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THE WHOLE ART OF GOVERNMENT CONSISTS IN THE ART OF BEING HONEST.—Jefferson

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CONSIDERATIONS RESPECTING THE

Lawfulness of War under the Gospel Dispensation;

Addressed to the Teachers and Professors of Christianity in the United States of America.

BY REQUEST.

"Shall the sword devour forever?"—2 Sam. ii. 26.

Solely impressed, as we are, with the belief that war is irreconcilable with the precepts and the spirit of the Gospel, and prohibited by it, we cannot but feel that a fearful weight of responsibility is assumed by Christian nations in its prosecution; and under this conviction we are constrained to invite the professors of the Christian religion, and especially those who are looked to as its exponents, to a very serious and unbiased consideration of this subject. If we advert to the consequences resulting from war—its tendency to lower the standard of public morals—the slaughter and misery it produces—the domestic bereavements, anguish, and mourning inseparable from it—a subject is presented to our view, possessing the strongest claim to the serious reflection of the professors of the benign religion of Jesus Christ.

It has been highly gratifying to observe of latter years, that the most enlightened nations have manifested an increasing reluctance to appeal to the sword—that cruel and uncertain arbiter—in the settlement of national controversies; and that the efforts to adjust those controversies by peaceful negotiation, have, in numerous instances, been crowned with the most satisfactory results.

The hope, indeed, had been cherished, that in the present enlightened age of the world, and particularly in this enlightened country, the influence of pure, elevated moral principles and feelings, had obtained such an ascendancy in the minds of the people, as to prevent an appeal to arms; but this pleasing anticipation has not been realized. Our country, for a considerable time, has been engaged in war—exercising its powerful energies in the work of human slaughter. The fields of a neighboring nation have been strewn with the bodies of the slain, and its soil drenched with their blood. Can it be that this is in accordance with the precepts and the spirit of our holy religion?

The Prophets, in foretelling the coming of the Messiah, and describing the nature of his mission, present him in the character of the Prince of Peace,—of the increase of whose government and peace, there shall be no end. It is declared that "He shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people; and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." This strong and unequivocal language clearly indicates, that it was the will and purpose of the Most High that war should eventually be abolished.

And in the fullness of time, when an angel was commissioned to announce the advent of the promised Saviour, the announcement was accompanied with a rapturous song from "a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God, and saying, glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good-will towards men."

In harmonious agreement with the language of prophecy, and the ecstatic song of the angelic host, was the life and ministry of our Lord and Saviour. The law of the preceding dispensation, admitted the principle of retaliation—"An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." He adverts to this for the express purpose of placing a prohibition upon it. "But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil; but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also." While those under the Law were allowed to hate an enemy, His command is—"I say unto you, love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that despitefully use you and persecute you—that ye may be the children of your Father which is in Heaven."

Now, if the followers of Christ are forbidden to resist evil, and to hate an enemy; it is evident that the spirit which engenders war cannot be entertained by them; and this conclusion is rendered, if possible, still stronger, by the high standard, and holy inducement to

which he immediately directs their attention,—"That ye may be the children of your Father which is in Heaven."

Many other similar precepts from the same high authority could be adduced, but they are familiar to the class of readers whom we address. They are plain and positive; and they receive additional force from the accompanying reference to the Law of the preceding dispensation. They are the precepts and injunctions of Him whom we call our Lord and Master—and whom we profess to love and serve.

We ask for no new, or strained meaning to these precepts; we accept the words in their plain literal import; and so they were evidently accepted by the Apostles, and the primitive believers. Of this there can be no doubt. If we recur to Apostolic language as it is presented in the Epistles to the Churches, we shall there meet with injunctions, and exhortations, and entreaties in strict accordance with the precepts of their Divine Master. "Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good."—"See that none render evil for evil, to any man; but ever follow that which is good, both among yourselves, and to all men."—"Love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous, not rendering railing for railing, but contrariwise, blessing; knowing that ye are thereunto called, that ye should inherit a blessing."—"Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves; but rather give place unto wrath; for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord."

Now let us ask, if language could be framed, more strongly prohibiting the indulgence of the spirit which produces war, than that in the preceding passages.

If it be said that war is not directly, and specifically interdicted; we reply, neither was suicide nor many other acknowledged crimes.

It was seen fit to forbid them by enforcing those virtues that most effectually exclude them. If Christianity forbids those passions which engender war—which are fed by it, and without which, indeed, it cannot exist, it follows inevitably that Christianity forbids war.

It will be admitted that the views and the practice of the earliest converts to Christianity—living as they did near the time of its Founder, and under the teaching of the Apostles, or their immediate successors—are entitled to great influence, in deciding this momentous question; and ecclesiastical history of the highest authority establishes the fact that the early Christians, not only insisted that they were forbidden to fight—but that they manifested their sincerity, by offering up their lives, rather than violate, what they deemed, an injunction of their Divine Master. A few cases may here be cited:

Maximilian, a Roman youth, on being brought before the tribunal, to be enrolled as a soldier, refused—saying to the Proconsul, "I am a Christian and cannot fight." On being told that there was no alternative between bearing arms, and being put to death, he promptly and firmly replied—"I cannot fight, if I die." He continued firm to his principles, and was led to execution.

The primitive Christians not only refused to enlist, as soldiers, but those in the army who embraced Christianity, immediately abandoned the profession, without regard to consequences.

Marcellus, a Roman Centurion, on becoming a convert to Christianity, promptly resigned his commission, declaring, that having become a Christian, he could serve no longer—"It is not lawful," said he, for a Christian to bear arms for any earthly consideration." He continued firm in his refusal, and suffered death on that account.

Cassian, who was a Notary in the same legion, on embracing Christianity, resigned his commission, and firmly adhering to the sentiments avowed by Marcellus—like him was led to execution. Martin, another Roman, who was bred to the profession of arms, on being converted to Christianity, abandoned the army, saying, "I am a Christian and therefore I cannot fight."

These are not isolated cases—many more might be adduced if it were necessary—but the fact we aim to establish will not be denied. Tertullian, in speaking of a large portion of the Roman armies, after Christianity had been widely spread over the world, expressly assures us, that "not a Christian could be found among them." Irenæus, Justin Martyr, and others, furnish conclusive evidence that the Christians of their day bore the most ample testimony to the incompatibility of war with the religion of the Gospel—and that many of them sealed their testimony with their blood. Clement of Alexandria, speaks of Christians as the "followers of peace," and says expressly that they "used none of the implements of war." Lactantius, another early Christian, alleges that, "it can never be lawful for a righteous man to go to war."

The evidence upon this point is fully sustained by the early opponents of Christianity: Celsus, who lived towards the close of the second century, accuses the Christians of his day, "of refusing to bear arms, even in cases of necessity." Origen, the defender of Christianity, does not deny, but admits the fact, and justifies it on the ground that war was unlawful

If, then, the language of prophecy is clear and positive that the time will come, when nation shall not lift up sword against nation, nor the people learn war any more:—

If in accordance with this prophecy, the precepts and commandments of our Saviour are pacific in the fullest degree; strictly enjoining the forgiveness of injuries; making it the only condition upon which men can hope to be forgiven—and if He as strictly prohibited the indulgence of a spirit of resentment, or retaliation:—

If the early converts, under the teaching of the Apostles and their immediate successors, were so solemnly impressed with the belief that war was forbidden by their holy Redeemer, that they could not be induced to "bear arms for any earthly consideration," many of them nobly yielding up their lives in confirmation of their faith:—

If all this be indisputable, we ask, if the proposition is not fully and clearly established—that war is a grievous violation of the principles of our holy religion?

It remains now to account for the change that has taken place in the practice of the professors of this benign religion, in relation to war. The importance of the subject, and the magnitude of the evils consequent upon the change, calls for the clearest evidence of its propriety, and of its consistency with the precepts and spirit of the Gospel.

The Apostles foretold that after their decease, a departure from the purity of the Christian faith would take place—that "men would arise speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them," and that many would follow their pernicious ways, by reason of whom the way of truth would be evil spoken of."

That this prediction was strictly fulfilled, will be generally admitted. The falling away from the meek and unresisting spirit which so conspicuously marked the primitive Church, was gradual, keeping pace with the increase of the general profanity, and was doubtless accelerated by the corrupting influence of a union between the Church and the State.

When princes adopted the Christian religion from motives of state policy, it is not just cause of surprise, that couriers should claim to be converts—not that a modified and adulterated system of religion should ensue, and ultimately prevail amongst subjects,—nor that war should cease to be regarded as a violation of the spirit and precepts of the Gospel.

It will not be denied, that the precepts and injunctions of our blessed Lord, are binding upon individual believers. It becomes then an inquiry of the utmost importance, and we commend it to the mature and solemn reflection of all. By what human authority—by what human tribunal, can a community be absolved from the observance of those Divine laws and injunctions which are acknowledged to be binding upon its individual members?

If it be said, that Christianity exonerates nations from those duties, which she has imposed upon individuals, we ask for the ground upon which the assumption is based. If the plea of expediency be made, does it not imply a distrust of Divine protection? And if expediency be a justification of a violation of one Divine law, it is not perceived why it may not, with equal propriety, be urged in justification of a violation of every other Divine law. If human authority may abrogate, or suspend one law of God, why may not the same authority exercise the same power in regard to every other law of the Creator? Again, if the plea of expediency in relation to Christian doctrine and practice be admissible; by it could not the multitude of martyrs have escaped, who offered up their lives rather than deny the Lord that bought them, or violate his holy injunctions?

It may be said,—indeed it often is said, that war, though a great evil, is an evil that cannot be avoided in the present state of the world; and this conclusion may serve to quiet the consciences of many, whose feelings revolt at the fearful realities of war. Let us examine the correctness of the conclusion, that war is unavoidable—has the trial been made and found to be impracticable?

It is indeed to be regretted, that no instance of a strictly national character has yet occurred, to test the practicability of the principle for which we plead,—an unreasoning reliance upon the Omnipotent Arm for protection and defence. There is, however, a case to which we may refer, of a strong character, and sufficiently national for all the purposes of our argument.—Pennsylvania, it is known, was settled by men who believed that Christianity forbade war under any and every pretext. They acted in strict accordance with this belief. They planted themselves in the midst of savages. They were surrounded by men who knew nothing of written treaties, or the obligations of revealed religion; by men who were addicted to war in its most sanguinary and revolting forms;—and yet "for more than seventy years," and up to the time that the government of the Colony passed into other hands, they enjoyed uninterrupted peace.

"The Pennsylvanians," says Clarkson, "became armed, though without arms; they became strong though without strength; they became safe, without the ordinary means of safe-

ty. For the greater part of a century, and never during the administration of William Penn, or that of his proper successors, was there a quarrel or a war."—"Whatever the quarrels of the Pennsylvania Indians were with others, they uniformly respected, and held sacred, as it were, the territories of William Penn."

The settlers of Pennsylvania, relying upon Divine protection, placed themselves in the midst of savages, without the means of resisting aggression;—and even savage magnanimity felt the appeal—suppressed the war-cry—and permitted them to possess the land in undisturbed repose. What a lesson, may we not ask, to Christian nations!

How painfully, how instructively, does the situation of other American colonies contrast with this! We will not attempt to portray it; but refer to the blood-stained pages of colonial history.

Will it be said that the same confiding spirit, and peaceable deportment, if practised in sincerity and truth, towards nations professing the benign religion of the Gospel, would be more dangerous or less successful? We trust not—such a conclusion would be a libel upon mankind—a denial of the efficacy of the Christian religion—and an inexcusable distrust of the Providence and moral government of God.

It is not unusual to attempt a justification of war under the Gospel dispensation, by referring to the wars of the Jews, under the dispensation of the Law. It is conceded that many of these wars were authorized by the Supreme Ruler of the universe, for purposes of his own inscrutable wisdom; but this high authority cannot be claimed by Christian nations; and it has been shown that the two dispensations are essentially different—that holy men during the continuance of the legal dispensation, predicted, under the influence of the spirit of prophecy, that the time would come when nation should cease to lift up sword against nation, or to learn war any more. We have seen that the Divine Author and Founder of the existing dispensation, called the attention of his followers to those violent and vindictive passions, the indulgence of which were allowed under the Law, for the express purpose of excluding them from the code of morals which it was His purpose to establish; and that His immediate followers, and their successors for nearly two centuries, firmly believed that war was forbidden by their Divine Master. We have shown that the conviction was so solemnly sealed upon their consciences, that when called by the rulers of that day to serve as soldiers, no earthly consideration or suffering could induce them to swerve from this article of primitive Christian faith.

And the early writers, Irenæus, Justin Martyr, and Tertullian, affirm as their belief, that the prophecy which declares that men should turn their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks, was then fulfilled. With the hope of enforcing our views upon this subject, and for the purpose of showing that they are neither wild or visionary, we here offer the sentiments of persons respecting it, who lived at different periods of time, and were eminent for their piety or learning.

"War," says Erasmus, "does more harm to the morals of men than even to their property and persons."—"and again, "They who defend war, must defend the dispositions which lead to war; and these dispositions are absolutely forbidden by the Gospel."

Richard Watson, Bishop of Llandaff, asserts that "War has practices and principles, peculiar to itself, which but ill quadrate with the rules of moral rectitude, and are quite abhorrent to the benignity of Christianity."

Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon and Lord high Chancellor of England, says, that "War introduces and propagates opinions and practices as much against Heaven as against earth; it lays our nature and our manners as waste as our gardens and habitations; and we can as easily preserve the beauty of the one as the integrity of the other, under the cursed jurisdiction of drums and trumpets."

William Law, a pious minister of the church of England, and well known as the author of "A Practical Treatise on Christianity," avers that "There is not a virtue of Gospel goodness, but has its death-blow from war."

The eminent Dr. V. Knox, after remarking that almost all the professions have some characteristic manner, observes, "It happens, unfortunately, that profanity, libertinism, and infidelity, are thought by weaker minds, almost as necessary a part of a soldier's uniform, as his shoulder-knot. To hesitate at an oath, to decline intoxication, to profess a regard for religion, would be almost as ignominious as to refuse a challenge."

The British poet, Southey, notwithstanding he had eulogized the heroes of his native land, was constrained to speak in terms of high commendation of those who refuse to fight; and he declares that "The prohibition of war by our Divine Master, is plain, literal, and undeniable."

The Bishop of Llandaff, already quoted, says, "I am persuaded that when the spirit of Christianity shall exert its proper influence over

the minds of individuals, and especially over the minds of public men in their public capacities, over the minds of men constituting the councils of Princes,—when this happy period shall arrive, war will cease throughout the whole Christian world."

Now, if it be true that—"The dispositions which lead to war are absolutely forbidden by the Gospel;"—if they "are quite abhorrent to the benignity of Christianity;"—if war "introduces and propagates opinions and practices as much against Heaven as against earth;"—if it "lays our nature and our manners as waste as our gardens and habitations," and renders it as difficult to preserve "the beauty of the one, as the integrity of the other;"—

If "There is not a virtue of Gospel goodness, but has its death-blow from war;"—if it is productive of "profanity, libertinism, and infidelity;"—if all this be true, should not every wise and good man—should not all who are seeking to promote the present and eternal welfare of their fellowmen, unite in one great and untiring effort to abolish,—to banish from the earth this cruel, demoralizing, and destructive scourge?

A state of universal and enduring peace—even if, as some suppose, it is to be accomplished by a special interposition of Divine Providence, at some remote period of time,—is a delightful theme to contemplate.

We, also, believe, in accordance with prophecy, that it will arrive; but, we believe that it will be a result of individual faithfulness. We fully unite in opinion with the Bishop of Llandaff, that peace will become universal, "whenever the spirit of Christianity shall exert its proper influence;"—and we have shown that Christianity did produce it, in an earlier and purer state of the Church—so far, at least, as Christianity prevailed.

If, then, peace on earth be looked to as an end and an aim of our holy religion—is not each individual believer called upon to cultivate in himself, and endeavor to promote in others, those feelings and that course of conduct which are calculated to produce this blessed effect?

We have ventured especially to request the attention of those who have assumed the responsible station of ministers and teachers of the Christian religion, to this subject, because, whatever effects the character of this religion, or opposes its progress in the world, seems peculiarly to claim their notice. And we would suggest, that the fact of our country being at the present time engaged in war furnishes a strong reason for entering into a careful examination of the evidence respecting the lawfulness of war under the Gospel dispensation.

May we venture to ask whether those pacific principles by which the Church in the apostolic age—and, indeed, during the first and greater part of the second centuries, was so remarkably distinguished, are inculcated by the Christian teachers of the present day, with that clearness and fullness, to which they are justly entitled?

Even those who do not fully unite with us in the belief, that "war is unreservedly prohibited by the Christian religion," must admit that, besides the misery and suffering it produces—it is highly demoralizing—and that it eminently tends to retard the progress of vital religion among men:—and if so, the glorious theme of "peace on earth" should not fail to find devoted advocates in all who are sincerely seeking to promote the present and eternal welfare of their fellow-men.

We are aware that when the public mind is strongly excited, it may require great moral courage, and a deep and abiding sense of duty, to enable the pastor to stand firmly at his post, and advocate the noble cause of peace. But these are occasions when, by reason of the position he occupies, his constant intercourse with the people, and the influence he exerts upon their feelings, he may—by restraining, or by giving a right direction to the popular impulse—become instrumental in hastening the day when righteousness shall cover the earth, as the waters cover the sea.

In conclusion, we would ask attention to one view of the subject of war, which commends itself with awful solemnity to the consideration of all, and with peculiar force to those who are now addressing. We refer to the ultimate—to the unseen consequences of war—to the final state of the myriads of spirits, disembodied, it is greatly to be feared, while under the influence of the most ferocious passions, and sent uncalled, into the world of righteous retribution.

The reflection is awful indeed—and must, we would fain hope, command the most serious attention;—and by producing a firm conviction of the utter incompatibility of war with the meek, forgiving, and peaceable spirit of the Gospel, lead to increased and earnest efforts to eradicate from the earth this scourge to the family of man.

If, then, the fruits of war be anguish, unspeakable, and bitterness in the latter end—how strong—how powerful is the claim upon our efforts to oppose it, and restore the Church to the state of purity in which it stood in the primitive period of its existence!

May the Lord in his mercy hasten the day when this shall be effected; when nation shall no longer lift up sword against nation, and the people shall learn war no more; but the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdoms of the Lord, and of his Christ.

Signed on behalf and by direction of a Meeting of the Representatives of the Religious Society of the Friends, of the Yearly Meeting of New York, held in the City of New York, the 4th of First month, 1848.

RICHARD CARPENTER, Clerk.