

Arguments about war

extract from Proposition XV § xv

§ xv. *Objection:* They object that it is lawful to make war, because Abraham made war before the giving of the Law, and the Israelites after the giving of the Law.

Answer: I answer as I did before,

1. that Abraham offered sacrifices at that time, and circumcised the males, but these things are not lawful for us under the Gospel.

2. That neither defensive nor offensive war was lawful for the Israelites based on their own will, or by their own judgement. But if they wanted success, they were always obliged to ask for divine revelation first.

3. That their wars against the wicked nations were an image of the inward war of true Christians against their spiritual enemies, in which we overcome the devil, the world, and the flesh.

4. Christ explicitly forbids something (Matthew 5:26)¹ which was granted to the Jews in their time, because of their hardness. On the contrary, we are commanded to exercise patience and love, which Moses did not command to his disciples. . . .

Objection: Secondly, they object that defense is a natural right, and that religion does not destroy nature.

Answer: I answer, that to obey God, and entrust ourselves to him in faith and patience, is not to destroy nature, but to exalt and perfect it; to elevate it from the natural to the supernatural life, by Christ living within and comforting it, so that it may do all things and become more than conquerer.²

¹ The citation Barclay gives does not relate to the content. Matthew 5:44 seems more appropriate.

² Romans 8:37.

Objection: Thirdly, they object that John did not abolish or condemn war when the soldiers came to him.

Answer: I answer, So what? The question is not about John's doctrine, but Christ's. We are Christ's disciples, not John's. Christ, not John, is the Prophet we all ought to hear. Although Christ said that "Among men born of women there is not anyone greater than John the Baptist," he adds that "the least in the Kingdom of God is greater than he."³ And what was John's answer? Let us see if it can justify the soldiers of today.* If it is closely examined, it is plain that what he tells the soldiers obviously forbids them that employment. He commands them "not to do violence to anyone, not to defraud anyone," and tells them to "be content with their wages."⁴ Considering that he commands the soldiers not to use violence or deceit against anyone — without that, how can soldiers make war? Are not deceit, violence, and injustice three properties of war, and the natural consequences of battles?

Objection: Fourthly, they object that Cornelius and the centurion who is mentioned⁵ were soldiers and it doesn't say anywhere that they laid down their military employment.

Answer: I answer that we don't read anywhere that they continued as soldiers. But if they continued in the doctrine of Christ (and we don't read anywhere that they fell from the faith) it is most probable that they did not continue in the military, especially if we consider that two or three centuries afterwards Christians altogether rejected war. . . . It is as easy to hide the sun at mid-day, as to deny that the primitive Christians renounced all revenge and war.

³ Luke 7:28 RB.

⁴ Luke 3:14 RB. King James has "do violence to no man" but the majority of modern versions render that phrase with something like "extort money."

⁵ Matthew 8:5 RB

And although this is well known to everyone, it is just as well known that almost all the modern sects live in neglect and contempt of this law of Christ and oppress others who disagree with them for conscience sake and before God. We have suffered a lot in our country because we could not bear arms ourselves nor send others in our place; because we could not give money to buy drums, flags, and other military gear; and because for conscience sake we could not keep our doors and shops closed on days when fasts and prayers were proclaimed to ask a blessing on, and success for, the arms of the Kingdom or Commonwealth under which we live, and we could not give thanks for victories achieved by shedding much blood. By this forcing of the conscience, they would have forced our brethren who lived in different kingdoms which were at war with each other to implore God for contrary and contradictory things, which was impossible. For it is impossible that two parties fighting together could both obtain the victory. And because we cannot agree with them in this confusion, we are subject to persecution. . . .

Objection: Fifthly, they object that Christ (Luke 22:36), speaking to his disciples, commanded them that anyone who did not have a sword should sell his coat and buy one. Therefore, they say, arms are lawful.

Answer: I answer, some people understand this to mean the outward sword, but only in regard to that one occasion, and in other cases they believe that Christians are prohibited wars under the Gospel. Among this group is Ambrose, who says, "O Lord! why do you command me to buy a sword when you forbid me to strike with it?" . . . Others think that Christ was speaking mystically, and not literally. For example, in comments on Matthew 19, Origen says "If anyone, who looks only to the letter and does not understand the will of the words, sells his bodily garment and buys a sword, interpreting the words of Christ in a way contrary to his will, he shall perish." . . . And truly when we

consider the answer of the disciples, “Master, behold, here are two swords,” thinking about outward swords; and then we consider Christ’s answer, “It is enough,” it seems that Christ did not want the rest who did not have swords (for they had only two swords) to sell their coats and buy outward swords. Who can think that, if the situation was like that, he would have said *two was enough*? But in any case it is enough to know that the use of arms is unlawful under the Gospel.

Objection: Sixthly, they object that the Scriptures and the ancient Fathers (so-called) only prohibited private revenge, and did not prohibit the use of weapons for the defense of our country, body, wives, children, and goods when the magistrate commands it, seeing that the magistrate ought to be obeyed. Therefore although it is not lawful for private people to do it on their own initiative, nevertheless they are obliged to do it by command of the magistrate.

Answer: I answer, if the magistrate is truly a Christian or wants to be one, he himself ought to obey the command of his Master who said, “love your enemies,” etc. and then the Christian magistrate could not command us to kill them. But if the magistrate is not a true Christian, then we ought to obey our Lord and King Jesus Christ, just as the magistrate ought to obey him. For in the kingdom of Christ everyone ought to submit to his laws, from the highest to the lowest, from the king to the beggar, and from Caesar to the peasant. . . .

But lastly, since nothing seems more contrary to human nature than this principle [of nonviolence], and since self defense seems most justifiable; just as this principle is hardest for human beings, so also this principle is the most perfect part of the Christian religion. This is where the denial of self and complete confidence in God are most fully expressed, and therefore Christ and his apostles left us a most perfect example of this principle. As for the present magistrates of the Christian world, we do not completely

deny them the name of Christians because they publicly claim that name; still we can boldly affirm that they are far from the perfection of the Christian religion. As I have said many times before, in their present condition they have not come to the pure dispensation of the Gospel. While they are in that condition we shall not say that war, if the cause is just, is altogether unlawful to them.

Circumcision and other ceremonies were permitted to the Jews, not because they were necessary or lawful after the resurrection of Christ, but because the Spirit which could free them from such rudiments was not yet raised up in them. In the same way those who now consider themselves Christians, who are still in the mixture and not in the patient suffering spirit, are not yet capable of this form of Christianity, and therefore they cannot abstain from self-defense until they attain that perfection. But for those whom Christ has brought here to this perfect condition it is not lawful to defend themselves by arms but they ought to trust to the Lord in everything.

Sources: Robert Barclay, *Apology for the True Christian Divinity*, Proposition XV § xv (Glenside PA: Quaker Heritage Press, 2002) pp. 471-476 and Roberti Barclaii, *Teologiae verè Christianae apologia*, facsimile (Amsterdam: Jacob Claus, 1676) pp. 366-370.