

Just War

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Introduction

Considering the military action in Iran, it is important for Christians to understand how Scripture would understand the concept of war. The Bible itself is full of warfare and does not explicitly condemn warfare, but frames warfare in the term understood by theologians as Just War. In our times, our nation has waged war in the frame called Values-Based War. These two competing justifications for warfare are often confused and misunderstood by Christians. This short essay will help Christians understand the differences between Just War and Values-Based War.

Just War vs. Values-Based War

The distinction between Just War and Values-Based War is not merely semantic; it reflects two fundamentally different moral frameworks for the use of force by nations. The concept of Just War is rooted in Scripture and developed by the early Church; the Just War tradition offers a theologically grounded ethic of restraint and justice. By contrast, modern Values-Based Warfare is often justified around the promotion of Western democracy, global liberalism, secular humanism, and geopolitics. Waging under a Values-Based Warfare banner risks untethering military action from a transcendent moral authority of the Bible and national accountability to God and replacing it with shifting ideological goals.

The foundation of the Just War theory begins with the Bible. While Scripture upholds peace as a central Christian virtue (Matt. 5:9, English Standard Version [ESV]), it also affirms the legitimacy of governing authorities to wield force for the preservation of justice and to defend the common goodness of the people. The Apostle Paul writes about the power of the state, “for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer” (Rom. 13:4, ESV). This passage establishes that the use of force is not inherently immoral but may be divinely sanctioned when exercised by legitimate authority to punish evil and protect the innocent. Similarly, the Old Testament provides guidelines for warfare under divine authority, emphasizing justice, restraint, obedience to the command of God, and order (Deut. 20:1–4, ESV).

Building on this Biblical foundation, Augustine of Hippo articulated one of the earliest systematic Christian reflections on war. Augustine argued that war may be justified if it is waged by legitimate authority, for a just cause, and with the intention of restoring peace (Augustine, trans. 2001). He rejected warfare based on personal vengeance and emphasized that even in war, the Christian must act with love and moral discipline. War, for Augustine, is a tragic necessity in a fallen world and not a means of ideological expansion. This is a warning to our nation’s leaders as they lead America.

Thomas Aquinas later refined Augustine’s insights into a formal framework. In his *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas identified three essential criteria for just war: legitimate authority, just cause, and right intention (Aquinas, trans. 1947). Legitimate authority ensures that war is not undertaken by private individuals. Just cause requires that war address a real and grave injustice,

such as defense against aggression. Right intention demands that the ultimate aim be the restoration of peace and justice rather than conquest or ideological imposition. These principles impose moral limits on warfare, ensuring that it remains accountable to God's justice rather than human ambition. Subsequent Christian thinkers, such as Francisco de Vitoria and Hugo Grotius, further developed Just War principles, to include proportionality and discrimination (Grotius, 2005). These contributions underscore that warfare must be limited in scope and conducted with moral care, particularly regarding the protection of noncombatants. The Just War tradition, therefore, presents warfare framed in a moral vision grounded in natural law and divine authority.

In contrast, modern Values-Based Warfare often departs from these theological constraints because Western values are no longer guided by cultural Christianity. Now, rather than responding to clear acts of injustice or aggression, our current wars are frequently justified by the desire to promote ideological systems such as democracy or Western liberalism. While these values may reflect limited aspects of common grace, they are not equivalent to the concept of Just War underscored through Biblical justice. When nations wage war to export political ideals, the criteria of just cause and right intention become obscured and vary widely in their application. War risks becoming an instrument of cultural transformation rather than a measured response to restraining evil in the world.

Furthermore, Values-Based Warfare completely lacks a stable moral foundation. Unlike the Just War tradition promoted by Christian academics, which is grounded in the unchanging character of God, modern ideological frameworks are fluid, contested political and arbitrary. What one generation considers morally necessary another generation may reject. This instability can lead to mission creep, prolonged forever-wars, and diminished moral clarity. Without the transcendent accountability of God, war may be justified by political expediency rather than genuine justice.

The Just War theory, by contrast, calls nations to humility and restraint when deciding military actions. It recognizes that all human authorities are subject to God's judgment and must exercise power with moral seriousness. War is never an end in itself; it is a last resort and should be approached with sorrow and aimed at restoring peace. As Jesus teaches us, "Blessed are the peacemakers" (Matt. 5:9, ESV). Just War theory does not contradict this teaching but seeks to uphold it within the realities of a fallen world.

In conclusion, the Christian doctrine of Just War provides a Biblically faithful and morally coherent framework for evaluating the use of military force. Grounded in Scripture and developed by theologians such as Augustine and Aquinas, it emphasizes justice, restraint, and accountability to God's authority over His creation. By contrast, Values-Based warfare elevates human ideologies and political agendas above divine authority, risking moral legitimacy by embracing an unjust military action. For both the Church and the state, the Just War tradition remains the more faithful and enduring guide for nations to follow. Warfare is inevitable as Ecclesiastes 3:8 says there "is a time for war", but before a nation's leaders decide to fight that war, they should do only under the understanding of the Just War footing.

References

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