

# **CHRISTIANS CAN BE SOLDIERS**

Dedicated to my fellow soldiers  
at the  
10th Combat Aviation Brigade  
Ft. Drum, NY  
*Fly to Glory*

# CHRISTIANS CAN BE SOLDIERS

FROM MARTIN LUTHER'S  
*WHETHER SOLDIERS TOO CAN BE  
IN A HOLY ESTATE*

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## FOREWORD

As the text that follows was being prepared for publication in the Winter of 2009, the armed forces of the United States were still engaged in conflict in both Iraq and Afghanistan, but also, for the first time in years, were meeting all recruitment goals. Families of those servicemen and women—and in many cases the companies and corporations for which they worked—were actively participating in all sorts of activities in support of their service. With the beginning of a new presidential administration, however, what the future holds for these conflicts, those serving within them, and their families at home, is anyone's guess.

Added to the mix of this reality are three movies from 2008 dealing with crucial aspects of military action remaining in wide release. The first, *Valkyrie*, a retelling of the plot by German officers to assassinate Hitler, raises the question as to whether or not a tyrant is to be tolerated, and if not, whose responsibility it is to depose him. The second, *The Reader*, a fictional account of the life of a former concentration camp guard in post-World War II Germany, raises the question of the responsibility of individual soldiers for actions taken while in military service. A third movie, *Defiance*, relates the true story of Jewish resistance fighters in Nazi-occupied Belarussian forests, and raises the questions

that come with armed resistance to an established authority. While all three movies deal specifically with German actions during World War II, they address questions of universal significance which in one way or another have confronted all Christians who have taken up arms for one reason or another.

Without a doubt the chief question posed is the morality of a given action by an individual in the midst of armed conflict. Specifically: How can a Christian know that what is being done is right or good in the eyes of God? If that Christian is serving in the military, does moral obligation cease to be an issue? If military service results in a chronically troubled conscience, can it ever be quieted?

This book offers answers to these questions. It describes chiefly how a Christian can indeed serve in the military, and serve in the military in the most dangerous and deadly of positions, with a clear conscience. It also addresses the role of armed conflict in general in Christian life. It is hoped that by offering this classic work in a new and fresh translation, it will provide comfort not only to Christian men and women serving in the military, but also to the Christian-on-the-street who himself is troubled by these questions.

Of course, the original work translated here (cf. Dr. Martin Luther's *Sämmtliche Schriften*, ed. by J. G. Walch (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House: 1885) Vol. 10 C., Cols. 488-531) did not have chapters or study questions. These have been added to ease reading, study and reference. The greater historical and current theological context is treated in the extensive Afterword. Special thanks are due



to The Confessional Lutheran Education Foundation for their funding of this project. Responsibility for any shortfall and weakness within the text is mine alone.

Paul Strawn



# 1

## INTRODUCTION

There are Christians who are troubled by the military and what it does. Some go so far as to doubt whether it should even exist. Other Christians serve in the military but do so only by ignoring the questions it raises about God, the human conscience, and the soul.

Why would a Christian ignore such critical questions? The logic is simple: If a Christian serving in the military actually thought about God, listened to his conscience, and feared for his soul, he would not serve.

But can anyone be a soldier without thinking about such things? Shouldn't God and the soul be just the things that

are thought of at the most critical moments of life?

In reality, a soldier can only fight to the best of his abilities if he fights with a good, well-trained conscience. Where there is a good conscience there is courage. Where there is courage, the body is more powerful, the mind is more alert, and circumstances and events work together for victory (which nonetheless is granted by God!).

If, however, the conscience is untrained and uncertain, courage cannot exist. It is impossible for a person with a bad conscience to be anything but frightened and cowardly.

Moses put it to the children of Israel in Deuteronomy 28:25 this way: “If you are disobedient, the Lord will give you a fearful heart, so that when you go out against your enemies one way, you will flee seven ways.”

What happens when an attack is disorganized? Soldiers move hesitantly and timidly, and victory is not achieved.

As for those consciences in a company of soldiers that are wild and evil, who are known to be foolish and reckless, success or failure for them is purely a matter of chance. What happens to them is the same thing that would happen to an animal that might find itself in the middle of a battle.

Victory is not achieved because of such soldiers. They are found in many companies, but are certainly never their core.

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***This advice is for  
Christians who want  
to be good soldiers.***

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What follows is a bit of advice for those who want to be good soldiers, but not good soldiers alone. This advice is for Christians who want to be good soldiers in such a way that they do not lose God's grace and eternal

life.

Toward this end it must be noted from the outset that the job a person does and who a person is are two different things. A specific job itself may be good and right. That job, however, can become evil and wrong if the person doing it is not good or right or does not do the job correctly.

The work a judge does, for example, is highly valuable and godly—even if the work of the executioner is considered to be part of it. But if someone does the work of the judge who does not have the authority to do so, or if a judge is corrupt, then his work is no longer right nor good.

Marriage is also highly valuable and godly. That still does not prevent many married people from behaving terribly and horribly.

The same holds true for soldiers. The work of a soldier is in and of itself right and godly. Care needs to be taken, however, that the person serving as a soldier is also righteous.

By the term *righteous* I do not mean the righteousness which makes a person right before God. Such righteousness occurs only by faith in Jesus Christ, given freely without any work or merit on our part. It is only by God's grace.

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***The work of a soldier  
is in and of itself  
right and godly.***

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Rather, the term *righteous* here refers to an external righteousness that has to do with jobs and work. The question this book addresses is whether or not the righteousness before God that is a Christian's by faith remains with a soldier who does what a soldier is to do: Go to war, kill,

damage and destroy. After all, is not the work of a soldier sin and injustice? Doesn't it burden the conscience before God? Shouldn't a Christian avoid military service? Do only good? Love? Injure and kill no one? (Remember: By work what is meant is something which, although good and right in and of itself, can nonetheless become evil and wrong when a person is evil and unrighteous.)

Here I will not deal in detail with the purpose and work of war. War is in itself right and godly. What the Word of God calls "the sword" (Romans 13:1 ff. and 1 Peter 3:14 ff.) was instituted by God to punish the wicked, protect the innocent, and maintain peace. These passages alone are powerful enough proof to demonstrate that waging war, killing, and whatever the course of war might take, have been established by God.

What is war other than the punishing of injustice and evil? Why is war waged unless peace and obedience are desired?

Even if killing and destroying do not seem like works of love, they are in reality nothing else. Uninstructed Christians think otherwise. They think that Christians should never do such things.

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***Even if killing and destroying do not seem like works of love, they are in reality nothing else.***

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But consider the work of an excellent surgeon. When infection is severe, he must remove or render useless a hand, foot, eye or ear to save the entire body. If the destroyed body part alone is considered, the surgeon certainly seems cruel and

merciless. When the saved body is considered, however, it is clear that the surgeon is in reality an excellent, faithful person doing a good Christian work.

Similar thoughts can also be applied to war. If the punishing of the wicked, killing of the unjust and the creation of calamity alone are considered, war appears to be a totally unchristian work and against Christian love in every way.

Yet when I consider how war protects the pious, how it preserves and guards spouse and child, home and business, goods, honor, and peace, war turns out to be a precious and godly work. In other words, war too cuts off a leg or hand so that the entire body is not destroyed.

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1. Does the existence of the military trouble some Christians?
  2. What questions for the Christian should serving in the military raise?
  3. How can a soldier fight to the best of his abilities?
  4. Who grants victory in war?
  5. Is the job a person does and who a person is the same thing?
  6. Is the work of a soldier righteous and godly? How so?
  7. What does the Word of God call 'the sword'?
  8. How is the work of war like the work of a doctor?