Can Christians Support War?

The Vietnam War created upheaval in American society with many people questioning whether Christians can support war. I was in college after the war and was also struggling with this question when I came across Luther's *Whether Soldiers Too Can Be Saved*. After reading through his Biblical reasons for why the calling of soldier is a good calling, I later became a Navy Chaplain and full-heartedly supported those who had that calling of protecting family, neighbors, property, nation, etc. The Reformation was a time of societal upheaval when people questioned almost everything and added to this was the concrete threat of invasion from southern invaders into Europe. From his biblical studies Martin Luther commented on these things in a number of writings, but as we feel the current worldwide challenges, we will consider here two particular writings on these topics: *Whether Soldiers Too Can Be Saved* (1526) and *On War Against The Turk* (1529).[[1]](#footnote-1)

Writing to a soldier who had questions about whether a Christian can kill other people in war, Luther mentions many scriptures but especially focuses on John the Baptist’s answer to soldiers when they asked John the Baptist what they should do to bear fruits that befit repentance (Luke 3:8-14). John doesn't tell them to stop being soldiers but rather says: “Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages.” Luther does mention that you can have a good calling but a bad person in that calling so it's very important for soldiers to follow John the Baptist's advice and be good in their office and not abuse that calling. Luther emphasizes that war is a godly responsibility of earthly government and soldiers, which does not seem to be a work of love:

**Now slaying and robbing do not seem to be works of love. A simple man therefore does not think it is a Christian thing to do. In truth, however, even this is a work of love. For example, a good doctor sometimes finds so serious and terrible a sickness that he must amputate or destroy a hand, foot, ear, eye, to save the body. Looking at it from the point of view of the organ that he amputates he appears to be a cruel and merciless man; but looking at it from the point of view of the body, which the doctor wants to save, he is a fine and true man and does a good and Christian work, as far as the work itself is concerned. In the same way, when I think of a soldier fulfilling his office by punishing the wicked, killing the wicked, and creating so much misery, it seems an un-Christian work completely contrary to Christian love. But when I think of how it protects the good and keeps and preserves wife and child, house and farm, property, and honor and peace, then I see how precious and godly this work is; and I observe that it amputates a leg or a hand, so that the whole body may not perish. For if the sword were not a guard to preserve peace, everything in the world would be ruined because of lack of peace. Therefore, such a war is only a very brief lack of peace that prevents an everlasting and immeasurable lack of peace, a small misfortune that prevents a great misfortune.**

**What men write about war, saying that it is a great plague, is all true. But they should also consider how great the plague is that war prevents. If people were good and wanted to keep peace, war would be the greatest plague on earth. But what are you going to do about the fact that people will not keep the peace, but rob, steal, kill, outrage women and children, and take away property and honor? The small lack of peace called war or the sword must set a limit to this universal, worldwide lack of peace which would destroy everyone.**

**This is why God honors the sword so highly that he says that he himself has instituted it [Rom. 13:1] and does not want men to say or think that they have invented it or instituted it. For the hand that wields this sword and kills with it is not man's hand, but God's; and it is not man, but God, who hangs, troubles, beheads, kills, and fights. All these are God's works and judgments.**

**To sum it up, we must in thinking about a soldier’s office, not concentrate on the killing, burning, striking, hitting, seizing, etc. This is what children with their limited and restricted vision see when they regard a doctor as a sawbones who amputates, but do not see that he does this only to save the whole body. So, too, we must look at the office of the soldier, or the sword, with the eyes of an adult and see why this office slays and acts so cruelly. Then it will prove itself to be an office which, in itself, is godly and as needful and useful to the world as eating and drinking or any other work.**

**There are some who abuse this office, and strike and kill people needlessly simply because they want to. But that is the fault of the persons, not of the office, for where there is an office or a work or anything else so good that self-willed, wicked people do not abuse it? They are like mad physicians who would needlessly amputate a healthy hand just because they wanted to. Indeed, they themselves are part of that universal lack of peace which must be prevented by just wars and the sword and be forced into peace. It always happens and always has happened that those who begin war unnecessarily are beaten. Ultimately, they cannot escape God's judgment and sword. In the end God’s justice does finds them and strikes as happened to the peasants in the revolt.[[2]](#footnote-2)**

The above is Luther’s main point in *Whether Soldiers Too Can Be Saved*, and now we turn to his *On War Against The Turk*. In this work Luther opposes war and supports war depending on the situation. He opposes a leader starting war or going to war for these reasons: “the winning of great honor, glory, and wealth, the extension of territory, or wrath and revenge and other such reasons.”[[3]](#footnote-3) He also greatly disagrees with the Crusades because the Crusades were portrayed as Holy War led by the spiritual leaders (popes, pastors, etc.), so the Crusades were entirely contrary to Christ (John 18:36): “Think of all the heartbreak and misery that have been caused by the Crusades, by the indulgences, and by crusade tax. With these Christians have been stirred up to take the sword and fight the Turk when they ought to have been fighting the devil and unbelief with the word and with prayer.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Pastors fight a spiritual war with the spiritual weapons of prayer and God’s Word (Ephesians 6). Luther discerns carefully between spiritual leaders and earthly government leaders, between spiritual war and government led war. The Word and prayer are given to spiritual leaders and Christians, but the sword (earthly weapons) is given *by God* to the government (Romans 13). Thus the government leader has the grave responsibility of protecting citizens, which is given by God and if the leader doesn’t fulfill this the leader is disobeying God.[[5]](#footnote-5) When invaded, it is the emperor’s job to fight and the peoples’ job to obey the emperor in going to battle.[[6]](#footnote-6) Luther here advises to prepare well for war: “we should arm and prepare ourselves.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

Very interestingly, Luther observes how spiritual warfare and physical warfare can happen at the same time, and prayer (with repentance as our first prayer) and the work of God’s Word need to lead off for Christians. Murder and lies are the spirit of evil wars of aggression and invasion, and the devil is behind such murder and lies (John 8:44) so the devil needs to be defeated by prayer and the Word even as the soldier goes to war with the sword.[[8]](#footnote-8) Luther strongly exhorts that during war, Christians should continue to pray diligently, writing that people:

**should then be most diligently exhorted to prayer and shown that such prayer pleases God, that he has commanded it and promised to hear it, and that no one ought to think lightly of his own praying or have doubts about it, but with firm faith be sure that it will be heard.**[[9]](#footnote-9)

1. *Luther’s Works*, vol. 46, Robert C. Schultz, ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), pages 87-137 and 155-205. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., 96-97. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., 185. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 186. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., 184. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 185. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., 201. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., 179. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., 172. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)