

# Jesus Christ Forbids War

**Christianity armed is Christianity falsified.** The gospel that God gives to men and women through Jesus Christ is a message of peace, and *a gift of the power to live in peace*. If we accept this gift, we are not shamed, forced, or reasoned into laying down weapons and war. Rather, we are transformed into new creatures. And warfare is alien to this peaceable new creature. The new creature may make war on its own unruly habits, but does not willingly injure another soul.

This creature grows ever more like Jesus Christ,<sup>1</sup> who lived and preached a way of life that often challenged people, but never harmed them. Indeed, as a “new creature in Christ,” we now find ourselves becoming a member of Christ’s body, just as an arm, a leg or an eye is a member of your body or mine.<sup>2</sup> This is no mere poetic fancy; membership in Christ can be experienced as truly today as in the days when the Apostle Paul preached it. And what does it mean to become a member of Christ?

Jesus taught His followers not to fight back against evil, but to love their enemies.<sup>3</sup> The Biblical records tell us that when two disciples urged revenge on villages that had refused them hospitality, Jesus rebuked them, saying that He had come “to save men’s lives, not to destroy them.”<sup>4</sup> At the scene of His arrest in the Garden, when one of His defenders cut off an attacker’s ear, Jesus disarmed the defender and healed the ear.<sup>5</sup> Questioned by the Roman governor on His alleged claim to kingship, He disowned armed defense of any such claim because His “kingdom was not of this world.”<sup>6</sup> Finally, when foes had crucified Him, He prayed from the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”<sup>7</sup> His followers maintained the unwavering peaceableness of His witness for over two centuries, again and again choosing martyrdom over a recourse to arms.

Because Jesus accepted torture and death rather than protect Himself by force, it should come as no surprise that His disciples taught, not arts of self-defense, but the acceptance of all suffering as experience knowingly permitted by a trustworthy God<sup>8</sup> who will one day “wipe away all tears from our eyes.”<sup>9</sup> And so the living Christ teaches us today – to accept suffering when it can’t be avoided, but without seeking to inflict injury in return. “I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves,” He instructs: “Be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.”<sup>10</sup>

To become a member of this Person is to lose the knack of hardening one’s heart on which the power to wage war depends. Consistently, Jesus taught not new rules for outward conduct but new depths of compassion.<sup>11</sup> This compassion is not to be won without struggle, but the struggle we are now called to is an inward one, a work of “casting down imaginations.” For this, spiritual weapons are needed, and not the “carnal” ones by which blood is shed.<sup>12</sup> “Be perfect,” He tells us, “like your Heavenly Father:” meaning that we are to be bountiful to the just and unjust alike, as God is with sunlight and rain.<sup>13</sup>

War and fighting, taught the Apostle James, come from uncontrolled desires, and the determination to snatch by force what God may not be granting because it is not in our best interests to have it.<sup>14</sup> We are admonished to show respect and obedience to sword-bearing civil authorities,<sup>15</sup> but also to take no part in the “futile works of darkness.”<sup>16</sup> If they ask of us what we cannot give, we must choose obedience to God over obedience to men and women.<sup>17</sup> How then to respond to the world’s many invitations to support warfare? As the Living God instructs us through our conscience. All this is not to pass judgment on fellow believers that listen for the voice of Christ, but feel they have not been told to forsake all things that make for war. To them we say, in all love and respect: just keep listening.

Today a great lie goes masquerading in Christ’s robes. It appears wherever apologists for war, or lethal injection, or lying, or ravaging the earth, or profiteering off human weakness, seek to persuade us that these evils are O.K. for Christians to take part in. How easily they fool us! We’re all too eager to imagine God smiling on all the old, familiar ways that the world does things: think how our ancestors bought into slavery, genocide, the whipping of children and the subjugation of women! Or we fancy God blessing the new ways that the experts say are now *necessary*: If nuclear weapons, disinformation, torture of detainees, and use of the products of unfree labor are *necessary* in this modern world, how could Christ fault Christians for participating in a *necessary* system?

This makes it terribly important for followers of Christ to stand against falsifications of Christ’s gospel message of love toward all – a message that can’t be maintained by anyone armed to kill. Neither is it credible to many a non-Christian who, surveying Christian history, looks on its record of slaughter – crusade, inquisition, witch-hunt, massacre, pogrom. *How did we Christians become such hypocrites?*

Christ instructed his followers to be faithful “even unto death.”<sup>18</sup> The apostle Paul reinforced Jesus’ peaceable gospel by repudiating “carnal warfare” and “carnal weapons” in almost all his writings.<sup>19</sup> And Christians of the first two centuries, *faithful unto death*, routinely accepted execution rather than serve in the Roman army. It was soon well known that Christians would die rather than bear arms. But by the end of the third century all that was gone. What happened? Had Christians given in to fear? Had the most stalwart pacifists among them been killed off during the many persecutions? Did successful evangelism fill the Church with young new converts who didn’t “get” the peace testimony before the military recruiters came for them? Did the example of one Christian youth in uniform make it easier for the next one to accept conscription, starting a chain reaction?

With the conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine in 312 it became acceptable to dominate by the sword “in Christ’s name,” and by the time of Aquinas’s *Summa Theologica* in the Thirteenth Century, the “just war” theory had become standard Christian doctrine. Christians who sought to reclaim their original nonviolent tradition over the centuries were often silenced or killed, though ultimately the Anabaptists, Quakers and others in the modern era, like the Jehovah’s Witnesses, recovered it, stood by it, and survived. Today, in most democracies, a Christian pacifist is rarely challenged to be “faithful even unto death.” But Christ has not ceased to ask that of us. We are still bidden to trust in His Providence rather than put our faith in the protection of the gun.

The peace testimony of such Christians is rarely preached on street corners or from the TV screen, because it can’t be promoted like a political program, with appeals to self-interest or humane ideals. For it can’t be separated from the gospel faith in which it is rooted, which converts us into a “new creature” capable of both understanding it and living it. The new creature is graced with an infectious inner peace<sup>20</sup> that endures, if God wills, as well under oppression or martyrdom as under outward liberty. But the old creature can neither understand nor live this: “For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God.”<sup>21</sup>

This “preaching,” or message, of the cross is the only alternative to the way of the world, in which mutual fear, anger and ignorance will forever provide grounds for the pre-emptive attack that starts a war. Only the way of the cross, by which men and women renounce the right to kill in self-protection, removes these grounds. This can only seem foolishness to a world for whom death is the greatest evil, and self-preservation the highest law. “We are fools for Christ’s sake.”<sup>22</sup> (Where is self-interest here? And what have “humane ideals” to do with such radical obedience?)

And what is this message of the cross? Simply this: *the One who made you wants you to come home to your God. God means you to enjoy the peace, knowledge, and joy of the Divine Fullness, beyond time and change.*<sup>23</sup> *God dwells in your heart, sees through your eyes, and knows your every thought* – yes, including all the ones you wish no one knew. *But there is not a foolish, or shameful, or evil thing you have done, or wished to do, or had others do for you, that God is not willing to forgive. God forgives it so that it may no longer keep you from perfect enjoyment of your heavenly inheritance.* But to receive this forgiveness, you must turn to God and ask to be freed from “bondage to sin” – a technical term, often misunderstood as a matter of outward offenses, for an inward addiction to whatever draws us away from God’s light and love.

For this reason, people that have experienced this “repentance to salvation”<sup>24</sup> have described it as being “born again”<sup>25</sup> or being given “a new heart.”<sup>26</sup> This process does not magically leave us immune to temptation, of course, or incapable of error or further growth. We must still “work out our salvation with fear and trembling.”<sup>27</sup> But from now on, whenever we find ourselves lacking in the courage, or wisdom, or faith to do what God asks of us, we learn that God will give it to us merely for the asking.<sup>28</sup> This means that we are free to live without our old defenses, “wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.” For no one harms us except by “power given from above,”<sup>29</sup> so that we may say with the Psalmist, “I will not fear what flesh can do to me.”<sup>30</sup> This same creation, once seen as a battlefield of mutually opposing elements, a chaos of chance without Providence, now appears to us as one organism in which “all things work together for good to them that love God.”<sup>31</sup>

This is the essence of the “good news” of salvation in Jesus Christ, who died and rose again to free us from slavery to sin, and who now lives, teaches, and reigns as king in the hearts of those here on earth who accept Him<sup>32</sup> – under whatever name a particular heart may know its Savior by. This new life in Christ is a good life, the best of lives; but it requires us to die to the old self we knew,<sup>33</sup> and so frightens many not ready for it. This is why so many of us choose an inauthentic Shadow Christianity, which allows us to hope for a Christian’s heavenly reward but keep one foot in a corrupt world largely run by the ignorant and self-serving, ruled by fear, foul with injustice, full of the glitter of false goods. But this Shadow Christianity will fail us in trouble and death, and must be discarded. It does not save.

A time of great pain and trial is upon us now. As a global civilization we’ve responded to our challenges shamefully, and as individuals, inadequately. All the world’s religions have taught that we must reap as we have sown,<sup>34</sup> so we can foresee a frightful harvest as the world heats up, nuclear waste piles up, and oil, topsoil and fresh water run out. *Will we repent in time? Or will Christ tell us, on that final day when we are shown all the souls we’ve injured, “inasmuch as you did this to these, you did it to Me?”*<sup>35</sup>

*John Jeremiah Edminster, 6/16/2005, as revised 3/24/2007.*

## NOTES

Bible citations are from the King James Version (KJV), New Jerusalem Bible (NJB), or Revised Standard Version (RSV).

- <sup>1</sup> 2 Cor. 3:18 (NJB): “all of us... are being transformed into the image that we reflect in brighter and brighter glory....”
- <sup>2</sup> For “membership,” see John 15:1-11, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Galatians 6:15, Ephesians 4:24, Colossians 3:10.
- <sup>3</sup> Matthew 5:39, 44. This passage (Matt. 5:38-48), part of the “Sermon on the Mount,” also appears, with minor variants, at Luke 6:27-36. The entire Sermon may be read as an exhortation, not simply to observe the Divine Law, but to develop the devout, tender heart that would cause one to spontaneously do much more than the Law requires.
- <sup>4</sup> Luke 9:51-56.
- <sup>5</sup> Luke 22:49-51, John 18:10-11. From this the Church Father Tertullian (c.160-c.220) argued that Christ “disarmed every soldier when he disarmed Peter.” Robert Barclay, *Apology for the True Christian Divinity*, Prop. XV, §xiv.
- <sup>6</sup> John 18:36.
- <sup>7</sup> Luke 23:34.
- <sup>8</sup> See Hebrews 12:5-11, which refers to divine “chastisement” or “training” as for our benefit; or 1 Peter 2:19-24, 3:17, 4:12-14. Cf. Job 2:10 (NJB), “If we take happiness from God’s hand, must we not take sorrow too?” This does not mean we may not protest injustices done to ourselves. But “vengeance is mine,” says the Lord, Romans 12:19 (KJV).
- <sup>9</sup> Revelation 7:17; 21:4: “And there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither... any more pain.”
- <sup>10</sup> Matthew 10:16, said to the twelve apostles at the outset of their first mission, to preach and heal throughout Israel.
- <sup>11</sup> See Jonathan Dymond, *An Inquiry into the Accordancy of War with the Principles of Christianity* (London, 1823-4), to which this tract is heavily indebted, accessible online at <http://www.qhpress.org/texts/dymond/index.html>.
- <sup>12</sup> 2 Corinthians 10:4-5. Yoga’s taming of the mind through “practice” and “dispassion” and “cultivation of the opposite” invite comparison, *Yoga-Sutras* 1:12-16, 2:33-34. But one may ask help directly from Christ for such work: “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me,” Phil. 4:13.
- <sup>13</sup> Matthew 5:48. “Perfect” in the original Greek is *teleios*, “having attained the end or purpose,” or “mature.”
- <sup>14</sup> James 4:1-3. Hindu tradition has a thought-provoking parallel to this teaching, Bhagavad-Gita 3:36-39.
- <sup>15</sup> Paul argues for honor and obedience to sword-bearing rulers in Romans 13, but none at the time were Christian; it does not follow that Christians should become sword-bearing rulers themselves, and use the sword to destroy life.
- <sup>16</sup> Ephesians 5:11; cf. 2 Cor. 6:17 (NJB), “Get away from them, purify yourselves, says the Lord. Do not touch anything unclean, and then I shall welcome you.”
- <sup>17</sup> This was stated by Peter and other apostles before the high priest at Jerusalem, Acts 5:29.
- <sup>18</sup> Revelation 2:10, even as Jesus himself was “obedient unto death,” Philippians 2:8.
- <sup>19</sup> See Romans 12:17-21; 1 Corinthians 4:10-13; 2 Cor. 10:3-6; Galatians 5:14, 19-25, 6:10; Ephesians 4:26-27, 31-32, 5:11, 6:11-18; Philippians 2:3, 14-15, Colossians 3:8, 15; 1 Thessalonians 4:8, 5:22, especially 1 Thess. 5:15 (KJV): “See that none render evil for evil unto any man; but ever follow that which is good, both among yourselves, and to all men.”
- <sup>20</sup> John 14:27, Philippians 4:7.
- <sup>21</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:18.
- <sup>22</sup> 1 Corinthians 4:10.
- <sup>23</sup> See, for example, Romans 14:17, Ephesians 3:14-19, and Revelation 10:6.
- <sup>24</sup> “Repentance to salvation” at 2 Corinthians 7:10; “repentance unto life” at Acts 11:18.
- <sup>25</sup> Jesus tells Nicodemus “you must be born again,” John 3:3; cf. 1 Peter 1:23, “born again...by the word of God....”
- <sup>26</sup> This “new heart” image comes from Ezekiel 11:19 and 36:26. Cf. Jeremiah 31:31-34, echoed at Hebrews 8:10.
- <sup>27</sup> Philippians 2:12, “For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure,” Phil. 2:13.
- <sup>28</sup> Regarding our want for wisdom, see James 1:5. The prayer “increase our faith” is recorded at Luke 17:5.
- <sup>29</sup> John 19:11, Jesus’ answer to Pilate’s claim to have power either to crucify or to release him.
- <sup>30</sup> Psalm 56:4.
- <sup>31</sup> Romans 8:28. Cf. Bhag. Gita 6:6, 18:20-22, which relate what is experienced to the inward quality of the experiencer.
- <sup>32</sup> “God” (not “Christ”) is named as the Savior in much Judeo-Christian scripture (including Isaiah 45:21-22, Hosea 13:4, Luke 1:47). Over the centuries, many Christians have argued that salvation may be given to souls that do not identify their Savior as Jesus. Cf. 1 John 4:7 (NJB), “every one who loves is a child of God and knows God.”
- <sup>33</sup> Matt. 16:24-25, 19:21-26; John 3:3-8, 12:24-26; Romans 8:13; Colossians 3:1-5.
- <sup>34</sup> Known to Hinduism and Buddhism as the law of Karma, this principle appears in Christian scripture at Gal. 6:7, Rom. 2:6, 2 Cor. 9:6. Cf. Job 4:8, and Rev. 13:10b (KJV), “He that killeth with the sword must be killed with the sword.” In Islam this is recognized as the justice of God, who calls us to account for the intentions in our hearts, and rewards us in the hereafter, e.g. *Qur’an* 2:2-10, 24-27, 225; 4.40, 122-124; 16:111; 21:47; 36:54 ff.; 37:31, 38-39; 45:27-35; etc.
- <sup>33</sup> Matthew 25:45.