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Peace and War **A Report for the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church**

The annual Synod of the Christian Reformed Church of North America (CRCNA) met in Grand Rapids, Michigan in June and adopted a study-committee report on peace and war that had been in the works for nearly three years. Seeking to help the church assess recent changes in the controversial arena of foreign and military affairs in a way that can lead to responsible action, the report approaches these affairs from a broad biblical and historical perspective.

The 70-page report is available online at www.crcna.org and can be obtained from the CRCNA office at 2850 Kalamazoo Ave., SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49560; 877-279-9994. Below are some excerpts from the report's Prologue.

Prologue

Some Christians who say they take a just-war position mean simply that they support their country's current military engagement because they believe the cause is right. On the other hand, Christians who are worried about growing militarism counter by criticizing those who find it easy to justify warfare. Among Christians who urge nonmilitary approaches to the resolution of every international conflict, some consider all warfare to be unjust and at odds with the call to peacemaking. Rather than accept an oversimplified polarization as an adequate presentation of the alternatives, we believe Christians should reevaluate contemporary issues of war and peace within a well-grounded biblical-historical framework.

When God delivered Israel from Egypt, Moses recognized the victory as God's; it was not due to Israel's military strength (Ex. 15). In giving the Promised Land to Israel, God did not authorize a crusade of self-aggrandizing conquest. Israel gained the land not by its own power and strength but by God's strength and authority. Israel's military role in God's cleansing of the land came at God's command and was a tool in God's judgment on

nations whose sins demanded punishment. God did not authorize the children of Israel to make holy war on their own terms whenever they chose to do so.

God's covenant with Israel established, among other things, an order of just government that was designed to allow all to live in peace and to fulfill their diverse responsibilities before God. The laws of the covenant included penalties for those who violated their neighbors in one way or another. The prophets made clear that Israel's kings and other officials who were responsible to uphold justice stood under God's judgment if they failed to protect the people from those who prey on them. When Israel's own sins became too much for God and the land to bear, God brought judgment on Israel, using other nations to cleanse the land of Israel's sins.

Neither Jesus nor any of the apostles called for Christians to try to reestablish Israel as a political entity in the land of promise. Nor did Jesus give his followers a commission to try to create a territorial polity for Christians based on some kind of new land grant from God. No, Christians are to go into all the world to preach the gospel of the kingdom, the good news that the risen Jesus Christ is King and Lord of all creation.

Yet, as the New Testament authors reiterate, there continues to be an important role for governing authorities to encourage those who do good and to punish the evildoer under the all-encompassing kingship of Jesus Christ. As Paul explains in Romans 13, government's responsibility to exercise retribution is a God-ordained responsibility, different from the expression of human vengeance that Paul rejects in Romans 12. Clearly government's use of force has a limited and restricted role in the larger context of its responsibility to govern justly and to maintain a just peace.

Just governing for the common public good is essential to peace. Peace is not simply an absence of war; it is the condition of a justly governed society in which people can fulfill their many callings before God free of the daily or hourly fear of violence and chaos.

A just government may consider going to war only as a last resort to restrain aggression and restore peaceful order. Such warfare can be justified only in limited circumstances and may be pursued only in carefully restrained ways that will, among other things, aim to protect noncombatants. These and many other criteria are part of the moral reasoning of just war. Just-war criteria hold governments accountable.

Much talk in the United States today about the use of force presupposes that God has called the United States to a unique, even messianic, role in history to promote freedom and restrain evil throughout the world. America is presumed to be the last defense against earthly chaos, the ultimate bastion against terrorism, and the leading authority to protect the world from evil. These assumptions imply that military force is justified primarily by reference to the ends being sought rather than by normative standards that bind and restrain any use of force. Making proper judgments about the justifiability of warfare, however, requires a wider and deeper assessment of government's responsibility to uphold

a just peace. Calling Christians to this critical task also demands careful scrutiny of the government's assumptions and its actions arising from these assumptions that may be at odds with the gospel of the kingdom.

For all these reasons a reexamination of the Christian Reformed Church's past statements on justifiable warfare needs to be undertaken with the utmost care to understand how biblical revelation illumines the historical path along which we are walking in North America and the world today.

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