



We Have No Time For This War

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Written by Layton Friesen

We're clearly not tired of war just yet. As this past week in the Middle East has shown, killing enemies still gives our lives meaning. We can talk all we want about "regrettably" sending missiles; the fact remains that war does something in the human spirit we have not learned to live without. What is this deep purpose that we believe war will give our lives, even at the price of untold suffering and wretchedness? Each of us longs to be involved in the abolishing of evil and the victory of good. War keeps holding out that promise, and no matter how it fails to keep its end of the bargain, we just don't give up on war.

I call myself a pacifist, of a sort. Pacifists often have a hard time explaining themselves on the day war breaks out. This is because by the time war breaks out, pacifism makes no sense. The present war in the Middle East is addressing a situation that was caused by previous wars. Other wars in the future will be needed to deal with the fallout of this war, even if this war is justified.

I remember when the second Iraq war broke out in 2003. At the time there was little a pacifist could say. Of course, if Sadaam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, and of course if he was going to use them, he must be stopped. Pacifists could not imagine any realistic way to stop Hussein at that moment. But now, 23 years later, it's easy to be a pacifist about the second Iraq war. Even U.S. presidents are now pacifists when it comes to that war. It was stupid, unjust and caused an utterly unpredictable amount of wretchedness, not only for Iraq and the Gulf region but for the rest of the world. But on the day it started, pacifists had little they could say. We were going out to destroy evil and secure good, what's to say against that?

But does a pacifist need to believe all wars are as stupid as the second Iraq war? Some pacifists believe that, but not me. I come from a tradition of pacifism that believes war may have a place in God's providential care of the world. God sometimes uses war for his own purpose of restraining evil. The first Anabaptist confession in 1527 said,

"The sword is ordained of God outside the perfection of Christ. It punishes and puts to death the wicked, and guards and protects the good. In the Law the sword was ordained for the punishment of the wicked and for their death, and the same [sword] is [now] ordained to be used by the worldly magistrates."

That can hardly be called pacifism, if by pacifism you mean the belief that all war is wrong and stupid. No, according to the Schleithem Confession, war is something God "ordains", at least for the time being, to punish the wicked and protect the good. Most Mennonite confessions since then have used similar language.

But it is a different kind of pacifism, rare these days, even among pacifists. I call this "gospel pacifism" to differentiate it from "absolute pacifism". It says pacifism is for those consumed with proclaiming the gospel. People called to proclaim the gospel, who announce by their lives, words and worship Christ's great cruciform response to all the world's violence, people charged with developing little prototypes (churches) of heaven on earth, little exhibits of what it could look like when the lion lies down with the Lamb, these people love their enemies and forgive them rather than killing. Even if God sometimes "ordains" a war to punish evil-doers. We exempt ourselves from fighting like medical personnel in a war zone are exempt from fighting. You can't be doing medical healing work and killing work at the same time. You can't be at work proclaiming Jesus' cruciform response to evil and killing your enemies at the same time.

What primarily concerns gospel pacifists in any war situation is, How will this effect the proclamation of the gospel? Is the struggling church in Iran, or Israel, or Iraq, or Syria calling for this war? Are Christian workers in the region demanding governments utilize force to put down an oppressor and protect the voiceless? How will this war effect the long-range prospects of Christ-followers in this region?

Maybe this war will accomplish some short-term good in the Middle East. War sometimes does. Ask me in 23 years. But for Christians, proclaiming the Prince of Peace takes up all our time. This Prince is the one who on the night he was betrayed told Peter to stuff his sword and then suffered all the evil of the cosmos. He loved his crucifiers who were acting on our behalf and thus destroyed evil and secured the good eternally.

Telling that story takes a lot of time.