

Peace and War, Religious Liberty Article XVI & Article XVII

Peace and War - Article XVI

It is the duty of Christians to seek peace with all men on principles of righteousness. In accordance with the spirit and teachings of Christ they should do all in their power to put an end to war.

The true remedy for the war spirit is the gospel of our Lord. The supreme need of the world is the acceptance of His teachings in all the affairs of men and nations, and the practical application of His law of love. Christian people throughout the world should pray for the reign of the Prince of Peace.

Isaiah 2:4; Matthew 5:9, 38-48; 6:33; 26:52; Luke 22:36, 38; Romans 12:18-19; 13:1-7; 14:19; Hebrews 12:14; James 4:1-2.

Key Text:

Isaiah 2:4: “He shall judge between the nations, And rebuke many people; They shall beat their swords into plowshares, And their spears into pruning hooks; Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, Neither shall they learn war anymore.”

Matthew 5:9: “Blessed *are* the peacemakers, For they shall be called sons of God.”

Matthew 5:43-45: “You have heard that it was said, ‘*You shall love your neighbor* and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.”

Romans 12:18-19: “If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but *rather* give place to wrath; for it is written, “*Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,*” says the Lord.”

Romans 13:1-4: “*Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God.* ² *Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves.* ³ *For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to*

be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. ⁴ *For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil."*

The apex of the Beatitudes is found in these words, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they are called the children of God" (Matt 5:9). Peacemaking is described as a fundamental characteristic of believers. The Messiah was called "The Prince of Peace" (Isa 9:6). Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give unto you" (John 14:27). The Christian gospel itself is called "the gospel of peace" (Acts 10:36; Eph 6:15), and the Holy Spirit himself produces the fruit of peace (Col 3:15; Gal 5:22).

Peace is not merely the absence of war. The Hebrew word for peace, *shalom*, refers to a state of harmony, prosperity, well-being, and completeness.

There are three fundamental areas where Christians are called to make peace: with God, between Christians, and corporately in the world and society. The first is personal and "vertical": "Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom 5:1). The second area is "horizontal" reconciliation within the body of Christ. Ephesians 2:13-17 says, "You who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He is our peace...He has...reconciled both groups to God in one body through the cross." The third area involves corporate peacemaking in the world and society at large. "If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all" (Rom 12:18).

The *BF&M* statement is very specific that this corporate peacemaking is to be based on "principles of righteousness." Where unrighteousness, injustice and wickedness dwell, there can be no peace (Isa 48:22). The reason for this is that unrighteousness sustains division, discord, pain and strife. So whether in personal, familial, business, school or international relationships,

there will be no biblical peace (healthiness, harmony) unless it is founded upon God's righteousness.

The *BF&M* statement calls upon the faithful to "do all in their power to put an end to war." While some have suggested that must mean unilateral disarmament, Baptists for the most part have not understood the statement in this way and have usually taken the position that sometimes in order to establish a just and righteous peace, following the Augustinian tradition, a "just war" must be engaged.

Christians have devoted serious reflection to the issue of peace and war. Through the centuries, Christians have adopted three major positions regarding Christian participation in war and the proper attitude toward war. Activism affirms that Christians are morally obligated to participate in all wars in which their government commands their services. Pacifism sees no place for Christians to engage in any type of warfare at all. Selectivism advocates that Christians may participate in just wars. Let's take a closer look.

Selectivism denies that Christians should participate in all wars. Pacifism denies that war is an appropriate activity for a child of God due to the evil nature of war. Opponents of war may seek conscientious objector status that grants alternatives to military service. Some pacifists even refuse to invest in companies that produce materials used in war and choose rather to invest in so-called peace funds.

Selectivism appeals to the "just war tradition" originally defined by Augustine dealing with just causes for war and just means to engage war. Criteria for engaging in just war include a declaration of war by a legitimate authority, the proportionate use of force, and protection for non-combatants.

Pacifism, although a minority position today, has enjoyed ascendancy at various times in Baptist life in relation to international events. Southern Baptists adopted the article on “Peace and War” during a time of ascendancy of pacifism within the Southern Baptist Convention. Reflecting the general mood of the nation, messengers to almost every SBC annual meeting between WWI and WWII passed resolutions calling for international disarmament. A resolution passed by Southern Baptists at the 1941 annual meeting stated, “We hereby express our utter abhorrence of war as an instrument of International policy and our profound conviction and belief that all international differences could and of a right ought to be composed by peaceful diplomatic exchanges, and, when these fail, by arbitration.”

The 1963 BF&M deleted a sentence from the 1925 BF&M calling on all Christians to “pray for the reign of the Prince of Peace.” The BF&M 2000 restored the substance of the call to prayer with the statement, “Christian people throughout the world should pray for the reign of the Prince of Peace.”

The BF&M article on “Peace and War” builds on the previous article “The Christian and the Social Order” that calls on Christians to bring the influence of Christ to bear in human society. The BF&M sets forth the method, manner, message and mandate of peace.

1. The BF&M prioritizes the method of peace—“to seek peace with all men on principles of righteousness.”
2. The BF&M specifies the manner of peace—“on principles of righteousness.”
3. The BF&M advocates a singular message of peace—“the Gospel as a remedy for the war spirit.”
4. The BF&M mandates prayer for the reign of the Prince of Peace (Isa 9:6).

The focus of the BF&M regarding peace centers on the coming King and His Kingdom. The coming of the King institutes the Edenic-like qualities described in the vision of Isaiah 2:4, the only Old Testament passage cited in the supporting Scripture passages.

Religious Liberty - Article XVII

God alone is Lord of the conscience, and He has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are contrary to His Word or not contained in it. Church and state should be separate. The state owes to every church protection and full freedom in the pursuit of its spiritual ends. In providing for such freedom no ecclesiastical group or denomination should be favored by the state more than others. Civil government being ordained of God, it is the duty of Christians to render loyal obedience thereto in all things not contrary to the revealed will of God. The church should not resort to the civil power to carry on its work. The gospel of Christ contemplates spiritual means alone for the pursuit of its ends. The state has no right to impose penalties for religious opinions of any kind. The state has no right to impose taxes for the support of any form of religion. A free church in a free state is the Christian ideal, and this implies the right of free and unhindered access to God on the part of all men, and the right to form and propagate opinions in the sphere of religion without interference by the civil power.

Genesis 1:27; 2:7; Matthew 6:6-7,24; 16:26; 22:21; John 8:36; Acts 4:19-20; Romans 6:1-2; 13:1-7; Galatians 5:1,13; Philippians 3:20; 1 Timothy 2:1-2; James 4:12; 1 Peter 2:12-17; 3:11-17; 4:12-19.

Key Texts

Genesis 1:27: “So God created man in His *own* image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.”

Acts 4:19-20: “But Peter and John answered and said to them, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.”

Acts 5:29: “But Peter and the *other* apostles answered and said: “We ought to obey God rather than men.”

Religious liberty sprung fully formed in the earliest Baptist writings. Their doctrine of the church assumed that the Spirit, and He alone, used the power of biblical truth, to produce the new birth. The composition of the church consists only of those born again under His influences. Believers only, therefore, should be baptized. The Spirit’s sword, not the magistrate’s sword, makes Christians. A church constituted by those whose consciences have been either forced or bribed by carnal power is not a New Testament church and will not result in authentic Christianity.

The 2000 *BF&M* continues this historical witness when it states as its first sentence, “God alone is Lord of the conscience, and He has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are contrary to His Word or not contained in it.”

The article strongly implies that creeds enforced by a civil power would be unwarranted and outside the bounds of legitimate government: “The state has no right to impose penalties for religious opinions of any kind.”

The preface of the 2000 *BF&M* includes wording on this issue that is more carefully constructed than that of the 1963 *BF&M*: “Baptists cherish and defend religious liberty, and deny the right of any secular or religious authority to impose a confession of faith upon a church or body of churches.”

Just as strongly, however, the confession encourages and approves the development of doctrinal statements derived from the Word of God and entered into voluntarily by churches for the sake of gospel witness. “The gospel of Christ contemplates spiritual means alone for the

pursuit of its ends” and including among these “the right to form and propagate opinions in the sphere of religion without interference by the civil power.”

However, no citizen is more loyal to the government or more zealous for the rights of others than a historically informed, gospel believing Baptist. A well-ordered government should function “so that every church [and every religion enjoys] protection and full freedom in the pursuit of its spiritual ends.” This commitment to freedom arises not from doubts concerning the clarity of divine revelation or a realistic view of truth, but from the happy conviction that the gospel, and it only, is the power of God unto salvation.

In his book, *More Than Just a Name: Preserving our Baptist Identity*, Baptist theologian Stan Norman defined religious freedom as “the right of each person to be free and uncoerced in his or her pursuit, or lack of pursuit, of a personal relationship with God.” Baptists affirm that religious liberty is an inalienable right granted by God to all people. J. B. Jeter, legendary nineteenth century Baptist leader, described Baptist support for religious liberty for all people. “They [Baptists] have not only claimed it [religious liberty] for themselves, but have accorded it to others—Jews and pagans, as well as Christians.

Baptists, alone of all denominations, consistently advocated religious freedom for all people. European civilization bequeathed to the world Christendom—the unity of state, culture, and Christian tradition. Other than the Anabaptists, the Protestant Reformers were Magisterial Reformers, that is, they elevated the role of government over the church believing that the magistrate (government) received from God the power to purify the church. The Lutherans, Calvinists, and Anglicans all used the power of the government to purify, or corrupt, the church, depending on which side of government enforcement you found yourself.

What then are the emphases of the BF&M statement regarding religious freedom? Five are highlighted.

First, the BF&M affirms the Lordship of God provides the supreme foundation of religious liberty.

Second, the BF&M proclaims the principle of separation of church and state

Third, the BF&M sets forth the mutual, albeit distinct, duties of government and religious faith which each has to each other. God ordained the principle of government and charged the government with specific duties.

Fourth, the BF&M delineates limitations for government and religion. According to the BF&M, government has three limitations. First, the government is not to grant favored status to any “ecclesiological group or denomination.” Second, the state must not impose penalties for religious opinions. Third, the state must not impose taxes to support any religion. In addition to these, there must be no financial entanglements with government funding.

Finally, government grants its citizens the right to propagate the faith. The first amendment of the U.S. Constitution guarantees the freedom of assembly (including religious assemblies) and freedom of speech (including religious speech).

Religion, also, has limitations in the realm of government involvement. Religion should not use civil power for its spiritual mission. Jesus rebuked James and John for a desire to impose the severest form of penalty to the residents of a city that did not welcome Jesus – destruction by fire from heaven (Lk 9:53-56). The Christian faith opposes any form of external coercion; rather, Christians advocate the principles of religious persuasion rather than force, that is, “the use of spiritual means alone for the pursuit of its ends” (2 Cor 5:20).

** This article draws extensively from the writings of Tom Nettles, Jim Parker, and Mark Rathel.*