

God and the War¹

THE topic on which I dwell is 'God and the War.' The question would very naturally and perhaps urgently arise, does God have anything to do with this war? War is, to say the least, a ghastly evil. I did not say, war is wrong. The waging of war is often highly necessary and even dutiful. For a sovereign state or federation of sovereign states the waging of war is oftentimes the only resort that remains, to guard the paths of justice, to promote the interests of God-given liberty and, paradoxical as it may seem, to conserve the blessing of true peace. The waging of war upon just and necessary occasion is no more wrong than is the execution of just judgment upon the violators of civil righteousness within a particular municipality or nation. But war is a ghastly evil in that it is always the consequence of sin.

As never before in the lifetime of the oldest of us we are confronted with the barbarities and brutalities of which corrupt human nature is capable. We witness tyranny, oppression, cruelty, suffering, the destruction of precious life and property. As we think of all this, there appears to be such foolishness and absurdity to it all, not to speak of the iniquity that lies behind the whole tragedy of turmoil and devastation. Can God have anything to do with such a spectacle of waste and destruction? Surely he is of purer eyes than to behold evil and he cannot look upon sin.

It is possible that our minds are not controlled by the thought of God's holiness. Perhaps our minds are controlled by an evolutionary philosophy, and we are incurable optimists. These ordeals are, we may be disposed to say, but the birthpangs of a better day. The evolutionary

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process proceeds through conflict and suffering, and the greater the struggle the greater hope we should entertain for the ultimate result. In the past we became too complacent towards things as they were, too complacent towards the obsolete or the obsolescent. It is necessary by the law of progress that the upheaval be all the more radical and even painful, in order that we may shake off the scales or the chains that have clogged us in the past and step forward into the vistas and achievements of a new order.

But perhaps our minds *are controlled* by the thought of the holiness of God and, if so, our answer to the question may be that it is more honouring to the one living and true God to say that this war is entirely of man's making and that God has nothing whatsoever to do with it. We perhaps think that it is beneath the dignity and majesty that are his to be in any way related to so wretched and despicable a thing as war with its entail of untold enmities and miseries.

Perhaps we might try to shield the integrity of God by supposing that the world has simply got out of hand, and that God is not able to cope with the perversity of human nature. He is doing the best he can with a bad situation, and like our good selves he deserves our warm sympathy and support.

Or again, perhaps we entertain a more noble conception of the power of God and say that he has just left the world to go its own way. He has been pouring out the bowels of entreaty, he has been striving with men. But they have not been responsive to his pleadings and warnings. Men have proved themselves hard-hearted, stiff-necked and rebellious. In holy retribution he has withdrawn his hand and, as a sad spectator, leaves men to their own resources. He allows the world for a time to reel and stagger in the wisdom that is folly. And so he has no active providence in this war. His relation to it is one of bare permission.

All of these attempts to philosophize with respect to the rationale of the present conflict may be well-meaning. Indeed some distorted element of truth, twisted from its proper orientation, shifted from its proper context, inheres in each of these attempts. For if any system were entirely devoid of plausibility, devoid of any approximation to reality, it is not likely that it would have much appeal to any large proportion of men.

The question however recurs: Are these the answers of truth? Are they the answers of God's wisdom as deposited in his Word? Are they the answers of the Christian revelation?

When the question is thus qualified the answer simply is that it will not do to say that God has nothing to do with this war. It will not do to say simply that God allows or permits this war. For the Scripture says, 'Shall there be evil in a city and the Lord hath not done it?' (Amos 3:6). 'I am the Lord, and there is none else, there is no God beside me: I girded thee, though thou hast not known me: that they may know from the rising of the sun, and from the west, that there is none beside me. I am the Lord, and there is none else. I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the Lord do all these things' (Isa. 45:5-7). 'Surely as I have thought, so shall it come to pass; and as I have purposed, so shall it stand' (Isa. 14:24). All things come to pass by God's ordination and in his providence. We are faced with the inescapable truth that the whole of history in its broadest extent and minutest detail is the unrolling of the plan devised from eternity and accomplished by him of whom and through whom and to whom are all things. If our thought is guided by the Christian revelation we are shut up to the recognition that it is no honour to God to say that he has nothing to do with this war, nor that he occupies with reference to it the position of offended but sad spectator.

What then is the meaning of this war, as that meaning may be derived from the Biblical revelation? When we say *meaning* we are not presuming to claim that we in our puny finitude, and particularly we sinners in our sinful ignorance, are able to survey all the counsel of the Eternal as it is embodied in the events of history. God's way is in the sea and his path in the great waters. His footsteps are not known. Clouds and darkness are round about him. 'Canst thou by searching find out God? Canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection?' (Job 11:7). How little a portion do we know of his secret counsel! But we do know in part, and God has not left us to wander in total darkness with respect to the mystery of his providence and the purpose of his will.

There are at least five propositions that may be elicited from the Scriptures with respect to the meaning of this war. If viewed from the

standpoint of revelation they may be called reasons. If viewed from the standpoint of our responsibility they may be called lessons.

1. *This war is an evil consequent upon sin.* It is one of the logical issues of sin. 'From whence come wars and fightings among you? Come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members?' (James 4:1). We cannot deal with the topic *God and the War* unless we first propound the topic *Man and the War*. The sinful cause and occasion of war is the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life.

It is, no doubt, impossible for us to diagnose all the affections, motives, volitions, acts and purposes that have converged upon one another, that have interacted with one another, and that in unison bear the onus of responsibility for the gigantic catastrophe that has now befallen the world. We must recognize that a complex movement having its root far back in history, a complex movement of sinful impulse, ambition and action that only the all-seeing eye of God can fully view and diagnose, lies back of, and comes to fruition in, this present conflict.

While we are not able to survey that movement in all its factors and in their various interactions, nevertheless we cannot but recognize the broad features of that movement. It should be far from me, loyal as I trust I am to the cause being fought by the United States, Great Britain, China and other members of the United Nations, to disavow the responsibility that rests upon the nation of which I am a grateful citizen, and upon the nation of which I am a grateful resident. But whatever of responsibility rests upon us for failures of the past, and however much we must bow in shame and humility for the sins committed in our national capacities, we must not allow our judgment to be blinded to the stark spectre that stalks before us in the crime and barbarity of the Axis nations. It surely must be said that Nazi Germany has been the main perpetrator of wrong in plunging the world into the holocaust that is now upon us. And why did Germany descend to such acts of iniquitous aggression? We cannot explain it on any other ground than that the moral fibre of the German people had undergone some radical deterioration. There must have been an eclipse of those moral principles that guide just and humane treatment of fellow men. And when we say moral eclipse, we must not dissociate that eclipse from its

religious source and basis. This source we must find in departure from the one living and true God, and such departure, in a country like Germany at least, means departure from the gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

We do not need any profound knowledge of history to be able to discover the source of this departure, and therefore the source of the moral and spiritual débâcle witnessed in that religion of blood and race and soil embodied in the ideology of Nazi Germany. This source is found in the naturalistic and destructive criticism of our Christian faith that found a ready home and active sponsorship in German soil. This war is the logical issue of that religion of blood and soil embraced by German Nazism, and that religion is the logical outcome of that pseudo-Christianity that is based upon the denial of the divine authority and finality of Holy Scripture as the infallible Word of God. That is the diagnosis which, I am making bold to say, is the root cause of the onslaught on decency, justice, liberty, mercy and truth we have witnessed in the Nazi aggression.

But this indictment is a humiliating one for us. It is only too obvious that that same pseudo-Christianity, and that same godless religion that is its child, have found in our nations hospitable entertainment and sponsorship. It may not have produced in our nations the same notorious fruits that have been manifest in Nazi Germany. We should be thankful that some respect for truth and justice has survived among us. Yet the very same phenomenon is with us and prevalent among us. Let us painfully know that the virus that has produced in the Nazi regime those atrocities we severely condemn is a virus that we also have fostered and cultivated. It is the virus of a pseudo-Christianity that has denied the very foundations upon which the Christian faith rests.

The roots of these crimes reside in our fallen nature. For that corruption there is but one cure—the gospel of the grace of God. In this pseudo-Christianity we have the denial of that which is our only salvation from the corruption that issues in just such barbarous acts of tyranny, oppression and destruction as have confronted us in the avalanche of Nazi power. ‘The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence’ (Gen. 6:11). This is *Man and the War*.

2. *This war is divine retribution for sin.* We may think lightly of sin, we

may be indifferent to it. But not so God. Sin is the contradiction of his glory, the contradiction of that law that is the reflex of his holy nature. And so ‘the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness’ (Rom. 1:18).

It is, of course, true that God does not execute all his wrath in this world. But it is a settled datum of history, as recorded in the Scripture and abundantly corroborated by subsequent history, that when iniquity abounds the Lord rises up out of his place to punish the inhabitants of the world for their iniquity. He did this in the case of the Old World by destroying men from off the face of the ground. He did this in the case of Sodom and Gomorrah by destroying them with fire and brimstone. The divine philosophy of history forces us to the conclusion that in this present conflict we must discern the rod of the divine anger and the staff of the divine indignation.

We rightly regard with the utmost disapprobation the unspeakable iniquities committed by the Axis nations. We think of treachery and deceit, treachery that baffles our ability adequately to depict its true character—our minds immediately travel to Pearl Harbour! We think of tyranny and ruthless persecution—Nazi oppression of Jews and Christians in Germany and in the conquered states of Europe is the very acme of this iniquity! And if we are looking for the most classic example of the inexpressibly mean and contemptible we find it in the actions of Mussolini and of the Fascist regime in Italy. We can say that these are incarnations of blatant wickedness.

There often surges up in our minds the question: Why, if God is the God of justice, if by him actions are weighed, does he not forthwith destroy such perpetrators of iniquity from off the face of the earth? We are disposed to reiterate the plaint and question of the prophet, ‘Righteous art thou, O Lord, when I plead with thee: yet let me talk with thee of thy judgments: wherefore doth the way of the wicked prosper? Wherefore are all they happy that deal very treacherously? Thou hast planted them, yea, they have taken root: they grow, yea, they bring forth fruit: thou art near in their mouth, and far from their reins’ (Jeremiah 12:1, 2). Or perhaps we reiterate the questions of the psalmist when we, like him, observe the prosperity of the wicked. ‘How doth

God know? and is there knowledge in the Most High?' (Psalm 73:11).

If our minds are imbued with the principles of the divine government as set forth in the Scriptures and as exemplified in history, we cannot escape the application to Germany, Italy and Japan of the word of God through Isaiah the prophet, 'O Assyrian, the rod of mine anger, and the staff in their hand is mine indignation. I will send him against an hypocritical nation, and against the people of my wrath will I give him a charge, to take the spoil, and to take the prey, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets' (Isaiah 10:5, 6).

Assyria was not more righteous than Israel, and Assyria did not set out on its campaign of conquest and destruction with the motive and intention of executing the dictates of divine retribution upon Israel. Oh no! For Isaiah continues, 'Howbeit he meaneth not so, neither doth his heart think so; but it is in his heart to destroy and cut off nations not a few' (vs. 7). Assyria's purpose did not coincide with God's purpose and neither does the purpose of the Axis nations with which we are now at war. Nevertheless, their campaign as the campaign of Assyria fulfils in the grand strategy of God's plan the purpose of holy retribution and judgment. We cannot diagnose the meaning of the crisis that is upon us nor derive the appropriate lessons from it unless we see in large letters the writing of divine displeasure upon us for *our* sins.

It is true that in due time the divine judgment will be executed also upon the instruments of this judgment upon us. Again, as in the case of Assyria, 'Wherefore it shall come to pass, that when the Lord hath performed his whole work upon Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, I will punish the fruit of the stout heart of the king of Assyria, and the glory of his high looks' (Isaiah 10:12). 'Therefore shall the Lord, the Lord of hosts, send among his fat ones leanness, and under his glory he shall kindle a burning like the burning of a fire' (vs. 16). But the greater iniquity of the instrument of judgment, and the greater judgment that will in due time be executed upon that instrument, must not blind us to the iniquity that is the ground for the divine anger against us. God is punishing us for our iniquity, let us therefore in submissiveness and humility hear the rod and him who has appointed it: When we stagger let us know that we stagger under the staff of God's righteous indignation.

3. *This war is the divine call to repentance.* 'When thy judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness' (Isa. 26:9).

Naturally we all long for the date when the bells of a victorious armistice or peace will begin to toll. We naturally think of days approximating those of the past. We think in terms of economic stability and comfort, and we perhaps pray for the early cessation of hostilities. But surely we have learned that there is something more important and precious than peace. Why have we gone to war? Is it not because we have deemed something more precious than peace? We must read the text again—'the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness'. That is the lesson of *God and the War* that bears upon us with more practical moment than anything else. It is the lesson that we have been loath to learn, the lesson of individual and national repentance. I do not think I am unduly pessimistic if I say that the signs have not been pointing in the direction of penitence and humility. We have had much humiliation, but have we put on humility as a garment? Have we acquainted ourselves with the alarming prevalence of sexual immorality and of marital infidelity? Have we followed the history of the divorce courts, the facility with which divorce may be secured, and the frequency with which divorce is sought and granted? Have we witnessed the appalling increase in profanity, a tendency given impetus, deplorable to relate, by the example of some who occupy positions of high public trust? Have we taken cognizance of the lamentable increase in desecration of the Sabbath? Have we not rather heard or read the proclamation from the highest seat of government of a seven-day week, when God has said, 'Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God' (Exod. 20:9, 10)? Have we not heard, in the terms of a pernicious antithesis, that this war is to be won in the workshop and not in the church? Can we fail to discern that the economic and educational systems of this country are very largely devised and conducted in systematic disregard of the authority and will of God? Our defiance has surely reached Babel proportions when we think that in the interests of defending our civil and religious liberties we can dispense with the laws which God has ordained. For the laws of God are the only basis and guarantee of true liberty and true worship.

Our minds are very liable in these times to be blinded by a certain kind of panic. We quite properly desire and set our minds upon the preservation of our national liberties and integrity and, in order to that end, upon the defeat of those enemies that are arrayed against us. But in preoccupation with that end we are too prone to that panic that blinds our vision of the kingdom of God and his righteousness. I would not set up a false antithesis. But we should remember that no temporal catastrophe can be as bad as the strengthening of the bands of godlessness. I am not saying that it is necessary for us to undergo ultimate defeat in order to learn righteousness. May God forbid that this should be the case. But it would be better for us to suffer the humiliation of defeat, if thereby we should learn righteousness, than to be crowned with sweeping military victory if thereby we are to be confirmed in the ways of ungodliness. 'Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness' (Matt. 6:33). 'The kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost' (Rom. 14:17). Let us ever remember the sovereign prerogatives of God's kingdom and even in the pursuance of a life-and-death military conflict let us learn to think even then in terms of the kingdom of him who is the 'King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God' (1 Tim. 1:17). 'If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land' (2 Chron. 7:14).

4. *The perfecting of Christ's body, the church, is being promoted by this war.* The whole of history is the unfolding of God's purpose. But we must also remember that all authority in heaven and in earth has been committed unto Christ. He is head over all things, and he is head over all things to his body, the church. It is with respect to him that the Lord says, 'Yet have I set my king upon my holy hill of Zion.' 'Ask of me, and I shall give thee the nations for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession' (Psalm 2:6, 8). He is head over all things and is ordering all affairs in order to promote the welfare of his bride, the apple of his eye. 'All things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose' (Rom. 8:28).

We quite properly view with dismay and even horror the way in

which true and faithful believers are downtrodden and persecuted in many parts of the world. We cannot but view with the keenest alarm the way in which the enemies of the gospel have been successful in frustrating the efforts of the true church to propagate the gospel, and the jeopardy into which the cause of evangelization throughout the world has been cast. We should cry from the depths of distress and real solicitude, 'Lord, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked triumph?' (Psalm 94:3). And we should with grief reiterate the complaint of the psalmist, 'O God, the heathen are come into thine inheritance; thy holy temple have they defiled; they have laid Jerusalem on heaps' (Psalm 79:1). The false optimism of indifference to, or escape from, the realities of current history should have no place in our outlook. The extinction of the true church is inherent in the philosophy of Nazi Germany and pagan Japan. Here we have a religious philosophy at work that is the antithesis of the Christian faith.

But as we confront the grim realities of the present situation we must not forget the reality of the situation that is more ultimate, the situation created by the transcendent kingship of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ as the king and head of the church. Through all the upheavals, sufferings, tribulations, persecutions and even executions of God's people, there runs an invincible purpose that cannot fail of execution, the completion of the whole body of Christ, in line with the word of the apostle, 'I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened . . . have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel' (Phil. 1:12). These sufferings fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ, to the end of furthering the great purpose that Christ had in view in coming into the world, and of bringing that purpose to its consummation in the glorification of a countless multitude whom no man can number out of every nation and kindred and people and tongue. It cannot fail to be true, 'These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb' (Rev. 7:14).

Let not our certitude and peace be disturbed. Christ sits as king and he must reign until all his enemies shall have been made his footstool. He will not leave off until he will bring forth the headstone of this living temple with shoutings, crying, 'Grace, grace unto it'. 'The hands of

Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house; his hands shall also finish it' (Zech. 4:9).

5. *The war vindicates God's sovereignty.* It is an inexpressible comfort in these days of upheaval and turmoil to know that all events, great and small, are embraced in God's sovereign providence. He has not resigned the reins of government. Present history is not moving toward chaos. It is moving in the grand drama of God's plan and purpose to the accomplishment of his holy designs and to the vindication of his glory.

Before the avalanche of totalitarian human government, many professing Christians are capitulating and many have also enlisted in the unholy crusade of taking 'counsel together, against the Lord, and against his anointed, saying, Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us' (Psa. 2:2, 3). With respect to the true church of God they have said, 'Come, and let us cut them off from being a nation; that the name of Israel may be no more in remembrance' (Psa. 83:4). We must be reminded in such a situation that in this universe there is only one totalitarian government, and that men must assume in it the place of humble submission and obedience. 'The Lord reigneth; let the people tremble; he sitteth between the cherubim; let the earth be moved. The Lord is great in Zion; and he is high above all the people' (Psa. 99:1, 2). 'Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth' (Psa. 46:10). All history is under God's governance and is moving towards his tribunal where every infraction upon truth and deviation from justice will receive its final adjustment and adjudication. 'He cometh to judge the earth: with righteousness shall he judge the world, and the people with equity' (Psa. 98:9). It is here that the believer finds solace, for it is the secret place of the Most High and the shadow of the Almighty. Through all the disquieting events of our history there runs the sovereign and holy purpose of the Lord God omnipotent. And even though clouds and darkness are round about him, justice and judgment are the habitation of his throne. He fulfils his righteous purpose through the unrighteous wills of wicked men.

We must assert, and take refuge in, the absolute sovereignty of the eternal God, the absolute sovereignty of him who is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and with equal universality the mediatorial

sovereignty of the Lord Jesus Christ, the God-man, the incarnate Son, the Saviour-King, the King of kings, and Lord of lords. In the words of the prophet let us say to ourselves and others, 'Enter into the rock, and hide thee in the dust, for fear of the Lord, and for the glory of his majesty. The lofty looks of man shall be humbled, and the haughtiness of men shall be bowed down, and the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day' (Isa. 2:10, 11).

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Volume one
THE CLAIMS OF TRUTH

The Banner of Truth Trust