

Rights, Just War, and Public Policy Theology (Part 1)

by John Cobin, Ph.D. for *The Times Examiner*
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This column is the first segment of a three-part series dealing with natural rights and warfare issues in Christian perspective

In the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson stated: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights; that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness [or property].” However, this assertion must be supported—if not by theological premise then at least by social custom. If the vast majority of the members of society do not “hold these truths” then the rights to life, liberty and property will *not* be respected. A “self-evident” right or truth is one which is, according to the dictionary, “evident without proof or reasoning; producing certainty or conviction upon a bare presentation to the mind.”

Nonetheless, the idea that human beings have such fundamental or “natural” rights is not evident to many people. For instance, the Marxists are myriad who deny that human beings possess a right to property. An even greater number of people believe that only certain *classes* of human beings have rights to life or liberty. Unborn human beings are not considered to have rights until at least twenty weeks after conception—if not up until the point of birth (or beyond)—by many intelligent people. In some places, people regard those classified as incapacitated or economically unproductive as not being rights-bearers.

Still others find it perfectly acceptable to enslave certain classes of human beings—even the author of the Declaration of Independence owned Negro slaves! One need only consider the treatment of Indians and the Chinese Coulees to see that thinking regarding the abridgment of rights for certain classes of human beings extended far beyond the Founding Fathers. Furthermore, confiscation of income and wealth from certain classes of human beings by progressive and other kinds of taxation is not only commonplace but is widely considered to be civilized and just behavior.

So in what sense is the veracity of fundamental rights of life, liberty and property self-evident? Apparently, such rights were self-evident to the Founders, at least insofar as they were the province of Caucasians (and perhaps only Christian ones). For them, their rights were evident without proof or reasoning, producing certainty or conviction upon a bare presentation to the mind. It was *obvious* that they held natural rights to life, liberty, and property. It also made no difference whether savages or uncivilized human beings (like Indians, Negroes, Turks or Chinese) agreed with the self-evident nature of their rights.

The Founders knew that in order for society to be civil, and for men to be able to have effective social cooperation, some ground rules must be set down and agreed upon. If there would be no mutual and diligent respect for fundamental rights, then all their work in forming a civil government and its laws would be in vain. Setting aside the agendas and personal preferences of any members, they boiled down the rights to be respected to life, liberty, and property—the same three “natural” rights that philosopher John Locke had set forth in his *Second Treatise of Civil Government* (1690).

Locke based much of his thinking in the Bible, particularly the Old Testament. Man, being created in the image of God, was not to be killed by other men except for a capital offense (Genesis 1:26-27; 9:6), implementing and confirming man’s right to life. Permanent, involuntary slavery has always been an abomination for God’s people (Leviticus 25:39; Nehemiah 5:5; John 8:32, 35; 1 Corinthians 7:21; Galatians 5:1). The ownership and use of property to sustain a man’s life, as well as for his family and heirs and the people of God, is clearly expressed and its integrity is not questioned (Genesis 13:2; 23:9; 50:13; Numbers 27:8-11; 2 Samuel 19:32; 1 Kings 21:1-19; 1 Chronicles 27:31; 2 Chronicles 17:13; 32:29; Proverbs 13:22; 22:28; 23:10; Jeremiah 37:12; Matthew 25:14-30; Acts 5:4; 1 Timothy 6:17-19).

As time rolled on, the classes of human beings whose fundamental rights are self-evident has expanded to include all races. Chattel slavery is now outlawed in nearly every country. The only classes currently excluded from being full rights-bearers are those who suffer from a physical, mental, or developmental defect (including being unborn). However, another important element has entered in: these rights are no longer natural but are instead considered to be *granted and held at the pleasure of the state*. And even though human beings are rarely property, they are still routinely conscripted and have their labor or

property extorted from them under color of law, effectively rendering them slaves—at least in an abstract sense.

Unlike the vision of the Founders, one class of human beings has now taken charge of deciding if and when other classes of human beings will enjoy the exalted level of being rights-bearers. Politicians, judges, and other rulers, acting upon the lead of savant philosophers, have taken the chief role in determining which human beings have rights, effectively rendering void the ideals of Jefferson and the other Founders. In a sobering sense, history is the record of how wide or how narrow has been the class of human beings who are afforded rights.

Rights, Just War, and Public Policy Theology (Part 2)

by John Cobin, Ph.D. for *The Times Examiner*
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This column is the second segment of a three-part series dealing with natural rights & warfare issues in Christian perspective

Do Christians have rights? Is it proper for them to assert their rights as Americans? If so, to what extent should they be asserted? The Bible teaches that Christians are not to claim their rights against each other, but rather to be defrauded if necessary (1 Corinthians 6:7-8; 1 Thessalonians 4:6). It is part and parcel of being a Christian to prefer others and to esteem others better than themselves (Romans 12:10; Philippians 2:3-4). They are even called upon to suffer abuse from unbelievers when they can bear testimony of Christ to them and promote peace (Matthew 5:38-42; Romans 12:17-21). The Christian life is, in reality, one of cross-bearing and suffering (Mark 8:34; Philippians 1:29). Therefore, in a sense, Christians have no rights—or at least they are commanded to not exercise them in most circumstances—for the sake of God’s glory, the love of God’s people, or for the purpose of bearing testimony to God’s grace in them.

Nevertheless, if Christians are called to live in civil society and participate in its trade and institutions, then they must adhere to social customs. The Bible gives every indication that Christians are to work, buy, sell, give of their earnings, hold property, pass on an inheritance, and enter into commercial agreements with others. Thus, Christians need to both assert and comply with social customs for economic cooperation. Those customs include establishing and maintaining political and personal rights and liberties, assigning duties to government to protect rights and obligations on each other to respect them.

When Christians have a say in determining what rights will be concluded as “self-evident” it makes sense for them to base their recommendations on God’s word. Accordingly, the Founders originated a basis for claiming rights to life, liberty, and property in God’s revelation to man as a means by which sinful men would be able to dwell together in peaceful cooperation in economic and social spheres. By establishing the civil rights of men, and limiting the scope of government to protect those rights against predators, the Founders (and Christians) became peacemakers in the world. They fulfilled the mandate of love toward one another (as outlined in the New Testament) and to the society in general (Galatians 6:10). “Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace” (James 3:18).

Although no civilization is without its imperfections, it is clear that the most peaceful, generous, and cooperative civilizations have been those which exalt private property rights, esteem life highly, and prize liberty. Christian commitment does not preclude the use of law and order in business or social behavior. Christians understand the sinful nature of men and thus understand, in the words of Jefferson, “that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.” Absent private property rights, liberty, and the rule of law, history bears witness of the tragedy that will ensue under collectivist and totalitarian systems: war, chaos, destruction of property, murder, mayhem, poverty, and environmental degradation. By asserting fundamental rights to life, liberty, and property, Christians demonstrate the goodness of God in the world and sow peace and prosperity for men. To do the opposite would be to sin—harming their neighbors by worsening their terrestrial misery (Romans 13:10). Conceptually, being “stewards of the mysteries of God” (1 Corinthians

4:1) and being “good stewards of the manifold grace of God” (1 Peter 4:10) includes not only the Gospel itself but also in caring for all of the works of God that promote His kingdom and peace in the world.

But should Christians *forever* advocate the same set of rights promulgated by the Founders? Yes, they should! Those rights are derived from the unchanging precepts of God’s word and His attributes. But does the existence of democratic processes alter the *nature* of the action of government agents? In other words, can popularly elected rulers violate fundamental rights with immunity? For example, are extortion and abortion cleansed (i.e., no longer wrong) because they have been approved by a referendum or decreed by a ruler elected under democratic processes? After all, since we have representative government in America, some claim that Christians are precluded from chafing against legislation or decrees by disobeying edicts. Yet, clearly, for the Christian it is “self-evident” that the precepts of God’s word trump any of the political and social concoctions of men. A society based on adherence to His principles will lead to the “great society” rather than the failed proactive policies of rulers whose philosophy vies against such principles. At the end of the day, the opinions of all the rulers and philosophers of the world regarding rights and morality are of little worth compared to the decrees of the God of the universe.

Were our American Christian forefathers, such as the strong and devout Christian Stonewall Jackson, wrong in asserting their rights to self-defense of life, liberty, and property? They certainly were not. They were not merely fighting for “their” rights. They were fighting to preserve a system of social cooperation. Many endeavored to engender peace and prosperity “to them and their posterity”, for the glory of God, for the benefit of the church, and for the expansion of the testimony of Jesus Christ in the world. They were not wrong in performing acts of love and sowing the seeds of peace. On the contrary, Christians today do wrong by refusing to stand up to tyrants and by allowing this world’s system to dominate their hearts, minds, and social or economic interactions.

Rights, Just War, and Public Policy Theology (Part 3)

by John Cobin, Ph.D. for *The Times Examiner*
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This column is the third segment of a three-part series dealing with natural rights and warfare issues in Christian perspective

Standing for truth or civil rights is a scary business with dire consequences at times. It may even lead to war. But what is a “just war”? When may Christians participate in war? Who are the biggest beneficiaries of war? May Christians kill each other in self-defense at home or when in combat?

Christians may only participate in *just* wars (i.e., wars of self-defense rather than aggression). What ultimately determines whether a war is just is the believer’s conscience after apprehending a candid understanding of the facts—notwithstanding claims of rulers that declare a conflict to be just. The reason Christians can participate in a collective defense effort is little different than the reason why they can undertake self-defense against predators individually. They are called upon to promote peace by preserving life, liberty, and property. And sometimes that call leads them to repel predators by force.

One implication of justifiable self-defense is the sad reality that Christians might end up killing some of their brethren when they engage in collective action (i.e., war). There are always those who will try to increase chaos and misery in society by abridging fundamental rights, and Christians who cherish peace will be right to stand up for life, liberty, and property—even by force of arms. Yet, Christians must take special care to minimize or eliminate bloodshed, especially when some of their brethren’s lives may be in jeopardy. Sometimes this objective is difficult to achieve, with sinful choices of assailants leading to personal disaster at the hand of a brother defending his fundamental rights.

It is not sinful for a Christian to kill brother who is attacking him either by robbing him or firing at him in an opposing army. A Christian can hardly check the Christian credentials of an unknown assailant prior to defending himself. Consider that there were undoubtedly professing believers on both sides in both the American War for Independence and the War Between the States. While the reprehensible cir-

cumstances are an abomination to God, there are often deadly consequences from sin (Galatians 6:7)—particularly in the case of aggressive behavior (Jeremiah 19:7; 21:9; 38:2; Matthew 26:52; Luke 21:24).

What special obligation does a Christian have to know about the spiritual condition of his assailant? Building on the premise of Christians in combat being accepted, the righteous brother will surely be troubled by the thought of killing his sinning brother in the opposing army as a matter of collective self-defense. The rule of thumb must be that a Christian prefers his brother, meaning that he should do whatever he can to know the status of a potential menace prior to confronting him. If he can ascertain that his opponent is a believer he must try to avoid conflict, which can be especially difficult if the opponent speaks a different language or communication is otherwise unfeasible. In most wartime cases, it will be impossible to avoid conflict or find out the spiritual status of an adversary. Thus, a Christian must rely upon prayer to protect his brethren and Providence to direct all things justly. Of course, a Christian can avoid this problem altogether simply by refusing to enlist, even if he is conscripted. When in doubt, this tactic may be best. However, in the case of a just war, a Christian must be left to his liberty to take up arms and fight for the glory of God and peace among men if he wishes.

Nevertheless, there will be occasions when a Christian's conscience will not permit him to fight. Should Christians resist the draft? At times they should. They cannot support aggression. They are to undertake actions which ultimately promote peace and prosperity for their families and the church, as well as the glory of God and the expansion of His kingdom. But what about resisting the draft in just wars of national defense too? Well, ordinarily this concern is mute since Christians will spontaneously rally to support a just cause. But they could in theory still justly resist the draft as a violation of individual liberty, becoming a *de facto* form of enslavement. "Let each be fully convinced in his own mind" (Romans 14:5).

What can be said with confidence is that Christians may only enlist to defend their homes and country—and may never attack another country in a war of aggression. It is hard to see, therefore, how a Christian could have rightfully been part of either the British loyalists or Northern (Lincolnite) armies. The same thing could be said of the more recent conflicts in Iraq and Vietnam (and perhaps others).

Furthermore, we can confidently assert that Christians should not favor or implement the use of weapons of mass destruction, knowing that innocent people—including many Christians—will *unavoidably* be killed. Christians are to sow peace in the world and to not do harm to a neighbor (Psalm 34:14; Matthew 5:9; Romans 13:10; 14:19; 2 Timothy 2:22; Hebrews 12:14; 1 Peter 3:1). Further, one's theology of warfare must be reconciled with passages like Galatians 6:10: "As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith." The notion of nuclear, chemical, or biological obliteration is repugnant to such biblical doctrine.

Remember that states and rulers are the greatest beneficiaries of war, along with certain business interests that profit from trade during wartime—or that manufacture weapons and harness energy for the war machine. Christians must not participate in evil but overcome it with good (Romans 12:21). So let us not be accomplices of wickedness, or of the vile deeds and unjust wars of the "kings of the earth" (Isaiah 24:1; Revelation 16:14; 18:3, 9) and the contemporary rulers of America.