979), pp.724-834.

[11] Bercot dedicates six pages to citations of various fathers against "war," "killing" and what he can find against Christians serving in the military, yet he does not list this text. *Dictionary*, pp.676-682.

[12] *Apology* 37.4. Also see Helgeland, pp.736-7.

[13] *Church History* 5.5.1-6. Eusebius had apparently read another account in addition to that of Tertullian. Tertullian claimed to have a letter written by Aurelius, but this letter no longer exists. There is a spurious fourth century letter attributed to Aurelius containing this story, but it is clearly not the authentic letter of Tertullian's claim. For more of the history of the forgery see, Helgeland, pp.766-69. In addition to Tertullian and Eusebius this story can also be found in pagan historian Cassius Dio's *Roman History* 72.8-9.

[14] *Church History* 8.3. Also see note 28 below.

[15] *Against Celsus* VIII.73.

[16] Helgeland, p.753.

[17] *Church History* 6.41.16-22.

[18] A better presentation of this issue can be found on the CH101 web site [http://www.churchhistory101.com/docs/Hermas-2ndRepentance.pdf].

[19] Just to mention a few: *The Shepherd of Hermas* surfaced and may have been written in part to address this issue. Tertullian rejected *Hermas* - this had something to do with the rejection of this early document as "inspired" text. Tertullian defects from the "catholic" church in part over this issue. The conflict in North Africa with Donatus was influenced by this issue.

[20] Vassilios Tzaferis, "Inscribed 'To God Jesus Christ': Early Christian Prayer Hall Found in Megiddo Prison," Biblical Archaeology Review, Vol. 33, No. 2 (March/April 2007). The Baylor Library did not have this volume in print, thus I downloaded the digital copy with no page numbers. At the beginning of the article the discovery was reportedly made "in the late 1990's," but later in the article, "in late 2005." This photo is taken from a web site post: [http://www.nbcnews.com/id/9950210/ns/technology_and_science-science/t/archaeologists-unveil-ancient-church-israel].

[21] Tzaferis, "Inscribed."

[22] Shean, John F., *Soldiering for God: Christianity and the Roman Army* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2010), p.183. Shean points to C.H. Kraeling, *The Christian Building: Excavations at Dura-Europos*, 8.2 (1967).

[23] Shean, *Soldiering*, p.185. Shean points to the study of E. LeBlant, *Inscriptions chretienne de la Gaule anterieure au VIII siecle* (Paris 1856-65), 1 :81-87.

[24] *Church History* 8.4.

[25] Shean, *Soldiering*, pp.143-144, 207-209, 244.

[26] There are many heroic stories that incite a sense of pride and amazement at these men willing to die in front of fellow soldiers, refusing to participate in the common pagan sacrifices. Shean does a good job of telling a few stories, *Soldiering*, pp.194-215.

[27] Shean, *Soldiering*, p.215.

[28] The early traditions apparently were transmitted orally. There is no reliable documentary evidence prior to the fifth century, but the tradition is that the faith was first brought to Armenia by the apostle Thaddeus in the first century.

[29] *Church History* 9.8.

[30] "Daia made this vow to Jupiter, that if he obtained victory he would extinguish and utterly efface the name of the Christians." Lactantius, *On How Persecutors Died* 46.1.

[31] See Leithart, Peter, *Defending Constantine: The Twilight of an Empire and the Dawn of Christendom* (IVP Academic 2010), pp.212-232, Chapter 10 "Justice for All."

[32] "Nowhere in *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* do we find any condemnation of Christians enlisting, for the armies of Constantine and Licinius shoulder a sacred task, aided at crucial points by divine intervention," Helgeland, p.759.

[33] *On How Persecutors Died* 10.6. This report that Diocletian ordered all Christians to make a sacrifice corroborates Eusebius that Christians were not being forced to sacrifice.

[34] Eusebius is especially generous in *Life of Constantine*. Because of the criticism aimed at Eusebius I will not present more data from his writings. He is very supportive of Constantine, but I think some of the criticism against this fourth century bishop is unfair. For work on Eusebius and Constantine see Leithart, Peter, *Defending Constantine*. For an excellent historical presentation see, Odahl, Charles Matson, *Constantine and the Christian Empire* (Routledge 2010), 2nd ed. There are numerous articles on Constantine addressing these issues on the Church History 101 web site [http://www.churchhistory101.com/century4-p4.php].

[35] See Odahl and Leithart. Most of the Leithart text is constructed as a rebuttal of John Yoder, a famous Mennonite theologian (1927-1997). For how Constantine came to be viewed with such disrespect see, Williams, D.H., *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism* (Eerdmans 1999), especially Chapter 4, "The Corruption of the Church and It's Tradition," pp.101-131. You can also read my summary review of this text [http://www.churchhistory101.com/feedback/dhwilliams-tradition.php].

[36] Leithart, Defending, p.278.

[37] My appreciation to Christoper. His web site pointed me in the right direction to conclude my section on the recent archeological evidence [https://gatesofnineveh.wordpress.com/].

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