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# Christians & War

## DAVE BAST

War is a difficult subject to struggle with, especially for Christians, or at least it should be. If we are told that we are not to commit murder, then is it okay for Christians to go to war? How should we respond or think about this? This week on *Groundwork*, retired chaplain Herman Keizer joins us to talk about a biblical response to these deep questions. Stay tuned.

## BOB HEERSPINK

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Bob Heerspink.

## DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and today, Bob, we are addressing another one of those difficult questions that 8<sup>th</sup> graders have thrown at us.

## BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

## DAVE BAST

Here it is for this week: How should Christians respond or act to the war? I think they are thinking of the war in Afghanistan and Iraq; after all, this is a person who's probably their whole life pretty much it has been in the news. We have been at war for 10 years now, since 9/11. So this student, this young person asks: Should we support the war or what? If we are not supposed to murder, why is it okay for Christians to go to war?

## BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; I would think that here is a young person who is saying: Hey, I hear the pastor preach a sermon: Thou shalt not kill; Jesus tells us turn the other cheek; then at the same time we are very thankful when someone from the congregation enlists and says: I am willing to defend our country.

## DAVE BAST

Yes, and they are prayed for every week, you know. Don't forget our service men and women, yes.

## BOB HEERSPINK

Packages are sent out...

## DAVE BAST

So, what is the deal here? That is a tough one. In fact, we asked these questions on our websites and we got very clearly kind of two sides to this. For example, here is something posted by a woman named Alana: By definition, being a Christian means being Christ-like or walking in his footsteps. Somehow, I just don't see Jesus carrying a gun to kill his nation's enemies – just my humble opinion.

## BOB HEERSPINK

Well, that is someone looking at the way Jesus lived his life, and said if Jesus wouldn't enlist in the military, then maybe we as Christians shouldn't enlist in the military either; but there were other opinions expressed,

and one of them was by Christopher, who says: I am a Christian and I serve in the U.S. Army. I know some Christians who say they are called to the military and I know some who strongly believe they shouldn't. I don't go looking for people to fight, but I will fight to defend those I care about: family, friends or fellow service members. So here is someone saying: I really feel actually a call. God has led me to serve in the military in this country.

### **DAVE BAST**

Yes, and I think most of us probably would come down on that side, that if we are called upon to defend our family, our friends, our squad members, we are going to do that; and so, Christians have responded and enlisted in the military or they serve as police officers because after all, it is the same issue, the use of violence in order to protect or defend, ideally. That is what it is all about.

### **BOB HEERSPINK**

And yet, you have wars where both sides go in saying: God is on my side. During World War II, it was not just the Allies who saw God on their side, but the Nazis went in with belt buckles that said: God With Us.

### **DAVE BAST**

Well, the German Army: Gott Mit Uns, yes. Well, those are great questions, and questions that are being wrestled with, not just by 8<sup>th</sup> graders. I hope all of us are doing that. You know, I think there are two extremes that it is easy to fall into; kind of the jingoistic – my nation right or wrong – don't ever question; or on the other hand: No, this is violence. No Christian could ever be caught up in that. So, let's try to explore that and find the middle way; and fortunately, we are joined by somebody who spent a long time not only thinking about these questions, but living them in reality as a military chaplain, Pastor Herman Keizer, and he will be joining us after a quick break.

*Segment 2*

### **BOB HEERSPINK**

Welcome back to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Bob Heerspink, and joining me is my co-host Dave Bast; and with us today is Chaplain Herm Keizer. Herm has a long history of service to our country. He has been an active chaplain in Vietnam, has served for 17 years in the Pentagon, and after that with the State Department. Welcome, Herm, to our program.

### **HERMAN KEIZER**

Thanks, Bob. Nice to be here.

### **BOB HEERSPINK**

Well, Herm, we are here to discuss some of the challenges that Christians face when dealing with issues of war. You know, that tension that Christians often find when they go to scripture; one the one hand: Love your enemies. Do not kill. On the other hand: Obey the government. How have you in your experience – and certainly you have lived this; you have not just thought about it theoretically – how do you start bringing those strands of scripture together?

### **HERMAN KEIZER**

Well, I think you really have to think seriously about what the scripture says, and also what our obligation is to the government. You know, when Jesus is asked whether he should pay tribute to Caesar, he is asked that by the Pharisees, and the Pharisees were very nationalistic; so what Jesus is really saying back to them is to give to Caesar the things that belong to Caesar, and your nationalism shouldn't get in the way of your obligation to pay your taxes.

### **DAVE BAST**

Right; that is in Matthew 22...

## **HERMAN KEIZER**

Right.

## **DAVE BAST**

And they set it up to try to get him to say something that could either be considered disloyal to Rome or unpatriotic to Jewish nationalism, and he kind of stymied them by saying: You know, you actually have obligations to Caesar.

## **HERMAN KEIZER**

It wasn't so much government to government, it was faith allegiance on one hand that the Pharisees had to the Israelites, and then Caesar is god for the Romans, and so really, it is a choice between which deities are you going to serve; and I think Jesus says: Hey, both of those are misplaced ways of looking at how God operates in this world.

## **DAVE BAST**

Paul says in Romans 13 – this is another foundation passage for this whole idea of what we owe to the government that is over us – he says that it is constituted by God; it is an extension of God's authority and that it does not bear the sword in vain. It is to punish wrongdoers and all that. Talk a little bit about that, too, and how that has a bearing on this question of war.

## **HERMAN KEIZER**

I think a lot of times that Romans passage is taken out of context. In Romans 12 Paul addresses the whole notion of taking vengeance on yourself, and he says that is wrong. Vengeance belongs to God not to us, and then he talks about the role of government, and I think that comes out of his Hebrew tradition, where the prophets have always said that the leaders in Israel were, in fact, representatives of God, and even Cyrus was God's servant when he came to take them captive. You know, I would have a hard time saying that if we had been taken over by Germany in World War II, you know, I would say Hitler is God's servant? Give me a break. And then it is followed on that by another passage about love; and so I think that what Paul is saying is you have to obey government in order to get rid of unabated chaos; but at the same time, if your government is wrong, then you have an obligation to speak against the government because we are really living under the reign of Christ, because the second part of Romans 13, I think, deals with the second coming.

## **BOB HEERSPINK**

So, when you have dealt with people who have come to you and have said: Yes, the government does have the power of the sword, it can wage war, but with this war, is it right or wrong? What kind of principles do we offer Christians to evaluate whether we should go to war?

## **HERMAN KEIZER**

Well, I think there have been three kinds of historic positions that Christians have felt about war. One is that crusade kind of thing, that all war is somehow God's business. The second one is pacifism, where you don't participate in any way with government, but you can critique government from outside, and a Christian life is really separate from civil life in many ways. Most pacifists don't even run for elective office; and then the biggest tradition is the "just war" tradition, and that is back in the ancient Greeks, but it is picked up by St. Augustine at the time of the Constantinian change; and then service in the military became a possibility for Christians, where I am not so sure it was a possibility before; and then with Caesar no longer taking the role of God, is it as much idolatry as when Paul spoke those words and Nero was the emperor? You know, it seems to me that part of the idolatry had gone away because no longer was Caesar seen as God. You know, he had converted to Christianity; his mother did all kinds of things; so in many ways, the "just war" tradition goes way back. Then in the Middle Ages St. Thomas Aquinas picks it up again; and then it is picked up by a lot of the religious lawyers, and we have a tendency to forget that most of the lawyers in the Middle Ages were religious and they dealt a lot with religious law; and they began to put those things within the context of international law, so that now what you have in the "just war" tradition is, you have established an international law the kinds of things that come out of our Christian tradition. For instance, invasion is not a

just war; so when you look at what happened in Kuwait, you know, that was an invasion on the part of Iraq into Kuwait, and the United Nations came up and said: No, that is illegal by international law.

**BOB HEERSPINK**

That kind of aggression is simply ruled out in a just war.

**HERMAN KEIZER**

Right.

**DAVE BAST**

Okay; so, Christians take different approaches to this whole question of the legitimacy of government and using force in war; and some say: No, not at all, nothing; we opt out; we are pacifists; we won't even participate in government; but the majority view is that God has given us government for a good purpose. It is to keep us all from just killing each other in revenge. So the State is given a monopoly of legitimate force in its armed forces and its police forces, and most Christians think it is legitimate for us to participate then because we are serving God that way, but within certain limits of what is right and wrong, of justice or injustice.

**HERMAN KEIZER**

Right; and I think, you know, the war in Afghanistan has been judged by Christians as a just war because Afghanistan was being used as a base to train terrorists and it was obvious and we knew that that was going on. We knew that because we had helped the Mujahideen go against Russia...

**DAVE BAST**

Right.

**HERMAN KEIZER**

So we had a lot of knowledge about what was going on in Afghanistan.

**DAVE BAST**

And in that case where basically it is self defense in a sense because we were attacked by terrorists and we are responding by trying to go after them.

**HERMAN KEIZER**

Right; and so we are acting against aggression; and when you look at the war in Iraq, the question really becomes: Was that kind of a preemptive thing? Were we really in danger from Saddam; and if we were, then we could have acted, but the main criterion always in acting first is, is there a clear and present danger?

**DAVE BAST**

So that is a little more murky. You are suggesting that that is one that Christians might be a little more divided on.

**HERMAN KEIZER**

Right; and most Christian churches that accept the "just war" tradition are also nuclear pacifists, you know, because they say those kinds of weapons can never be used because of the terrible destruction it causes on humanity, and you cannot discriminate military from civilian, nor can you really be proportional. I mean, once you drop one of those things you are causing huge amounts of devastation.

**BOB HEERSPINK**

That oversteps bounds that just are not acceptable.

**HERMAN KEIZER**

Right.

**BOB HEERSPINK**

Well, we have to take a break right now, but we will be back in a moment with Chaplain Keizer and explore more fully what practical implications we have as Christians for living in a world that is so often at war.

*Segment 3*

**DAVE BAST**

Welcome back to our *Groundwork* conversation. Along with Bob Heerspink, I am Dave Bast, and we are also joined today by Herman Keizer, a retired Army chaplain. We have been talking about the idea of a “just war,” of the fact that God has ordained governments and given them the responsibility, even, we could say, for protecting innocent lives; for self defense, both as a nation and in communities; but there are rules even that govern war, and Herm, you have just been sharing some of these; the idea that it must be a legitimate cause. You cannot be an aggressor or an invader. The fact that there are some things even in war that you are not supposed to do, not in a moral way anyway; like using mass destruction weapons and just killing anyone and everyone; but what I would like to explore a little bit further is the human side of this. You have been in combat yourself. You have dealt with hundreds and hundreds of soldiers who have struggled with probably some moral questions. Is that true? Do our own troops struggle with these same issues themselves?

**HERMAN KEIZER**

Oh, yes; a lot of times, and more so now than I think in the past, because in the past not too many soldiers shot to kill. There have been studies that in World War II only twenty percent of the soldiers on the battlefield shot to kill; so after Vietnam, the government...

**DAVE BAST**

Just let me stop you there a minute because in a way that is fascinating. So, most of them were shooting just to shoot sort of in the general direction. They were hoping they didn't hit anything.

**HERMAN KEIZER**

Right.

**DAVE BAST**

So most of the people who were killed were killed by accident.

**HERMAN KEIZER**

There is a kind of aversion on the part of human beings to take another life...

**DAVE BAST**

Which is God-given, probably; yes.

**HERMAN KEIZER**

Right; and you know, even St. Augustine says that you cannot kill to protect yourself because we are such selfish creatures that we would always have to question our motivations in order to just protect ourselves. If you are looking for laws of self-protection, don't go to St. Augustine; but St. Augustine says that if somebody is going after you, then I no longer have a right to, but sometimes I have an obligation to protect you.

**DAVE BAST**

In other words, I don't necessarily have an obligation to protect myself, but I have an obligation to protect a defenseless brother or sister.

**HERMAN KEIZER**

Right.

**BOB HEERSPINK**

But you know, I have often heard it said, Herm, that to really be ready to kill another person in war, so often we have to see the enemy as less than human. We dehumanize, we call the enemy names, and therefore we can kill them. So I would imagine for a soldier to both do his or her work and yet not see the enemy as less than a real human being is a real challenge.

**HERMAN KEIZER**

Yes, and that was one of the real challenges that I first faced when I got to Vietnam. So I came in and I talked to the commander and he said he would try to do everything he could to stop that, and he just was not successful. So I asked him if I could try something and he said sure. So in formation I asked the soldiers that if they could keep any of the military items on the dead enemy that they wanted, but I wanted to have all of their personal kinds of items; so if you found a wallet, if you found family pictures, if you found a little money, those kinds of things, give that to me; and within two weeks suddenly the enemy was humanized. Here was a picture of this man – and they could see he was lying dead in front of them – but the picture showed him with a wife and a child; and you cannot dehumanize that kind of proof no matter how much you would want to, but it is easier if you dehumanize them because, you know, then you are not killing people; but the way we train people now with pop-ups that are all silhouettes of people, it isn't always in their mind that what you are shooting at is a person; and that also desensitizes people. Our military now is the most lethal force that has ever been on the ground in ground combat, and about 85% of our soldiers shoot to kill.

**DAVE BAST**

Now.

**HERMAN KEIZER**

Now; and then you give them crew-served weapons, which are automatic weapons like machine guns and everything like that, and you have more people killing. What I have found in my time in the chaplaincy is that that causes the kind of problem that we really haven't looked at very much, and that is moral injury in war. What happens if you see a whole group of people killed and then you find out that none of them were warriors? That happens with real regularity in the kind of nonconventional wars we are fighting now. We train our soldiers to be reflexive, and all of a sudden when it is over, then you reflect on what you have done.

**DAVE BAST**

Yes.

**HERMAN KEIZER**

And that is when morality comes. You know, that is when all of these things about "Thou shalt not kill," all these other things come sweeping in and you feel the condemnation; and then what happens is you walk home and you walk into your living room and your aunt says: Did you kill somebody over there? Because there is a kind of fascination about that, too...

**DAVE BAST**

Right, right.

**HERMAN KEIZER**

And right away the person – the soldier or Marine who is sitting there says: They think I am a murderer.

**DAVE BAST**

Yes; and what you are saying, I don't think very many civilians realize this at all, that there has been this shift in our own military as a result of a different kind of training; so we are turning out more killers, and we are doing it by teaching them to shoot automatically, as if it is like in a shooting gallery, but then afterwards, this reaction sets in. They think: What have I done?

## **HERMAN KEIZER**

Yes; there was a young major at West Point who was trying to build into the training some notion about accountability in war, and what responsibility... I mean, what is the agency in war; and you are an agent of the State, you know, and what does that mean when you act on a battle field that is different then say in a bar brawl? Unfortunately, we haven't done very well with that; and a lot of that, I think, comes out of the idea: America right or wrong, no matter what we do; and you really don't want soldiers questioning. Everybody says when you see the enemy it is not time to think about whether you should. I struggled with the military a lot on the necessity of training people to act reflexively. Is that really the moral obligation of the trainers of our military; and then, doesn't that have to be balanced by something? I mean, if you are training them to be reflexive, then how in the world are they going to handle things when they reflect on what they have done, just out of sheer... they have practiced to do it that way?

## **BOB HEERSPINK**

Right; you mentioned the soldier coming home and being with his aunt and then she asks this question. What can Christians back home, and what can the Church do to help soldiers or to minister to soldiers effectively? Asking those kinds of questions, I assume, is not very helpful. What advice would you give to the people listening to the program who say: Well, I know soldiers who are in the Army or in the other military fields, what can I do for them?

## **HERMAN KEIZER**

Well, I think one of the things that you have to do is you have to separate the soldier from the cause that the soldier is fighting. You know, the problem with Vietnam was the soldiers were the baby killers. The government did nothing wrong. I walked with crosses on my uniform and was spit at. Here I am a non-combatant and I am getting spit and told I am a baby killer; and that is very, very destructive. If you look in the airports sometimes you will see when the soldiers are coming back some people will stand up and give them a round of applause and thanks, and most of those who start that are Vietnam vets because they don't want people coming back the way we came back; and I think one of the things we can do is say: Look, you went over and you did your duty as you saw it, and that is part of your obligation, to do your duty; and if the government was wrong, then you and I need to sit down and have some serious discussions before we go to war about whether the war is just or unjust. You know, the Congress of the United States is supposed to declare war. Congress has not declared war since World War II, and I think as a result of the presidential powers, what we have done is we have cut off the public from the debate about whether this is really something that we should be about or not. I think when the public is cut off then the Church doesn't have a place, really, to talk about that either, and we should.

## **DAVE BAST**

So the place to be engaged and involved is with our government now before more wars start and not after.

## **HERMAN KEIZER**

Yes, and as a body of believers. I don't think this is an individual dialogue that needs to take place only internally; I think it is a dialogue that has to be up front. It is crazy, we have international laws that ban all kinds of weapons of mass destruction except nuclear weapons. Now, what are we afraid of....

## **DAVE BAST**

Yes, that is a crazy thing.

## **HERMAN KEIZER**

What are we hiding? There are just some things that are just not allowed to see the light of day. Like I think the American public should know that our training has made us the most effective and lethal army that we have ever fielded.

## **DAVE BAST**

Well, Chaplain Herman Keizer, thank you for joining this conversation. It is a difficult one – a tough one – and there is a lot more to be said, but maybe in another program we will take it up.

Thanks to you too for joining our *Groundwork* conversation, and please remember it is listeners like you asking questions that can keep our topics relevant. So tell us what you think about what you are hearing, and suggest some things you would like to hear on future *Groundwork* programs. Just visit us at [groundworkonline.com](https://groundworkonline.com) and join the conversation.

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