

# Church and State

THE ELDER'S ROLE IN WAR



PRCC  
CHAPLAIN  
MINISTRIES

# The Resource Mission of the PRCC:

The military is a culture unlike any other. Its mission brings unique challenges and temptations, which churches and organizations that support the Armed Forces must uncover and address.

To assist our denominational churches and civilian ministers, the Presbyterian & Reformed Commission on Chaplains (PRCC) offers resources to make the gospel relevant and accessible to military life. What we provide is based on the beliefs (a) that overcoming any challenge in life begins by turning to Christ, and (b) that apart from the enlightenment of the Word and the regenerative work of the Spirit a person will not find their greatest purpose, peace of mind or recovery from sin or afflictions. With this vision, we hope this pamphlet will offer a way to understand issues confronting military members while pointing to how we can call upon God to bring hope.

We are grateful for this pamphlet written by Dr. Dwight Horn, who serves as our Associate Endorser for Military and Veteran Care. His insightful and detailed work provides an overview of how the church is needed in preparing covenant family members, military personnel, and congregations for war. It is a valuable resource for pastors and church leaders. When church leaders do not engage on this topic, service members are left on their own to decide questions of justice, killing, and the moral implications of fighting in war.

It is my prayer that God will use this work to strengthen you and your local church.

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## The Role of God's Appointed Leaders in Preparation for War

**T**he picture on the cover is a memorial service for Marines killed in combat. I was in that situation in Iraq when our Battalion lost three Marines. As a Chaplain leading the event, I stood before the helmets, rifles, boots, and dog tags of the deceased, and I tried to comfort those gathered and honor the fallen for their noble and gallant service. They gave their lives to bring liberation and restoration to Iraqi citizens.

Inwardly, I grieved like the others gathered for those killed in action. Yet, partly what troubled me as well was that while these young men lost their lives serving their nation and defending freedom, it would only be their unit, family, and friends back home who would know of this loss and suffer the pain. How many service members pass away in obscurity, fighting for their country, but vanishing in the myriad distractions and consuming passions that otherwise focus the attention of those back home? It is as if the incredible hardships and heroism in war have no connection to the ones benefiting from those sacrifices.

As American citizens and those called into God's church as elders who are leaders and vanguards for truth, should we not be engaged with our nation and those who fight for it? We benefit from how our nation wields the sword and what our fighters provide in terms of safety and security of rights. Is there more to be done on our part?

For the Israelites of old, spiritual leaders were directly connected to what happened on the battlefield. In Exodus, the first priest, Aaron, held up Moses' arms, the Israelite leader, to enable victory in battle (Ex 17:11-13). In Deuteronomy, God had His priests come forward to bless the warriors (Deut 20:2-4). That presence signaled that God was tying war into His divine providence, and it sent that same message to those fighting: "the Lord your God is the one who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you."<sup>[1]</sup> Consider as well in 2 Chronicles where the Levitical Temple singers led the way into battle (II Chron 20:1-21). God again sanctioned war through the religious leaders to bring His purposes.

This leads to the question of why Christian leaders should not have a role when their nation faces war. We do not live in a theocracy, and Christians have different responsibilities than those held by the Israelite priests and prophets. Yet, should not there be some level of involvement by those whom God entrusts as leaders in the church? There are many issues to consider.

## 2

## The Church and State

*Christians cannot reconstitute Adam's failed mandate to live before God as a priest (Gen 2:15) and king (Gen 1:26-28). That work was, is, and will continue to be perfectly accomplished by Christ alone (Jn 19:30; I Pet 2:24; Rom 5:12ff; Eph 1:7; Rev 1:18; Heb 2:5-18; Heb 4:14-16; Heb 7-8; Rev 1:5, 11:15; 12:9-10; 17:14; 19:16; and 21:1-4). Our role is to live faithfully in the Kingdom of God (Col 3:1-2) while concomitantly existing in the Earthly Kingdom as ambassadors for truth (II Cor 5:18-20 and 10:5; II Tim 4:2), evangelists for the gospel (Acts 1:8; Matt 28:18-20; I Pet 3:15-16), representatives of the*

*moral values we uphold (II Tim 2:1-2; Jn 13:35), obedient subjects except where fidelity to God would be compromised (I Pet 2:13-14; Mk 12:17; Rom 13:5-7; Acts 5:29); and participants in civil, military, and mundane roles and activities as called upon by God (Matt 8:5ff).*

Considering how Christians live in the state, an issue that gets mired in confusion quickly is the **separation of Church and State**. This concept is usually connected to Thomas Jefferson who, as President, assured the church of the state's limitation of powers in religion. He stated:

***Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between Man & his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only, & not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should "make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," thus building a wall of separation between Church & State.***<sup>[2]</sup>

This declaration was already established in the First Amendment to the Constitution (Establishment and Free Exercise Clauses) and received further clarification in the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993. Both documents clarify that the church is free from the state to abide by its religious doctrine and polity, except when there is a compelling government interest, and only then when the government acts in the least restrictive way. An area often in tension is governmental policy regarding public health, such as vaccinations.<sup>[3]</sup>

To narrow the discussion, let us focus not on state policy but on biblical truth regarding civil rule. That leads us to consider how God maintains righteousness in this world, aligning things to His created order.

This process was straightforward. God instructed Adam and Eve to rule over creation (Gen 1:28), maintaining all according to the good. That failed when they sinned, leading to the corruption of goodness and the mandate to exercise dominion.

God's current order of authority to rule is divided between the state and the church. On civil matters, God's righteous purposes are overseen by His appointed public representatives:

***Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore, whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves.***<sup>[4]</sup>

Yet, while these leaders are given authority to rule outside the church—protecting rights, public order, conventions that guide physical well-being, and cultural mandates—this power should not be exercised in a way that disconnects it from God. Authority to govern in the Earthly Kingdom, as following on from the Noahic Covenant, is given to sustain goodness (Gen 9:5-6). I appreciate R. C. Sproul's statement on this as he was speaking to the newly inaugurated governor of Florida:

***Your authority, and the only authority that you have whatsoever, is an authority delegated to you by the One***

***who possesses all authority, and this is God. Ultimately, God is the foundation of authority by which you will rule in government. I challenge you this day to always remember that you are accountable to God for how you exercise that office, and may you not be seduced by this mythological concept of separation of church and state. The state, as much as the church, is instituted by God, ordained by God, and derives whatever authority it has through delegation of divine authority. The state, therefore, is answerable and accountable to God.***<sup>[5]</sup>

In essence, leaders over civil matters are not separated from God at all. Their authority is given to institute and secure righteousness: **“By me kings reign, and rulers decree justice. By me princes rule, and nobles.”**<sup>[6]</sup> This is true whether they know it or not, and accept it or not.

John Calvin in *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* speaks of it this way:

***“It is not owing to human perverseness that supreme power on earth is lodged in kings and other governors, but by Divine Providence, and the holy decree of Him to whom it has seemed good so to govern the affairs of men, since he is present, and also presides in enacting laws and exercising judicial equity.”***<sup>[7]</sup>

A point to consider as we turn to the church is who is best positioned to advise people, including civil leaders where appropriate, on policies related to righteousness. One group is certainly religious leaders. They are charged to be ambassadors, teachers, and/or evangelists, proclaiming God's perfect will to the world (Titus 1:5-



16; Acts 20:17ff; Rom 10:14-15). This means that their ministry can include leaders in the secular arena. It fulfills the calling to be witnesses of God's truth in word and deed (Col 3:17). It is in keeping with being the "salt and light" to the world, preserving goodness, and bearing witness to faith (Matt 5:13-16; and II Cor 5:17-20). It is a part of being the priesthood of believers, proclaiming the excellencies of God who called us out of darkness and into God's marvelous light (1 Pet 2:9-12). It connects with helping all to be godly:

***I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.***<sup>[8]</sup>

How does this approach fit with the separation of church and state? The esteemed theologian, J. Gresham Machen, wrote about this, saying:

***We do not think that the Presbyterian Church ought to become a political lobby; we do not think that it has any right to put itself on record as either favoring or opposing political and social measures about which no direct guidance is found in The Scriptures. That does not mean at all that we deprecate advocacy of good political measures and opposition to bad measures on the part of members of the church; on the contrary we think that such activity is a very important Christian duty, and that Christians ought to organize themselves in accordance with their***

***consciences for the furtherance of political and social ends that they think right. But what we do deprecate is such activity on the part of official agencies of the church.***<sup>[9]</sup>

His point is well-taken. Members of the church should impact the state by providing truth to influence the minds of civil and political leaders, and that can best occur through the training of elders who provide relevant and sound biblical knowledge. It would all be done as stated not by way of dictating how the government should set policy:

***Synods and councils are to handle, or conclude nothing, but that which is ecclesiastical: and are not to intermeddle with civil affairs which concern the commonwealth, unless by way of humble petition in cases extraordinary; or, by way of advice, for satisfaction of conscience, if they be thereunto required by the civil magistrate. [Emphasis added WCF 25.4]***

The church is not an institution purposed to make or campaign for civil legislation. Yet to those things pertaining directly to the formation, maintenance, and preservation of goodness in creation, let church leaders “provide biblical insight” to their members and any who seek their counsel to allow the light of God’s truth to permeate a nation so that goodness is honored:

***Christians must strive neither to deny the importance of politics—since it has great bearing on the justice, peace, and prosperity of this world—nor to exalt politics as a means for ushering in the redemptive kingdom of heaven. ....Each believer must seek to apply, with wisdom, biblical teaching that is relevant to political decisions. Certain***

***political actions are clearly inconsistent with the faith, but many possible approaches to voting, supporting parties, forming public policy, and political strategizing are potentially consistent with Christian faith. In these areas believers enjoy Christian liberty—and responsibility—to exercise their wisdom “seek[ing] the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile (Jer. 29:7).”<sup>[10]</sup>***

There are many biblical examples of God’s people engaging with the government. Joseph, Daniel, Nehemiah, and Esther intervened with Kings in their time and stood for what was right, offering guidance and wisdom to bring about God’s purposes. They were willing to risk suffering and death to maintain their beliefs. Let the elders in the church, particularly the teaching elders, empower Christians in these roles with the ability to facilitate these kinds of ministries. Let them also give spiritual insight to those outside the church when called upon to order their decisions in a righteous direction.

Having clarified the issue regarding the church and civil rule, we can focus specifically on authority in the church. Elders and their governing bodies are entrusted with this role: “The Lord Jesus, as King and Head of his church, hath therein appointed a government, in the hand of church officers, distinct from the civil magistrate.” <sup>[11]</sup> The state has no role in this: “Civil magistrates may not assume to themselves the administration of the Word and sacraments; or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven; or, in the least, interfere in matters of faith.” <sup>[12]</sup> Elders through the governing church courts are the appointed means by which God brings truth and discipline on religious matters and maintains purity, obedience, and care by following biblical mandates (Matt 16:19; I Tim 3:15, 5:17; I Thess 5:12; Hebrews 13:7, 17, 24; and I Cor 12:28).

In David VanDrunen's book, *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms*, he offers an important overview of this distinction of church rule and how that role works both independently from and cooperatively with the state in carrying out God's order. He says,

***[T]he classic Reformed theological paradigm suggests that Christians are citizens of two distinct kingdoms, both of which are ordained of God and under his law, yet exist for different purposes, have different functions, and operate according to different rules. In their capacity as citizens of the spiritual kingdom of Christ, Christians insist upon non-violence and the ways of peace, refusing to bear arms on behalf of his kingdom; in their capacity as citizens of the civil kingdom, they participate as necessary in the coercive work of the state, bearing arms on its behalf when occasion warrants. As citizens of the spiritual kingdom, they have no patriotic allegiance to any earthly nation; but as citizens of the civil kingdom, a healthy patriotism is certainly possible. As citizens of the spiritual kingdom, they can make radical critiques of all theories, practices, and institutions that are not submissive to the redemptive lordship of Christ; but as citizens of the civil kingdom they can acknowledge the significant benefits that the state brings for earthly life, enjoy the amazing products of human culture, and seek common cause with non-Christians on a variety of social projects. As citizens of the spiritual kingdom, they submit to the redemptive ethic of Scripture; yet as citizens of the civil kingdom they can engage in genuine moral conversation with those of other faiths through the universally accessible law of nature, without making adherence to Scripture a test for participating in cultural affairs. As citizens of the spiritual***

***kingdom, they can view the state and other social institutions as temporal and designed to pass away; but as citizens of the civil kingdom, they can have a keen interest in promoting the welfare of human society here and now.*** <sup>[13]</sup>

This explains how Christian leaders and their followers should live exclusively in and for the Kingdom of God while simultaneously in the flesh being represented by an Earthly Kingdom as led by God's appointed official. The foundation is built on unconditional adherence to the Kingdom of God, remaining in Christ through faith and obedience to scripture while rejecting worldliness and dying to self (Phil 8:7-11). From there, one lives as a good citizen of the state under the rule, protection, direction, guidance, and benefits afforded by the Earthly Kingdom.

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***“To summarize the relationship between church and state in a sentence, we could say, God has given the power of the sword to governments and the power of the keys to churches, and he intends for them to work separately but cooperatively toward the greater end of worship.”*** <sup>[14]</sup>

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### A Voice for Truth in War

Accepting that the church integrally is tied to the proclamation of justice and the hope to defend righteousness against evil, we must consider how elders should weigh in on war considerations. There is no greater potential to corrupt a nation and its people than to go to war for evil purposes, and God does collectively punish for evil, whether the act is committed by individuals (Rom 5:12ff; Exod 20:5), national leaders, or nations (Gen 18; II Chron 28:19; Deut 1:35 and 28:36-37). He also holds all people accountable for sin, whether they are aware of it or not (Lev 5:17; Hos 4:6; Rom 2:12-16; Jas 4:17). This calls for church leaders to bring the light of God's counsel on issues like war that impact their nation. How is this done?

First, the power to declare war lies with the state. It is the agency God ordained to use force to address evil and bring justice:

***For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil.*** <sup>[15]</sup>

We must be mindful, though, that not every war is based on a “just cause.” History offers many examples, and most would agree that Russia’s war on Ukraine lacks a “just cause.” Its leader, Vladimir Putin, his cronies, and even the Head of the Russian Orthodox

Church, though proclaiming that there is a legitimate cause, appear to be deluded and malevolent in their beliefs. A state can misjudge the necessity for war or be simply corrupt in its use of power.

A religious leader in Germany during the rule of Adolph Hitler, Clemens August von Galen, “The Lion of Munster,” offers a profound example of being willing to see the evil of his leaders and declare his opposition. He stated about his nation, there is a “new and harmful totalitarian ideology which puts race above morality, blood above law [...], which repudiates Revelation, and seeks to destroy the foundations of Christianity.”<sup>[16]</sup>

Because of his pronouncements, many threatened to have him hanged. Bishop von Galen would not stay quiet, however. He continued to defy the civil authorities for their iniquitous defilement of humanity by saying,

***Justice is the only solid foundation of any state. The right to life, to inviolability, to freedom is an indispensable part of any moral order of society. . . We demand justice! If this call remains unheard and unanswered, if the reign of Justice is not restored, then our German people and our country — in spite of the heroism of our soldiers and the glorious victories they have won — will perish through an inner rottenness and decay.*** <sup>[17]</sup>

This minister recognized the need to speak God’s truth when civil rulers seditiously influence the minds and actions of their people. As another German minister, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, said during that time: “Silence in the presence of evil is itself evil. Not to speak is to speak, not to act is to act.”<sup>[18]</sup>

As Bishops ourselves, we act as “watchmen” to hear from God and proclaim His message (1 Titus 1:9), and as we do so, in the words of “The Lion of Munster”, “May God give us discernment and heroic strength; may we never through selfishness or vile fear of men consent to sin, tarnishing our conscience in order to gain or preserve the favour of powerful mortals.”<sup>[19]</sup>

In sum, separation from the state does not mean that elders silence their voices in matters that define and defile the very goodness of God’s creation. This is especially true when providing biblical principles that can give insight into the possible need for war. The cost of not doing this is too great for humanity and spirituality.

***“[F]or many veterans, killing provokes a moral conflict with a lasting impact on their sense of self, spirituality, and relationships with others.”***<sup>[20]</sup>

Yet, while elders engage in protecting the sanctity of all things, “gathering and protecting the saints” (WCF 25:2), they must be mindful that their efforts are not to unify God’s Kingdom and the Earthly Kingdom (Jn 18:36). They are about providing wisdom and prayer in support to those desirous of upholding God’s truth (Gen 41:33-36; Rom 13:4). They are about protecting the spirituality of those who serve the nation and those who support and benefit from it (Deut 20; Judges 6:12ff; Matt 8:5ff; Lk 3:14; Acts 10:1ff)

## **Scripture and the Decision for War: The Jus Ad Bellum Decision**

While discerning God’s will to start a war is challenging, we have scriptural guidance. It can be captured under seven principles that undergird the first tenet of the Just War Theory, Jus Ad Bellum (Justice before War). The other two tenets are Jus in Bello (Justice



in War) and Jus Post Bellum (Justice once war ends).

When is it “just” to attack an enemy force? Here are points to consider:

**1. Right Authority:** “Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right.”<sup>[21]</sup> God places the responsibility for civil justice in the public domain with rulers. In this regard, following the lead of that authority is seemingly right.

However, does one owe obsequious loyalty to this authority such that it means participating in evil? The example of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego illustrates otherwise (Dan 3:12-28). One serves God above all others and must not do evil just because a higher authority orders it (Ex 20:2-3). That is true for every mandate a ruler decides to enact, especially one that orders a nation to be at war and incur the ensuing destruction. Hence, let no one take a human life simply because a leader orders the action. “For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.”<sup>[22]</sup>

As elders who are equippers in spiritual readiness and who bring insight on how the Bible helps to answer modern-day issues and mandates (e.g., cremation, organ transplant, abortion and reproductive care, euthanasia, vaccines as derived from fetal matter, gender identity and the like), offer insight about how to follow God’s appointed leaders when it comes to obeying and participating in a leader’s decision to start a war.

**2. Just Cause:** To take a life created in the image of God is the greatest internal conflict from which one can suffer:

***One veteran put it this way: “All I knew is I hurt inside and I didn’t know why, you know? I didn’t know why I should feel so bad if I didn’t do anything wrong. I was not a baby killer. I was not—I did my job. I did what everybody else did. But always that nagging question, why do I hurt like this?”*** <sup>[23]</sup>

This sentiment is supported by a medical study where “[k]illing a combatant or civilian in a warzone or failing to save a life is known to ‘haunt’ some military service members and to convey risk for negative mental health outcomes, such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), suicidal ideation, and alcohol abuse.” <sup>[24]</sup>

That mental turmoil arises because of conviction for sin (Gen 9:6; Jn 16:8; Rom 2:14-15). To take a life without a “just cause” is that sin. It is murder (Ex 20:13). This judgment remains true even if a person claims that he was only following orders or that another is to blame (Genesis 3:12-13). Perhaps a person will escape punishment in the earthly courts, but not before God (Rom 3:3-8). Guilt and conviction by the Spirit are evidence of that (Ps 32:3-5; Jn 16:7-11).

Elders must be ready when called upon to make this clear to combatants. They can be instrumental in helping people find a “just cause” for taking a life in battle, so they will not suffer. This ministry can also extend to helping service members understand forgiveness for sin and the power of Christ to free them from guilt when they struggle with or commit sin in war. These discussions are not currently happening as they

should in the church or the military.

As a Chaplain, I counseled service members on the front lines of combat who were deeply troubled by the issue of killing in combat, wondering whether their actions were right in God's eyes. I endlessly wondered why our nation allowed these internal conflicts to occur in the minds of those we send to war and why we still do.

***Postdeployment depression and PTSD symptoms mediated [brought about] the association between killing in combat and suicidal thinking, while postdeployment PTSD symptoms mediated [brought about] the association between killing in combat and desire for self-harm. These results provide preliminary evidence that suicidal thinking and the desire for self-harm are associated with different mental health predictors, and that the impact of killing on suicidal ideation may be important to consider in the evaluation and care of our newly returning veterans [parentheses offered for clarification].*** <sup>[25]</sup>

Scripture states that one's motivation in taking a life is key to whether it is a just act. One clear biblical warrant given for killing is self-defense (Ex 22:2-3). If you fight a lethal enemy in the interest of stopping them from using their power to destroy goodness—protecting the rights of people—taking a life is justified. When going to war, therefore, one must assess if this engagement is connected to the defense of the innocent against a hostile force committed to annihilating innocence (Gen 9:5-6). That makes taking someone's life justifiable.

This is where church leaders support those questioning whether killing is right. They cannot answer for individuals whether a specific war meets those guidelines, but they can speak to what would be a just cause in battle. To clarify, “it is the final act to restore every aspect of goodness through the rightful execution of lethal power and for the ultimate realization of humanity existing in its proper interrelationships. That, and that alone, is the reason to kill.”<sup>[26]</sup> Providing counsel and sound biblical wisdom to allow people to gain this insight and make their own godly decisions on war must be done.

- 3. Right Intent:** Just because evil exists, and a nation could receive judgment for sin, this does not mean that God will bring that punishment. He might withhold it because righteous individuals are in that wicked nation (Gen 18). He might withhold it since it is His nature to do so (Jonah 3). There can be other reasons. Yet the real issue is not whether an opposing nation deserves judgment but whether God means for it to happen, raising a nation to be His instrument for righteousness.

Deciding upon this issue is about the intent of going to war. Wrongful intentions include anger, retribution, abusive control, covetousness of resources, and megalomania. The sole rightful intent is to establish righteousness for God's purposes.

Religious leaders are vital resources in discerning these things. When they set aside personal bias or influence, they can provide sound biblical advice, prayer, and counsel that enable people, including national decision-makers, to uncover whether going to war has a godly intention.

Elders should understand as well that having the right intent

for war is especially critical in the heat of battle. Combat can become about a desire for vengeance (Rom 12:19), lust (Jas 4:2-3), anger (Gen 4), jealousy (I Kings 21), or the like. Getting the right intention for taking life is vital to safeguard warriors as they move through conflict.

Further, elders should understand that having a righteous intention for war is crucial for warriors post-combat. They might wrestle with internal questions about the moral basis for that war and how that connected to their service, wondering most earnestly if those people deserved to die. By knowing at the outset that their mission was solely to follow God in maintaining His righteous purposes, they will ease their consciences and maintain certainty about why the enemy had to be killed.

**4. Proportionality:** Throughout the Old Testament, God guides the Israelites in battle and provides instruction on how far they should go in fighting the enemy. At times, God allows the enemy to be free of destruction if they are willing to relinquish their sinful ways (Ex 20:10-15). He also offers complete mercy where judgment is merited (2 Kings 6:8-23; Jonah 4). Contrarily, he commands the annihilation of those who are wholly evil and who by God's divine knowledge must face judgment (I Sam 15; Ex 20:16-18). In all these situations, the goal for armies is to use force only to the extent that it destroys the potential for evil to exist.

This pattern of engagement is necessary today. It starts with a willingness to be merciful to the enemy. This is because justice is about the restoration of those offended and the "offenders." It is not about a nation's ability utterly to devastate the enemy. Hence, if an enemy relinquishes its will to use lethality to pursue evil, establish peace and restore goodness by upholding fair

justice for all. Only attack and cripple what allows an enemy to assert its malevolent designs and what causes their will to continue towards corruption.

I had a marine officer tell me after the Battle of Fallujah that we should have turned that city into a glass factory, meaning that we should have obliterated the whole thing with an atomic bomb. I understood his sentiment. He was bereft because of the good men and women lost in that battle. Yet, annihilating something without discretion to protect what is good is wrong. Proportionality is the goal.

- 5. Public Declaration:** The idea behind this principle is to make an official pronouncement to inform those entrenched in wickedness that they will be attacked if they refuse to turn from evil.

In the Old Testament, we find this tactic used. Consider how often the Jewish Northern and Southern Kingdoms heard the prophets' warnings, telling them that destruction would come if they did not turn from their wicked ways. For instance, the prophet Hosea brings this message to the Northern Kingdom, and Jeremiah offers that same message to the Southern Kingdom. In the end, both kingdoms failed to heed the warnings and were destroyed by nations that God used to bring punishment.

Offering this kind of public declaration today is right as well. I have fliers that we dropped in the Battle of Fallujah, offering this ultimatum to the insurgents to lay down arms, leave, or else die. Those who stayed met their fate despite being offered the warning.

Elders should note that this process brings comfort to combatants. They can be affirmed by knowing the enemy refused to relinquish their will to carry out evil. They needed to die for the sake of protecting holiness. That realization helps post-war, when one reflects on his involvement in taking a human life.

**6. Last Resort:** A moving passage in Matthew is when Jesus confronts the religious leaders and excoriates them for their obstinacy, refusing to listen to God: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling.” <sup>[27]</sup> It is a profound and sad condemnation of a people who were given countless opportunities to turn from evil but remained hell-bent on condemnation.

With the same appeal to make people turn from their demise, every opportunity should be given to the enemy to restore them to justice and right their wrongs. The prayer and hope are that war will not occur. It must remain always the last resort

**7. Conviction to Act:** This issue is not in “Just War” doctrine. It is essential to warriors, though, as they prepare for war. Let us address the idea.

As Solomon offered: “There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven—...A time for war and a time for peace.”<sup>[28]</sup> One must discern when those times are. As mentioned, just because evil exists, and the rights of the innocent have been violated, it does not mean that lethality by one nation against another is the answer. A question exists whether there is a “conviction to act.” Does one have internal

certainty that going to war and killing this enemy is right?

Religious leaders can help people find that conviction. They can provide spiritual counsel to all, including God's appointed civil and political leaders when appropriate, who themselves must find conviction to act and call a nation to war.

The cost of going to war is monumental. Those impacted the most are the ones who stare the enemy in the eyes and kill them. They will invariably wonder whether that fatal decision was right. Religious leaders are vital messengers who bring scripture to answer this question.

***Researchers have identified an association between killing in combat and posttraumatic stress among multiple generations of U.S. military. A recent study examining the impact of combat exposures on both PTSD symptoms and depression in U.S. veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan found that shooting at the enemy contributed to symptoms more than being shot. ...Guilt and shame appear to be important mediating factors in the relationship between killing and PTSD, depression, and suicidality. Steenkamp et al. have observed that, for many veterans, the most “haunting and impactful” war events are “those involving perceived moral transgressions”. Studies of U.S. military veterans show that shame, guilt, and the belief that one has participated in immoral acts are significantly associated with both suicidal ideation and PTSD. With regard to social and behavioral impacts, Maguen et al. (2010) found that killing in combat independently predicted postdeployment alcohol abuse, anger, and relationship problems among veterans of***



Of note, there might be situations where a nation decides to go to war, and individuals, regardless of their status as military or civilian, do not believe that there is a conviction to act. They do not see the war as “just.” We should not ostracize or belittle these people. We want every person to stand for truth as they know it before God. They might be wrong. They might be right while all others are wrong. Regardless, as Paul makes clear, what is paramount is that the “faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves.”<sup>[30]</sup> Let us help all find their inner conviction to follow God’s will in their lives, challenging them always to remain humble and open to erroneous beliefs and willing in the face of them to turn course.

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***God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in anything, contrary to His Word; or beside it, in matters of faith, or worship. So that, to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands, out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience: and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also. WCF Ch. 20.2***

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The seven principles examined offer a healthy look into what grounds justice and determines whether those in a nation, collectively or individually, are right to kill the enemy. As elders, we can take this information, study scripture, and glean principles to decide on war. We can then offer this wisdom to those who will listen.

## Why Does This Discussion About War Matter?

### It is for the sake of Combatants

With wars in foreign lands, it is easy to ignore the raging conflict as it exists for our military service members. In doing this, those who serve faithfully bear the weight of those hardships alone and suffer from not being blessed by what the Church offers. We should not let that happen.

***In comparison to the civilian population, Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans are facing elevated rates of suicide and mental illness, drug and alcohol dependence, car crashes, and homelessness. They and their families also experience higher rates of divorce as well as homicide, child abuse, and child neglect by both parents left behind and returning veterans.*** <sup>[31]</sup>

Organize the church to meet the needs of those who serve. Studies show that “spiritual community participation—as exemplified by religious service attendance—is associated with healthier lives, including greater longevity, less depression and suicide, and less substance use. For many patients, spirituality is important and influences key outcomes in illness, such as quality of life and medical care decisions.” The obvious reason for this is that Christ is the answer. He is the only hope for healing, and we in the church are the ones through whom that message of hope is given (Rom 10:14-15). Thus, interceding for those who wear the uniform is a ministry in which we must be involved. Let us expend every resource to be a place of refuge for them.

A part of this work too is supporting our Chaplains who serve with combatants on the front lines of battle. We must find ways to be more invested in their lives and ministry so they can be more effective in their outreach.

## **It is for the sake of Veterans**

Veterans have an increased risk of prison, suicide, drug use, violence, and divorce.<sup>[33]</sup> This can be directly linked to PTSD and moral injury.<sup>[34]</sup> What happens in combat can change a person forever and bring consequences that would not have otherwise followed. Imagine rising every day to a tortured soul that makes deadness and death more appealing than life. If only someone would reach out with the answer to silence the demonic voices that tirelessly pulsate like a haunting scream in the night.

***[H]armful existential, social, psychological, emotional, and spiritual consequences stem from exposure to events that conflict with core moral values or expectations, [bringing about] guilt, shame, feelings of worthlessness, trouble with forgiveness, and/or loss of meaning-making.*** <sup>[35]</sup>

No amount of psychiatry and psychology can bring wholeness to a person without the ministry of Christ. That role is entrusted to the elders, who are given the keys to the kingdom. They can impart godly counsel and bring spiritual freedom. These efforts, as well as those to organize church ministry for this group, are essential for reaching veterans who otherwise move slowly and inexorably toward their demise as they struggle to quiet their conscious convictions and all associated physical ailments.

How can elders help the church become a beacon of hope for

veterans? Provide pastoral counseling and have a list of licensed Christian psychiatrists, psychologists, and counselors for referral. Identify retired service members in your church to be veteran liaisons. Link up with Christian veteran outreaches, using local veteran community resources. Start a military support group in the church or neighborhood and get resources on veteran topics to place about the church. Open a food pantry and reach out to the homeless in the community where veterans are easily found. Connect teaching and preaching to veteran needs. In these ways, you will uncover a world around your church lurking in the shadows and waiting to receive God's love.

### **It is for the sake of Military Families**

There are unique factors associated with military life that are not in the civilian world. Families constantly relocate to new duty stations, creating challenges like new schools for the children and the loss of existing support structures at previous assignments, such as churches, friends, and known community resources.

Financial difficulties can also arise as families struggle to make military pay meet their needs and face unexpected expenses, such as reestablishing households in new areas.

Additionally, recurring military deployments can cause spousal temptations to bond with others, philander, or establish long-term affairs.

Even when military members are not deployed, they face arduous work schedules and continuous field training. As a result, the spouse who stays behind is responsible for managing all other family obligations, which can create inflammatory arguments

and resentments about fiscal decisions, parental responsibilities, intimacy, and lack of appreciation and love.

Children can suffer too under the strains of military life. “[They] ... face a wide range of mental health challenges due to their unique family circumstances. Studies show that these children are at a higher risk of experiencing mental health issues compared to their civilian peers.”<sup>[36]</sup>

Unsurprisingly, these conditions are partly why military marriages end in divorce at a greater rate than those found in the civilian setting.<sup>[37]</sup> The toxic emotions that fester inspire thoughts that there must be a better life elsewhere.

Church leaders must know these issues and find ways to enter that world, such as starting spousal support groups, food pantries, financial classes, providing diaconal service for household urgent needs, establishing programs to adopt military families, and connecting with local military and veteran agencies that support troop welfare. Be creative to uncover ways to connect to the military and be certain that God will use you and bless your efforts.

### **It is because we are at war: “Shadow Wars”**

After the September 11, 2001, attack on America, Congress authorized the President to use necessary force to prevent future attacks by those associated with these terrorists [Senate Joint Resolution 23, Nov 1, 2007]. This legislation sent America’s military over the world in hostile environments and has led to numerous shadow wars—minor but highly kinetic military engagements with enemy combatants on foreign soil.<sup>[38]</sup>

What happens in these shadow wars, while not equaling the overall impact of a major war, is significant. Military members die, get injured, kill the enemy, spend time away from family in hostile environments, and face the impact of being in war.

***Research conducted after military conflicts has shown that deployment and exposure to combat result in increased risk of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), major depression, substance abuse, functional impairment in social and employment settings, and the increased use of health care services.*** <sup>[39]</sup>

Some of these deployed servicemen are reservists who come home to their quiet communities without their units to support them, and mostly to non-existent veteran care centers. These people can easily withdraw into their cocoon of shame, guilt, and other mental and emotional stains on the soul.

Are churches supporting those serving in these special engagements, which are often not publicized? Do we know and support the families of combatants who are sent to these conflicts? If we are not, should we not start to find ways of doing this? It is again about seeking those opportunities, finding them, and being purposeful to establish ministries that bring healing, hope, and love.

***“Some researchers have postulated that religious and spiritual factors might positively affect various physiological mechanisms involved in health. Positive emotions (e.g., forgiveness, hope, contentment, love) might benefit the individual through their impact on neural pathways that connect to the endocrine and***

***immune systems. ... Meditation, forgiveness, and certain religious and spiritual thoughts might reduce the arousal in the SNS and HPA, increasing immune competence and restoring psychological stability.”*** <sup>[40]</sup>

## **It is because we are preparing for World War**

What looms on the horizon is an international conflict that will be far more severe than the shadow wars. Every military Service Chief is preparing for that engagement.

Headlines reveal there are countries, not aligned to the strategic or peaceful interests of the United States or its allies, who are presently preparing for war through territorial expansion, increased military development of equipment, personnel, and training, stockpiling resources, procuring military outposts on disputed waters and islands, performing cyber operations to disrupt American resources and infrastructure, using satellite and unmanned aircraft to spy on American military sites, and developing robust space weapons to attack and counter American operations.

We should prepare for this type of engagement. It will be unprecedented. The casualty rates will be high, and the enemy will target American infrastructure through asymmetric warfare. <sup>[41]</sup> This will include financial systems, “electricity, gas, water, transport, health care, and other public services.”<sup>[42]</sup>

Are we equipping the church for this? Are parishioners spiritually able to navigate the storms of the next World War? Can they articulate the biblical principles that speak to the need for justice in war, and can they connect that for themselves to the current

context of war and what may arise in a world conflict? What are elders doing to enlighten through biblical training, counsel, and wisdom to give insight into justice and how God uses it to accomplish His purposes in war?

Let elders learn how to be witnesses of truth to the church on moral issues like war to allow our members and others to uncover a righteous basis for decisions that have eternal consequences.

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***[S]pecial grace that God gives to those who are saved brings more of the blessings of common grace to unbelievers living in the realm of the church's influence. Unbelievers benefit from the example of Christian lives that they see in society, from the prayers and the acts of mercy that Christians do for the community, from the knowledge of the teachings of scripture and its wisdom in which they find some intellectual and moral benefit, and from the influence on laws, customs, and the beliefs of a society that comes through the social and political activities of Christians. Historically it has often been the powerful presence of those whose lives were changed by the gospel that has resulted in freedom for the slaves, rights for women, widespread public education, technological and scientific progress, increased productivity in the economy, a high value placed on work and thrift and honesty and so forth.*** <sup>[43]</sup>

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John Knox did not hesitate to communicate his convictions to the public. His attacks, even against royalty, were robust, fearless, and unflinching. Queen Mary of Scots was so terrified of him that she said, “I fear the prayers of John Knox more than all the assembled armies of Europe.”<sup>[44]</sup>

His challenges to civil magistrates and lords were equally forthright, urging these noblemen to join him in speaking against corruption by appointed rulers:

***Now if your king is a man ignorant of God, enemy to his true religion, blinded by superstition, and a persecutor of Christ's members: shall you be excused, if with silence you pass over his iniquity? Be not deceived, my lords. You are placed in authority for another purpose than to flatter your king in his folly and blind rage: ... so by your gravity, counsel, and admonition, you are bound to correct and repress whatsoever you know him to attempt expressly repugning to God's word, honour, glory, or what you shall espy him to do (be it by ignorance, or be it by malice) against his subjects great or small.*** <sup>[45]</sup>

Knox felt obligated to address sin in and outside of the church. May our passion as elders to protect the righteous order of God motivate us to speak boldly for truth, especially as we have been addressing when it comes to exegeting biblical principles that form the basis for decisions with international conflict.

The church does not control whether our country decides to go to

war, and we recognize that the church and state remain separate in policy, governance, and authority. However, we must be mindful that God uses His people uniquely to direct “state” matters, much like he did with Joseph, Moses, Samuel, Elijah, and others. We should be ready for this, rising as God calls, to become advocates for justice (Prov 12:26; II Cor 5:20ff; Col. 4:5-6; I Pet 2:12; I Pet 3:15).

We may find that through our intercession on behalf of the nation, God will show us grace, and we will avoid a catastrophic war. Thus, may we dedicate ourselves and those within our fellowship to this end. Pray for our President and other national leaders that they will be humble and desirous of knowing God and His will. Seek spiritual revival in the land as religious leaders in the past have done. Proclaim scripture wherever possible so that God might allow His favor to grace our nation.

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***I have heard your prayer and have chosen this place for Myself as a house of sacrifice. If I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or if I command the locust to devour the land, or if I send pestilence among My people, and My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin and will heal their land.*** <sup>[46]</sup>

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To help educate and lead reformed churches in this endeavor, Mission to North America, through its Presbyterian and Reformed Commission on Chaplains, has resources available with a focus on

Military and Veteran Ministry. You can access these materials through the website (<https://resources.pcamna.org/categories/chaplain-ministries/>).

You can also contact us to come and provide direct ministry support, either with training or advisement. Further, we could use the support of your mission agencies to support us directly through prayer and donations as we seek to expand resources and outreach. Be in touch so we can open the pathway to care for those who sacrifice their lives in service to our great nation.

## About the Author

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The material is written by Dwight Horn. He retired in February of 2023 from 28 years of active-duty service in the Navy as a Chaplain (CAPT, CHC, USN, Ret.). His advanced education includes a D.Min, M.Div., M.A., and ThM. He works for the Presbyterian and Reformed Commission on Chaplains (PRCC) as an Associate Endorser and for Military and Veteran Ministry. He has authored articles and a book on war.

## Resources to Explore on the Chaplaincy:

1. Dwight Horn, *Emasculating Warriors, A Nation at War with its Warriors*, <https://www.amazon.com/Emasculating-Warriors-Nation-War-its/dp/179298443X>.
2. David VanDrunen, *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms*, (Cambridge: Eerdmans: 2010).
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## Notes

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