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# On Asking Better Questions... and Finding Better Answers

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# On Asking Better Questions . . . and Finding Better Answers

BY PAUL ANDERSON

**A**SKING BETTER questions leads to better answers. A troublesome fact about the world Christian movement is that since the fourth century A.D., Christians have been divided on matters of war and peace. In fact, in the two World Wars of this century, more Christians were killed by Christians than had been killed in all the wars of the last two millennia combined. This is a troubling fact, to say the least, and a major contributor to the rejection of Christianity, from what I am told by non-Christians. So how did things come to be this way?

Until A.D. 312, the Christian witness was unanimous in its stand against participation in war. The sentiment of the apostolic era was characterized by the statement, "I am a follower of Jesus Christ; therefore, it is not lawful for me to fight." When the emperor Constantine became a Christian, however, things changed. He marched his troops through a river and declared that his was now a "Christian" army—having been thusly baptized. From that time on, Christians began to consult the Scriptures and to formulate church doctrine asking, "How may participation in war be justified?" That question produced Just War theories and the Holy War theologies of the Crusades. Ironically, both these postures overlooked entirely the teachings of Jesus on the topic.

Things changed, though, with the recovery of biblical authority during the Reformation (1520 and forward). When people began to read the Bible for themselves they began to ask the question, "What does it mean to follow the way of Jesus?" When put that way, the answer is clear. To say "Yes" to Jesus is to say "No" to violence of any sort. At least three separate groups came to that conclusion, and the Anabaptists, Quakers, and the Brethren have come to be called the historic Peace Churches. Like the first Christians, they asked not, "What is expedient?" or "When is killing justified?" but "What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus Christ?" Not a bad question.

Another worthy question, especially in the aftermath of Desert Storm (which must be considered the most successful war in human history in terms of combatant casualties inflicted to those sustained—over 1,000:1) is "Do we *really* want God to answer our prayers for victory?"

Mark Twain's "The War Prayer" poses this query with troubling lucidity. At the close of the prayer a mysterious stranger ascends the podium with a message from the Most High. The message was a request for clarification from God as to whether people *really* wished the prayer to be answered. "If you would beseech a blessing upon yourself, beware!" he declared, "lest without intent you invoke a curse upon a neighbor at the same time." Thus, the messenger from the Throne translates the other side of that prayer for the congregation to consider:

**O** LORD OUR Father, our young patriots, idols of our hearts, go forth to battle—be Thou near them! With them—in spirit—we also go forth from the sweet peace of our beloved firesides to smite the foe. O Lord our God, help us tear their soldiers to bloody shreds with our shells; help us cover their smiling fields with the pale forms of their patriot dead; help us to drown the thunder of the guns with the shrieks of their wounded, writhing in pain; help us to wring the hearts of their unoffending widows with unavailing grief; help us to turn them out roofless with their little children to wander unfriended the wastes of their desolated land in rags and hunger and thirst . . . imploring Thee for the refuge of the grave and denied it—for our sakes who adore Thee, Lord, blast their hopes, blight their lives, protract their bitter pilgrimage, make heavy their steps, water their way with their tears, stain the white snow with the blood of their wounded feet! We ask it in the spirit of love of Him who is the Source of Love, and who is the ever-faithful refuge and friend of all that are sore beset and seek His aid with humble and contrite hearts. Amen.

According to Twain, no one understood a word he said, "for they thought he was a lunatic."

The query for followers of Christ is whether noble ends can ever justify violent means. This question was raised for me as a teenager in a very personal way.

"How much evil would you be willing to commit in the name of good?" I can still hear that question ringing in my ears as I listened to Lauren King deliver the morning message that eventful Sunday at Canton First Friends Church. I was about to turn eighteen, and while the Viet Nam war was coming to a close, I knew I would soon have to register for the draft at the local post office.

**A**S I PONDERED the implications of that question, my options became much clearer. I was not so much bothered about the prospect of dying for my country. What bothered me was the idea of taking, and preparing to take, the life of another human being. To allow for any harmful intentionality was to betray the way of my Lord. The only option left for me was to object to involvement in war as a matter of Christian conscience.

Back then, it was relatively easy to object to war. The Viet Nam conflict was an unpopular one, and peace protests enjoyed their "golden age" of influence. But following the wake of Desert Storm, it becomes more cumbersome to be proper stewards of a peace testimony today. When war is popular, advocacy for peace takes a beating.

Now may be among the most pressing of times in which a witness for peaceful means to peaceful ends is needed. There is no better time to inform the conscience of a nation than when there is still time to avert future armed engagements. The time to talk and educate about peace is before a conflict emerges.

So how do we help form and reform the conscience of the nation? It begins with first being sensitized personally to Christ's will for His would-be followers. It proceeds by asking, and helping others to ask, better questions—from which better answers come. ■