

A Pastoral Letter to Members of the Armed Forces in Time of War

March 27, 2003

Dear Christians in military service,

Greetings to you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Among those I meet, I know of very few who are not tuned in for constant updates on the continued fighting in Iraq. I hope that this letter finds you safe and in good spirits, and pray that the Lord would grant you every good gift necessary for the duty to which you have been called.

As you may well know, support for the military is not unanimous throughout our nation. One will find protests here and there each day; and while such protesters are hardly the greatest in number, they are certainly among the loudest of the citizens whom you fight to defend. I am particularly offended by a number of religious leaders who have publicly condemned the war on Iraq, and this serves as my motivation for this letter. The statements of these leaders, no matter their prestige, have one thing in common: They base their protest upon their personal moral leadership, and not upon the Word of God.

But moral leadership is meaningless when divorced from Scripture, so I simply wish to encourage you on the basis of God's Word.

First, let us be clear that you serve in an honorable vocation. When soldiers came to John the Baptist for counsel, he did not tell them to abandon the Roman army; he told them to continue in their service and act with honor (Luke 3:14). When a centurion came to Jesus Himself for help, the Lord did not rebuke him for his vocation, but helped him and sent him on his way (Matt. 8:5-18). There is a reason for this: Armed forces are necessary and have God's approval. St. Paul declares in Romans 13:4 that rulers have the right-and responsibility-to bear the sword in order to punish the evildoer, and part of the sword that they wield is the military. As members of the armed forces, you are instruments of God to preserve peace and suppress evil.

This leads us to the subject of war. It is the nature of evil to tyrannize, and this evil is part of the sinful nature of man. A bully who is met with passivity and capitulation will only seek to bully more. This is, at the root, the fatal error of the "peace movement": It attempts to disarm evil with an offer of passivity (even as it threatens fellow citizens who disagree!). Unfortunately, this bleeds into religion until some believe that a Christian cannot support war in any form. On the other hand, Martin Luther wrote:

"What men write about war, saying that it is a great plague, is all true. But they should also consider how great the plague is that war prevents. If people were good and wanted to keep peace, war would be the greatest plague on earth. But what are you going to do about the fact that people

will not keep the peace, but rob, steal, kill, outrage women and children, and take away property and honor? The small lack of peace called war or the sword must set a limit to this universal, worldwide lack of peace which would destroy everyone." (Luther's Works, American Edition 46:95)

This seems most appropriate for our current day, quite similar to the words of your Commander-in-Chief. Force is necessary to restrain and defeat evil. Given the task of stopping enemy fire, it is recommended that you choose weapons over thoughts of world peace any day.

War is a plague, and it is a mark of honor that you run to the plague, not away, to prevent a greater outbreak. Of course, it is true that a war can be just or unjust, even as a soldier's actions can be righteous or sinful. In the plague of war, conscience and faith are put to severe test. The just actions of a soldier may accuse his conscience terribly when he is called upon to kill. On the other hand, the horrors of war can blunt the conscience so much that sin no longer seems like sin at all. In between, the soldier may find himself simply uncertain as to what in war is sin and what is not. This is actually true for every Christian in every place, but the unforgiving ferocity of the battlefield magnifies the moral struggle that much more.

Therefore, be assured that your salvation does not depend on war, battlefield performance, or the righteousness of each and every action you perform. Your salvation is already certain because the Lord Jesus Christ has sacrificed Himself on the cross for your sins; and in that sacrifice, He has defeated sin and death, once for all. Like little else, the violence of war reinforces the truth of the wages of sin; but in your baptism, you are already delivered from eternal death. Troubled conscience or not, confess your sins-even those you are unsure of, and give thanks that you are the Lord's. Whatever may happen this day, you have eternal life.

Finally, I wish to express my humble thanks as an American citizen. The doctrines that I have stated are the same that I teach here, for they are the truth of God's Word and you deserve support for the godly vocation that you have. I therefore offer you my gratitude, even as I count my courage cheap in comparison to you who take up arms and guard the wall. Thank you.

The peace of the Lord be with you always. Sincerely,

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