

THE CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE OF WAR AND MILITARY PARTICIPATION FROM  
PENTECOST TO CONSTANTINE

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A Paper

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By

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## **Introduction**

The following paper will explore the Christian doctrine of war and military participation from Pentecost until the reign of the Roman emperor Constantine the Great. While it is not the agenda of this paper to develop a modern statement on the ethics of Christian participation in the military it will be noted that the contents of this paper may be found useful for that type of discussion. It will also be stated at the beginning that there was near universal consensus amongst Christian writers that participation in the military and in warfare was contrary to the teachings of the Jesus tradition. On the other hand, we do find evidence that theory and practice did not always merge. There were Christians in the Roman military and at times even those writers, like Tertullian of Carthage, who were adamantly against military participation, showed some flexibility regarding, for example, those converted while in the military.

The focus of this paper will be on those documents that became canonical (Scripture); those documents which were emerging as authoritative sources for Christian doctrine and practice during this era. We will further consider the nature of the Roman military and the general Greco-Roman culture in brief. We will explore the evidence that there were Christians in the military as well as the possible interpretations of relevant canonical passages on this topic. Finally, we will explore the teachings of several patristic writers.

## **Canonical Documents**

Though the New Testament canon had not fully developed at this stage in church history there were documents that were emerging as authoritative for church doctrine and practice. The most notable were the Four Gospels and the Pauline corpus. It appears that there is little room for debate regarding the perspective of these writings on matters regarding disciples being in the military.

The First Gospel contains the famous Sermon on the Mount where Jesus tells his audience that peacemakers are called the sons of God (5:9)<sup>1</sup>, that those who are angry are like murderers (v. 22), that retaliation against wrong doers is not an option (vv. 38-42), that enemies are to be loved and prayer is to be made others for despite injustice (vv. 43-48). The Third Gospel reiterates these teachings (e.g. 6:22, 27-36). These teachings also were echoed by the Apostle Paul. Even where the Apostle teaches that Christians should submit to the rule of the Roman Empire (Romans 13:1-7) he precludes this by reminding Christians that right behavior includes blessing those who persecute, never repaying evil for evil, and never taking vengeance, but instead caring for one's enemies (12:14, 17, 19-20).

These teachings were reflected in the earliest Christian documents that later did not become canonized, but nevertheless give insight into the thought world of the early church. In the Didache the "way of life" includes blessing those who curse Christians, praying for enemies, and fasting for those who persecute Christians.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, the apologist Justin Martyr writes about Christians, "we who hated and killed one another and would not associate with men of different tribes because of [their different] customs, now after the manifestation of Christ live together and pray for our enemies and try to persuade those who unjustly hate us".<sup>3</sup> Also he quotes Matthew 5:46 defending Christians as those who pray for enemies and love those who hate them and so forth.<sup>4</sup>

The consensus of the documents that became canonized is that Christians are to behave in the aforementioned fashion. There are times when the Christian is compared to a soldier, but this is metaphorical and therefore should not be read as addressing Christians participating in the

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<sup>1</sup> All biblical statements will be adapted from the ESV whether quoted or merely referenced.

<sup>2</sup> *The Didache*, 1:3, in Cyril C. Richardson, ed., *Early Church Fathers*, New York, NY: Touchstone, 1996. 171.

<sup>3</sup> Justin Martyr, *The First Apology*, 14, in Richardson, 249-250.

<sup>4</sup> Justin Martyr, *The First Apology*, 15, in Ibid. 251.

Roman military. The passages that allowed the doctrine of Just War to develop later are those stories where John the Baptist, and later Jesus, are depicted as interacting with Roman military men while taking a stand against such an occupation.

The first narrative is found in the Third Gospel. Some Roman soldiers hear the Baptist preaching about the coming of salvation of God. As with others the soldiers ask the Baptist what is expected of them. The Baptist tells the soldiers, “Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse anyone falsely, and be content with your wages (3:14).” It is notable that there is no command to set down the sword, nor is there any teaching on why these soldiers must reject a former oath and renounce their military lifestyles. There are only ethical guidelines that make for better behavior from the soldiers.

The second narrative is found in both the First and Third Gospels (Matthew 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-10). There is a centurion with a sick servant who comes to Jesus for help. Jesus is impressed with this faith of the centurion and by his word heals the servant. There is no command from the mouth of Jesus to renounce his military service, only praise for his faith.

While there are many behaviors associated with military service that are outright denounced by the documents that make up the New Testament these above examples allowed for there to be at least some doubt that the Christian doctrine on military participation was complete nonresistance. It was at least considered a possibility from early on that somehow being a soldier made acts of violence acceptable to some extent.

### **The Greco-Roman Cultural Setting**

To fully grasp the moral conundrum that Christians faced regarding the question of military service we must explore all that was connected to such a lifestyle. While it is obvious that the above teachings regarding loving the enemy, and teachings against murder, had to be

taken into consideration it is not true that these were the only problems that faced Christians. In fact we can narrow down four major problems faced by Christians who considered military service: (1) bloodshed/murder, (2) other immoral behaviors, (3) pagan associations/religions, (4) and the oath to Caesar.

The first point has been addressed. As regards other immoral behaviors that list can include torturing prisoners, authorizing pagan sacrifices, honor and power that do not allow one to be humble, collecting temple taxes, and even authorizing or participating in the gladiatorial shows, amongst other things. The overall mood of the military camp was pagan and the behaviors that could be found within made being a Christian and a soldier exceptionally difficult.

As regards pagan associations/religions it must be understood that “the army had a religious structure that informed nearly everything it did.”<sup>5</sup> The Roman camp was considered a sacred space, the good soldier was trained to honor the gods, and the deities were throughout the camp and were venerated. The eagle standard representing Jupiter Optimus Maximus was worshiped.<sup>6</sup> The yearly calendar given to the Roman military, as exemplified by the document known as *Feriale Duranum*, shows that the army had religious festivals and sacrifices to the gods every several days. It appears that it would have been impossible to maintain Christian exclusivity, regarding the worship of the Trinitarian God, while living in this environment, without some form of compromise.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, the oath to Caesar was considered to be a *sacramentum* that contradicted Christian baptism.<sup>8</sup> To commit to unquestionable obedience to the emperor was to serve two masters, something Jesus said was impossible to do (Matthew 6:24; Luke 16:13). Also, as we

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<sup>5</sup> John Helgeland, Robert J. Daly, and J. Patout Burns, *Christians and the Military: The Early Experience*, Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1985. 48.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 49-50.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 51-54.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 50.

will explore below, this allegiance did not end with the commitment to merely obey the Caesar, but the cult of the emperor demanded that he be worshiped as well.

### **Christians in the Roman Military**

There are several stories from this era that show us that there were Christians in the Roman military. First there is the story of *Legio XII* where a Roman unit was near dehydration and several Christians within the unit prayed to the Christian God who sent rain soon thereafter, saving the unit and allowing them to fight to victory.<sup>9</sup> Second, Eusebius records “that several Christian soldiers at Alexandria were executed during an outbreak of violence against the Church there around 249 A.D.”<sup>10</sup> Eusebius also informs us that Christians participated in the Armenian army when Maximim Dia attempted to “impose pagan practices on them”.<sup>11</sup> There are more examples that we do not have the space to record here.

Many of the references to Christians in the military are made because these Christians are seen as heroes for standing up against efforts to force emperor worship upon them. Lactantius records that Christians were killed when diviners told the emperor that there were unbelievers in the camp who were preventing the divination from taking place.<sup>12</sup> A legionnaire named Marinus was beheaded on the eve of being promoted to the rank of centurion when he refused to participate in emperor worship.<sup>13</sup> A Christian centurion named Marcellus protested during a festival honoring the emperors Diocletian and Maximilian because he could no longer uphold his military oath. This led to his execution despite serving multiple tours of duty.<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand a young Christian named Maximilian refused to enroll in the army when his Christian father brought him to the proconsul Dion. In the recorded dialogue between

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 69.

<sup>10</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastic History* 8.1.7; 8.4.2-3, in Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastic History* 9.8.2,4, in Ibid. 70.

<sup>12</sup> Lactantius, *Death of the Persecutors* 10:1-4, in Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 71.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 74-78.

Dion and Maximilian what stands out is that Maximilian could not reconcile his oath to Christ with an oath to Caesar. When he is reminded by Dion that other Christians serve in the army Maximilian replied, “They know what is in their own best interest, but I am a Christian, and I cannot do what is wrong.”<sup>15</sup> This story shows us that there was tension regarding Christian military service. The father, a Christian, brought his son to enroll, but his son, a Christian, could not do so because he was a Christian. When Dion tried to get the young man to enroll because other Christians had done so, the young man basically points out that each Christian must make the decision, but that he could not do it.

Tertullian, who was staunchly against Christian military participation, and along with Origen of Alexandria was one of the most articulate pacifist of the early church, wrote that Christians had converted across the Empire, including in “the camps themselves”.<sup>16</sup> He further boasts that Christians, like any other citizen, “sail the sea, serve in the army, farm the land, buy and sell”.<sup>17</sup> While Tertullian argued against this he seems to have acknowledged that it was what it was and even used it to defend the validity of Christians as normal Roman citizens. We may then understand that while Christians wrestled with this issue in theory there was more of a balance in practice. In other words, Christian writings seem to oppose Christian military participation, but this did not prevent early Christians from serving in the military.

### **Christian Apologetics before Constantine**

In the following section we will explore the writings of several prominent Christian writers whose writing have been preserved to this day. These writers range from the second century to the reign of Constantine. The final writer we will examine will be Lactantius who

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 72-74.

<sup>16</sup> Tertullian, *Apology* 37.4, in Louis J. Swift, *The Early Fathers of War and Military Service*, Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, Inc. 1953. 38.

<sup>17/17</sup> Tertullian, *Apology* 42:2-3, in Ibid. 39.

wrote before and after the rise of Constantine. We will not explore others like Augustine who arose afterward, for that is not the purpose of this paper.

### Clement of Rome

The *First Letter of Clement*, attributed to an early Bishop of Rome, follows the canonical practice of using the soldier as an example of Christian living. The Bishop uses the military hierarchy as an example of the forming church hierarchy. While such metaphors may show respect for the military it cannot be read as supporting military practice.<sup>18</sup> Later in the same text, in the form of a prayer, God is thanked for the “health, peace, harmony, and stability in order” that comes from the emperor.<sup>19</sup> This writing follows the Pauline admonition to honor the emperor, but neither of these statements indicates, either way, whether or not a Christian should participate in the actual Roman military.

### Justin Martyr of Samaria

The aforementioned Justin Martyr understood the Christian church to be the manifestation of the prophetic vision found in the prophets where swords turn to plowshares and spears into pruning hooks (Micah 4:2, 3; Isaiah 2:3, 4): “we who once killed each other not only do not make war on each other, but in order not to lie or deceive our inquisitors we gladly die for the confession of Christ”.<sup>20</sup> Justin saw Christians as those “living in a new age which eschews violence in all its forms”.<sup>21</sup> Justin’s pupil, Tatian, furthered his teacher’s apology by suggested that warfare was “inspired by demons”.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Clement of Rome, *First Letter of Clement* 37:1-4, in Swift, 33.

<sup>19</sup> Clement of Rome, *First Letter of Clement* 61:1-2, in Ibid. 33-34.

<sup>20</sup> Justin Martyr, *The First Apology*, 39, in Richardson, 266.

<sup>21</sup> Swift, 34.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 36

## Athenagoras of Athens

Athenagoras addressed the emperor Marcus Aurelius in his *Plea for the Christians* arguing that while Christians do not participate in violence<sup>23</sup>; it is simply not true that Christians do not benefit the empire since, “We pray for your reign in order that succession may pass from father to son, as is most fitting, and that your sway may increase and expand as everyone becomes subject to you” since this “development benefits us, too, inasmuch as we can both lead a life of quiet and peace, and do willingly everything that is enjoined upon us.”<sup>24</sup>

Here we see the Pauline idea that Christians can be good citizens of the empire without compromising kingdom ethics and allegiance to Christ developed further to the point of supporting the emperor and his rule. Later Christians would argue along this same line. Some would even pray for military victory.

## Tertullian of Carthage

Tertullian was probably the first bluntly apologetic pacifist writer. While he affirmed the aforementioned obligation to “pray without ceasing for all emperors, for their prolonged life, for a secure empire, for protection of the imperial palace, for brave armies, a loyal Senate, an upright citizenry, a peaceful world and for everything that the emperor desires as a man and as a Caesar”<sup>25</sup> he understood service in the military as incompatible with Christianity.

He shunned the idea that a Christian could be like Joseph or Daniel, serving in a pagan system, because it would be a position of honor that a humble Christian could not hold in good conscience.<sup>26</sup> He further objected to the example of John the Baptist interaction with the Roman soldier on the basis that it was prior to Jesus, and therefore an inferior teaching (i.e Christ would

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<sup>23</sup> Athenagoras, *Plea for the Christians* 1:4, in Ibid. 35-36.

<sup>24</sup> Athenagoras, *Plea for the Christians* 37:2-3, in Ibid. 36.

<sup>25</sup> Tertullian, *Apology* 30:4, in Ibid. 39.

<sup>26</sup> Tertullian, *On Idolatry* 17:2-3, in Ibid. 40.

have demanded more from the soldier if asked the same question). When Jesus took the sword from Peter he “disarmed every soldier thereafter”.<sup>27</sup> Tertullian asked, “Will a son of peace who should even go to court take part in battle?”<sup>28</sup>

In addition Tertullian did not see service to Caesar as compatible with service to Christ. He wrote, “There can be no compatibility between an oath made to God and one made to man, between the standard of Christ and that of the devil, between the camp of light and the camp of darkness. The soul cannot be beholden by two masters, God and Caesar.”<sup>29</sup> The fact that Tertullian had to make such arguments suggest to some that there were Christians who had raised such objections: “Quite clearly other Christians did not see eye to eye with Tertullian on this issue since they appealed to examples from both Old and New Testaments (i.e. Moses, Aaron, Joshua, John the Baptist, the Centurion who believed in Christ) as justification for serving in the army.”<sup>30</sup>

There was one important exception made by Tertullian. In *On Idolatry* Tertullian acknowledges that though it is respectable to leave the army upon conversion, it is understandable if one does not, “provided no act is performed that is contrary to the Faith.”<sup>31</sup> The reasons for this compromise include “desertion was a capital offense”, severance pay would be lost, and all other post-service benefits would be lost.<sup>32</sup>

### Cyprian of Carthage

The successor of Tertullian, Cyprian, while less pronounced in his view was consistent with Tertullian. He argued that it was foolish to make someone a criminal who kills another only

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<sup>27</sup> Tertullian, *On Idolatry* 19:1-3, in Ibid. 41.

<sup>28</sup> Tertullian, *On the Crown*, 11:1-7

<sup>29</sup> Tertullian, *On Idolatry* 19:1-3, in Ibid. 41.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 42.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 45.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 46.

to honor a soldier who kills many more simply because he does this on behalf of the state.<sup>33</sup> He further argued that someone who has participated in the Eucharist should not have his hand “stained with the sword and with bloodshed”.<sup>34</sup>

### Clement of Alexandria

Clement of Alexandria understood war to be the work of demons. He also wrote that Christians were not to participate in warfare. The reason given is that Christians are “a peaceful race”.<sup>35</sup> This echoes the Apostle Paul in teaching that Christians are new creation.

### Hippolytus of Rome

A document known as the *Apostolic Tradition*, arguably written by Hippolytus, states, “A soldier who is in authority must be told not to execute men; if he should be ordered to do it, he shall not do it. He must be told not to take the military oath. If he will not agree, let him be rejected.”<sup>36</sup> It is seen here that a Christian can be a soldier if he does not kill, order others to do so or follow such orders, and if he does not take the military oath. Whether this was possible is questionable.

### Origen of Alexandria

### Arnobius

Arnobius was one of the final writers before Constantine came to power. While he boasted that Rome has grown, expanded her borders, and won many military victories during

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<sup>33</sup> Cyprian, *To Donatus* 6, in *Ibid.* 48.

<sup>34</sup> Cyprian, *On the Goodness of Patience* 14, in *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Greeks* III.42.1, in *Ibid.* 50

<sup>36</sup> Hippolytus, *The Apostolic Tradition* 17, in Helgeland. 37.

the time that Christianity had existed<sup>37</sup> he actually denounced wars and argued that it is better to have one's blood shed than to shed the blood of another.<sup>38</sup>

### Lactantius

Lactantius is an interesting case study in that he represents that transition from pre-Constantine thought to post-Constantine thought. In his *Divine Institutes* he argues that a man who gets revenge cannot be called "good",<sup>39</sup> that the gladiatorial games are wrong for those who participate or even observe,<sup>40</sup> that the Roman wars are evil,<sup>41</sup> that piety demands avoiding war,<sup>42</sup> that a man cannot be just and kill,<sup>43</sup> and so forth.

Yet when Constantine became emperor the same Lactantius wrote that it was the triumph of God and the victory of the Lord.<sup>44</sup> In an addendum to his *Divine Institutes* he later wrote praise for Constantine as "the greatest of emperors" who "cast aside error to acknowledged and honor the majesty of the one true God."<sup>45</sup> It was this novel idea that would allow others like Augustine of Hippo, Ambrose of Milan, and Eusebius of Caesarea to defend service in the military under an emperor who acknowledged Christ as Lord.

### Summary

While it is true that, "For the first three centuries no Christian writing which has survived to our time condoned Christian participation in war",<sup>46</sup> it is not true that the reasoning was universal. The first and most obvious reason to teach against Christians being in the military was

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<sup>37</sup> Arnobius, *Against the Pagans* 1:14, in Swift, 61.

<sup>38</sup> Arnobius, *Against the Pagans* 1:6, Ibid. 60.

<sup>39</sup> Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* 6.18.17, in Ibid. 61.

<sup>40</sup> Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* 5.1.7.13, in Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* 6.20.15, in Ibid. 62.

<sup>42</sup> Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* 5.10.10, in Ibid. 63.

<sup>43</sup> Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* 6.6.22-24, in Ibid. 63-64.

<sup>44</sup> Lactantius, *Death of the Persecutors*, 52:4, in Ibid. 67.

<sup>45</sup> Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, 1.1.13, in Ibid. 68.

<sup>46</sup> Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity: Beginnings to 1500, V. 1*, San Francisco, CA: Harper-Collins, 1975. 242-243.

bloodshed, but there appears to be some who saw the bloodshed of war as not being equal to the useless bloodshed associated with personal ambitions. Others taught that war itself was not something completely evil, but that it was not the role of the Christians, because the Christian was part of a new era in time between the First and Second Advent of Christ. Others argued against Christians being in the military because of the pagan associated, the allegiance given to the gods and to Caesar, to the unjust nature of some of the wars, and so forth.