

What Are Methodist Beliefs about War?

Unless you've been living a completely screen-free and media-free life, you've heard about the war the United States government recently started in Iran with the assistance of and on behalf of Israel. There's an entire other post to be made about the (dubious) theological motivations behind war with Iran, and maybe I'll write that next week. But for now, I'm going to stick with the topic of United Methodist beliefs about war and how they evolved from John Wesley's opposition of war as well as the general biblically-based views of war.

Christians in general tend to embody one of two positions regarding war: *pacifism* or the *just-war position*. Pacifism, in short, is the belief that war is always wrong and Christians have a moral duty to avoid fighting in wars (known as conscientious objection). The just-war position holds that "the state has an obligation to protect people from the destruction that others do, to avenge injuries, and to restore what has been unjustly taken." A just war, then, is a war that is waged in order to **help** rather than to harm.

The official United Methodist position acknowledges pacifism but leans toward the just-war position simply because the official UMC position does not forbid or condemn military service. While it also supports conscientious objection, it does allow military service chosen "as a result of personal conviction." In the United Methodist Revised Social Principles, the Church writes,

"We reject the use of war as an instrument of foreign policy and insist that every peaceful and diplomatic means of resolution be exhausted before the start of armed conflicts. Similarly, we oppose the increasing reliance on preemptive strikes unless they can be clearly demonstrated to be proportionate in response, delimited in human casualties, and undertaken in response to clear and immediate threats to human lives. ... Christians have struggled with the issue of war since the time of Jesus. Some Christians have argued historically that war and other acts of violence are never acceptable, while other believers have asserted that it is sometimes necessary to take up arms in self-defense or to defend the innocent and prevent unchecked aggression, tyranny and genocide."

The US government's recent preemptive strikes on targets in Iran, including an elementary school full of young girls, meets 0 of the 3 criteria of justification listed

above. And “unchecked aggression” is a pretty tidy summation of current US foreign policy.

In the same paragraph of the Revised Social Principles that I cited above, this line also appears: “We grieve that in a world where so many live in poverty, governments continue to dedicate enormous resources to preparing for and conducting wars.” The US’s military action in Iran has cost approximately \$50 billion so far, while millions of Americans go without SNAP food assistance and Medicaid due to cost-cutting.

The Council of Bishops, in their recent letter on Middle East aggression, wrote this:

“We stand resolute in remembering the uncompromising call of Jesus: ‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God’ (Matthew 5:9). This calling is a summons to act with courage and with a steadfast commitment to honoring the dignity and life of every human being. We urge leaders on every side to turn from the escalation of violence and seek paths toward justice, reconciliation, and lasting peace. We implore them to place the protection of innocent lives at the center of every decision.”

Does the Church’s current position line up with John Wesley’s beliefs about war? Well, yes and no. Scholars and critics have differing interpretations of Wesley’s somewhat limited statements on war. Wesley Fellow Mark Gorman argues that “John Wesley should have been a pacifist, and we should, too.” He cites a passage from Wesley’s *A Doctrine of Original Sin*:

“But there is a still greater and more undeniable proof that the very foundations of all things, civil and religious, are utterly out of course in the Christian as well as the heathen war. There is a still more horrid reproach to the Christian name, yea to the name of man, to all reason and humanity. There is *war* in the world! ... Now who can reconcile war (I will not say to religion, but) to any degree of reason or common sense? ... So long as this monster stalks uncontrolled, where is reason, virtue, humanity? They are utterly excluded. They have no place. They are a name and nothing more.”

He then claims that, in this passage, Wesley “rejects the whole enterprise” of war the same way that pacifism does. Gorman writes, “If war is a ‘horrid reproach to the Christian name,’ then it follows that supporting war means siding with the ‘horrid reproach’ over ‘the Christian name.’ And for Wesley, ‘Christian’ was never merely about naming; it concerned the whole of life, lived before God, in community with others equally committed to the gospel.” He then adds, “If war is sinful, if it is inherently a sign of human depravity, then Christian freedom from sin must include freedom from war.”

Thus, modern United Methodists have the opportunity to “correct” this oversight by committing to pacifism.

John Singleton of the *Methodist Recorder* argues that Wesley “believed war to be the ‘foulest curse’ on the face of humanity. He described it as the denial - even the crucifixion - of all the higher attributes of civilization; it was nothing short of rebellion against humanity and God.” When the American colonists rebelled against England in the precursor of what would be known as the Revolutionary War, Wesley urged the colonists to pursue “impartial arbitration” rather than bloodshed.

Steven Rankin, writing in the *Methodist Review*, notes that “Wesley also made comments about war as a bad witness. It represented a particularly telling failure on the part of Christians. ... Warfare between Christian nations was a tragically effective counter-witness to heathen or pagan nations about the love of God which was supposed to be shed abroad in Christian hearts through the Holy Spirit.” In Wesley’s statement on the American Revolution, he writes, “Ye salt of the earth, exert the seasoning, preserving quality which you are favoured with. Bring your contentious brethren in your loving arms of faith and prayer, and lay them at your Father’s feet... .”

Let us pray for a quick and peaceful resolution to this objectively unjust war currently being waged in the Middle East, and the safe return of our troops. And let us follow the advice of the Council of Bishops: “As followers of Christ, let us be steadfast in prayer for those whose lives were taken that they may rest in God’s eternal peace. Let us pray for the wounded that healing and comfort may surround them. Let us pray for families and communities in mourning that they may find strength for the days ahead. And let us pray for leaders and nations that they may choose the path of peace over the path of destruction.”