

'Example and Testimony of the Early Christians on the Subject of War'

by Jonathan Dymond

The sermon explores the unwavering commitment of early Christians to pacifism and their refusal to engage in war based on Christ's teachings.

Scripture: Matthew 10:37, Mark 9:42, Acts 28:20, Hebrews 5:2, Hebrews 12:1-2, Hebrews 13:7

Topics: "Christian Living", "Faith And War"

Description

Steven Cole discusses the Greek word 'Perikeimai,' which means to surround or encircle, illustrating how it can hinder our progress in the Christian race, as depicted in Hebrews 12:1. The term is used in various contexts in the Bible, such as describing the fate of those who cause stumbling and Paul being bound with a chain. Cole encourages studying the lives of biblical characters and historical figures to learn from their successes and failures in running the race of faith.

Transcript

EXAMPLE AND TESTIMONY

OF

The Early Christians

ON THE SUBJECT OF

WAR.

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BY JONATHAN DYMOND.

[1821]

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During a considerable period after the death of Christ, it is certain that his followers believed he had forbidden war; and that, in consequence of this belief, many of them refused to engage in it, whatever were the consequences whether reproach, or imprisonment, or death. These facts are indisputable; "It is as easy," says a learned writer of the seventeenth century, "to obscure the sun at mid-day, as to deny that the primitive Christians renounced all revenge and war." Christ and his apostles delivered general precepts for the regulation of our conduct. And to what did their immediate successors apply the pacific precepts which had been delivered? They applied them to war: they were assured that the precepts absolutely forbade it. This belief they derived from those very precepts on which we have insisted: they referred expressly to the same passages in the New Testament, and from the authority and obligation of those passages, they refused to bear arms.* A few examples from their history will show with what undoubting confidence they believed in the unlawfulness of war, and how much they were willing to suffer in the cause of peace.

Maximilian, as it is related in the Acts of Ruinart, was brought before the tribunal to be enrolled as a soldier. On the proconsul's asking his name, Maximilian replied: "I am a Christian, and cannot fight." It was, however, ordered that he should be enrolled, but he refused to serve, still alleging that he was a Christian. He was immediately told that there was no alternative between bearing arms and being put to death. But his fidelity was not to be shaken: "I cannot fight," said he, "if I die." He continued steadfast to his principles, and was consigned to the executioner.

The primitive Christians not only refused to be enlisted in the army, but when any embraced Christianity while already enlisted, they abandoned the profession at whatever cost. Marcellus was a centurion in the legion called Trajana. While holding this commission, he became a Christian; and believing, in common with his fellow Christians, that war was no longer permitted to him, he threw down his belt at the head of the legion, declaring that he had become a Christian, and that he would serve no longer. He was committed to prison; but he was still faithful to Christianity. "It is not lawful," said he, "for a Christian to bear arms for any earthly consideration;" and he was, in consequence, put to death. Almost immediately afterward, Cassian, who was notary to the same legion, gave up his office. He steadfastly maintained the sentiments of Marcellus, and, like him, was consigned to the executioner. Martin, of whom so much is said by Sulpicius Severus, was bred to the profession of arms, which on his acceptance of Christianity, he abandoned. To Julian the Apostate, the only reason that he find he gave for his conduct was this:--"I am a Christian, and therefore I cannot fight."

These were not the sentiments, and this was not the conduct of isolated individuals who might be actuated by individual opinion or by their private interpretations of the duties of Christianity. Their principles were the principles of the body. They were recognized and defended by the Christian writers, their contemporaries. Justin Martyr and Tatian talk of soldiers and Christians as distinct characters; and Tatian says that the Christians declined even military commands. Clemens of Alexandria calls his Christian contemporaries the "followers of peace," and expressly tells us "that the followers of peace used none of the implements of war." Lactantius, another early Christian, says expressly, "It can never be lawful for a righteous man to go to war." About the end of the second century, Celsus, one of the opponents of Christianity, charged the Christians with refusing to bear arms even in case of necessity. Origen, the defender of the Christians, does not think of denying the fact; he admits the refusal, and justifies it, because war was unlawful. Even after Christianity had spread over almost the whole of the known world, Tertullian, in speaking of a part of the Roman armies, including more than one-third of the standing legions of Rome, distinctly informs us that "not a Christian could be found among them."

All this is explicit. The evidence of the following fact is, however, yet more determinative and satisfactory. Some of the arguments which at the present day are brought against the advocates of peace, were then urged against these early Christians; and these arguments are examined and repelled. This indicates investigation and inquiry, and manifests that their belief of the unlawfulness of war was not a vague opinion hastily admitted and loosely floating among them, but that it was the result of deliberate examination, and a consequent firm conviction that Christ had forbidden it. The very same arguments which are brought in defence of war at the present day, were brought against the Christians sixteen hundred years ago; and, sixteen hundred years ago, they were repelled by these faithful contenders for the purity of our religion. It is remarkable, too, that Tertullian appeals to the precepts from the Mount, in proof of those principles on which we insist:--that the dispositions which the precepts inculcate are not compatible with war, and that war, therefore, is irreconcilable with Christianity.

If it be possible, a still stronger evidence of the primitive belief is contained in the circumstance, that some of the Christian authors declared that the refusal of the Christians to bear arms was a fulfillment of ancient prophecy. The peculiar strength of this evidence consists in this,--that the fact of a refusal to bear arms is assumed as notorious and unquestioned. Irenaeus, who lived about the year 180, affirms that the prophecy of Isaiah, which declared that men should turn their swords into plough-shares, and their spears into pruning-hooks had been fulfilled in his time; "for the Christians," says he, "have changed their swords and their lances into instruments of peace, and they know not how to fight." Justin Martyr, his contemporary, writes,--"That the prophecy is fulfilled, you have good reason to believe, for we, who in times past killed one another, do not now fight with our enemies." Tertullian, who lived later, says: "You must confess that the prophecy has been accomplished, as far as the practice of every individual is concerned to whom it is applicable."**

It is therefore indisputable, that the Christians who lived nearest to the time of our Saviour believed, with undoubting confidence, that he had unequivocally forbidden war; and they openly avowed this belief; and that, in support of it, they were willing to sacrifice, and did sacrifice, their fortunes and their lives.

[Professing] Christians, however, afterward became soldiers, and when?--When their general fidelity to Christianity became relaxed; when in other respects, they violated its principles; when they had begun "to dissemble," and "to falsify their word," and "to cheat;" when "Christian casuists" had persuaded them that they might "sit at meat in the idol's temple;" when [professing] Christians accepted even the priesthoods of idolatry. In a word, they became soldiers when they had ceased to be Christians.

The departure from the original faithfulness was, however, not suddenly general. Like every other corruption, war obtained by degrees. During the first two hundred years, not a Christian soldier is upon record. In the third century, when Christianity became partially corrupted, Christian soldiers were common. The number increased with the increase of the general profligacy; until at last, in the fourth century, [nominal] Christians became soldiers without hesitation. Here and there, however, an ancient father, still lifted up his voice for peace; but these, one after another, dropping from the world, the tenet that war is unlawful ceased at length to be a tenet of the [professing] church.

Let it always be borne in mind by those who are advocating war, that they are contending for a corruption which their forefathers abhorred; and that they are making Jesus Christ the sanctioner of crimes, which his primitive followers offered up their lives because they would not commit.

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Extracted from Dymond's book "An Inquiry into the Accordancy of War with the Principles of Christianity" (London, 1821).

Notes

*[citations added by Tract Association editors, based on texts Dymond referred to elsewhere in his book]

"I say unto you, that ye resist not evil."

"Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy; but I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you." - Matt. v.39, &c.

"Blessed are the peace-makers: for they shall be called the children of God." - Matt. v.9.

"Have peace one with another." - Mark ix.50. "See that none render evil for evil to any man." - 1 Thess. v.15. "God hath called us to pe ace." - 1 Cor. vii.15.

"Follow after love, patience, meekness." - "Be gentle, showing all meekness unto all men." - "Live in peace."

"Let all bitterness and wrath, and anger and clamor, and evil speaking, be put away from you with all malice."

"Avenge not yourselves." - "If thine enemy hunger feed him: if he thirst give him drink." - "Recompense to no man evil for evil." - "Overcome evil with good."

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