

THE CHRISTIAN & MILITARY SERVICE

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“Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s.” Matthew 22:21

A special committee of the United Methodist Church which had been appointed to study possible changes in the Methodist Hymnal recommended that the church delete from the hymnal that great old hymn “Onward Christian Soldiers.” This committee gave as its reason for this recommendation their belief that the hymn contained militaristic language. They objected to this hymn talking about such things as war and battle and marching and soldiers.

Such reasoning is unbiblical, unreasonable, and at best a matter of misguided idealism. God’s word describes the Christian life as a *war* which requires the Christian to wear *armor* and to use *weapons* in such well known passages as Ephesians 6:12-17. In Revelation 19:14, the multitudes of saints and angels which come with Christ in the air at his second coming are called “The *armies* that were in heaven.” As a matter of fact, the word of God has quite a bit to say about military service and armies and wars and in this message we shall look at some of what God’s word has to say about the Christian and military service.

THE RELATION OF THE CHRISTIAN TO CIVIL GOVERNMENT

The command of Christ in our text is “...Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s and unto God the things that are God’s.” Our religion and our allegiance to God do not exempt us from certain obligations to the civil government or to the state if you please.

The context of this statement by our Lord is this: Some Herodians had come to him in an attempt to catch him and trip him up in his words. They had asked him if it was proper for God’s people to pay taxes to the Roman government.

The Lord’s answer was that whatever belongs to Caesar or the government must be given to the government. “Render...unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s...” The Lord’s answer here covers all duties of citizens to their rulers and governments, not just paying taxes but voting and getting a driver’s license and obeying all the laws of the land. There are several direct statements in God’s word that clearly teach this responsibility for God’s people to obey the law of the land.

Romans 13:1-7 says “Let every soul be subject unto the higher power. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God; and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? Do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: for he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake. For, for this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God’s ministers, attending continually upon this very thing. Render

therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.” This is a very clear and plain set of instructions isn’t it?

Who is it that God requires to submit to the civil government? Paul says here in Romans 13:1, “Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers...” Every soul,” every man that has a soul must submit to the law of the land. “Every soul” removes every exemption so that no one can claim an exemption from their duties to the state.

Another direct and very clear and plain biblical statement that teaches this responsibility of Christians to obey the law of Caesar is I Peter 2:13-17. “Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well. For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men: as free, and not using your liberty for a cloak of maliciousness, but as the servants of God. Honor all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king.”

It is wrong not to pay taxes! I don’t like it. Our taxes are too high, I believe. But we must obey every ordinance of man Peter says here including paying taxes and serving in the military and anything else that the government requires which is consistent with the word of God. Our Lord Himself was subject to the civil government. He paid taxes and otherwise obeyed the law. In Matthew 17:27, we read how he paid his taxes.

Allegiance to Jesus Christ does not release us from our responsibility to Caesar or to civil government, whether by paying taxes or obeying the laws of the land or serving in the military when required or whatever. The word of God teaches that Caesar (the state) has claims to which Christians must cheerfully yield and submit.

It also teaches that God has claims to which men must submit. Our responsibility is to yield to God the service he demands and at the same time render to the civil government its due.

Christianity is not an enemy of civil government but a friend. The kingdom of Christ does not clash or interfere with the kingdoms of this world in anything over which God has given those kingdoms authority. The Lord says that we are to submit to Caesar as good citizens and doing so will not interfere with our submitting to God. Baptist Christians believe in separation of church and state but we also believe in loyalty to both because God has appointed both. (While we do believe in separation of church and state we do not believe in the separation of God and state.)

Often times people who do not want to serve in the military will seek to avoid doing so or to justify not doing so by calling themselves “conscientious objectors.” But conscientious Christians must be subject to Caesar not objectors to him. Look once again at Romans 13:5, “Wherefore ye must needs be subject (to Caesar), not only for wrath but also for conscience sake.”

GOD'S WORD AND MILITARY SERVICE

As we look at God's word we find that many of the great men of God in the Bible were military men. Men like Abraham, Moses, Joshua, David, and Josiah were soldiers.

Let's think specifically about Abraham. The 14th chapter of Genesis tells us how four kings combined their armies and raided and plundered the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah and how they took Lot and his family captive. Abraham's faithfulness to God did not prevent him from raising an army, going after and defeating the invading army, and rescuing his nephew Lot. When Abraham and his army returned from the battle he was met by God's priest Melchizedek who neither condemned nor criticized Abraham's military actions. Instead he said in Genesis 14:18-20, "Blessed by Abram of the most high God, possessor of heaven and earth: and blessed be the most high God, which hath delivered thine enemies into thy hand..." Hebrews 11:34 compliments these men of God who were soldiers when it says that through faith they "...waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens."

In II Samuel 5:19, King David prayed to God asking whether to go to war with the Philistines. "And David inquired of the Lord, saying, shall I go up to the Philistines? Wilt thou deliver them into mine hand? And the Lord said unto David, Go up: for I will doubtless deliver the Philistines into thine hand." God commanded his people to go to war. God would never have commanded his people to do something that is intrinsically wrong.

It is also important to note that God gave Israel some military laws for the regulation of their armies. These laws included:

1. A lower age limit of 21 years for men to serve in the military (Numbers 1:2-3, 18-20, 45, 26:2-3). This same regulation was used in the American Revolution by our armies.
2. A selective service. Not all men of military age and qualification had to be called up. Numbers 31:3-6 tells us how only some of the militarily eligible men were used as troops on some occasions.
3. The Levites (priests) were exempted from the military though some of them chose to serve anyway (Numbers 1:48-49).
4. Men who had just married were to be exempt from going to war (Deuteronomy 20:5-9).
5. Sanitation was required in the army camps (Deuteronomy 23:9-14).
6. Pensions and rewards for veterans were allowed in the laws of booty (Numbers 31:21-42, Deuteronomy 20:14).

Since God established these laws to regulate military service it is therefore certainly not wrong for God's people to serve in the military.

There are some other miscellaneous incidents and persons in God's word which relate specifically to this matter of military service. On one occasion some soldiers came to John the Baptist when he had preached demanding repentance and asked him what repentance would require of them. This incident is described in Luke 3:14. "And the soldiers likewise demanded of him, saying, And what shall we do? And he said unto them, Do violence to no man, neither

accuse any falsely; and be content with your wages.” John did not tell these repentant soldiers to quit the military because it was sinful to be involved in that profession. He said, “Do violence to no man” or literally “rob no one by violence.”

Cornelius was a Roman centurion, an officer in the Roman Army, whom God saved. The tenth chapter of Acts tells us about Cornelius. When Cornelius was saved, God said to him that his alms were accepted and his prayers had been heard. He did not tell him to change professions and get out of the army.

HOW BAPTISTS HAVE VIEWED MILITARY SERVICE

What has been the historic Baptist position concerning military service? We Baptists have a proud heritage of serving in the military of our beloved America. Baptists to a man fought for independence during the American Revolution serving as soldiers and officers and chaplains.

Howison in his “History of Virginia” says, “...none were more willing to give their money and goods to their country; none more prompt to march to the field of battle, and none more heroic in actual combat, than the Baptist of Virginia.” As a matter of fact, so many Baptist men enlisted to fight in the Revolution that some churches had only women and children and old men left in their ranks.

Richard Furman, a young Baptist preacher from South Carolina, was one of the best and most successful recruiters in the Revolutionary Army. General Cornwallis offered huge sums of money as a reward for the capture of Richard Furman and several times he was almost caught. Cornwallis is reported to have said that he feared Furman’s prayers more than the American Army.

Outstanding Baptist chaplains during the war included Hezekiah Smith a close personal friend of General Washington and John Gano. Gano was pastor of the First Baptist Church of New York City. He immersed General Washington in front of 42 witnesses during the war. Another chaplain, Elder McClanahan recruited an entire company of Baptist soldiers, led them into battle as their captain and at the same time served as their chaplain. Six of the twenty-one brigade chaplains in the American Army during the Revolution were Baptists. After the war General Washington wrote a letter praising the Baptists for their part in the War for Independence.

Baptists have served our country well in its wars. My Baptist great-great-grandfather, Amos Jefferson Justice, served as a sergeant in the Tenth Missouri Infantry Regiment in the Army of the Confederate States of America. The First Baptist Church of Atoka, Oklahoma where my father was pastor during the Second World War sent out 120 men and women to serve in the war. Five of them gave their lives in that war. The United States utilized 11 million soldiers during WWII. We ought to be proud that very few Baptists claimed to be “conscientious objectors.”

THE PRACTICAL NECESSITY OF SERVING IN THE MILITARY

Serving in the military is not only a biblically legitimate activity; it is a practical necessity as well. Serving in the military comes from five practical considerations:

1. Legitimate concern for our own personal welfare and safety.
2. An interest and concern for the welfare of our families.
3. Our concern for the welfare of our fellow citizens.
4. An honest pride in the glorious history of our country.
5. A deep love for the institutions that we hold so dear.

In II Samuel 10:12, Joab, the general in David's army, told his reasoning for going to battle with the enemy in that certain campaign. "...Let us play the men for our people, and for the cities of our God..." Joab, in going to battle, was concerned for the welfare of his people and for their cities and all that that involved.

The safety and welfare of the people is the supreme law of government. This is the very basic reason why the government exists. The Preamble to the United States Constitution recognizes this. "We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this constitution for the United States of America." The common defence, of course, involves military service! Wars are fought by civilized nations to defend life, liberty (including religious liberty), and property.

It is true that God's word teaches us to love peace and to work for peace. We must always work for peace and doing so is biblical and it is commendable. But today as we honor our beloved forefathers and husbands and brothers and sisters who have fought and died to defend our country, the words of Robert L Dabney, chief of staff to General Stonewall Jackson and a Presbyterian minister, are certainly appropriate. "He who cultivates the art of peace does, indeed, make a worthy contribution to the wellbeing of his fellow men; but he who defends (his fellowmen) with his life makes the contribution of supreme value."

CONCLUSION

Aren't you grateful today for the freedom to worship that our loved ones and acquaintances have fought and died in order to obtain and preserve for us? Have you ever taken advantage of this freedom to consider God's word and what it says about salvation from sin? Do you know the Christ of this Bible? The Christ whom we worship in this glorious American freedom? Have you ever seen yourself as a sinner, lost and undone, alienated from God, guilty, deserving only of eternal punishment in the flames of hell, unable to do anything about your lost and undone condition? Have you ever seen the Christ of the Bible who is the Saviour of sinners? Have you repented of your sins, turned away from them in godly sorrow, and turned to Jesus Christ as your Lord, trusting in him and him alone as your hope of being accepted with God? Would you do so today? Won't you turn from your sin and yourself and come to Christ today trusting in his righteousness as that because of which God should forgive you and accept you into his favor?