

## Should Christians go to war?

Have you ever wondered how people of peace, like Christians, can contemplate the use of force?

Certainly the violence of these opening years of the 21st century is staggering. Terrorist activity and military conflict worldwide – the resulting loss of life can never, ever, be things of which the human race can be proud. No wonder such mayhem causes us distress – and this distress should ideally drive us to prayer.

As for what Christians should do, here are some questions to consider:-

### 1. Do we believe in the validity of punishment?

The answer, surely, must be Yes – if there is such a thing as objective truth and a given morality by which human life is ordered. If this were not so, we would have to remove from our vocabulary such words as ‘reward’, ‘merit’, ‘justice’ and even ‘forgiveness’.

Punishment is not a popular word in circles that dislike the language of retribution, and who speak rather of ‘corrective punishment’. However, St Paul said secular authority is “God’s servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.” (Romans 13:4, NIV). So the treatment of wrongdoing must have a retributive element in it, if it is ever to be corrective.

### 2. Is there a difference between force and violence?

The use of force is the disciplinary exercise of lawful authority – as seen, for example, in a well-run police force. This is a valid part of God’s order. St Paul said: “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities...he who rebels is rebelling against what God has instituted....” (Romans 13:1,2 NIV)

Of course ‘force’ can become ‘violence’ under a repressive authority. Revelation 13:5-8 depicts such authorities as a blasphemous “beast”. Then the call can indeed be for civil disobedience. The earliest Trades Unions themselves were begun through Christian influence!

### 3. Do we assent to the depravity of the human heart?

People are selfish. We can’t be trusted to behave well towards others. So our societies need to agree rules for our order and survival. Without such restraints, and the power to apply them, chaos and anarchy are the result.

A Christian is called to shun all violence, but to also be committed to the disciplined use of force. Sadly, a lot of muddled thinking takes place (especially during times of international conflict) when the debate fails to take account of the difference between violence and force.

Force is concerned with the upholding of law. Violence is concerned with the overthrow of law.

**Mankind must put an end to war,  
or war will put an end to mankind.**

John F Kennedy