

On the Line FOR PEACE

Christians in the Army? Part 2

In the May On the Line for Peace (see it on the web at mph.org/otl), we looked at scripture and at what early church leaders said about Christians serving in the army.

The first Christians' beliefs

They said clearly that serving in the military went against the kind of love and service that God wants (and showed through Jesus Christ).

A non-Christian writer, **Celsus**, urged Christians in A.D. 178 to:

"fight for [the king], and if he require it, to fight under him . . . If all men were to do the same as you, there would be nothing to prevent him being left in utter solitude and desertion, and the forces of the empire would fall into the hands of the wildest and most lawless barbarians."

(We still hear this today—"If we don't attack Iraq, who will protect our freedoms and keep the terrorists from coming here?")

But **Tertullian**, an African Christian about the year 200, said that **all people share God's image**. The Christian church even then was against abortion and the death penalty for criminals. So, it didn't make sense to support killing in war, either.

How things changed

We know that Christians did begin to serve in the army, and some soldiers became Christians and didn't leave the army. At first, Christian leaders allowed them to serve in the army, but only during peacetime. Then more changes came.

The Roman emperor Constantine brought a big change in how the church (that had often been a persecuted,

small group) lived in the world. In the year 313, he declared religious freedom. He also said (as many world leaders after him) that God was on his side in battles, and got Christian leaders to support him. (At the same time, Constantine supported other religions and murdered members of his own family to get more power.)

The church liked being friends with the emperor and slowly began to change its teachings on war. Church leaders stopped calling acts of war murder. They began to see some good in helping the emperor fight "bad guys." They forgot how God said to deal with people we don't like.

In 350, Athanasius, a bishop in Egypt, wrote: "It is not right to kill, yet in war it is lawful and praiseworthy to destroy the enemy." In 380, the emperor established Christianity as the official religion. **By the year 416, the empire required all its soldiers to be Christians.**

"Just war"

In the 400s, the bishop **Augustine** tried to say what a "just war" (a war Christians could support)



would look like. He admitted that Christians need to love their enemies, but decided that you can kill someone while loving them. **He wrote, "Love does not exclude wars of mercy waged by the good."**

According to Augustine, a Christian

by Anne Meyer Byler

What about the Old Testament? What were the Crusades? Was any war declared unjust by the church? What about nuclear war? Look for more history in the September issue.

could fight, torture, and kill the enemy on three conditions:

- It had to be for a just cause.
- You had to truly love the victim.
- You had to feel very sorry about it.

Compare this to what Jesus and Paul said:

"Love your enemies, and do good to everyone who hates you." (Luke 6:27)

"No one who loves others will harm them." (Romans 13:10)

✓ Check out these books for more information and explanations. (Especially good for older kids.)

How Christians Made Peace with War: Early Christian Understandings of War by John Driver. Herald Press, 1988. 86 pp.

Making War and Making Peace: Why Some Christians Fight and Some Don't by Dennis Byler. Herald Press, 1989. 97 pp.

Peacemaker of today: Jonathan Ben-Artzi



In January 2003, in Israel, Jonathan Ben-Artzi was sentenced to 35 days in military prison. This was his seventh prison term in a row, which means he's been in jail a total of 196 days, or more than 6 months. Jonathan is a pacifist who opposes war. He also is against the Israeli army's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. (This occupation is against United Nations resolutions, but the U.S. continues to give \$6 billion a year in military aid to Israel anyway.)

Jonathan was officially adopted as a "prisoner of conscience" by Amnesty International (www.amnesty.org).

Why would Christians think it was okay to be in the army?

1. Since it's so hard to follow what Jesus says about enemies, some say Jesus meant those words for sometime in the future.
2. People can come and attack your family and friends, and bring horrible destruction. Surely God doesn't want this to happen, some say.
3. God told Hebrews in the Old Testament to fight battles.
4. The Bible doesn't say that Jesus told the officers he met (the centurion in

Matthew 8: 5-13, for example) to leave the army.

5. If you killed some people who were clearly doing evil, it might save the lives of more people in the end.

*Christians have argued about this from the time of Augustine till today. **What do YOU think?** How would you answer these reasons for Christians to fight? (Send your answers to: ambyler@maplenet.net. We might print them in the next column. It's okay to talk to older people for ideas, too!)*