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Freedom for Life

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We conclude our discussion of the sixth commandment by turning to the problem of war. . . .

In this case, too, we shall begin by trying to stab our consciences awake in relation to certain illusions which may have been feasible once but cannot be entertained any longer.

1. There was a time when it was possible not only for monks and ecclesiastics but also for very wide circles of secular society to throw the problem of military action wholly on the so-called military classes. The very word "soldier," with its suggestion of a being apart, has its origin in this period. War was a matter for princes and rulers and their relatively small armies. It did not concern others unless they were accidentally involved. . . .

Those days are gone. Today everyone is a military person, either directly or indirectly. That is to say, everyone participates in the suffering and action which war demands. All nations as such, and all their members, have long since become responsible military subjects. It would be ridiculous today to throw the responsibility on the collective body, i.e., the fatherland which calls, the people which rallies, and the state which orders. Each individual is himself the fatherland, the people, the state; each individual is himself a belligerent. Hence each individual must act when war is waged, and each has to ask whether the war is just or unjust. This is the first thing which today makes the problem of war so serious from the ethical standpoint. It is an illusion to think that there can be an uncommitted spectator.

2. It has always been realized that war is concerned with the acquisition and protection of material interests, more specifically the possession of land and property. In times past, however, it was easier to lose sight of the material aspect in all kinds of notions about the honour, justice, freedom and greatness of the nation as represented in its princely houses and rulers, or about the supreme human values at stake, so that something of the character of a crusade, of a religious or cultural war, could be conferred upon the conflict, when in reality the decisive if not the exclusive point was simply the deployment of power for the acquisition of power in the elemental sense. Political mysticism, of course, is still to be found; but it is now much more difficult to believe in it sincerely. Certain fog patches have lifted. . . .

This means, however, that in a way very different from previous generations we can and should realize that the real issue in war, and an effective impulse towards it, is much less man himself and his vital needs than the economic power which in war is shown not so much to be possessed by man as to possess him, and this to his ruin, since instead of helping him to live and let live it forces him to kill and be killed. War reveals the basically chaotic character of the so-called peaceful will, efforts and achievements of man. It exposes his radical inability to be master without becoming not merely a slave but his own destroyer, and therefore fundamentally a suicide. It discloses the flagrant incapacity of man and the judgment which he is always on the point of bringing on himself even in peacetime. This means that in reality it is only superficially that the question of war differs from that of peace, i.e., from the question what we will and do, on what our life is fixed and how we order it, before war comes again with its killing and being killed. Do we possess the power to live, or does it possess us? So long as it possesses us, war will always be inevitable. *Si vis pacem, para bellum*, says the old Roman proverb. But a wiser version would be: *si non vis bellum, para pacem*. We should see to it that peace is better organized. But if we want something like war even in peacetime, how can we prepare for peace? How can we do anything but mobilize for war? How can it be otherwise than that war should break out and be fought? This is the unvarnished truth from which we can no longer escape so easily today as previously.

3. It has always been realized that the main goal in war is to neutralize the forces of the enemy. But it has not always been seen so clearly as one might desire that this goal demands not merely the most skillful and courageous dedication and possible forfeiture of one's own life but also quite nakedly and brutally the killing of as many as possible of the men who make up the opposing forces. In former days this was concealed by the fact that the individual confronted an individual opponent and could thus think of himself as in an unavoidable position of self-defense in which it was his duty and right to kill. Today it is even better concealed by the fact that as a result of recent technical development the individual to a very large extent cannot even see his individual opponents as such. . . .

Today, however, the increasing scientific objectivity of military killing, the development, appalling effectiveness and dreadful nature of the methods, instruments and machines employed, and the extension of the conflict to the civilian population, have made it quite clear that war does in fact mean no more and no less than killing with neither glory, dignity nor chivalry, with neither restraint nor consideration in any respect. The glory of the so-called military profession, which has incidentally become the profession of everybody either directly or indirectly, can now feed only on the relics of ancient illusions long since stripped of their substance. Much is already gained if only we do at last soberly admit that, whatever may be the purpose or possible justice of a war, it now means that, without disguise or shame, not only individuals or even armies, but whole nations as such, are out to destroy one another by every possible means. It only needed the atom and hydrogen bomb to complete the self-disclosure of war in this regard. . . .

In view of these questions we do well to make it clear *praenumerando* that if there can be any question of a just war, if we can describe this undertaking and participation in it as commanded, then it can only be with the same, and indeed with even stricter reserve and caution than have been found to be necessary in relation to such things as suicide, abortion, capital punishment etc. War is to be set in this category, nor is there any point in concealing the fact that the soldier, i.e., the fighting civilian, stands in direct proximity to the executioner. At any rate, it is only in this extreme zone, and in conjunction with

other human acts which come dangerously near to murder, that military action can in certain instances be regarded as approved and commanded rather than prohibited.

We must also add that in this particular case the question is indeed to be put far more strictly than in relation to the other possibilities. For (1) war is an action in which the nation and all its members are actually engaged in killing, or in the direct or indirect preparation and promotion of killing. All are involved in this action, either as those who desire or as those who permit it, and in any case, as those who contribute to it in some sector. All are directly responsible in respect of the question whether it is commanded killing or forbidden murder. Again, however, killing in war is (2) a killing of those who for the individuals fighting in the service of the nation can be enemies only in the sense that they for their part have to wage war in the service of their country. The fact that the latter fight with approval on the other side can only make them appear guilty and criminal from this side. But whether the participants are guilty and criminal, and as such about to kill and therefore to murder, is a question which they also from their side might put to those who fight with approval on this side. Finally, killing in war (3), unlike the other possibilities already discussed, calls in question, not merely for individuals but for millions of men, the whole of morality, or better, obedience to the command of God in all its dimensions. Does not war demand that almost everything that God has forbidden be done on a broad front? To kill effectively, and in connexion therewith, must not those who wage war steal, rob, commit arson, lie, deceive, slander, and unfortunately to a large extent fornicate, not to speak of the almost inevitable repression of all the finer and weightier forms of obedience? And how can they believe and pray when at the climax of this whole world of dubious action it is a brutal matter of killing? It may be true that even in war many a man may save many things,—and indeed that an inner strength may become for him a more strong and genuine because a more tested possession. But it is certainly not true that people become better in war. The fact is that war is for most people a trial for which they are no match, and from the consequences of which they can never recover. Since all this is incontestable, can it and should it nevertheless be defended and ventured?

All affirmative answers to this question are wrong from the

very outset, and in Christian ethics constitute a flat betrayal of the Gospel, if they ignore the whole risk and venture of this. Nevertheless, and do not rest on an exact calculation of what is here at stake and whether we can and must nevertheless reply in the affirmative. We can also put it in this way. All affirmative answers to the question are wrong if they do not start with the assumption that the inflexible negative of pacifism has almost infinite arguments in its favor and is almost overpoweringly strong. . . .

A first essential is that war should not on any account be recognized as a normal, fixed and in some sense necessary part of what on the Christian view constitutes the just state, or the political order demanded by God. Certainly the state as such possesses power and must be able to exercise it. But it does this in any case, and it is no primary concern of Christian ethics to say that it should do so, or to maintain that the exercise of power constitutes the essence of the state, i.e., its *opus proprium*, or even a part of it. What Christian ethics must insist is that it is an *opus alienum* for the state to have to exercise power. It cannot assure the state that in the exercise of power either the state or its organs may do gaily and confidently whatever they think is right. In such cases it must always confront them with the question whether there is really any necessity for this exercise. Especially the state must not be given *carte blanche* to grasp the *ultima ratio* of organizing mass slaughter in its dealings with other states. Christian ethics cannot insist too loudly that such mass slaughter might well be mass murder, and therefore that this final possibility should not be seized like any other, but only at the very last hour in the darkest of days. The Church and theology have first and supremely to make this detached and delaying movement. If they do not first and for a long time make this the burden of their message, if they do not throw in their weight decisively on this side of the scales, they have become savourless salt, and must not be surprised if they are freely trampled underfoot on every side. It is also to be noted that, if the Church and theology think otherwise, if they do not say this first, if they do not throw their weight on this side, if they speak tediously and tritely of war as a political *opus proprium*, then at the striking of the last hour in the darkest of days they will be in no position to say authentically and authoritatively what they may say at such a time. That is to say, they will be in no

position authentically and authoritatively to issue a call to arms, to the political *opus alienum*. For they can do this only if they have previously held aloof, calling for peace right up to the very last moment. . . .

What Christian ethics has to emphasize is that neither inwardly nor outwardly does the normal task of the state, which is at issue even in time of war, consist in a process of annihilating rather than maintaining and fostering life. Nor should it be rashly maintained that annihilating life is also part of the process of maintaining and fostering it. Biological wisdom of this kind cannot serve as the norm or rule in ethics. The state which Christian ethics can and must affirm, which it has to proclaim as the political order willed and established by God, is not in itself and as such the mythological beast of the jungle, the monster with the Janus head, which by its very nature is prepared at any moment to turn thousands into killers and thousands more into killed. The Church does the state no honor, nor does it help it, if in relation to it, it acts on this assumption concerning its nature. According to the Christian understanding, it is no part of the normal task of the state to wage war; its normal task is to fashion peace in such a way that life is served and war kept at bay. If there is a mistake in pacifism, apart from the inadvisable ethical absolutism of its thesis, it consists in its abstract negation of war, as if war could be understood and negated in isolation and not in relation to the so-called peace which precedes it. Our attention should be directed to this relation. It is when a state does not rightly pursue its normal task that sooner or later it is compelled to take up the abnormal one of war, and therefore to inflict this abnormal task on other states. It is when the power of the state is insufficient to meet the inner needs of the country that it will seek an outer safety-valve for the consequent unrest and think it is found in war. It is when interest-bearing capital rather than man is the object whose maintenance and increase are the meaning and goal of the political order that the mechanism is already set going which one day will send men to kill and be killed. Against such a perversion of peace neither the supposed, though already undermined and no longer steadfast, love of the masses for peace, nor the well-meant and vocal declaiming of idealists against war, is of any avail. For the point is that when war does break out it is usually the masses who march, and even the

clearest words spoken against war, and the most painful recollections of previous wars, are rendered stale and impotent. A peace which is no real peace can make war inevitable. Hence the first, basic and decisive point which Christian ethics must make in this matter is that the state, the totality of responsible citizens, and each individual in his own conduct should so fashion peace while there is still time that it will not lead to this explosion but make war superfluous and unnecessary instead of inevitable. Relatively speaking, it requires no great faith, insight nor courage to condemn war radically and absolutely, for no one apart from leaders of the armaments industry and a few high-ranking officers really believes that war is preferable to peace. Again, it requires no faith, insight nor courage at all to howl with the wolves that unfortunately war belongs no less to the present world order, historical life and the nature of the state than does peace, so that from the very outset we must regard it as an emergency for which preparation must be made. . . . Pacifists and militarists are usually agreed in the fact that for them the fashioning of peace as the fashioning of the state for democracy, and of democracy for social democracy, is a secondary concern as compared with rearmament or disarmament. It is for this reason that Christian ethics must be opposed to both. Neither rearmament nor disarmament can be a first concern, but the restoration of an order of life which is meaningful and just. When this is so, the two slogans will not disappear. They will have their proper place. They will come up for discussion at the proper time. But they will necessarily lose their fanatical tone, since far more urgent concerns will be up for discussion. And there can always be the hope that some day both will prove to be irrelevant.

It is only against the background of this first concern, and only as the Church has a good conscience that it is doing its best for a just peace among states and nations, that it can and should plead for the preservation of peace among states and nations, for fidelity and faith in their mutual dealings as the reasonable presupposition of a true foreign policy, for solid agreements and alliances and their honest observance, for international courts and conventions, and above all, and in all nations, for openness, understanding and patience towards others and for such education of young people as will lead them to prefer peace to war. The Church can and should

raise its voice against the institution of standing armies in which the officers constitute *per se* a permanent danger to peace. It can and should resist all kinds of hysterical or premature war scares. It exists in this aeon. Hence it is not commissioned to proclaim that war is absolutely avoidable. But it is certainly commissioned to oppose the satanic doctrine that war is inevitable and therefore justified, that it is unavoidable and therefore right when it occurs, so that Christians have to participate in it. Even in a world in which states and nations are still in the early stages and never at the end of the long road in respect of that first concern, there is never in practice an absolute necessity of war, and the Church certainly has neither right nor obligation to affirm this necessity either in general or in detail as the occasion may arise. We do not need optimism but simply a modicum of sane intelligence to recognize that relatively if not absolutely, in practice if not in principle, war can be avoided to a very large extent. The Church must not preach pacifism, but it must see to it that this sane intelligence is voiced and heard so long as this is possible, and that the many ways of avoiding war which now exist in practice should be honestly applied until they are all exhausted. It is better in this respect that the Church should stick to its post too long and become a forlorn hope than that it should leave it too soon and then have to realize that it has become unfaithful by yielding to the general excitement, and that it is thus the accessory to an avoidable war which can only be described as mass murder. In excitement and propaganda there lurks already the mass killing which can only be mass murder. On no account, not even *in extremis*, should the Church be found among the agitators or use their language. Deliberate agitators, and those deceived by them, must always be firmly and quietly resisted, whether they like it or not. And this is what the Church can do with its word. Hence its word must never be a howling with the pack.

If only the Church had learned the two lessons (a) of Christian concern for the fashioning of true peace among nations to keep war at bay, and (b) of Christian concern for peaceful measures and solutions among states to avert war; if only these two requirements and their unconditional primacy were the assured possession of all Christian ethics, we might feel better assured both against misunderstandings and also against threatened relapses into the post-Constantinian theol-

ogy of war, and we might therefore be confident to say that we cannot accept the absolutism of the pacifist thesis, and that Christian support for war and in war is not entirely beyond the bounds of possibility. . . .

This . . . point rests on the assumption that the conduct of one state or nation can throw another into the wholly abnormal situation of emergency in which not merely its greater or lesser prosperity but its very existence and autonomy are menaced and attacked. In consequence of the attitude of this other state, a nation can find itself faced by the question whether it must surrender or assert itself as such in face of the claims of the other. Nothing less than this final question must be at issue if a war is to be just and necessary.

Perhaps a state desires to expand politically, geographically or economically, and therefore to extend its frontiers and dominion. Perhaps it thinks it necessary to rectify its internal conditions, e.g., to bring about political unity, by external adventure. Perhaps it considers that its honour and prestige are violated by the attitude of another state. Perhaps it feels that it is threatened by a shift in the balance of power among other states. Perhaps it thinks it sees in the internal conditions of another state, whether revolutionary or reactionary, a reason for displeasure or anxiety. Perhaps it believes it can and should ascribe to itself a historical mission, e.g., a call to lead and rule other nations. All this may well be so. Yet it certainly does not constitute a valid reason for setting one's own great or little war machine in motion, for sending out one's troops to the battlefield to kill and be killed. Such aims may be well worth striving for. But they are too paltry to be worth the terrible price involved in their realization by war. War for such reasons could always have been avoided. War for such reasons is an act of murder. When such reasons lie on one side of the scale, and the knowledge of war and its necessary terrors on the other, we should have to be either incorrigible romanticists or malevolent sophists even to doubt which side ought to rise and which to fall. The Christian Church has to testify unambiguously that wars waged for such reasons are not just, and therefore ought not to be undertaken.

Even the existence or non-existence of a state does not always constitute a valid reason for war. It can sometimes

happen that the time of a state in its present form of existence has expired, that its independent life has no more meaning nor basis, and that it is thus better advised to yield and surrender, continuing its life within a greater nexus of states. There are times when this kind of question has to be raised and answered. As is well-known, Jeremiah did not repeat the message of Isaiah in an earlier situation, but summoned the people to submit rather than resist. We may well imagine a case in which the witness of the Christian Church ought to have a similar material content.

Indeed, it is only in answer to this particular question that there is a legitimate reason for war, namely, when a people or state has serious grounds for not being able to assume responsibility for the surrender of its independence, or, to put it even more sharply, when it has to defend within its borders the independence which it has serious grounds for not surrendering. The sixth commandment is too urgent to permit of the justification of war by Christian ethics on any other grounds.

Why do we have to allow the possibility that in the light of the divine commandment this is a justifiable reason for war, so that a war waged for this reason must be described as a just war in spite of all the horrors which it will certainly entail? The obvious answer is that there may well be bound up with the independent life of a nation responsibility for the whole physical, intellectual and spiritual life of the people comprising it, and therefore their relationship to God. It may well be that in and with the independence of a nation there is entrusted to its people something which, without any claim or pretension, they are commissioned to attest to others, and which they may not therefore surrender. It may well be that with the independence of the state, and perhaps in the form of the legally constituted society guaranteed by it, they would also have to yield something which must not be betrayed, which is necessarily more important to them than the preservation of life itself, and which is thus more important than the preservation of the lives of those who unfortunately are trying to take it from them. It may well be that they are thus forbidden by God to renounce the independent status of their nation, and that they must therefore defend it without considering either their own lives or the lives of those who

threaten it. Christian ethics cannot possibly deny that this case may sometimes occur. The divine command itself posits and presents it as a case of extreme urgency.

I may remark in passing that I myself should see it as such a case if there were any attack on the independence, neutrality and territorial integrity of the Swiss Confederation, and I should speak and act accordingly.

But a similar situation may arise in a different form, e.g., when a state which is not itself directly threatened or attacked considers itself summoned by the obligation of a treaty or in some other way to come to the aid of a weaker neighbour which does actually find itself in this situation. In solidarity with the state which it tries to help, it will then find itself in a position of true emergency. At such a time Christian ethics can no longer be absolutely pacifist. It cannot, therefore, oppose all military action, nor resist all military armament. If it has said all there is to be said about true peace and the practical avoidability of war; if it has honestly and resolutely opposed a radical militarism, it may then add that, should the command of God require a nation to defend itself in such an emergency, or in solidarity with another nation in such an emergency, then it not only may but must do so. It may also add that if this is basically the only reason for war on the basis of its constitution and history and in the minds of all its responsible citizens, then it may and must prepare for it even in peacetime. For even though this preparation has in view the terrible venture of killing and being killed, with all that this entails, the venture itself is inescapably demanded.

A distinctively Christian note in the acceptance of this demand is that it is quite unconditional. That is to say, it is independent of the success or failure of the enterprise, and therefore of the strength of one's own forces in comparison with those of the enemy. . . .

We cannot separate the question of the just war from the two questions of faith on the one side and obedience on the other. And these are reciprocal. If war is ventured in obedience and therefore with a good conscience, it is also ventured in faith and therefore with joyous and reckless determination. And if it is really ventured in the necessary faith, its basis is not found in mere enthusiasm but in the simple fact that, perhaps most unwillingly and certainly with a

heavy heart, it has to be waged in obedience and certainly cannot be shirked for the sake of a worthless peace. Conversely, "if ye will not believe, surely ye shall not be established" (Is. 7:9). This means that the Christian Church will have its own part to play in a state which finds itself in this kind of emergency and therefore forced into war. But we can also see in what sense it must stand by this nation, rousing, comforting and encouraging it, yet also calling it to repentance and conversion. There can certainly be no question of howling with the pack, or of enunciating a military code invented *ad hoc*, but only of preaching the Gospel of the lordship of God's free grace and of direction to the prayer which will not consist in the invocation of a pagan god of history and battles, but which will always derive from, and return to, the *dona nobis pacem*. In this form, however, the message of the Church may and should be a call to martial resolution which can be righteous only as an act of obedience but which as such can be truly righteous, which can be powerful only as an act of faith but which as such can be truly powerful. If right up to the last moment the Church has really devoted itself to the inculcation of the first two lessons, it need not be afraid that in a genuine emergency it will not have the right word of help and guidance, i.e., this third lesson. Nor need it be concerned lest it should compromise itself with this word in face of the fact that even the most just of wars might end in defeat. The Church which does not give any easy sanction to war, which constantly seeks to avert it, which is studious to avoid any general or institutional approval in principle, which proclaims peace alone as the will of God both internally and externally, which testifies to the very last against unjust reasons for war—this Church is able in a true emergency, or in the rare case of a just war, to tell men that, even though they now have to kill, they are not murderers, but may and must do the will of God in this *opus alienum* of the state.

We have still to consider, however, the same question with reference to the responsibility and decision of the individual. Thus far we have discussed it in relation to the state, war being an action undertaken by the state as a whole. On the Christian view, however, the state is not a strange, lofty and powerful hypostasis suspended over the individual, dominating him, and thinking, willing and deciding for him. To be

sure, individuals are included in its jurisdiction and brought under its authority. Individuals are protected by it and owe allegiance to it. Yet in the very same process it is they who support and maintain it. Enjoying its relative perfections, they also share, even if only by silence or inaction, in its imperfections. They bear responsibility for its condition, and for what is done or not done by it. They are in the same boat with its government, whatever its constitutional form and however acceptable or not. They are in solidarity with the majority of its citizens, whether they belong to this majority or not. The infamous statement attributed to Louis XIV can and should be corrected. Every individual in his own place and function is the state. If the state is a divine order for the continued existence of which Christians should pray, we can also say that, as they themselves are the Church, so they are also the state. Hence the state cannot relieve the individual of any responsibility. On the contrary, the state is wholly a responsibility of the individual. Nor is this any less true of war as a responsibility of the individual. The state wages war in the person of the individual. In war it is he, the individual man or woman, who must prepare for, further, support and in the last analysis execute the work of killing. It is part of the responsibility that in so doing he must risk his own life. But the decisive point is that he must be active in the destruction of the lives of others. . . .

As and because this same question is put to the state, it is also a genuine concern of each individual responsible for it and within it. This means, however, that the individual is asked to consider with the state what the state has to consider, not as a private person in a private affair and from a private standpoint, but as a citizen in an affair of state and from a civic standpoint, yet also personally and in personal responsibility. At a specific point and in a specific way it all applies also and especially to him. He personally is asked whether he hears the commandment and sees war in its terrible reality. He is asked whether he is working for the righteous inner peace which cannot lead to war, or whether he is contributing to a rotten and unjust peace which contains the seeds of war. He is asked whether he is helping on the many positive and restraining measures for the avoidance of war, or perhaps the opposite. He is asked whether in his own conduct and general behavior, his way of thinking and speaking, what he permits or forbids

himself to do, what he supports or hinders in others, he is postponing or preventing war. Is he clear that if war comes it will not be vertically up from the kingdom of demons but—demonically enough—through men, and that he himself will be one of the men who are guilty or innocent in relation to it? Again, has he set aside all inadequate and false reasons for war, and is he not only prepared to be but genuinely at work as a public and positive witness that most of the reasons are in fact inadequate and false, and do not justify such a dreadful act? Only when he has faced these questions is he finally asked whether, in the event of a true emergency arising in spite of everything for his nation or state, he is willing and ready *ultima ratione, in extremis*, to accept war and military training, to do so as a Christian, and therefore to do so fearlessly in spite of all that it entails, shouldering personal responsibility not merely for being killed but for the much more horrible act of killing. . . . In all these aspects the question of war must be asked and answered as a personal question. And perhaps the most important contribution that Christian ethics can make in this field is to lift the whole problem inexorably out of the indifferent sphere of general political and moral discussion and to translate it into the personal question: "What hast thou so far done or failed to do in the matter, and what art thou doing or failing to do at this moment?" Killing is a very personal act, and being killed a very personal experience. It is thus commensurate with the thing itself that even in the political form which killing assumes in war it should be the theme of supremely personal interrogation.

In this connexion we may conclude with a consideration of the specific problems of conscription and conscientious objection.

The pacifist demand for the abolition of conscription (cf. J.G. Heering, *Der Sundenfall des Christentums*, pp. 252f.) is shortsighted. For conscription has the salutary effect of bringing home the question of war. War is an affair of the state and therefore of the totality of its subjects, not of a minority or majority of volunteers or militarists. All citizens share responsibility for it both in peace and war. They thus share the burden of this responsibility, and must themselves face the question whether it is right or wrong. This fact is given due expression and brought right home by conscription, whereas it is glossed over in every other type