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Spirituality and Armed Conflict

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Abstract: The position of the Church concerning war and armed conflicts is dictated by the teachings in the Book of Mormon. War is condemned by God and peace is always valiantly sought. However, at times wars must be fought by the righteous in order to safeguard liberty. Although God aids the righteous in war, the righteous may suffer or be slain.

SPIRITUALITY and



—Salt Lake Tribune Photo

ARE THOSE who worship God justified in going to war—in taking human life—in building battle-ships, guns, and atomic bombs?

What should be the attitude of the Church in time of war?

Will the righteous be protected on the field of battle?

Do nations, humbled by the ravages of war, turn to God?

Why, if God exists, does he not stop war and destruction among his children?

These questions face us almost daily and are calling forth confused answers.

War is an Evil

Most men will agree that war is an evil because the business of those engaged in war is to kill the enemy and destroy his property. War is considered evil because it arouses hatred, promotes greed, and destroys spirituality. There are, however, voices raised here and there in defense of war. The arguments put forth are the age-old arguments that wars make a nation virulent, keep the population of the earth in check, and provide the incentive for new inventions which in turn bless mankind.

Christian Confusion

Because certain passages of scripture, taken by themselves, seem to condemn all who take up the sword, so-called Christians in general have many problems in time of war.

“Thou shalt not kill,” declared the Lord on Mt. Sinai. (Exodus 20:13.)

Again, we hear the words of the Savior to Peter, “. . . Put up again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword.” (Matt. 26:52.)

To the twelve disciples the Lord taught,

Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment:

But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: . . . (Ibid., 5:21-22.)

Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth:

But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. (Ibid., 5:38-39.)

There are those among the Christians who consider these passages as constituting the whole law. Most prominent among these is a group whose position in regard to war has

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The Book of Mormon speaks on current problems

become so well-established that many countries respect their point of view and, in time of war, appoint their conscripted young men to tasks other than the manipulation of weapons of destruction. Others have refused to support war in any capacity. Such views are in direct contrast to that of another sect who has justified wars so long as the leader directs his subjects to fight them. Historically, some religious leaders have called upon Christians to fight for the Holy Land and have even directed princes of Europe to war upon their neighbors, where the neighboring kingdoms became rebellious. Others have supported what are called “just wars.”

Most churches have abhorred war, but in time of conflict have given support along lines of economic or national interest. Churches have often divided in time of war. Such a division occurred in the United States during the Civil War. A typical example of Protestant confusion on the issue of war is shown in the report of the Oxford Conference of 1942. Although the question of what position the so-called Christian churches should take in the raging world war came up for prolonged discussion, no unanimity of opinion was reached, and the delegates went home with the injunction, “Support your respective countries,” and they might have added, “right or wrong.”

ARMED CONFLICT

by William E. Berrett*

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The Book of Mormon Speaks

In the midst of this Christian confusion the Book of Mormon speaks with a clarion voice. And the voice is that of servants of the Most High. The Nephite prophets, like all prophets of God, condemned war and valiantly sought peace. Nevertheless, these prophets prized liberty even above life and were ready to fight to preserve it.

Notwithstanding the horrors and evils of war and the beauty of peace, there is a greater purpose in life than merely remaining peaceful. Life calls for growth of the soul. Opportunities for growth arise only where man retains his freedom, his free agency, his right to live, work, and worship according to the dictates of his own conscience. To retain for man this free agency, without which progress is impossible, God rejected Lucifer and his plan for man on the earth. (See Moses 4:3.)

Preparation Often Prevents War

The Nephite people with the sanction and often the direct aid of their prophets prepared arms, walls, and towers for the defense of their cities. Thus we read:

And I, Nephi, did take the sword of Laban, and after the manner of it did make many swords, lest by any means the people who were now called Lamanites should come upon us and destroy us; for I knew their hatred towards me and my children and those who were called my people. (II Nephi 5:14.)

Jarom also believed in preparedness for war, for he wrote:

And we multiplied exceedingly, and spread upon the face of the land, and became exceeding rich in gold, and in silver, and in precious things, and in fine workmanship of wood, in buildings, and in machinery, and also in iron and copper, and brass and steel, making all manner of tools of every kind to till the ground, and weapons of war—yea, the sharp pointed arrow, and the quiver, and the dart, and the javelin, and all preparations for war.

And thus being prepared to meet the Lamanites, they did not prosper against us. But the word of the Lord was verified, which he spake unto our fathers, saying that: Inasmuch as ye will keep my com-

mandments ye shall prosper in the land. (Jarom 1:8-9.)

The great general, Moroni, himself a mighty man of God, seeing the Lamanites preparing for war, hastened to prepare his own people for the defense of their liberties.

Now it came to pass that while Amalickiah had thus been obtaining power by fraud and deceit, Moroni, on the other hand, had been preparing the minds of the people to be faithful unto the Lord their God.

Yea, he had been strengthening the armies of the Nephites, and erecting small forts, or places of resort; throwing up banks of earth round about to enclose his armies, and also building walls of stone to encircle them about, round about their cities and the borders of their lands; yea, all round about the land.

And in their weakest fortifications he did place the greater number of men; and thus he did fortify and strengthen the land which was possessed by the Nephites.

And thus he was preparing to support their liberty, their lands, their wives, and their children, and their peace, and that they might live unto the Lord their God, and that they might maintain that which was called by their enemies the cause of Christians. (Alma 48:7-10.)

It is well to note what Mormon writes of this great general, after whom he named his own son:

And Moroni was a strong and a mighty man; he was a man of a perfect understanding; yea, a man that did not delight in bloodshed; a man whose soul did joy in the liberty and the freedom of his country, and his brethren from bondage and slavery; . . .

Yea, and he was a man who was firm in the faith of Christ, and he had sworn with an oath to defend his people, his rights, and his country, and his religion, even to the loss of his blood. (*Ibid.*, 48:11, 13.)

Prophets Fight to Protect Life, Liberty, and Property

That the Nephites believed that God expected them to fight if necessary to preserve their life and liberty is shown by the following comment of Mormon:

Nevertheless, the Nephites were inspired by a better cause, for they were not fighting for monarchy nor power but they were fighting for their homes and their liberties, their wives and their children, and their all, yea, for their rites of worship and their church.

And they were doing that which they felt was the duty which they owed to their God; for the Lord had said unto them, and also unto their fathers, that: Inasmuch as ye are not guilty of the first offense, neither the second, ye shall not suffer yourselves to be slain by the hands of your enemies.

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—Harold M. Lambert Photo

* (See page 296 for note on author)

SPIRITUALITY AND ARMED CONFLICT

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And again, the Lord has said that: Ye shall defend your families even unto bloodshed. Therefore for this cause were the Nephites contending with the Lamanites, to defend themselves, and their families, and their lands, their country, and their rights, and their religion. (*Ibid.*, 43:45-47.)

The Prophet Alma armed his people and personally led them in a civil war against a wicked king who had seized the throne. Of one of the battles we read:

And it came to pass that Alma fought with Amlici with the sword, face to face; and they did contend mightily, one with another.

And it came to pass that Alma, being a man of God, being exercised with much faith, cried, saying: O Lord, have mercy and spare my life, that I may be an instrument in thy hands to save and preserve this people.

Now when Alma had said these words he contended again with Amlici; and he was strengthened, insomuch that he slew Amlici with the sword. (*Ibid.*, 2:29-31.)

The Nephite missionary Ammon did not hesitate to defend property entrusted to his care even though such defense resulted in the shedding of the blood of those who attacked him. (See *Ibid.*, 17:25-39.)

The Nephite governor, Pahoran, in a letter to the great General Moroni, justifies the shedding of blood by warfare in these words:

And now, behold, we will resist wickedness even unto bloodshed. We would not shed the blood of the Lamanites if they would stay in their own land.

We would not shed the blood of our brethren if they would not rise up in rebellion and take the sword against us.

We would subject ourselves to the yoke of bondage if it were requisite with the justice of God, or if he should command us so to do.

But behold he doth not command us that we shall subject ourselves to our enemies, but that we should put our trust in him, and he will deliver us.

Therefore, my beloved brother, Moroni, let us resist evil, and whatsoever evil we cannot resist with our words, yea, such as rebellions and dissensions, let us resist them with our swords, that we may retain our freedom, that we may rejoice in the great privilege of our church, and in the cause of our Redeemer and our God. (*Ibid.*, 61:10-14.)

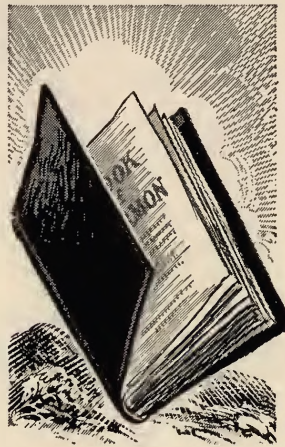
God helps the Righteous in Their Battles

The Nephites were taught that God would prosper them in battles fought in self-defense:

Now the Nephites were taught to defend themselves against their enemies, even to the shedding of blood if it were necessary; yea, and they were also taught never to give an offense, yea, and never to raise the sword except it were against an enemy, except it were to preserve their lives.

And this was their faith, that by so doing God would prosper them in the land, or in other words, if they were faithful in keeping the commandments of God that he would prosper them in the land; yea, warn them to flee, or to prepare for war, according to their danger. (*Ibid.*, 48:14-15.)

The method by which God aided the righteous in their battles is most interesting:



And also, that God would make it known unto them whither they should go to defend themselves against their enemies, and by so doing, the Lord would deliver them; and this was the faith of Moroni, and his heart did glory in it; not in the shedding of blood but in doing good, in preserving his people, yea, in keeping the commandments of God, yea, and resisting iniquity.

Yea, verily, verily I say unto you, if all men had been, and were, and ever would be, like unto Moroni, behold, the very powers of hell would have been shaken forever; yea, the devil would never have power over the hearts of the children of men. (*Ibid.*, 48:16-17.)

That God did not condemn his prophets for taking up the sword in defense of life and liberty is shown by the fact that he did not withdraw his Spirit from them. Nephi received remarkable visions and visitations by angels after slaying the wicked King Laban. Alma is visited by an angel not long after killing Amlici in battle. Ammon is full of the Spirit both during and after his battle with the Lamanite bandits. Moroni is directed

in battle by the Spirit of the Lord, which informs him of the movements of the enemy.

The Righteous May Be Slain in Battle

In a remarkable letter to Pahoran, governor of the Nephite lands, the prophet-general, Moroni, gives answer to a question every soldier's mother is asking: "Will God permit a righteous boy to be slain on the field of battle?" Some of the Nephite parents must have been asking the same question, for in his letter Moroni says:

Do ye suppose that, because so many of your brethren have been killed it is because of their wickedness? I say unto you, if ye have supposed this ye have supposed in vain; for I say unto you, there are many who have fallen by the sword; and behold it is to your condemnation;

For the Lord suffereth the righteous to be slain that his justice and judgment may come upon the wicked; therefore, ye need not suppose that the righteous are lost because they are slain; but behold, they do enter into the rest of the Lord their God. (*Ibid.*, 60:12-13.)

Moroni did not expect God's help unless his people should become diligent in their own cause.

And now behold, I say unto you, I fear exceedingly that the judgments of God will come upon this people, because of their exceeding slothfulness, yea, even the slothfulness of our government, and their exceeding great neglect towards their brethren, yea, towards those who have been slain. (*Ibid.*, 60:14.)

God Will Not Take Away Man's Free Agency

As the blood and carnage of battle spread across the earth, there are always those who are ready to deny a God who will not put an end to such brutality and slaughter. Why does a just God permit the innocent to be slain?

Again the Book of Mormon gives answer. God will not take away from men their free agency. Men may abuse their free agency. They may in its exercise become carnal, sensual, and devilish. They may make war on their neighbors and put the innocent to death, but interfere with that free agency and the whole purpose of life is frustrated, and progress is ended. The law is set forth in plain-

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THE IMPROVEMENT ERA

the church steps all afternoon!" Her voice broke. Her reputation was ruined, she who never missed a church supper.

Slowly Uncle reached under the lap robe. The children watched him in frozen silence. He held out mutely what was left of the pie.

"Forgot to leave it at all," he said. "Had a little accident with it, too."

Aunt's eyes bulged like marbles. She gazed at the mess of apple in disbelief, wrath, and finally, thankfulness. She let her breath out slowly. Then she clutched her skirt high above the litter of the stable floor and turned back to the house. At the barn door she turned, holding up her skirt on each side like a fan.

"You might as well all come into the house and eat up some of those doughnuts I made." She looked at the three pairs of feet dangling from the buggy like so many pendulums. "But don't a one of you go further'n the kitchen. Been traipsin' 'round the woods again!" As she crossed the yard to the house, they heard her add, to herself, "I'll make another pie tomorrow and take it up to the meetinghouse myself. Can't trust him for a minute when those young ones are around."

She hadn't said one word, Beth thought, as they climbed down from the buggy, about which one stepped in the pie!

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ness by Father Lehi speaking to his sons:

And the Messiah cometh in the fulness of time, that he may redeem the children of men from the fall. And because that they are redeemed from the fall they have become free forever, knowing good from evil; to act for themselves and not to be acted upon, save it be by the punishment of the law at the great and last day, according to the commandments which God hath given.

Wherefore, men are free according to the flesh; and all things are given them which are expedient unto man. And they are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great mediation of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil; for he seeketh that all men might be miserable like unto himself. (II Nephi 2:26-27.)

Samuel, the Lamanite prophet, teaches the same doctrine:

And now remember, remember, my brethren, that whosoever perisheth, perisheth (Continued on following page)

APRIL 1952



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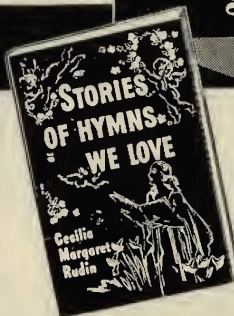
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unto himself; and whosoever doeth iniquity, doeth it unto himself; for behold, ye are free; ye are permitted to act for yourselves; for behold, God hath given unto you a knowledge and he hath made you free.

He hath given unto you that ye might know good from evil, and he hath given unto you that ye might choose life or death; and ye can do good and be restored unto that which is good, or have that which is good restored unto you; or ye can do evil, and have that which is evil restored unto you. (Helaman 14:30-31.)

During the missionary work of Alma and Amulek in the land of Ammonihah, they were arrested and forced to witness the burning of those whom they had converted:

And when Amulek saw the pains of the women and children who were consuming in the fire, he also was pained; and he said unto Alma: How can we witness this awful scene? Therefore let us stretch forth our hands, and exercise the power of God which is in us, and save them from the flames.

But Alma said unto him: The Spirit constraineth me that I must not stretch forth mine hand; for behold the Lord receiveth them up unto himself, in glory; and he doth suffer that they may do this thing, or that the people may do this thing unto them, according to the hardness of their hearts, that the judgments which he shall exercise upon them in his wrath may be just; and the blood of the innocent shall stand as a witness against them, yea, and cry mightily against them at the last day. (Alma 14:10-11.)

Alma's answer goes to the heart of the problem. God will not interfere with the free agency of his children that his judgments may be just, nor can we expect him to stop wars and evil in our day for the same reason. But the law of compensation catches up with the wicked. This law is stated clearly by Mormon:

But, behold, the judgments of God will overtake the wicked; and it is by the wicked that the wicked are punished; for it is the wicked that stir up the hearts of the children of men unto bloodshed. (Mormon 4:5.)

Wars Turn the Nations Away from God

Mormon observed that wars came about because of the wickedness of men and are destructive of both life and faith.

One might suppose that the poverty and misery resulting from war would turn people back to God, but listen to the words of a great observer of the rise and fall of nations:

And it came to pass that when I, Mormon, saw their lamentation and their mourning and their sorrow before the Lord, my heart did begin to rejoice within me, knowing the mercies and the long-suffering of the Lord, therefore supposing that he would be merciful unto them that they would again become a righteous people.

But behold this my joy was vain, for their sorrowing was not unto repentance, because of the goodness of God; but it was rather the sorrowing of the damned, because the Lord would not always suffer them to take happiness in sin.

And they did not come unto Jesus with broken hearts and contrite spirits, but they did curse God, and wish to die. Nevertheless they would struggle with the sword for their lives.

And it came to pass that my sorrow did return unto me again, and I saw that the day of grace was passed with them, both temporally and spiritually; for I saw thousands of them hewn down in open rebellion against their God, and heaped up as dung upon the face of the land. And thus three hundred and forty, and four years had passed away. (Mormon 2:12-15.)

This is also true in our day. The two world wars have nearly emptied the churches of Europe, and spirituality has sunk to a new low.

Where Shall the Church Stand?

What then shall be the position of the Church in time of war? Clearly the Church shall use all of its influence to avoid war between nations and individuals. This is best done by preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ to all men by precept and example, that mankind might come to love peace and abhor war.

But the Church also believes in the right of preserving life and liberty and will encourage its members to fight for their preservation against aggressor nations. Further, a member of the Church who is called to serve his nation in the cause of freedom may enter into battle with confidence that so long as his desires are righteous, God's Spirit will not desert him, and if death overtakes him on the field of battle, he will be received by that God who gave him life.

LEAP YEAR

By Nell Griffith Wilson

IN THIS month of leap year wooing
How can a man say—"No"?
When a crocus warms old winter's heart
And pushes through the snow.

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