

The Effects of WWI and WWII on the Lutheran understanding of a Just War

IDE Symposium: The Just War Doctrine

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My assignment for this paper was to research the effect that WWI and WWII had on the LCMS position concerning a just war. Without using the excuse that my expertise is in the century preceding the mid-20th, I did not find a great deal of writing showing any kind of an impact on our understanding of a just war. In fact there is precious little written post WW's concerning the criteria for a just war. The research is somewhat limited concerning WWI because some official publications of the synod begin around 1930 which is 15 years after WWI started. I then directed my attention to the 1940's publications of The Lutheran Witness, Concordia Pulpit, and Concordia Theological Monthly (now the Concordia Journal). As far as a statement concerning just war the only definitive source I found was in The Abiding Word published in 1946. In Vol. 1 pages 514 and 520 P.F. Siegel writes:

Government, therefore, has the right to declare war if it's efforts to safeguard their interests by peaceable means are not successful. In waging any war, however, the re-establishment of peace must be one of the chief aims of government, since it has no right to sacrifice the property and the lives of its subjects needlessly... Since government has the right to wage war, if that becomes necessary to defend its authority and rights, a Christian will gladly render military service to his county.

Along with the criteria outlined by our other presenters, Siegel lists three in particular. He says a just war must "safeguard the interests" of the government. What those interests are was not mentioned. That is a very broad brush stroke. The interests of the government could be access to oil overseas, or prevention of the spread of a form of government contrary to a democracy, or disallowing weapons to be placed in lands that make an attack against America very easy. Are these legitimate criteria for a just war? Maybe for some but not for everyone. His second point was "the re-establishment of peace." War is not for the sake of eliminating a race of people but for the prevention of harm to oneself or others. The goal then is the re-establishment of a harmonious relationship. Finally Siegel says a government may "defend its authority." That probably has much to do with defending one's own shores and citizens from military attack and invasion of a foreign army.

In the March, 1941 edition of CTM (pg. 208) it is clear that war was on the horizon. That edition has a quote from Luther when he wrote *Ob Kriegsleute auch in einem seligen Stande sein koennen* (whether soldiers are able to be blissful). Its content speaks to the disposition a soldier may have concerning the states command to go to war.

It must therefore be concluded on this point: To wage wars against equals must be a matter to which one is compelled and be done in the fear of God. But compulsion is when the enemy or neighbor attacks or begins hostilities and will not offer any assistance if one proposes justice, a hearing, an agreement, and if one endures evil words and mischievous tricks and does not make them an issue but persists in his headstrong behavior... But in all this God's hands are not tied that he might command warfare against such as have given us no cause, as He bade the children of Israel war against the Canaanites; there we have enough compulsion to wage war, namely, the command of God, although such a war also may not be waged without fear and care as God indicates, Josh. 7:1 ff., when the children of Israel were secure in their campaign against the men of Ai and were repulsed. It is such a matter of necessity when subjects wage war at the command of their government. For God commands that we be obedient to the government, and such a command is a necessity laid upon us; and yet it should be done with fear and humility.... The other question: What if my lord were wrong in his declaring war? Answer: If you know definitely that he is in the wrong, you shall fear and obey God more than him, Acts 5:29, and you shall not wage war or serve, since you cannot have a good conscience before God.... But if you do not have the information and cannot find out whether your lord is in the wrong, you shall not weaken an uncertain obedience for the sake of an uncertain right, but you shall, after the manner of love, assume the best of your lord.

The 1941 CTM's use of Luther indicates an official position that WWII would be a just war were the U.S. to enter into it. Pearl Harbor certainly bode that to be true but 9 months prior to that the LCMS seemed ready to inform her church body that were the government to call LCMS members to war, the members had a command from God to obey that call. The compelling criteria for Luther was an enemy who attacked or raised hostilities against you and would not assist in settling for peace.

After the December 7th, 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor America declares war against the Axis Powers. The question was raised as to whether war is a sin and to participate would then be a sin. The May 1942 edition of CTM (pg. 391-392) answers that question.

'War is sin' possibly appears a bit plausible when people think of the fact that there would be no war in the world without sin. But there is a great difference between holding, as we all do, that war is a result of sin, and affirming that war is sin. 'War is sin' means that anyone participating in war is sinning. And this is a great fallacy. The root error underlying this sort of judgment is its failure to distinguish between those who by unprovoked aggression foist death and destruction upon others and those who in the course of their plain patriotic and Christian duty are called to protect their home and country against the assaults of such aggressors. Participation in the same war may be a sin for one person and a solemn duty for another. In the words of General MacArthur quoted above: 'I am surprised that men with clear and logical minds confuse defensive warfare with the disease which it alone can cure when all other remedies have failed.' The sweeping statement that war is sin cannot be a harmonized Scriptural, Christian teaching. War may be a sin for one nation and a solemn God-given duty for another.

Once again the emphasis for justifying WWII was the fact that the U.S., with unprovoked aggression had death and destruction foisted upon them. For Japan WWII was a sin and it was also a sin for each of its military men to participate in it. However, for America it was not a sin and neither was the participation by its soldiers.

The April 1941 edition of the Lutheran Witness finally enters the Synod's periodical into the discussion. W.G. Pollack writes an article called *The Christian and the State, and war*. Polack makes ample use of Luther's two kingdom doctrine when he gives the state the authority to wage war and the citizen's obedience to that decision when he says;

It should always be borne in mind that the decision as to whether a war is necessary or not rests, not with the individual citizen nor with the Church, but with the regularly constituted officials of the State, whose duties include the protection of our life and goods, our national honor and our liberties, who have under solemn oath accepted this obligation and whose judgment the citizen and the Church must honor and support under the existing laws. Moreover, the decision and the responsibility as to the justice or injustice of a war does not rest, first, with the individual citizen nor with the Church, but with the properly elected or appointed officials of the State. If they decide that a war is necessary, the individual citizen must abide by their decision. If the individual has some small doubts in the matter, his best course is still to support the government.

It would have been helpful if Polack would have given examples of the difference between "small doubts" and "large doubts" which apparently would have allowed the citizen to object to the government's declaration.

The Lutheran Witness falls silent from that edition on concerning the justification of WWII. Each edition is wrought with stories about the military chaplains and the service they rendered. In January of 1942 the Lutheran Witness identifies the consequences of war even upon the soil where the war has not yet come. In an article by Wm. Birkner of Ft. Wayne, IN. some interesting observations are being made concerning the cost of war. It is written somewhat in a mode that expects the reader to re-evaluate the cost of war and whether it is worth it. The article is entitled *The War Raises Issues for our Church*. You might find these interesting if not applicable.

Out on Long Island lives Mr. X whose sense of loyalty has urged him during the past eight years to drive back to his home congregation Sunday after Sunday, passing six other Synodical Conference churches on his fifty mile round trip. After reading about the moratorium that has been declared on new machines "for the duration" and the apparent impossibility of obtaining new tires, Mr. X. is followed by many others in a similar position, the war situation will result in a problem of serious proportions for some of our older congregations in down-town metropolitan sections...Factories are working on a twenty-four hour basis, seven days a week. Faithful church-members in the industrialized sections of our country find it impossible to attend divine worship at the accustomed hour of 10:30 or 11:00 on Sunday morning. Our congregation will be confronted with the war-born necessity of arranging a schedule of services that will give all of their members the opportunity of attending divine worship in these days of stress...World War I eliminated

the German language as a medium of instruction in our Christian day-schools. In some communities World War II will see the abandonment of the German language in the public services of our congregations. Note: This does not mean that those of our members who are really dependent upon the German language should not receive the administrations of the Gospel privately through the language which they need.

The March of 1943 edition of the Lutheran Witness reported an incident which informs the readers who the Roman Catholics blame WWII on. This demonstrates the danger of Rome's doctrine that the Holy See oversees both the kingdom of the right and the kingdom of the left. It is a good argument for the Lutherans to retain the two kingdom doctrine as Luther surmised from Scripture. A layman writes into the Lutheran Witness this article;

We have seen uncomplimentary references to Martin Luther multiplying of late without reacting to them in these columns. But when a Catholic magazine prints a cartoon with the legend "Hitler is the spiritual successor of Luther, Luther divided, Hitler conquers," we conclude that enough is enough. The cartoon appeared in the January, 1943, issue of *The Sign, National Catholic Magazine*, and was reprinted in the *Christian Beacon* of January 28 as "a significant bit of Roman Catholic propaganda against Protestantism in the Unity States." It showed Adolf Hitler on a battlefield strewn with corpses and wrecked artillery, cities burning in the distance, and in the clouds the huge figure of a monk raising his fist against St. Peter's Church in Rome shown in a bright patch of sky. The article which went with the cartoon said, "To undo the work of Hitler, it is necessary first to undo the work of Luther." In order that this might be accomplished, this article went on to say, the world must be controlled by the Roman Catholic Church, then there will be peace and not until then.

A brief walk through history will tell you that the Dark Ages were indeed dark because Europe was controlled by the Roman Catholic Church. More war was waged in Europe during that history than at any other time. While Rome tends to take a pacifist position on war, they certainly advocated for an elimination of the Lutheran Confession.

Post WWII there appears to be an even greater movement away from the earlier support of the government and war. The July 1946 (pg. 534) CTM reprinted an article written by Prof. Henry Hamann for *The Australasian Theological Review* which questions the just war aspect of WWII. I knew Dr. Hamann from my days as a student at CTS Ft. Wayne when he was an adjunct professor there. His views may have softened up a little bit by then but his 1946 position is an honest reflection of his position on just war. The article is editorialized by John Theodore Mueller who lends support for Hamann's view.

"Destruction of great cities, rich with the beauty and culture of the ages, of cities containing...churches, schools, universities, hospitals, museums, art galleries, printing presses, libraries, and many other buildings of stately beauty with historic associations, and architectural significance," cannot be condoned by the Christian conscience, but calls for a world-wide protest on the part of all Christian citizens, who wish to preserve

decency and moral considerations even in times of war. The matter which he (Hamann) propounds is certainly worth considering.

Hamann seems to find destruction of buildings as reason for declaring war to be unjust, as though there is such a thing as war without destroying infrastructure. I wonder if Hamann and Mueller gave thought to the fact that without WWII the lives sacrificed in the Holocaust were less important than the historic associations and architectural significance of Europe. The old adage that power only respects a greater power is true in the kingdom of the left. Twice in 29 years Germany had attempted to control Europe and beyond. WWII ended any more attempts by them.

One last resource to look at involves a collection of sermons preached by LCMS pastor's which passed doctrinal review. The sermon publication is Concordia Pulpit which was published from 1930-1988. They started long after WWI had ended so there wasn't anything helpful from them concerning that war. A look at the sermons from the WWII era reveals some interesting evolution of thought by the church about the cause of war and the call to repentance. The first Concordia Pulpit sermon addressing the war (WWII) was printed in 1943 (pg. 162-165) using the texts Psalm 46:10 and Isaiah 54:10. After the texts were read that was the last time they were heard from in this sermon. The title was "Wartime: can we depend on God." It asks a very important question. "Are we on God's side? Of that we must be sure and not whether God is on our side." It follows with a directive statement that says "We cannot expect any favors from God if we fly into the face of God's natural and moral laws." That statement reveals the thought that being on God's side is a matter of natural and moral law rather than by faith in Jesus (AC IV then AC VI).

In the same 1943 publication of CP (pg. 405-410) a sermon was preached using Isaiah 2:5 entitled "The Light of the Lord." The sermon is a scathing attack on the failure of the American people to follow both natural and moral law. It claims WWII is a result of the immorality of the American culture and people. It claims the war is God's visitation upon America and is deserved because of her "divorces and dishonesties, adultery and drunkenness, graft and greed along with all manner of brazenly bold sin." It later on lists such vices as "gambling, drinking, debauchery, and harlotry... taverns are thriving as men stagger forth with drunken steps singing foul odious songs." The claim is that "the idea of sin has become pardonable, if not exactly a virtuous form of human activity." The sermon is so founded on war as God's punishment for immorality that it says "I am speaking of the sins of the people and tell you that this war might have been avoided if our church and country had heeded God's call to repentance." The Preachers belief is that victory is tied to a moral America and if America would return to moral living it would insure "God must fight on our side...Be true to God, to Christ, to His Word and to His Church, and I promise you that if, for the present, the sword of America's power be blunted, her silver shield of freedom will never be pierced." It appears an early onset of "liberation theology" was in the LCMS.

By 1947 (two years after completion of WWII) the CP reveals no change in this thinking. An Independence Day sermon on Ps. 33:12 by K.H. Kumnick uses a quote from a Norwegian refugee that said of America "God must love the people of your great country to give them such a storehouse of plenty" (pg. 377). The counter question is this- does God not love the people of

poor countries? Later in the same sermon it says (pg. 379) “Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord...If our Christian heritage in America is to endure, the Lord must be our God forever and ever.” Let me be clear in saying I think living out the Baptismal Faith is a wonderful witness to Christ. At the same time it is a question as to whether America could then or ever be called Christian. The founding principle of Christianity is AC IV, not AC VI. Its identifying marks are in AC IX-XIV. The Officiant of the marks are in AC V, XIV. The recipients of the marks are AC VII. The preacher would have done well to study AC XX “Faith and good works.” In that same paragraph he quotes George Stephenson saying: “The Bible is the book of humanity, and because it is the book of humanity, it is the book of democracy. It follows from this that the Bible is the charter of liberty, the Magna Charta of the world.” This quote seems to indicate that the contents of the Bible are for the purpose of spreading democracy. His opening sentence is half right. The Bible is a book of humanity, the humanity but also the divinity of Christ Jesus. It is the book of salvation earned by the good and faithful work of Christ for humanity.

By 1948 an almost Universalist flavor had entered the pulpit. At a Memorial Day service preached by Luther G. Schliesser on John 15:12-13 (pg. 406-407) reveals this flavor. The service is taking place at a cemetery where American flags were placed at the graves of fallen veterans. The flags are said to “proudly stand at the head of the graves, like celestial guards, keeping watch over the dead.” The flag, because it was the flag of the victor in WWII is given angelic personification. The sermon goes on to thank those who gave their lives but takes it to a Universalist level when it says “They have done their duty (to the extent they gave their lives) and they did it well... To them we bow our heads and say: ‘Well done, good and faithful servants!’” The context of John 15 is not about losing one’s life in defense of the liberties and freedoms of a nation. It is about the possession of faith and the faithful exercise of the faith in receiving God’s Goodness in the means of grace. As such the steward’s faith was increased over his life. What does Pastor Schliesser do with the Jews, Muslims, Hindus and etc. that lost their lives in defense of America’s liberty? There is no “well done good and faithful servant” for them in eternity.

It isn’t until the 1954 (pg. 399-404) and 1956 (pg. 404-409) publications of CP that such a nationalism and universal approach to sermons on Memorial Day starts to cease. Both of these years preach a rather good sermon that is not ideological in nature but more textual. Each of them brings the hearer to repentance for the sake of their own soul, not for the purpose of national security and victory. They follow a basic outline of Law/Gospel and look to the cross in order to make sense of all of life, especially during the trying times. It is interesting that these two volumes follow right after the Korean War but did not result in the same preaching as followed WWII.

Much of the problem with the preachers following WWII was that they used Old Testament texts and tried to equate Israel with America. They saw America as God’s nation instead of the Holy Christian Church as God’s people. I know there were plenty of Lutherans who fought for the Fatherland in Germany who prayed to Christ in the same manner the LCMS Americans did. A family of them were members of mine at Our Savior in Muscatine, IA. While it is true that the cause of war is sin, the solution is not a matter for the Church to attend. War is a matter for the

government which will involve members of the Church by citizenship of the nation going to war. The conscience of the Christian will determine the reaction to a draft notice. It is not mandatory for a Christian to fight in an unjust war. The challenge for the Christian is to separate their personal desires and wishes from the call to serve a nation that may rightly be asking its citizens to enter into a war. We lean on and finally rest on the mercy of God to guide us as He indeed delivers us by grace from a lost and dying world.