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Waging Peace and the Pragmatics of Force: On Being Christian in a Time of War

1 Introduction

Can you imagine a world without war? I find it pretty difficult to imagine such a world.

I have to think carefully about why I find it so difficult to imagine a world free from war and other forms of violence. As a theologian, I ask whether I have come to believe that war is part of God's plan for humanity and creation. Does God intend for us to be at war with one another, with all of the associated suffering and loss that accompanies the violence of war? If it is not God's will, then why do I, and other Christians, so easily and uncritically accept the 'reality' of war? This is a particularly important issue for us to reflect on at present – given the much-publicized war in Ukraine after the Russian invasion (Engvall 2022), the Israel and Gaza conflict (Mishra 2024), as well as the wars on the African continent, in the Central African Republic (CAR), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Somalia, South Sudan and Sudan (IISS 2022).

There is good reason for me, in particular, to be cautious and sober about speaking on this topic – I am a white man. In fact, I am a white, male, relatively straight, 50-something year old, English speaking, Protestant-Christian theologian who speaks from a position of undeserved power and privilege. This is a problem since white men are violent. By stating this I do not mean to say that I am an essentialist (although, feminist, queer, black, and liberationist theological siblings have convinced me that at times a measure of 'strategic essentialism' is necessary when it comes to intersectional issues such as race, gender, sexuality and class) (Spivak 2003, 42–58; 2012, xi; Eide 2016, 2278–2280; 2010, 63–78; also see the excellent work by Brown 2019). In part what I am reflecting on today comes from my own struggle with being a violent white man. By claiming that white men are violent I am not making an argument for causation (i.e., that only white men are violent). Of course, we can all think of women, and persons of color, who are also violent in their actions, speech, and intentions. However, this is an argument that is based on coherence – where white men are, there is often violence in thought, speech and action. After all, what is war but the violent enactment of a sense of superiority, and a kind

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of chauvinism that believes that it is right, and others are not? In this coherent state, I am conscious of who I am, and the difficulty of talking about war and violence.

In this sense, as a white, male, educated theologian, I am somewhat like one of my former teachers, Stanley Hauerwas. He said that faithfulness to Jesus requires building the habits of peaceableness (in fact he said to be Christian you have to be a pacifist). When a student asked him why he claimed this he said: "I tell you this because, as you well know by now, I am a violent son-of-a-bitch and I need you to hold me to my confession" (Hauerwas in Collier 2015, 44). I apologize for the profanity – and I must warn you that there will be at least one more swearword in this chapter. However, it was important to get your attention, to make the point that men like me are prone to violence. And so, as a Methodist I have spent my faith life trying to learn the habits of peace and unlearn the habits of violence. So, in this essay the cussing Methodist theologian (who does not like to be called an ethicist), Stanley Hauerwas, will be a conversation partner. This is because both he, and I, are violent white men who come from a so-called peace church.

In 1988 (after the second state of emergency in South Africa), the Methodist Church of Southern Africa committed itself to bearing the name of the Prince of Peace in our worship and witness, and in doing so to order our private and public lives in peace. Simply stated, a peace church, "is one which declares, as a basic tennet [*sic*] of its teaching, its objection to war, participation in war, financial support for war and training for war" (Irvine 1988, 2). This sounds quite reasonable, given the one whose name we bear.

Yet, what I find so strange is that whenever I advocate for the peaceable witness of Jesus amid violence and war, people think I am naïve at best, and crazy at worst. Somehow, even Christians, have come to normalize war and violence to the extent that peace is presented as an irrational, unreal, and naïve way of life. People will respond by saying things like, "be a realist, wars will never end". To them I say, "if you believe that war is inevitable because you believe in a real world in which wars exist, then I challenge you to see that there is a world more real than the world of war – that is the world that is redeemed from violence and death by Jesus Christ" (cf. Hauerwas' treatment of this topic in Hauerwas 2011a, 14).

Somehow it seems more reasonable, even for Christians, to imagine the end of the world more readily than it does to imagine a world without war and violence. Simply put, the "statement that there is a world without war in a war-determined world is an eschatological remark" (Hauerwas 2011a, 15).

I hope to convince you of this truth in this paper. I want to convince you of a day that is coming – I call it, 'that day.' It is a day that we read about in Isaiah 11:6, we also read about it in Revelation 21:3–5. It is a day on which violence and enmity have ended, in which there is no more killing, no more dying, no more hatred, no more conflict, no more war. 'That day' is surely coming. Our task is to figure out

how we live today so that when that day comes, we will be able to say that we, our families, our churches, our communities, our nations, did our best to live on the right side of history. Stanley Hauerwas says on this topic that he aims "to convince Christians that war has been abolished." In particular he points out that the, "grammar of that sentence is very important: the past tense is deliberate." Since he says:

> I do not want to convince Christians to work for the abolition of war, but rather I want us to live recognizing that in the cross of Christ war has already been abolished. So I am not asking Christians to work to create a world free of war. The world has already been saved from war. The question is how Christians can and should live in a world of war as a people who believe that war has been abolished. (Hauerwas 2011a, 13)

As the title of this paper suggests, I want to engage the complex and difficult topic of being Christian in a world of war – I want to ask what it means to 'wage peace' and to what extent the 'pragmatics of force' are necessary when coupling peace with justice. My hope is that we will think about these things with charity, humility, intellectual rigor, and honesty.

Since I am a theologian and an ethicist, we shall begin with a prolegomenon on the relationship between belief (doctrine) and action (ethics). Next, we shall dwell on some of the beliefs of Christianity, seeking to gain an understanding of what it means to be Christian. Having done so we will spend some time unpacking what we mean when we use the words 'war' and 'violence'. Finally, we shall attempt to offer a theological and ethical answer to the question: What does it mean to be Christian in a world of war?

2 Becoming Who We Are: On the Relationship between Belief (Doctrine) and Action (Ethics)

A common misconception about Christian ethics is that it is a discipline that solves complex moral problems and tells people how to make the world a better place. Of course, that is not entirely un-true, but it is not entirely true either.

A better view of Christian ethics is that it helps us to understand how we should live so that we can become that which we were created to be. As Stanley Hauerwas puts it, "the first task of the church is not to make the world more just, but to make the world the world" (Hauerwas 2011a, 136).

I invite my students in systematic theology and ethics to dwell on the semantic and grammatical content of statements – a great deal of theology happens there. As you will see in this sentence, there clearly is a task for Christians and the church to undertake. We are not free from responsibility; indeed, we have

work to do. Second, our task is spelled out. We are to align our witness and our work with the work of God. God's work is witnessed to, and inaugurated, in Jesus Christ. God's work is moving towards the *telos* or plan that God has for history (thus, it is missiological, ecclesiological, eschatological, and soteriological all at the same time). We will dwell on that in a bit, so don't worry too much about it at this point. Lastly, this sentence witnesses to the truth that in Christian theology, while we are given responsibility, we should not think that we are the saviors of history and the world. It is God who created, it is God who holds history in God's hands, and it is God who gives us our identity and work in the 'in-between' times of the already (a world with war) and the not yet (a world that is free from war and violence).

Hauerwas further says that, "Christians believe that the true history of the world, that history that determines our destiny, is not carried by the nation-state. In spite of its powerful moral appeal, this history is the history of godlessness" (Hauerwas 2001, 421). I think that you can see where I am going. The question that we should ask ourselves is, are we willing to be Christian? In other words, are we truly willing to believe in God, and that God is the God of our world, and that we are not? If we truly believe this to be true, then we shall have to change our allegiances: to whom we bow our knee, for who, and for what, we are willing to die (or for that matter live), and on what we spend our precious attention, time and money.

I hope that what this short exercise has shown you is that in reality there can be no separation between theology and ethics. What we do in theology aims to understand who, what, and whose we are, and in ethics we seek to cultivate the habits of life that embody those truths individually and socially (Hauerwas 2011b, 256).

This may sound like quite a simple task, but as it turns out, we humans struggle to be who we truly are. Moreover, because we live in ways that are incongruent with who we are (we kill, we lie, we steal, we are selfish, etc.), brokenness has entered the world.

In Christian theology we call this brokenness sin, and we see the evidence of sin in how we treat one another, how we treat non-human creation, and how we become alienated from God, ourselves, and the rest of creation. Living in sin also means that we frequently must strive for perfection as imperfect selves living in an imperfect world. This leads to complex moral situations, where instead of being able to do what we know is right, we must respond to what we know to be wrong in the best possible way. Think about that statement for a moment, as Christians we often must respond to what we know to be wrong in the best possible way.

3 An Ethical Dilemma

Let me give you an example. How many of you would say that it is not morally or theologically acceptable for a Christian to murder another person in cold blood? Not many of us, I hope!

Yet, we have come to understand that there might be certain conditions under which it may be permissible (allowable, though never desirable) to take the life of another person. For example, in self-defence, or in defence of some other vulnerable person whose life is in danger? Some would say, yes, it is permissible perhaps even morally required that we should be willing to take on the guilt of killing another (*Schuldübernahme* as Dietrich Bonhoeffer explained this choice) (Bonhoeffer 1998, 6:275–285; see a detailed and very helpful discussion of this principle in Meireis 2022, 123). Bonhoeffer argued that it may in fact be unjust (or less just) to allow the life of another (or simply allow one's own life), to be taken without some responsible action to stop the unjust murder. The enactment of unjust violence upon the vulnerable engages an ethics of responsibility, but also the reality of guilt. However, do we always have the right to defense and retaliation, or are there limits to our actions of retaliation in relation to the actions of others?

Of course, this becomes more complex when we add in some 'variables' of contextual complexity. Most people would say that someone who cannot adequately protect themselves from harm should be protected from those who could harm them – right? After all, they are facing a situation of unequal power, the aggressor has the means, intelligence, or technology to cause harm that they are not equipped or informed to protect themselves from. That would be considered an unequal aggression where one party has greater power and agency than the other. Should the more vulnerable person always be protected? Some persons would answer yes. Now what if that person (who lacks the means, equipment, and intelligence to oppose aggression is Adolf Hitler?) Do we still offer him protection, or engage an act of retaliatory defence or violence on his behalf? You can see that things very quickly become complex. You can also see that there are a range of possible answers about what 'the greater good' is, or the 'lesser of two evils' could be, when dealing with complex ethical dilemmas.

Thus, working out what is permissible, indeed what is better, or what is less evil, in such complex moral situations requires that we apply our minds with rigor and care in order to come to a decision that is justifiable, or defensible, in relation to our core beliefs about God, creation, ourselves, and other human persons.

So, this is what we will do in the remainder of this chapter. We will think about what it means to be Christian amid war and violence.

4 What We Believe: Some Important Beliefs and Confessions in Relation to Peace and War

To be Christian means that we bear the name of Christ. The earliest creed of the Christian faith is simply, "Jesus is kyrios (Lord or Christ)" which is evidenced in Paul's use of this phrase when writing to, and of, the early church (cf., 1 Cor 12:3; Rom 10:9; Phil 2:11). Stanley Hauerwas famously, and crassly, said "Jesus is Lord. Everything else is bullshit" (Hauerwas, n.d.). That statement sums up the Lordship of Christ pretty clearly, bearing the name of Christ and being members of the community of His Kingdom is a profound claim. It has personal, and political implications. We belong to Jesus the Christ, and we should rightly commit ourselves to being part of his good, redeeming work in the world. This is our mission according to John 20:21, "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you."[1] However, in order to become who we are, and do what we were created to do, we need to learn some things about the God who created us. We need to understand a few things about God's good creation, and the good towards which God has intended God's good creation to live. In this sense, theology is not only about what we believe about God, but also about what we believe about the God who believes things about us.

For Christians, our knowledge of God comes by God's revealing grace. First and most clearly in the person of Jesus (John 14:8–8), and second and of great importance, in God's presence and work in creation (Rom 1:19). In Jesus we see the fullness of God, and God's nature, and God's will revealed. Jesus the Christ is the promised "Prince of Peace" of Isaiah 9:6. His loving, peaceable, sacrificial life inaugurates a way of living that transforms both history and our political realities. However, as history shows us, the Church has often struggled to be Christian. Charles Villa Vicencio writes,

> The high watermark of faith in the Abrahamic religions involves the praxis of love, peace, and justice measured in relation to the widow, the orphan, and the poor, rather than in rational understanding . . . [Yet] The prevailing ideas in any institution are, as a rule, those of the elite and benefactors of that institution, who keep a wary eye on those who deviate from the principles embedded in a Constantinian-type synthesis of religion and state. This has resulted in theological support for tribal and nationalistic beliefs that are more prevalent and emotionally persuasive in religion than many devout believers care to admit. (Villa-Vicencio 2021, 46)

1 Translation taken from English Standard Version

Living as those who bear the name of Christ, in His Kingdom, is not uncomplicated. There is often a great deal of tension between those who pretend to have power, or those who only have temporal power, and the God of eternal loving power. Oliver O'Donovan calls this the "doctrine of the Two", since Christians live in two ages, "the passing age of the principalities and powers has overlapped with the coming age of God's kingdom" (O'Donovan 1999, 211).

As Christians, our belief in God is not a belief in a God of war. We believe that God is a good creator who created creation for good, that God loves all humans and non-human creation, that God's Kingdom supersedes the kingdoms of earthly rulers, and that God's good end for history is loving justice and flourishing. This is the foundation upon which our beliefs (and actions) are built. Emmanuel Katongole writes,

> [. . .] even in a deeply divided world, even in the most deeply divided relationship, the way things are is not the way things have to be. [. . .] What we need is not simply better gear and techniques but a story that helps us remember another world is possible. The good news is that God's story offers us just that. In the midst of our world's deep brokenness, God's kingdom breaks in to create new possibilities. (Katongole and Rice 2009, 13)

I think that as Christians we have lost touch with what it means to be Christian. We have forgotten the story of our identity and our lives. Or, perhaps we no longer take our belief in who God is, who God has created us to be, and what God has intended for history and creation, seriously enough. If we did, we would spend a lot more time forming our churches, forming our families, forming our own lives for the task of 'waging peace', and a lot less time stuck on the seemingly inevitable, but ultimately doomed task of 'waging war.'

Perhaps, along with our loss of Christian belief, we also have lost the capacity for a Christ-inspired, Christian imagination of the world. John de Gruchy writes:

> In a time when we know how to make war, but cannot make peace; when we can land people on the moon but struggle to find space for refugees; when we can build skyscrapers, but cannot build good houses for the poor; when we can transplant hearts and kidneys, but cannot eradicate hunger; when we have much information, but little wisdom, we need to acknowledge how, despite all our knowledge we are acting like fools, and putting the world at risk. We need to learn again to fear the Lord and affirm our humanity as we respect that of others. (De Gruchy 2016, 12)

Indeed, we need to "learn again to fear the Lord and affirm our humanity as we respect that of others". We need to have spaces in which we once again learn, and are taught, the truth of our Christian beliefs. We also need to build communities where we can enliven a kind of prophetic imagination for the world that God has created, for the *telos* of history that God has intended, and for the real purpose of our lives as we live in the in-between times (Forster 2022c, 20; 2022a). So,

let's be reminded again what we believe, and how this should shape our lives in relation to war. We should not have to,

> [. . .] convince Christians to work for the abolition of war, but rather [. . .] to live recognizing that in the cross of Christ war has already been abolished. [We are] not asking Christians to work to create a world free of war. The world has already been saved from war. The question is how Christians can and should live in a world of war as a people who believe that war has been abolished. (Hauerwas 2011a, 13)

This is our identity, this is our calling, this is our destiny. This might be part of what it means to be Christian in a world of war. But, I can hear you say, if only it was that simple! If only we, and others, did not face onslaught and violence. Well yes, you are right. It is not so simple. To figure out how we live "in a world of war as people who believe that war has been abolished" we shall have to think very carefully about how our beliefs about the world engage the realities of the world in which we live.

5 Speaking the Truth: What We Mean by War and Violence

If we are going to think theologically and ethically about war, it is important to be able to articulate what it is that we are thinking about. There are many definitions of war. Some of them are helpful and instructive, while there are others that I think are deeply problematic from a Christian perspective.

Some persons and groups would want us to believe that any conflict involving two groups (normally nations, but sometimes also groups within nations) could be defined as a situation of war. Moreover, the grammatical understanding of the word 'war' has also shifted in recent years. From being a noun (i.e., a word that names something), it has recently been used as a verb (i.e., it describes an action, such as engaging in the 'war on terror').

The problem with vague understandings of the notion of war is that they are morally ambiguous and problematic. For example, in the telling of the history of military or political conflicts the 'winners' of a conflict (and I use the word 'win' in a very particular sense to mean those who triumphed in the battle, since nobody ultimately wins in a war) often describe their actions as 'war', while the actions of the losers of a conflict are described as 'acts of terror' (See Hauerwas' discussion of this topic in Hauerwas 2001, 421).

No, such ambiguity will not do. One of the virtues of the Christian faith is that we will face the truth and not give into lies – not even the subtle lies that we tell ourselves to protect ourselves and those whom we love from facing the truth.

As Christians, we are called to face the truth unflinchingly, with courage, commitment, and stamina. If we believe what was stated earlier, that God is a peaceable God, that God has a plan for history that does not involve violence, that God's view of human persons does not favor one nation over another (God does not love South Africans more than Zimbabweans, or citizens of the United States more than Mexicans), and Jesus has already redeemed all of creation and history, then we need to base our definition of war on those convictions. That is our point of departure, and not the expediency of retelling our histories, or casting ourselves and those that we favor over those with whom we disagree. And so, we are told,

> Only the church has the stance, therefore, to describe war for what it is, for the world is too broken to know the reality of war. For what is war but the desire to be rid of God, to claim for ourselves the power to determine our meaning and destiny? Our desire to protect ourselves from our enemies, to eliminate our enemies in the name of protecting the common history we share with our friends, is but the manifestation of our hatred of God. (Hauerwas 2001, 421)

So what is war? Well one answer is that war is our desire to be the Lords of our world, to be our own gods, and in so doing to structure the world in the manner that we believe is best. We want to draw the borders of our nations to include some and exclude others. Some nations wish to extend their borders, by the retelling of their histories, and they believe so much in this retold history, and in these contingent borders, that they will sacrifice the lives of young women and men – even the innocent – on the altar of their perverted religion, the construction of the self. So, let us name war for what it is – it is slaughter. It is the killing of other human persons, which is not natural, and the devastation of non-human creation.

Indeed, as we read in the scriptures, and see in our basic human nature, murder is neither right nor natural. The first record of a murder in the Bible is a brother killing his brother, Cain killing Abel (Genesis 4). Of course, when we think about it, all killing is fratricide – the killing of a sibling, a brother, a sister, a mother, a father, a child, and that is a declaration of our hatred of the God whose beloveds we are killing.

Let's not romanticize war, or valorize it, or lend moral sanction to so-called warriors in these struggles as the popular media and entertainment want to do. Some of us have been at war, whether the unjust wars of our nations, or the ideological wars of our peoples. Some of us know that the sacrifice of our lives and the lives of others is idolatry, and it must be named as such. But, there is promise:

> Christians have been offered the possibility of a different history through participation in a community in which one learns to love the enemy. They are thus a people who believe that God will have them exist through history without the necessity of war. (Hauerwas 2001, 422)

If we take this to be true, then the only wars that are permissible (never desirable) are those that can be considered theologically and morally defensible – these are not religious crusades, but indeed, acts of courage, mercy, and above all love. They are acts of love, precisely because in choosing the lesser of two evils we still choose evil, and along with that choice bring guilt upon ourselves.

In Christian thinking there have been some attempts to figure out when it may be permissible for us to take on the guilt of participating in the sin of war, for the sake of justice, mercy, and life. This has often been called the "Just War Theory", and it is traced back to St. Augustine. These are often called the "restrictions on going to war" or *jus ad bellum* (just conditions for going to war), and the *jus in bello* (attempts at safeguarding justice while at war).

Let me be clear, there is no such thing as a just war (*jus ad bellum*) – if we are Christians, then we need to confess that all wars are unjust. But, we can at least try to act justly in situations of war and violence (*jus in bello*). The traditional commitments to justice in war were that one would only resort to force or violence if it was a matter of justice (i.e., a just cause); then only when all other means had been fully exhausted; that those who declare the war should have some reasonable and defensible right to do so (i.e., be the proper authority or a moral representative of authority); that the intention of the conflict was just (i.e., not for reasons of power, wealth, or vengeance); that there is a reasonable chance of success; that due care be given for the protection of the innocent (civilians, the old or young, those who are vulnerable, and non-human creation) and that one would not use any more force than is absolutely necessary to achieve the just purpose or outcome of the war (Moseley 2023; Mokobake 2020). But, as you can see, these are complex, and often contested, criteria. So, let's try in this last section to understand what it might mean to be Christian in a world of war.

6 Who Should We Be? What Should We Do? On Being Christian in a World of War

Up to this point we have been wrestling with the theological, and existential, tension that exists between our lived reality of war, and our eschatological expectation of peace. We have confessed that we believe in a peaceable God, who sent his son, Jesus the Prince of Peace, to abolish war and violence and establish His

Kingdom of fullness for all of humanity and non-human creation. Ethically, we have said that the eschatological certainty of peace – the certainty of 'that day' – demands that we should live today in such a way that when 'that day' comes, we may be able to affirm that we did our best to live on the right side of history and the right side of God's loving will. In other words, we were Christian in identity and action – we were faithful in fulfilling our part in the *missio Dei*.

So, how might we do this practically, meaningfully, as Christians in the world today?

Based on what we have discussed above, I believe that there are two basic dispositions that we should hold. This is based on the notion of the "doctrine of the Two" that we dealt with earlier. How we are to live in this present world in which war is a reality can be related to what O'Donovan describes as the "passing age of principalities", and the overlapping emergence of "the Kingdom of God" in the lives of believers and communities of peace (O'Donovan 1999, 211).

7 A Peaceable Witness

As I wrestled with this question, it brought to mind the struggles that I, and many other South African Christians, faced during South Africa's apartheid era. As a young minister serving in a violence-wracked [black] township, I wondered what a responsible Christian witness would entail? What would responsible Christian ministry look like for the Church in the midst of political injustice and human and structural violence? My bishop at the time was the Rev. Peter Storey, one of the architects of the Peace Church movement in South Africa, a committed anti-Apartheid activist who was bold in his witness for peace (Storey 2018), the founder of the "End Conscription" campaign (Weekly Mail 1989). He offered the following advice for ministry, saying that there are four primary tasks that we should be engaged in to work for justice and peace as Christian ministers in apartheid South Africa:

> The first was to be a truth-teller, to proclaim the truth without fear and expose the lies of apartheid; the second was to bind up the broken, siding with the victims of injustice wherever [you] found them; the third was to try and 'live the alternative', seeking to be a visible contradiction of the apartheid state's cruel segregation practices and offering a picture of God's alternative; the fourth was to work in non-violent, Christ-like ways to bring a new dispensation of justice, equity and peace. (Storey 2018, 131)

These four imperatives have shaped my ministry, and the ministries and theological thought of many others for some decades now (Forster 2022b, 41–61). While political apartheid may have ended, the colonial imperatives that informed it,

and indeed the violence that leads to all forms of sexism, racism, homophobia, and war, have not.

To be Christian in a world of war requires faith in what is true; deep care and solidarity with those who are wounded and being wounded; siding with the poor, the marginalized, the unjustly treated and the violated; living the alternative to the violence and abuse of this world by being, and becoming, agents of peace and reconciliation in a violent world and doing whatever we can – without violence – to replace evil with good.

Let me return to where we started. If we believe in a good God, who created a good creation toward good ends, then we need to cultivate the kind of habits (often called values or virtues) for good living. The person of virtue always tries to do the right thing, no matter what the circumstances. The bearing of the virtues of Jesus the Christ is the work of the church.

Some of you specialize in Christian education and the formation of young people and adults. Form us in the church to be like Jesus. Some of you specialize in aesthetics and worship – use liturgy, the arts, and cultivate within us a prophetic imagination that empowers us to see the world that God has created, and to lean with courage and conviction into that promise. Some of you specialize in preaching and teaching – share with us in ways that are true, convincing, and evocative of the truth of our faith, and the responsibility of being people of faith. Some of you are skilled and called to care – teach us to live in deep solidarity with one another, to care and be tender with each other, teach us patience and love, and school us in the arts of healing and wholeness. Siblings, sisters and brothers, this (and many other things) are the work of Christ, and so teach us to do this, and be this, as we seek to be Christian.

To cultivate a faithful peaceable witness in a world of war, I commend three habits that we can use to live faithfully in the midst of war, in a world that is on its way to peace.

First, be obedient to Jesus' command to "pray for your enemies" (Matt 5:44). As a Christian, be a person of prayer. This means that you should pray, and when you pray, also pray for your enemies.

Second, surround yourself with friends, and even critics, who hold you to account. Allow others to speak to you about you. Break the 'bubble' and 'echo-chamber' of group think and allow yourself to be challenged, invited, and renewed through the inputs and perspectives of the supposed 'other'.

Third, enliven your imagination for peace by directing your own attention, and the attention of others, to people and processes that embody non-violence. Think about Albert Luthuli, Desmond Tutu, and Peter Storey, and Dorothy Day, Cesar Chavez and Martin Luther King Junior and so many more. Think about movements of non-violent peaceful change – there are many wonderful examples

of well-researched and developed resources for non-violent change (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011).

And when you encounter violence and you must act, let your actions be virtuous and loving, let them be redeeming, let them attempt to resolve rather than escalate, to build up, rather than break down. Remember that taking the role of non-violence, and the implications of such a stance, are always incomparably small compared to what non-violence makes possible.

At the end of the day, lean into the truer reality, pray to the Lord to give you both greater faith and actions to accompany that faith. Let's be reminded that, "Christians are called to live nonviolently, not because we think nonviolence is a strategy to rid the world of war, but rather because as faithful followers of Christ in a world of war we cannot imagine not living nonviolently" (Hauerwas 2011a, 16).

8 A Just Resolution of Violence for the Greater Cause of Peace

Violence is not a legitimate way of solving problems or disputes. We must confess and embody this. However, where we are subjected to violence, or called upon to act when seeing others being subjected to violence, how are we to be Christian? Torsten Meireis' notion of peaceable responsibility ethics is helpful to consider (Meireis 2022, 123–137). How do we responsibly decide "between two possible wrongs" (Meireis 2022, 123)? One of the first things that we can do, as was argued in the previous section, is to both tell the truth and live the truth.

First, the truth is that violence is never a desirable solution to complex problems, and as such those whose responsibility it is to curtail violence, or employ violence, should not be romanticized or idealized. Sadly, the contemporary media has done much to romanticize the notion of "our boys (and girls)" in uniform, who sacrificially offer their lives for our safety and security (Meireis 2022, 123). By adding honor to those who engage in war, we are helping to create the social imagination that makes war not only a possibility but something that our children, girls and boys, grow up admiring. Of course, it is entirely naïve to assume that only good people fight in 'our' wars and 'bad' people in the terrorism of others. Goodness and badness are moral attributes that are common to all of humanity in all situations. To call someone good because they were charged to kill is a category mistake of the gravest kind. The same can be said for unquestioningly calling those who fight wars on behalf of others, often not of their own choosing,

bad (Govier and Verwoerd 2004, 371–377; Verwoerd and Edlmann 2021, 207–235). We need higher standards of truth-knowing and truth-telling than this.

Among white South African men of a certain age there is a complex set of emotions with having been conscripted into military service. Some feel great shame, guilt, and live with the horror of what they did in the name of the temporal leaders and shifting political sentiments of the nation.

Hauerwas cautions that, "the moral challenge of war is too important for us to play a game of who is and who is not guilty for past or future wars. We're all guilty, pacifist and non-pacifist alike. Guilt is not helpful. What can be helpful is a cooperative effort to make war less likely" (Hauerwas 2011a, 18–19).

Those of us who have been in combat, or faced violence, will be able to testify that the reality of war is dreadful, dehumanizing, and seldom leaves persons unscarred – even if they survive. Moreover, we need to name the truth that the logic of war is often much less honest in its claims and it's telling. At what cost to human lives, society, and non-human creation do we engage in battle of any form (Mokobake 2020)? So, first, when we are faced with violence, we need to have the courage and the will to seek the truth, identify and call out the lies, and self-critically evaluate what we believe to be true about ourselves and others.

Our second instinct in war and violence should always be to position ourselves on the side of the victimized and abused, seeking both to bind up their wounds and also to stop the inflicting of further woundedness. Again, this is a complex moral issue. Some Christians who seek to offer a form of support for war turn to the ethics of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor and theologian who for the sake of justice supported a plot to try to assassinate Adolf Hitler. The assassination attempt failed. Bonhoeffer was jailed and later executed. However, in his *Ethics* (written in the period leading up to his imprisonment in April 1943), Bonhoeffer wrote that it is not enough to only "bind up the wounds of the victims beneath the wheel" of injustice, but that Christians had a responsibility to "seize the wheel itself" (Bonhoeffer in Green and DeJonge 2013, 374). This is true – but what persons who appeal to this idea to support war fail to mention is that Bonhoeffer never advocated this as a moral choice, as something that was good or right, or free from guilt and judgment. You may remember that the context of Bonhoeffer's hypothetical example comes from his 1932 lecture, *The Church and the Jewish Question* (Bonhoeffer 2009; Green and DeJonge 2013, 370–78). The question was, for a Christian Germany with the rise of National Socialism and the increasing harm and violence being enacted against Jewish Germans: What should a Christian do? Would it be more ethical to kill a person who was going to kill a number of innocent persons, or not do anything? In both instances death was inevitable and carried a penalty. In either case you will bear the burden of murder and be judged for it. However, in bearing that guilt, is it possible to secure greater

freedom and peace for the largest number of innocent others. To do nothing when innocent persons suffer is not necessarily the lesser of two evils. In such instances we may need to perpetrate a lesser evil, but still recognize it as an act of evil, out of responsibility for the greater good (Bedford-Strohm et al. 2016; Zimmermann 2016).

Third, when forced to choose to respond to violence or war, Christians should always witness to the alternative. This means that our choices should be directed towards peaceful resolution, the de-escalation of violence, the resolution of conflict in the most effective and fastest possible way, the rehumanization of both victims and perpetrators, and the disavowal of unjust or unnecessary power. When a conflict is done, how are we to live with ourselves and the supposed others with whom we have been in conflict (Govier and Verwoerd 2004; Gobodo-Madikizela 2010)? What might it mean to live with the kind of restorative grace that Jesus' life and ministry exemplify? If war has a liturgical character (as we have said above, it is imagined, supported in narrative and story, enacted by sacrifice etc.), then so does peace. Peace has a liturgical character that builds rhythms and activities of restoration, forgiveness, recompense, grace, and renewal. Even in times of war, we are called to be the church. The church is inclusive, restorative, honest, and loving. "The church simply names those whom God has called to live faithfully according to the redemption wrought through Christ. The difference between church and world is not an ontological difference, but rather a difference of agency" (Hauerwas 2011a, 16). The church has the possibility of difference from a violent world because Jesus frees us to choose how to live differently in a world of war. Jesus's death and resurrection give us redemptive and restorative agency, he offers us a new story to live by.

Fourth, whatever we are given to do, or choose to do, amid violence and war, it should be directed towards the ends of bringing "a new dispensation of justice, equity and peace" (Storey 2018, locs. 1754–1761 of 7927). As with Joseph, Christians are to take what was intended for evil, and do their best to turn it into good (Gen 50:20). The waging of peace in the midst of war can be dangerous work.

Again, Hauerwas says, "[t]o be kind in a violent world is very dangerous, but fortunately you will discover you were destined to be kind [. . .] Our gentle God created our kind to be kind by making it impossible for us to exist without caring for those both like and unlike us" (Hauerwas 2018, 27–28).

Our responsibility, as the Church, is not only for the war but indeed for the world. While we are working to resolve the conflict, care for the wounded, and bring about peace, we should constantly be praying for the wisdom and inspiration to know how to form ourselves and others to become the blessed community of peace that God has created us to be, and that we will be one day. This may mean that we choose not to use certain language, not to celebrate certain things,

or ever engage in certain acts again. It may also mean that we choose to live in ways that the world finds strange, even crazy, but in the end we will be able to witness to the truth that love wins and war does not.

9 Conclusion

The difference between Christians and the rest of the world, is of course not an ontological difference (we share a common humanity), rather it is a difference of agency (we choose to live differently because of what Christ has made possible). So, in this sense, being Christian means being the alternative to the mere acceptance of war. What we may find is that in a world of war, the waging of peace takes as much courage, as much intention, as much commitment, and as many resources as the waging of war. Of course, the return is much greater too. Let me end where I started, can you imagine a world without war? As a white man who was formed in the habits of violence, I long to be re-formed in the imagination that comes from believing in, and living for, the Prince of Peace.

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