

“Can War and Christian Faith Be Reconciled?” September 13, 2026
Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; Matthew 5:43-48 Westminster, Greenville
16th Sunday after Pentecost Ben Dorr

Do any of you subscribe to *Time* magazine?

I’m just wondering if I’m a relic of the past, by admitting I still subscribe to the print editions of more than one magazine these days.

I ask because I remember receiving a particular print version of *Time*. It was twenty-five years ago, right before the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and *Time* had just named the Duke professor Stanley Hauerwas as America’s “best” theologian.

For those of you here today who are not familiar with him, Hauerwas became a well-known theologian in church circles and seminaries in the 1980s, 90s, and 2000s. He’s good friends with Will Willimon, who preached in this pulpit three summers ago.

He’s written extensively on many subjects, including warfare, and why he is a pacifist, and why he believes God’s church cannot condone war or participation in the act of any war.

All of which makes me wonder... back in 2001, if the editors at *Time* had chosen to release their announcement of America’s “best” theologian a couple months later—after 9/11, after we sent our military into Afghanistan in pursuit of Osama bin Laden...would they have made the same choice?

Would they have chosen a pacifist AFTER our country had just been attacked?

When it comes to our question for this morning,
“Can War and Christian Faith Be Reconciled?”—

I need to begin with a concession:

I have most definitely bitten off more than I can chew in one sermon.

When I shared the topic with our Thursday morning Bible study, one of the participants said, “Gee, Ben, why don’t you ever bring us a difficult question to discuss?”

Of course, it’s not a new question.

It’s a very old question, one of the oldest in Christian history.

Which is one of the reasons I wanted to explore it with you.

I raise the question this morning NOT because I’m going to try to convince you that one particular response is more faithful than another. My goal this morning is to provide a common starting point, a common language, if you will.

I raise the question because I believe that we, as followers of Jesus, have a responsibility to know our own history, to be familiar with the different answers that our own faith tradition has provided to this question, so that they can help us formulate our own responses to the question of war in our own day and time.

Is everyone with me so far?

So let’s start 1600 years ago.

How many of you are familiar with the “Just War Theory”?

Back in the 4th and 5th centuries, Augustine of Hippo is credited with creating this theory that stipulates the different conditions in which a follower of Christ can participate in war. Then, in the 13th century, Thomas Aquinas took what Augustine said, and condensed it to three principles:

1. **Legitimate authority** — war can only be declared by a sovereign authority, not private individuals.
2. **Just cause** — there must be a genuine wrong to be righted (such as self-defense, restoring what was seized).
3. **Right intention** — the aim must be to promote good or avoid evil. War cannot be waged out of cruelty or conquest for its own sake.¹

From there, other theologians and philosophers expanded the theory through the years, to include consideration of how wars are fought, so that practices like proportionality, and protection for civilians, come into play.

And those stipulations have made their way into the modern era, becoming, as another of our Thursday Bible study participants pointed out, becoming codified in international law, such as the Geneva Conventions.

Now, for our purposes this morning, there are two theologians that I'd like you to consider.² Both present compelling arguments to today's question, and both end up in very different places with their answers.

The first is the aforementioned Stanley Hauerwas. Hauerwas was born just after WWII broke out. He taught at Duke for most of his career, and is now retired.

Hauerwas's argument for pacifism goes something like this:

¹ Thomas Aquinas's just war stipulations can be found on multiple sites on the internet.

² I am indebted to a sermon by the Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston, "Whose Side Are You On?", preached February 2, 2020, at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York City, for drawing my attention to the contrast between these two theologians and for the summary of their thoughts about war that he provides in his sermon.

When addressing the question of war, we need to start with what it means to be God's Church. And God's Church, according to Hauerwas, is supposed to offer the world a different way of living than the one that the world offers.

Hauerwas's argument is that the Church simply needs to be who it was created to be.

As God's church, our primary job is to reflect the life of Jesus...and because Jesus did not take up arms against his enemies, neither should we. Hauerwas argues that the cross of Christ is the single determining factor in this question—and just as Jesus did not respond to his enemies with violence, neither should we.

“The church does not...have a plan or a policy to...end war,” he writes. “Rather, the church is the alternative to...war in a war-weary world.”³

Of course, Hauerwas does not take this stance in a vacuum.

Mennonites, Quakers, and other branches of the Christian faith have historically stood against participating in war.

Now, Hauerwas spent the majority of his career arguing against the second theologian whom I want you to consider...and this other theologian wasn't just named “the best” by *Time*.

He actually appeared on the cover of *Time*, for its 25th anniversary edition, in March of 1948.

Do any of you know who that theologian was?
Reinhold Niebuhr.

³ Stanley Hauerwas, *War and the American Difference: Theological Reflections on Violence and National Identity*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011.

Niebuhr represents a different theological vein in our Christian tradition, when it comes to the question of war. It's a line of thinking that is often referred to as "Christian Realism," and needs to be explained with a bit of historical context.

Reinhold Niebuhr was born in 1892.

He went into the ministry at age 23, serving a small congregation in Detroit, composed of mostly German immigrants. He served that church for nearly 13 years, beginning in 1915, which means that his ministry there overlapped with WWI.

And in response to the horrors of the Great War, Niebuhr became a pacifist, writing in his diary:

"This is as good a time as any to make up my mind that I am done with the war business."

But as it turned out, Niebuhr was NOT done with the war business. As a professor at Union Seminary in NY City, Niebuhr watched Hitler's rise to power in the 1930s, and Niebuhr changed his mind about pacifism. In fact, it was during this time that Niebuhr wrote an essay entitled, "Why the Christian Church is Not Pacifist."

In short, Niebuhr answered today's question by saying that in order to "secure justice in a sinful world," it "may also be necessary to resist a...nation [like Hitler's Germany]...Such resistance [may mean] war."

Put another way, Niebuhr's starting point was not "what does it mean to be God's church," as it is for Hauerwas.

Niebuhr's starting point is justice.

Justice in the sense of “How does a Christian faithfully work to prevent evil from doing whatever it wants in this world?”

Now Niebuhr was not, strictly speaking, a “Just War” theologian, because the different conditions that “Just War” theology lays out—if a war is this, and this, and this, then it’s ok to go to war—those very conditions could lead a person to conclude that in a “just war,” we are morally pure and free of sin.

Niebuhr said that nothing could be further from the truth.

In fact, Niebuhr’s larger point was everyone is caught up in sin, whether one is a pacifist, or a soldier, or a theologian writing about war.

Which is why Niebuhr writes:

“The good news of the gospel is [not simply that we’re supposed to love one another, but] that there is a...divine mercy which is able to overcome [the] contradiction within our souls, [a contradiction] which we cannot ourselves overcome.”⁴

Ok...end of the history lesson.

Let’s bring the question into the present day.

What does our denomination say in response to today’s sermon topic?

Well, as you may have gathered from the title of the sermon series, it allows for more than one answer.

⁴ This section on Reinhold Niebuhr comes from two sources: Robert McAfee Brown, ed., *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986; Jeremy L. Sabella, *An American Conscience: The Reinhold Niebuhr Story*, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2017.

In our Westminster church family, we have members who, at one time in their lives, registered as conscientious objectors. And in our congregation, we have members who served in the military, members who were sent to war in Vietnam, in Iraq...and the Presbyterian Church (USA) provides a home for BOTH Christian responses.

If you were to ask me where I land, at this moment in my life, I'm probably closest to Reinhold Niebuhr, but haunted by Hauerwas, if I can put it like that...

And part of what I'm asking you to do today is consider which of those three positions—the Just War response, the pacifist response, or the Christian realist response—makes the most sense to you.

But before you do that, I think there's one more question we need to address. Not just how Christians through the years have responded to war, or how our denomination today responds.

What we haven't discussed is God's response.

What is God's response, when it comes to war?

I'm reminded of the time that our family visited Washington, D.C., five summers ago, right after the pandemic.

We went to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, and I was in search of a name. It was the name of the brother of one of my former church members...I didn't know the brother, he died before I was born, he was killed in Vietnam...but his picture was in that church, and I wanted to find his name.

So I did.

And then I remembered a story about someone else who once came to visit the Memorial. On November 18, 1989, a veteran named Richard A. Luttrell left a letter and a small photograph at the Memorial.

The letter read:

Dear Sir, For twenty two years I have carried your picture in my wallet. I was only eighteen years old that day that we faced one another on that trail in....Vietnam.

Why you did not take my life I'll never know. You stared at me for so long...

Forgive me for taking your life, I was reacting just the way I was trained...

So many times over the years I have stared at your picture and your daughter [in that picture], I suspect...

Today I visit the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in D.C. I have wanted to come here for several years now to say goodbye to many of my former comrades.

Somehow I hope and believe they will know I'm here, I truly loved many of them as I am sure you loved many of your former comrades.

*As of today we are no longer enemies.
I perceive you as a brave soldier defending his homeland...
As I leave here today I leave your picture and this letter...
Forgive me Sir, I shall try to live my life to the fullest...so until we
chance to meet again in another time and place, rest in peace.*

*Respectfully,
Richard A. Luttrell
101st Airborne Division*

A park service curator discovered the picture and the letter.

Long story short, with the help of the Vietnamese Embassy in Washington a number of years later, newspapers in Hanoi were convinced to publish the photograph with an accompanying article.

And, against astronomical odds, a copy of one of those newspapers made its way to a tiny farming village in Vietnam, where, unbelievably, the family of that deceased soldier lived.

And they recognized the photo!

A short time later, Richard Luttrell received a letter of his own, forwarded from Vietnam, written by a woman identified only as Lan:

Dear Mr. Richard, the child that you have taken care of, or through the picture, for over 30 years, she becomes an adult now, and she has spent so much suffering in her childhood by the missing of her father. I hope you will bring the joy and happiness to my family.

Luttrell responded, asking Lan if he could visit her in Vietnam.

She said yes, and in March of 2000, Richard Luttrell traveled back to Vietnam, the first time he had been in the country in 32 years.

When she saw him, Lan burst into tears and embraced Luttrell.

And the photograph of Lan and her father...it now rests on a small altar in Lan's home.⁵

⁵ Andrew Carroll, ed., *War Letters: Extraordinary Correspondence from American Wars*, New York: Washington Square Press, 2001.

I wonder if that story has something to say about our question for today.

How does God respond to war?
 Our God is not a God of vengeance.
 The God we know in Christ is a God of RECONCILIATION.

And God pushes us toward reconciliation—before war, during war, after war...at all times.

Maybe the best way we can answer today's question, "Can War and Christian Faith be Reconciled?"...is not with an air-tight theological argument.

Maybe it's by putting reconciliation front and center in our own lives of faith.

Do you remember our Call to Worship this morning?

"...if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation...all this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ...God has given us the ministry of reconciliation..."

The word Paul uses there is **anyone...**

If you're a soldier,
 if you serve in government,
 if you're a teacher,
 if you work in a hospital,
 if you're retired...
 anyone in Christ can work for reconciliation
 in God's world.

So as you do that work, may I invite you to remember the prayer that Reinhold Niebuhr created over 80 years ago, and still speaks wisdom to our day and time.

It's a prayer that was used by military chaplains in WWII.
It's a prayer that was adopted by Alcoholics Anonymous after the war.

You know it.

“God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things which should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.”

Amen.