

CAN A NUCLEAR WAR BE "JUST"?

For almost the first three centuries of Christianity's existence, the overwhelming majority of Christians refused to participate in the military or any violent activity, having taken seriously Jesus' words to "love one another", "love your enemies", and "do good to those who persecute you." In fact, historical documents show us that one of the major reasons for Roman persecution of early Christians was their refusal to serve in the military.

Only when Christianity was adopted as the state church by the Roman Empire in the fourth century did this position change. To make Christianity compatible to the state, Augustine and Ambrose developed the "just war" doctrine. These criteria for participation in war were occasionally quoted by Luther. And in Article 16 of the Augsburg Confession, it is stated that for a Lutheran to participate in any war, these principles of a "just war" must be followed.

According to these criteria, a war must meet the following standards:

BEFORE A WAR

1. The war must be a last resort. Every effort at forbearance, negotiation, and arbitration must have been tried.
2. The war must have a just cause - to protect the innocent and defend against unjust demands backed by the threat of force.
3. The war must be declared properly by a properly constituted government.
4. There must be a reasonable prospect for victory. The goals must be achievable without squandering the life and property of the people. In other words, suicide is contrary to the will of God, suicide of a nation as well as an individual.

DURING A WAR

5. The means must be proportionate to the ends. War is a necessary evil used in extreme situations to restore order, equilibrium, justice, and peace. The war must not cause wanton and unnecessary destruction outweighing the final good which is sought.
6. Noncombatants are to be safeguarded. Force is used only to restrain. No harm is to be done to those who can do no harm - civilians and prisoners.

AFTER A WAR

7. The defeated are to be shown mercy including assistance with rebuilding what has been destroyed.

If there ever were a time to look at our Lutheran tradition and ask hard questions, it is now in the nuclear age. Based on the seven principles above, we need to ask:

1. Are we trying every means of negotiation with the Soviet Union, or are we putting most of our efforts into preparation for war?
2. How can we justify preparing for a war that assures the destruction of almost everyone and everything we intend to protect?
3. Would time permit a proper declaration of war?
4. Is there any possibility of winning a nuclear war?

5. Would the destruction of life and property, ecological systems, species of plants and animals, the ozone layer, and possibly the human race be proportionate to the intended goal? What about the burns? What about the cancer and birth defects that would affect generations? What about the destruction of the cultural heritage of the past generations?
6. Is not the mass murder of millions of innocent civilians the very intent of strategic nuclear weapons? Is there any way that even tactical battlefield weapons would avoid mass murder and mass suffering?
7. If victory were possible, would the victor have the capacity to give proper help to thousands of third degree burn victims? (e.g. New York City has forty-eight beds for acute burn victims). Could the victor meet all the crying human needs and still have the resources and will to rebuild the defeated nation?

The question Lutherans, and all Christians, must ask is, "What is the shape of obedience to Jesus Christ in the nuclear age?"