

December 2021

What Can Church History Tell Us about the Debate Between Just War Theory and Pacifism and What Does This Mean for the Church Today?

Michael Payne
Liberty University, mpayne33@liberty.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/elev>



Part of the [Applied Ethics Commons](#), [History of Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Payne, Michael. 2021. "What Can Church History Tell Us about the Debate Between Just War Theory and Pacifism and What Does This Mean for the Church Today?." *Eleutheria* 5, (2).
<https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/elev/vol5/iss2/14>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Rawlings School of Divinity at Scholars Crossing. It has been accepted for inclusion in Eleutheria by an authorized editor of Scholars Crossing. For more information, please contact scholarlycommunications@liberty.edu.

What Can Church History Tell Us about the Debate Between Just War Theory and Pacifism and What Does This Mean for the Church Today?

Abstract

This paper, in addressing Just War Theory and Pacifism, will argue that throughout church history there are faithful Christians that can be found on both sides of the debate. With that being said, each side has an obligation to uphold peace and justice. The Just War adherent has an obligation to seek peace, be selective in what is deemed "just war," and be conscious of the dangers of supporting his nation's priorities over the teachings of Christ. On the other side, in the case of a just war, the pacifist cannot use his pacifism as an excuse to sit out. He must use his skills to further the just cause through non-violent ways. The paper shall conclude with a call for just war adherents and pacifists to learn from each other and work together in order to bring about greater unity in the Church.

Keywords

Just War Theory, Pacifism, Church History, Early Church, Reformation

Cover Page Footnote

Currently enrolled as a Grad Student at Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University. Currently pursuing a Master of Arts in Theological Studies

Introduction

The Christian's involvement in violence and killing has been a topic of debate within the Church for centuries. Packed within this topic lie questions such as: can a Christian serve in the military or police force, can a Christian go to war, can Christians take part in the government, or should they seek to live apart from the world in their own separate communities? Both sides effectively use Scripture to justify their positions and these debates can be found all the way back to the beginning of the Church. The question then remains, which side is correct? This paper shall argue that both Just War Theory and Pacifism can be justified by Scripture and the historic teachings of the Church. However, in the outbreak of a just war, adherents of both theories have an obligation to support the just cause without violating their convictions. This thesis will be argued through an examination of both scripture and church history, focusing especially on influential Christians on both sides of the debate. From there it shall present its findings and reveal what this means for the Church today. However, before this paper can proceed, we must first establish an understanding of Just War Theory and Pacifism.

Just War Theory

It must first be understood that the Just War Theory asserts that war is evil. The point is not that war is good but that in a fallen world it is simply unavoidable.¹ Because war is unavoidable, it is seen as proper for the Christian to participate in war. However, just because war is unavoidable, it does not mean it cannot be conducted in a controlled and moral way. For this reason, Jus ad Bellum and Jus in Bello were established. Jus ad Bellum are the right considerations that must be made prior to going to war. These criteria include a just cause, reasonable hope of success, right intention, war declaration made by proper authorities, proportionality, and war being the last resort.² This criteria is meant to prevent people going to war for greedy or nationalistic reasons and only as a last resort in the matter of self-defense or securing lasting peace. Jus in Bello is the criteria for the right conduct of war and is meant to limit the suffering that war causes. These criteria require that war be limited in scope, non-combatants

¹ John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 2nd edition. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 652.

² Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 654.

are not to be attacked, and unnecessary suffering is to be avoided.³ Lasting peace, the restraining of evil, and the betterment of society should always be the intended end state of a just war.

What is Pacifism

Pacifism, clearly stated, is an ideology that is opposed to killing and war.⁴ In other words, according to pacifist and Anabaptist theologian and pastor Palmer Becker, pacifists always give a clear “no” to violence.⁵ It is worth noting that there are at least four different types of pacifism. The first is Universal Pacifism which teaches that killing is always wrong.⁶ Second is Christian Pacifism which teaches that Christians may not kill but unbelievers may in certain instances.⁷ The third is Private Pacifism which states that personal violence is wrong but a nation may at times be justified in using war.⁸ The fourth type of pacifism is called Antiwar Pacifism. This form believes that personal violence is justified to defend rights, but that war is always wrong.⁹ It is worth noting that St. Augustine, whom many credit as the father of Just War Theory, actually held the position of Private Pacifism.¹⁰ For this reason, many Just War adherents would probably describe themselves similarly.

Since the vast majority of Christian pacifists, such as the Anabaptists, naturally adhere to Christian Pacifism, it is this type of pacifism that this paper is referring to whenever the word pacifism or pacifist is used.

³ Ibid., 654-655.

⁴ Ibid., 636.

⁵ Palmer Becker, *Anabaptist Essentials: Ten Signs of a Unique Christian Faith*. (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2017), loc 1573, Kindle.

⁶ Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 637.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 637.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Scripture

Both Just War adherents and pacifists justify their positions using Scripture. This section will explore biblical justifications for both sides.

A Justification for Just War Theory

Just War adherents propose four considerations taught from the Bible in developing Just War Theory. They first look at the biblical view of fallen mankind. This tells them that, due to human nature, war is unavoidable.¹¹ They also look at the biblical view of the state, such as in Romans 13:1-7, which tells us that the state is ordained by God and permitted to use the sword to maintain justice.¹² A biblical view of the Church, such as Matthew 5:13-16, shows that Christians have an obligation to do good and create a more just society.¹³ Finally, a biblical view of history and eschatology show that war will bring in the Second Coming.¹⁴ Just War adherents also claim that the Sixth Commandment is not absolute when it prohibits killing.¹⁵ It should be better understood as a prohibition against murder. This is supported by the fact that war and the death penalty were allowed during the time that the Ten Commandments were issued.¹⁶

Just War adherents also claim that if war and military service was deemed wrong by Jesus, then it would have been condemned in the New Testament. However, this is not the case. They point to Luke 3:14 where John the Baptist does not tell soldiers to quit their jobs but tells them not to extort money from people and be content with their pay.¹⁷ They also point to the fact that Jesus praised the faith of the centurion in Matthew 8:5-13 instead of condemning him or

¹¹ Ibid., 656.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 656.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 657.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Complete American Edition, Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, (Coyote Canyon Press, 2010), 2245.

telling him to turn from his wicked occupation.¹⁸

A Justification for Pacifism

When it comes to conflict, Christian Pacifists look to the example of Jesus. Jesus came not as a violent revolutionary but as the Prince of Peace.¹⁹ Jesus taught Christians to turn the other cheek (Matthew 5:39-41) and that peacemakers are blessed.²⁰ In 1 Peter 2:21-23 we are told to follow the example of Christ who was “abused but did not return abuse.”²¹ Jesus Himself outrightly denounced violence when He ordered Peter to put away his sword because he who lives by the sword dies by it.²² Jesus also said that His kingdom is not of this world. The weapons of the Christian are spiritual, not physical like that of the world.²³

To counter the use of military force in the Old Testament, pacifists argue that there is a marked distinction between the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament involved a theocracy which justified Israel’s use of force. In the New Testament, the sword was not handed on to the Church.²⁴ Additionally, the New Testament ethic of love supersedes the Old Testament ethic of justice.²⁵ Therefore, the Old Testament cannot be used as a justification for Christians participating in war.

History

Both sides present convincing cases using Scripture to justify their stances on war and violence. When it is difficult to determine a side based on Scripture

¹⁸ Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 657.

¹⁹ Becker, *Anabaptist Essentials*, loc 1512.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, loc 1524.

²¹ Becker, *Anabaptist Essentials*, loc 1537.

²² Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 639.

²³ *Ibid.*, 650.

²⁴ Ralph L. Moellering, “Attitudes Toward the Use of Force and Violence in Thomas Muentzer, Menno Simons, and Martin Luther: A Comparative Study with Reference to Prevalent Contemporary Positions.” *Concordia Theological Monthly*, Vol. 31, No. 7, (July 1960): 418.
<http://www.ctsfw.net/media/pdfs/MoelleringAttitudesTowardUseForceViolence.pdf>

²⁵ Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 659.

alone, it is often helpful to look to the historic teachings of the Church for guidance. This can help the Christian develop a historic understanding of biblical passages as well as ethical stances on different subjects. This section will examine the stances of historic Christian figures throughout history and view their understandings of Just War and pacifism. It is my intent here to give the reader a better understanding of where Just War Theory and Pacifism fit within the understandings of the Church as a whole.

The Early Church

Many scholars agree that the Early Church generally held a negative view of killing and military service in the Pre-Constantinian era of the Early Church.²⁶ In fact, it could be described as pacifistic. Many fathers of the Early Church, especially those in Africa,²⁷ spoke out against killing. The two most prolific were Tertullian and Origen. Tertullian claimed that Jesus took away the sword. Therefore, the Christian is forbidden to wear any uniform that symbolized as an evil act.²⁸ Any soldier who converts while serving must immediately leave the army.²⁹ This was no small demand on Tertullian's part. One was not normally allowed to simply quit the army. Many soldiers were bound by an enlistment obligation, not terribly different than today in the American army. To quit upon conversion meant one had to desert or refuse their duties. This normally led to execution.³⁰

Tertullian not only opposed Christian service in the military because of violence, he also opposed it because of the immoral lifestyle of the military. He claimed that acts of violence and idolatry are inescapable as a Roman soldier.³¹ This was because military service and emperor worship generally went hand in

²⁶James Turner Johnson, *The Quest for Peace: Three Moral Traditions in Western Cultural History*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 7.

²⁷ Willem Ruyter Knut, "Pacifism and Military Service in the Early Church," *CrossCurrents*. Vol. 32, No. 1, (Spring 1982): 60. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24458543?seq=1>

²⁸ Christopher A. Hall, *Living Wisely with the Church Fathers*, (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2017), 100.

²⁹ Knut, "Pacifism and Military Service," 61.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Hall, *Living Wisely*, 100.

hand, making it difficult for the Christian soldier to uphold his convictions of Jesus as Lord.³²

Origen was also very much opposed to Christian military service. While he claimed that at times the Roman government must wage war to maintain peace, it was the Christian's job to support it through prayer, not fighting.³³ He argued that since all Christians are priests, referencing 1 Peter 2:9, they should be exempted from military service just as pagan priests were.³⁴ In regards to Old Testament warfare, Origen stated that Jews were permitted, under the old covenant, to take up arms to protect their land and government from being destroyed. Christians, however, are called to wage spiritual warfare since they are "entering the wedge of the eschatological kingdom."³⁵ This was the belief of many early Christians. They were meant to be separate from the world because the world would soon pass away, and Christ would soon return.³⁶ While Tertullian and Origen were probably the most outspoken against Christian military service, they were not alone, we find objections to war and military service in a variety of early Christian writings to include the Canons of Hippolytus,³⁷ the church in Rome, and Cyprian.³⁸

While there was much opposition to violence by prominent members of the Early Church, it was not unanimous as some proponents of pacifism claim.³⁹ In fact, some scholars claim that these objections to military service should be viewed as the convictions of individuals and not the consensus of the Church universal.⁴⁰ While pacifists claim that Christians refrained from military service

³² Hall, *Living Wisely*, 98.

³³ *Ibid.*, 105.

³⁴ Knut, "Pacifism and Military Service," 61.

³⁵ Hall, *Living Wisely*, 106.

³⁶ Johnson, *The Quest for Peace*, 13.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

³⁸ Hall, *Living Wisely*, 100-102.

³⁹ Becker, *Anabaptist Essentials*, loc 1537.

⁴⁰ Johnson, *The Quest for Peace*, 19.

for the first 200 years of the Church,⁴¹ there is evidence that Christians were serving in the army as early as 174 AD.⁴² Tertullian himself even mentions in his writings how Marcus Aurelius' Twelfth Legion was saved from disaster by the prayers of its Christian members.⁴³ This showed Christian military service was a well established fact by about 200 AD and only increased throughout the century as evidenced by the persecution of Christian soldiers by third century emperors such as Decius, Diocletian, and Galerius.⁴⁴

Clement of Alexandria, who was a contemporary of Tertullian, is rather ambiguous in his writings on Christian military service. He taught that those who converted to Christianity as soldiers should remain as soldiers but should follow the orders of the "General who gives orders that are righteous."⁴⁵ In other writings, Clement implies that Christian learners can still work as soldiers but may not reach full Christian enlightenment.⁴⁶ This goes to show that there was a plurality of views on war and military service throughout the Pre-Constantinian Early Church.⁴⁷

With the rise of Constantine and the Edict of Milan in 312 AD, this plurality began to shift more in favor of Just War Theory. Many believe this is because the primary barrier to Christian military service, emperor worship, had been removed.⁴⁸ Additionally, it was becoming clear the beliefs of the first century Christians in a world that would soon pass away was becoming less of a reality. Christians would need to learn how to live as part of society.⁴⁹ Because of this, Christians had to develop a system to place controls on violence and war. This best manifested itself in the writings of Augustine, who is considered the

⁴¹ Becker, *Anabaptist Essentials*, loc 1537.

⁴² Johnson, *The Quest for Peace*, 15.

⁴³ Knut, "Pacifism and Military Service," 58.

⁴⁴ Knut, "Pacifism and Military Service," 58.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁴⁶ Johnson, *The Quest for Peace*, 57.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁴⁸ Knut, "Pacifism and Military Service," 62.

⁴⁹ Johnson, *The Quest for Peace*, 14.

father of Just War Theory.⁵⁰ Augustine taught that the power of the king, the death penalty of the judge, and the weapon of the soldier hold evil in check.⁵¹ Since governments are God ordained, the Christian should support the government in its efforts to maintain peace since peace nourishes the Church's life.⁵²

While the Just War Theory became normative within the Church during the Post-Constantinian era, it still maintained an uneasiness with regards to killing.⁵³ This is evidenced by the fact that Basil of Caesarea, who drew a distinction between killing and murder, still recommended those who kill justly should abstain from communion for three years.⁵⁴ Even Augustine admitted that war, even just war, is a reflection of human wretchedness.⁵⁵ It was for this reason that not all Christians were expected to fight. Clergy, who were expected to devote their lives completely to God, were forbidden to fight.⁵⁶ Additionally, the pacifist stance for non-priests would be preserved in the monastic life of the Church and would be the primary expression of pacifism for centuries.⁵⁷

The Middle Ages

Just as during the Post-Constantinian era of the Early Church, Just War Theory continued to be the normative stance of the Church of the Middle Ages. While it was the generally accepted stance, pacifism still had an influence on the Church. In this section we shall examine the Church's stance on Just War Theory through the writings of Thomas Aquinas but then also look at St. Francis to show that pacifism still had a place in the Medieval Church.

Thomas Aquinas is seen as a spiritual authority by many Christians but is especially revered in the Roman Catholic Church where he is viewed as a Saint and Doctor of the Church. Aquinas would improve upon Augustine's doctrine of

⁵⁰ Ibid., 57.

⁵¹ Hall, *Living Wisely*, 114-115.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., 112.

⁵⁴ Hall, *Living Wisely*, 112.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 116.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 110.

⁵⁷ Knut, "Pacifism and Military Service," 62.

Just War Theory, further clarifying the Church's position on war. In his magnum opus, *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas would lay out several questions; is war lawful, is it lawful for clerics to fight, and is fighting permissible on holy days?⁵⁸ To the first question, Aquinas, building off of the writings of Augustine, claimed that three things are necessary for war to be just. First, it must be declared by those in legitimate authority since they are God ordained.⁵⁹ Second, a just cause is required.⁶⁰ Third, there must be the right intention such as securing peace or righting a wrong.⁶¹ To the second question, Aquinas claimed that clerics should not fight. Clergy should be ready to imitate Christ and shed their own blood.⁶² Besides that, the ministrations of communion is incompatible with the shedding of blood.⁶³ Regarding holy days, Aquinas permits fighting but only out of great need.⁶⁴ Aquinas' writings helped the Church to continue to build its concept of Just War Theory and we can see in Aquinas the growing foundations for the modern understanding of Just War Theory.

Despite the predominance of Just War Theory in the Middle Ages, pacifism still had a place. Much like in the Post-Constantinian Church, clergy and monks were forbidden to fight.⁶⁵ Additionally, St. Francis of Assisi, who formed the Franciscan order, not only forbade military service amongst his monks but also amongst laypeople who joined his order.⁶⁶ This was a deviation from the standard Post-Constantinian/Medieval Church practice of two lifestyles. This practice taught that clergy and monks were supposed to be completely devoted to

⁵⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 2245.

⁵⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 2246.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 2248.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 2251

⁶⁵ Knut, *Pacifism and Military Service*, 62.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

God. This left out the possibility of military service.⁶⁷ This contrasted with the lifestyle of the layperson, who being more concerned with temporal affairs, is expected to participate in a just war.⁶⁸ St. Francis' teaching flew in the face of this societal understanding. However, it was this practice of pacifism that brought an end to the petty feudal wars of 13th century Italy.⁶⁹

The Reformation

With the Reformation came the emergence of new ideas and ways of viewing Scripture. The Reformation challenged the Church to move away from traditions and take a deeper look at Scripture to inform doctrinal understanding. While the stance of the Roman Catholic Church on war remained largely unchanged during this time, we shall examine the leaders of two of the prominent churches that emerged from the Reformation. These leaders are Martin Luther and Menno Simons.

Martin Luther, the German monk whose name is inseparable from the Reformation, has no qualms about inheriting Just War Theory principles from his Roman Catholic predecessors. Luther views the sword as a godly estate.⁷⁰ In an allusion to his Two Kingdoms Theory, Luther in his writing "Temporal Authority: To What Extent Should it be Obeyed," divides people into two classes. There are the people of God and the people of the world.⁷¹ The people of God are not subject to temporal laws.⁷² If everyone was a true Christian, there would be no need for temporal laws.⁷³ Unfortunately, since this is not the case, temporal laws

⁶⁷ Hall, *Living Wisely*, 110.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Knut, "Pacifism and Early Christian Service," 62.

⁷⁰ Martin Luther, "Temporal Authority: To What Extent Should it be Obeyed?" *Luther's Works, Vol. 45, The Christian in Society II*, ed. by Walther I. Brandt, (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1962), 87.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 91.

⁷³ Luther, "Temporal Authority," 89.

are needed.⁷⁴ Although Christians are not bound by temporal laws, they should still follow them in order to preserve peace within the world.⁷⁵ The Christian is therefore obliged to serve and assist the sword of the government, not for the Christian's sake, but out of love for his neighbor.⁷⁶ For oneself, the Christian should turn the other cheek but he is justified if he uses the sword in the defense of others.⁷⁷ Luther uses the examples of Abraham, Elijah, and David to support his claim.⁷⁸ He also borrows from Aquinas and Augustine in using John the Baptist's words to the soldiers in Luke 3:14 and Paul's narrative on God ordained government in Romans 13 to justify violence for the sake of peace.⁷⁹ Luther concludes his treatise by saying that government service must not be left to the non-Christian. Christians have a duty to serve in a God-ordained government.⁸⁰

Despite breaking away from the Roman Catholic Church, Luther's views on Christian sanctioned violence remain very similar. Much like past Christian leaders, Luther is emphatic about the need to maintain peace and stability for the common good. He also believes that Christians have a duty to take part in, support, and influence secular government in order to uphold godly justice.

On the opposite side of the spectrum during the Reformation stood Menno Simons, a major leader in the Anabaptist movement. As a Roman Catholic priest, he broke with Rome in 1536 over the issues of baptism and the use of violence.⁸¹ Menno was appalled by the execution he witnessed of an itinerant tailor who was re-baptized.⁸² He was also disturbed by the violent insurrection carried out against the Roman Catholic Church by more radical Anabaptists such as Thomas Muentzer.⁸³ These events would influence Menno's call for Christian pacifism. In

⁷⁴ Ibid., 90.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 94.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 95.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 96.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 98-100.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 99-100.

⁸¹ Moellering, "Attitudes Towards," 414-415.

⁸² Ibid., 414.

⁸³ Moellering, "Attitudes Toward," 414.

solidarity with many early Christians, Menno taught that the Christian's weapons are not carnal but spiritual.⁸⁴ While it is the Christian's duty to obey the government, it does not obligate them to fight in the army or administer justice.⁸⁵ His teaching emphasized a church that should be completely separated from secular politics,⁸⁶ establishing small enclaves of pure Christians set against the wider secular society, as seen in other Anabaptist movements across Europe.⁸⁷

Menno Simmons justified his positions as many Early Church fathers had done. He cited the example Jesus set when telling Peter to put away his sword.⁸⁸ He also claimed that the sword that was permitted to Israel in the Old Testament was not bequeathed to the Church in the New Testament.⁸⁹ Although the Christian is not to take part in the sword of government, he is to do good in society through Christian service and charity.⁹⁰ In the case of war, the Christian should overcome evil with good through opening up his home to war refugees and to work to heal the wounds of victims of violence.⁹¹

Today

The influence of Menno Simons, Luther, and the Roman Catholic Church would carry on into the modern Church. Much of what they taught is still followed by their adherents. In this section we shall examine the views on violence from the perspective of the modern Church. While there is a diversity of opinion, for the sake of simplicity we shall examine three main groups: the Anabaptists, the Protestants, and the Roman Catholics.

Anabaptists differentiate themselves from the main Protestant movement. This is not only due to their pacifism but also because they do not hold to the

⁸⁴ Ibid., 415.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 418.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 416.

⁸⁷ Johnson, *The Quest for Peace*, 74.

⁸⁸ Moellering, "Attitudes Toward," 419.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 418.

⁹⁰ Moellering, "Attitudes Toward," 418.

⁹¹ Ibid., 417.

defining Protestant notion of Sola Scriptura.⁹² Anabaptists claim Jesus, even more than Scripture, is the final authority on all things.⁹³ Because of this, they look to the example of Jesus as opposed to rigid doctrine to make theological decisions to include conflict. He did not come as a violent revolutionary, but as the Prince of Peace.⁹⁴ Jesus states that peacemakers are blessed, His kingdom is not of this world, and not to resist evildoers.⁹⁵

Anabaptists criticize Just War Theory claiming that violence always leads to more violence.⁹⁶ There are always alternatives to war, it does not have to be a last resort.⁹⁷ For this reason, Anabaptists seek to be peacebuilders through actively seeking to correct injustices in society in order to prevent violence.⁹⁸ While they will not support the government through military service, they will support through prayer, fasting, and charitable work.⁹⁹

While there are varying opinions amongst Protestants, generally speaking they are in favor of Just War Theory. Chaplains from most Protestant denominations can be found in the U.S. military catering to the spiritual needs of their flocks. Doctrinally, a look at the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, a Protestant confession held as foundational for most Presbyterians and highly regarded by many Baptists, teaches that Christians may serve in government and make use of the sword in order to preserve peace and the common good.¹⁰⁰ Also, in the Anglican Catechism, we are told that there are certain instances in which “justice, the protection of the weak and defenseless, and the preservation of life

⁹² Becker, *Anabaptist Essentials*, loc 415.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, loc 522.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, loc 1512.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, loc 1512-1524.

⁹⁶ Becker, *Anabaptist Essentials*, loc 1550.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, loc 1595.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, loc 1595-1653.

¹⁰⁰ Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Confession of Faith: With Proof Texts*, 1646, 116 <https://www.pcaac.org/bco/westminster-confession/>

may require acts of violence.”¹⁰¹ As we can see, by and large, most Protestants support Just War Theory.

The Roman Catholic Church has maintained its teachings on Just War Theory that were developed during the days of the Early Church. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that everyone has the right to defend oneself, others, and their community.¹⁰² It also permits civil authorities to use force against aggressors.¹⁰³ Several pages later, it lays out an abbreviated version of the Just War Theory to include the desirability of peace, humane treatment of non-combatants, expectation of success, and war as a last resort.¹⁰⁴

Even though this is the normative stance in the Roman Catholic Church, there is a place for pacifists, even outside clerical or monastic communities. In the 1960s, Vatican II officially made pacifism a legitimate position for Catholics to hold.¹⁰⁵ In fact, within the Catholic Church, one could argue that attitudes towards war and peace are just as complex as they were back during the Early Church.¹⁰⁶

Findings

A view of both history and Scripture show that this is a complex issue that has eluded absolute consensus across the universal Church. Both sides use Scripture effectively to justify their position. For that reason, we looked at church history to give a better understanding of the right position. While history did not give us a definitive answer, it did show us two things. First, it showed that Just War Theory has stood as the predominant and normative position of the Church throughout time. Second, despite being the minority, there has always been a place for pacifists in the Church.

Just War Theory is the Consensual Position of the Church

¹⁰¹ *To be a Christian: An Anglican Catechism*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 103.

¹⁰² Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Revised in Accordance with the Official Latin Text Promulgated by Pope John Paul II*, 2nd edition, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2019), 545-546. <http://ccc.usccb.org/flipbooks/catechism/VI/index.html>.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 555-557.

¹⁰⁵ Knut, "Pacifism and Military Service," 62.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

From the early Christians who served in the Roman Army to Augustine, Aquinas, and Luther, there has been an agreement throughout the majority of church history that violence is justified when used correctly. This teaching is continued in the Catholic Church as well as the majority of Protestant churches.

There Has Always Been a Place for Pacifists

Although pacifists are a minority within the Church, they have been a part of the Church from the beginning. Starting with several of the Early Church Fathers, continuing through St. Francis and Menno Simons, and manifested today through denominations such as the Anabaptists. Even today we see the Catholic Church allowing for pacifism to be a legitimate Catholic position. Additionally, although most Protestants accept Just War Theory, they still allow for the freedom of individual conscience. Although unjustly persecuted at times, there has always been a place for pacifists in the Church.

Implications for the Modern Christian

Violence and killing is no small matter. Jesus calls us as Christians to be peacemakers. However, the New Testament also allows for Christians to serve in the military. What is a Christian to do, especially when Just War adherents and pacifists confront each other on their beliefs? Can each side learn from the other? Can both sides get along and still work for the Kingdom. In short, yes. Here we shall look at implications for each side.

What Does This Mean for the Just War Adherent?

Many of the criticisms lodged against the Just War adherent by the pacifist are legitimate. Pacifists claim many churches that adhere to Just War Theory tend to support the wars of their governments regardless of whether it is just or not.¹⁰⁷ Additionally, in war time, both sides will justify their actions to paint them as right.¹⁰⁸ The Just War adherent must take these criticism seriously. The Just War adherent must remember that Just War Theory at its heart is a pacifist theory. War is a terrible thing. It only exists because of the fallen nature of mankind. The Christian must carefully scrutinize his government's actions to determine whether a war is just or not. If it is not just, he must petition his government to change course. For the Christian soldier, this has even larger consequences. If his military

¹⁰⁷ Becker, *Anabaptists Essentials*, loc 1550.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

enters into an unjust war, it is his Christian duty to find other employment. Both soldier and civilian must hold their government accountable if it is unjustly conducting war.

What Does this Mean for the Pacifist?

For the pacifist, he must understand that church history shows that Just War Theory is the normative position of the Church. Calling on the Church to adopt strictly pacifistic stances goes against the established doctrine and biblical understanding of the Church universal. More importantly, the pacifist must understand that in the case of a just war, it is still his responsibility to support the just cause of the war. Being a pacifist is no reason simply to sit out. This can be done without violating his conscience through supporting in nonviolent ways. Serving in the military as a chaplain is one possibility. Chaplains, by law, are not allowed to bear arms during wartime. A pacifist could still support the spiritual needs of soldiers without violating his pacifist ideals. Another example could be through serving in Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) that provide medical care or food relief to wartime victims. This would show the love of Christ and provide healing to those effected by war. Pacifists doing this would be following in the footsteps of Menno Simmons and St. Francis.

What Does This Mean for the Church as a Whole

The Church is made up of Just War adherents and pacifists. As stated above, Just War Theory is the normative doctrine of the Church but must always allow for individual conscience. The Church must find ways in which Christians of both persuasions can work together to spread the gospel. This could be through holding seminars on peace building or working to establish just practices at home and abroad to remove conditions that could lead to war. During times of heightened tension, it could be petitioning the government to seek peaceful resolutions. During times of just war, this could be working to end the suffering brought about by war. This should not be an issue that divides Christians. Instead, they should work together for the gospel and peace.

Conclusion

This paper set out to show that both Just War Theory and pacifism are legitimate Christian positions justified by both Scripture and church history. This was done through an examination of Scripture as well as key Christian figures throughout time. This paper found that faithful Christians stand on both side of the debate, even though the normative position appears to support the Just War

Theory. Because of this, the Church must find ways for both sides to work together for the greater good. Just War adherents must listen to the critiques of pacifists and be very strict in the wars they support. On the other side, pacifists must not hide behind their pacifism to avoid conflict during a just war. They must participate, which can be done without a violation of conscience. In the end, this need not be a dividing factor between Christians. The Church could benefit greatly from cooperation between both sides.

Bibliography

- Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologica*. Complete American Edition. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Coyote Canyon Press, 2010.
- Becker, Palmer. *Anabaptist Essentials: Ten Signs of a Unique Christian Faith*. Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press. 2017. Kindle.
- Catholic Church. *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Revised in Accordance with the Official Latin Text Promulgated by Pope John Paul II*. 2nd edition. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2019.
- Feinberg John S. and Paul D. Feinberg. *Ethics for a Brave New World*. 2nd edition. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010.
- Hall, Christopher A. *Living Wisely with the Church Fathers*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2017.
- Knut, Willem Ruyter. "Pacifism and Military Service in the Early Church." *CrossCurrents*. Vol. 32. No. 1. (Spring 1982): 54-70.
- Johnson, James Turner. *The Quest for Peace: Three Moral Traditions in Western Cultural History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987.
- Luther, Martin. "Temporal Authority: To What Extent Should it be Obeyed?" *Luther's Works, Vol. 45, The Christian in Society II*, edited by Walther I. Brandt, 77-129. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1962.
- Moellering, Ralph L. "Attitudes Toward the Use of Force and Violence in Thomas Muentzer, Menno Simons, and Martin Luther: A Comparative Study with Reference to Prevalent Contemporary Positions." *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 31. No. 7. (July 1960): 405-427.
- To be a Christian: An Anglican Catechism*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway. 2020.
- Westminster Assembly. *The Westminster Confession of Faith: With Proof Texts*, 1646.