

## WHAT SHOULD THE CHURCH DO ABOUT THE WAR?

By Craig M. Watts

It's hard to get the right answers if you ask the wrong questions. When it comes to war, too often Christians have asked, "What should the nation do?" That certainly has its place. But a more important question is, "What should the church do about this war?"

As Christians we should not see the most important action found in what nations do, even the super power nation of the United States. Rather than acting with the independence faith should afford, too often Christians look to the nation to call the shots. In various ways the church may seek to influence the course of the nation. But too rarely do we ask what we should do as church regardless of what the nation chooses to do.

Perhaps we are afraid of asking that question because we could discover we are incapable of being church in the face of war, even a war denounced as unjust by church leadership around the world. With an astonishing consensus, major church bodies, ecumenical organizations and prominent leaders on every continent have condemned the war in Iraq as immoral and illegitimate. Likewise, in the United States the leaders of mainline denominations, ecumenical bodies and numerous Christian ethicists have repudiated the claim that the war in Iraq is either necessary or warranted by classical "just war" standards. Yet for all this, the church has not asked what it should actually do in regard to the war. The leadership of the church has done little more than act like supplicants before the state.

Perhaps this is because the leadership is well aware of a reality a Gallup Poll brought to light earlier this year. Commenting on the poll, Gallup editor in chief Frank Newport observed, "In general, the more frequently an American attends church, the less likely he or she is to say the war was a mistake." Among those who never go to church, 62% expressed opposition to the war. In contrast, overall, only 45% of

church going Protestants said the war was a mistake. Whether the respondents were Republican or Democrat, church attendance increased the likelihood that respondents would support the war in Iraq. I find these results shameful.

Consequently, while I am convinced that the right question is "What should the church do about the war in Iraq," I am less convinced that the church in America is inclined to act like the church when it comes to war. Too many members – if I might allude to Tertullian – have chosen Washington over Jerusalem. They have placed their confidence in the President and other political leaders, rather than looking to the leaders of the church who actually know something about the Christian tradition in regard to the ethics of war and peace.

Despite the impression they seek to leave on the population, the morality of war is not a part of the expertise of the heads of state. They cannot be counted on for distinguishing a just war from an unjust war. Any war they choose to engage in will be deemed just with or without serious consideration of traditional just war standards. Above all, they pursue what they believe to be in the national interests. But for Christians national interests must not take priority in determining what is right and good. Other considerations must be at the forefront, considerations grounded in theologically informed faith and a passionate desire to be faithful to God in Christ.

In mainline churches we pride ourselves for allowing people to "make up their own minds" and boast that we don't "tell them what to believe." But it seems that such claims are a pleasant sounding facade that covers the fact that mainline church leaders aren't making much impact on members. While we might not be "telling them what to believe," the president and other politicians are doing exactly that. And many members are believing what they

say. Church leaders have failed to offer a substantive Christian counterpoint. If they address the topic of war at all, their words often echo politicians – right or left – rather than voicing the distinctive tones of faith.

The church in general has done a deplorable job in educating and training members in how to think about war in a remotely Christian fashion. The members by and large have no idea how to distinguish a just war from an unjust war, much less have any grasp of a biblically based pacifist viewpoint. Many ministers themselves are not sufficiently informed in this crucial area. Consequently, when war comes, they turn not to church leaders for answers, but to the president and / or leaders in their chosen political party. When it comes to equipping members to make crucial decisions about war, “the churches have shown themselves uninterested in doing this,” leading British Christian ethicist Oliver O’Donovan concludes.

We need to ask ourselves whether we are prepared to act like the church in the face of war. The Gallup Poll suggests that the Protestant church is not. Nevertheless, if we were to act like the church in response to the war in Iraq – and beyond – the following are among some of the things I believe we should do.

- 1) The church should fervently and continually pray for the end of the war and the beginning of a just peace, believing that ultimately prayer is more potent than the most advanced weapon.
- 2) The General Minister and Regional Ministers should write a letter to the congregations reasserting the ecumenical consensus that the war in Iraq is unjust by just war standards, and ask that the letter be read in worship services of all congregations.
- 3) On every level the church should reaffirm and intensify relations with the churches in Iraq and the surrounding region.
- 4) With the support of the General Minister and Regional Minister, parish ministers should actively discourage young people

from entering the military at least until the U.S. has exited Iraq.

- 5) The General Minister should call upon chaplains to make clear to those they serve that the leaders of their denomination and leaders of the international church overwhelmingly have determined the war in Iraq to be unjust.
- 6) The church should assure troops who refuse to bear arms in or be deployed to Iraq that the church will offer them its full moral support and offer legal support in whatever way possible in recognition of their heroic moral courage.
- 7) All troops should be assured that the church will persistently keep them in prayer and the church – despite its determined opposition to the war – commends their willingness to personally sacrifice in such significant ways.
- 8) The General Minister should request that the Regional Ministers institute required training in the Christian tradition with regard to war – including both just war and pacifist perspectives – for every minister with standing.
- 9) Courses on the ethics of war – dealing with both just war and pacifist traditions – should be instituted in all Disciples related seminaries and be required for all students seeking ordination.
- 10) The President and Congress of the United States should be informed that these are the actions the church will be taking regardless of the decisions the government chooses to take in relation to the war in Iraq.

The church cannot treat war like “just another” moral issue. Neither can the church abdicate to the state its own responsibility for determining whether or not a war is just and for identifying appropriate responses to war. We need to ask the right question about war – in Iraq and elsewhere. Then, instead of first of all petitioning the state to do what we think it should do, we as church should decisively and faithfully act against war and for peace to the glory of God in Christ.