

War, Peace, and International Social Issues

by Dr. Paul Marston

I came by choice into a commitment to a Wesleyan-Arminian holiness movement which had no strong tradition in Britain, and was delighted to be able to join the fairly recently formed UK Free Methodist church as a Lay Minister over two decades ago. We are closely connected with America, and I was privileged to come to the USA as a delegate to the 1989 General conference and again to lecture in SPU summer school. I thank God for the many godly Americans I have met, for the Spirit-filled bishops, and for the love, commitment, and work which American Christians of all denominations have given to the world, and for which Christians around the world should always be grateful.

Jeremiah, however, in speaking out against a war which most of his compatriots saw as justified and inevitable, was neither being unpatriotic nor denying the constitutional authority of his monarch. As a committed Free Methodist, I am delighted that our (1999) *Discipline* – which generally reflects a biblical perspective – explicitly contains the following passage:

Issues of War and Peace

¶ A/332. 1. We recognize the sovereign authority of government and the duty of all Christians to reverence the power, to obey the law, and to participate righteously in the administration of lawful order in the nation under whose protection they reside (Matthew 22:21; Romans 13:1-7). Members of our church should bear the responsibilities of good citizenship, and they have the right to act in the enforcement of law and the defense of the peace in accord with the conscience of each person.

2. We believe, however, that military aggression is indefensible as an instrument of national policy and strategy (Isaiah 2:3-4). The destruction of life and property, and the deceit and violence necessary to warfare are contrary to the spirit and mind of Jesus Christ (Isaiah 9:6-7; Matthew 5:44-45). It is, therefore, the duty of all Christians to promote peace and goodwill, to foster the spirit of understanding and mutual trust among all people, and to work with patience for the renunciation of war as a means to the settlement of international disputes (Romans 12:18; 14:19).

3. It is our firm conviction that none of our people should be required to enter military training or to bear arms and that the consciences of our individual members should be respected (Acts 4:19-20; 5:29). Therefore, we claim exemption from all military service for those who register officially with the church as conscientious objectors to war.

This is clear. We support the right of pacifists to be conscientious objectors, and my denomination calls upon me, as a Free Methodist and as current Secretary for the UK Free Methodist Conference for social and moral issues, to “renunciate war as a means to the settlement of international disputes” and proclaim that “military aggression is indefensible as an instrument of national policy and strategy.” This, however, remains meaningless unless we are prepared to apply it in particular. If it is not relevant in the present situation then it is difficult to see any situation in which it would be relevant.

America is now the only and overwhelmingly powerful super-power, with Tony Blair’s Britain as its closest ally. I am not personally a pacifist, and can conceive situations in which the use of military power can be justified. In the current situation, however, there is no way to see what is happening otherwise than as the use of

military aggression as an instrument of national policy (which my denomination tells me is indefensible), and the potential use of war as a means to settle an international dispute. I am calling on all fellow Free Methodists in my general conference – in Britain and America – to actively lobby against this.

As it happens, I have looked very closely at the “evidence” produced by Colin Powell (and the Britain “intelligence” document which turned out to have been cobbled together from the internet). It consists of vague photographs, information from dissidents with every reason to want the odious and evil Saddam regime to be overthrown, and a lack of evidence as to destruction of weapons that Iraq may possibly have had. It falls a long way short of any demonstration that Iraq actually has large numbers of devastating weapons. There is no indication that a weakened Saddam is a threat to any of his neighbours, or that such weapons (if he has them) will be used against Britain or the USA. The suggestion that Saddam’s secular, Shia-repressing, fascist regime would make common cause with the fanatical Muslims of al Qa’ida seems extremely unlikely, as they would be as likely to use weapons against Saddam as against us. Iraq has clearly been slow and reluctant to cooperate with Resolution 1441, and the threat of the international community to use force in a world-policing type context may well be justified. However that international community is currently recognised as represented through the United Nations, and the constituted authority on such issues is the Security Council. If we advocate the rule of international Law then we cannot simply ignore it on occasions it does not do what we would like. It currently looks highly unlikely that Bush and Blair will obtain a majority of votes on the Security Council to sanction immediate war (or war next week) – in spite of the economic threats and bullying of the small nations – and there is absolutely no doubt that under existing constitution France and Russia have the right to veto. Tony Blair cannot simply write this off as “unreasonable” if he is serious about international law – and it currently seems that the British Parliament and people are saying this loudly to him. Currently 76% in the UK (and actually a slim majority in the USA) are against a war without further international sanction and in the UK a million people recently held the largest peaceful demonstration in memory to express this.

Actually, it is not really the point whether Iraq invasion will lead (as many believe) to many deaths, a longish period of American colonial rule and oil exploitation, and the probable eventual fragmentation of self determining Iraq into three sections - one of which may be more sympathetic to al Qa’ida than the present regime. The current Iraq has not attacked Britain or America, is no real threat to its neighbours, and cannot bomb its own northern and southern minorities because of the no-fly zones. Declaration 1441 does not sanction war, and would have been unlikely to have been passed at all (let alone unanimously) had it done so. The international community, a majority in Europe, and all the Arab nations believe that an immediate (or next week) war is unjustifiable. A declaration of a war in such circumstances would be most certainly an “indefensible use of military aggression as an instrument of national policy and strategy (Isaiah 2:3-4)” and the use of “war as a means to the settlement of international disputes (Romans 12:18; 14:19)” for which Free Methodists are pledged to work for the renunciation. Let us do so by lobbying our respective governments by all means possible. In the UK we can write to our MPs, to Tony Blair, to Jack Straw, and to Ian Duncan Smith. In America citizens can join former president Jimmy Carter and others who are

lobbying within their own society. The former president's carefully worded opposition appears on <http://www.mggpillai.com/sections.php3?op=viewarticle&artid=2054>.

Finally on war issues, I wonder how many Americans realise that in 1997 America declared possession of 15,637 tonnes of mustard gas, 7464 tonnes of sarin nerve gas, 4032 tonnes of VX nerve gas, and 1698 tabun nerve gas. The destruction schedule of these, required under international law, is reputedly behind schedule. Donald Rumsfeld last month referred to the 1997 "Chemical Weapons Convention" (signed after some 30 years negotiations) as a "straitjacket" limiting US war options. Secretary Rumsfeld may well press for supposedly "non-lethal" chemical weapons to be used in any Iraqi combat – although this would be illegal under international law and their use would entitle Iraq (as co-signatory with America of the 1925 Geneva protocol) to retaliate in kind.

As a loyal Free Methodist, I agree with the clear implication of A/323 that a war in the present circumstances and lacking international sanction, would be military aggression as an instrument of national policy and the use of war as a means to the settlement of international disputes, and that it could have negative consequences. Naturally, if the USA with or without Britain, *does* launch an attack next week, I will be praying that there will be as little loss of life as possible (British, American and Iraqi) and that peace and justice will eventually come to the region.

There are, however, currently some other serious international issues of social concern. Who Americans elect as their President, and whether or not the system should require an actual majority of votes, is a matter for them. What is of more general concern is that, in spite of its Christian credentials, the Bush administration seems often not to be (in the words of Gladstone) "on the side of the angels", and his explanations have sometimes left a suspicion that there is too much commitment to mammon rather than to God. These are not domestic issues (in which a UK citizen has no particular business or concern) but issues that seriously affect the world community

First, As Christians we are responsible as stewards in God's world. In March 2001, after reneging on a campaign pledge to regulate carbon dioxide emissions from power plants, President George W. Bush announced his administration's opposition to the **Kyoto Protocol** which is a framework laid down by 38 developed countries to prevent global warming by reducing gas emission. His administration produced a number of flawed arguments [see <http://www.nrdc.org/globalWarming/akyotoqa.asp>]. By 6 February 2003, 84 Parties have signed and 105 Parties have ratified or acceded to the protocol. President Bush still rejects it on the grounds that it would be harmful to the U.S. economy – and many observers link this to his oil connections. A meeting of scientists recently rejected Bush's claim that more study was needed – we need action not study.

Secondly, unlike its Western allies, the United States has refused to sign the **Land Mine Convention**, which restricts mine manufacture. It maintains that the focus of international efforts should be on ways to control mines specifically meant to maim and kill civilians and that battle field mines (such as those it has deployed on the Korean peninsula) are legitimate because they are meant instead to deter military aggression. Mines do not know whether they are supposed to be "battle mines" or "civilian mines" and, because the manufacture of land mines continues, thousands of

civilians including many children are maimed every year. Some repressive regimes even deliberately use human minesweepers to clear “military mines”.

Thirdly, in 2001 the WTO issued the “**Doha Declaration**” confirming governments' right to override drug patents and authorise the manufacture of cheap generic versions for poorer countries. In the months since November 2001 the Bush administration, influenced by its pharmaceutical lobby, has consistently blocked agreement on any detailed application of this. The pharmaceutical lobby provided nearly \$60m to Republicans in recent mid-term elections, helping them win key seats in their bid to retake the Senate.

Finally, the **International Criminal Court** is empowered to hear cases concerning war crimes and crimes against humanity including bombing of civilians and use of systematic rape and torture. To-date 89 countries have ratified the statute (including the UK) and another 50 signed but not yet ratified it. The USA not only refused to ratify it, but in June 2002 the Bush administration threatened to veto all UN peacekeeping operations unless the Security Council adopted a resolution 1422 to override the court's jurisdiction and provide immunity to citizens of non-ratifying countries (ie the USA) engaged in UN authorised operations. British diplomats shared the views of Canada and France that this was unnecessary, but were instructed to support America. The resolution was passed, though limited to one year after which time the American regime is expected to cajole and bully members of the Security Council into extending it another year, and so on. The USA (eventually again supported by the UK which undermined EU opposition) then made bilateral arrangements with as many countries as possible that US soldiers/civilians would never be surrendered to this court. In view of the way Resolution 1441 speaks of Iraq, it is generally expected that USA personnel will be immune from any prosecution for war crimes (should there be any) committed in Iraq in any war, even though it will probably not even be a UN sanctioned operation.

American prophets within Free Methodism, like in particular Howard Snyder (eg in *A Kingdom Manifesto* (1985)) have made calls for Christians to be more involved in social and political issues. Concern for the welfare of the poor are not peripheral to the “real gospel” but are an inherent part of the “good news to the poor” – and Free Methodism has reaffirmed this commitment. We should all, of course, pray for peace and for justice – crying out to the Lord of all the earth as did the prophets and psalmists. But another aspect of this commitment may be for us all to continue to lobby our own governments to take the right actions on international social issues that affect the poor – like those listed above.

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