War/Peace Attitudes of American Presbyterians

By CLIFFORD EARLE
Former Secretary for International Affairs
Former Secretary, Department of
Social Education and Action, UPCUSA

PRESBYTERIANS have always found easy a call for peace or an endorsement of "the things that make for peace." But an ambiguity in the church's standards have made decidedly difficult, until fairly recently, a condemnation of almost any kind of war, especially while it is going on.

We refer, of course, to a sentence in Chapter XXIII of the Westminster Confession of Faith on the proper powers of "civil magistrates" or, as we would more likely say now, "civil governments." Paragraph 2 declares: "It is lawful for Christians to accept and execute the office of a magistrate, when called thereunto: in the managing whereof, as they ought especially to maintain piety, justice, and peace, according to the wholesome laws of each commonwealth, so, for that end, they may lawfully, now under the New Testament, wage war upon just and necessary occasions." This very Calvinistic standard has often placed churches of Reformed heritage in tension with such peace-affirming groups as Quakers, Brethren, Mennonites, Moravians, Adventists, and even Baptists and Methodists on the issue of support of a "defensive" war.

A mitigating affirmation, equally Calvinistic with the standard just cited, has been available to Presbyterians, however, in paragraph 2 of Chapter XX of the Westminster Confession: "God alone is lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in any thing contrary to his Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship. So that to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commandments out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience; and the requiring of an implicit faith, and

an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also."

On the one side, the church's confessional standard seemed to condone war "upon just and necessary occasions." On the other side, the church affirmed freedom of conscience so that a person need not be bound by what the church in its Confession says about war, but could seek for himself what the Lord requires, and in obedience devote himself to the things of peace. Each side has had its strong proponents.

In the late 1740's, for example, Gilbert Tennent, minister of the Second Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia and the outstanding son of William Tennent of Log College note, published a half dozen significant articles and addresses on defensive war. He and others in the colonies were worried over the hostility of the French along the western frontier. In 1747 Tennent joined Benjamin Franklin in organizing an Association for Defence, beginning with a public rally in Tennent's church and a sermon by Tennent on the justness of defensive war. In the uneasy period before and during the French and Indian War, "New Side" Presbyterians were vigorous in supporting defensive action "against those who are invading our rights."

As an example on the side of peacemaking we can cite David Low Dodge, who in the early years of the nineteenth century became a successful businessman in New York. A Presbyterian elder, strongly Calvinistic and evangelical in matters of religion, known for his philanthropy, he had no scruples or questions about the morality of war or the church's acceptance of the use of force. An incident in which he almost shot an innkeeper, mistaking him for a thief, led to a transformation of his thinking about self-defense and the use of arms by professing Christians. After three years, in 1808, he endorsed pacifism and nonresistance. In the following year he told of his quest and conclusion in a tract: *The Mediator's Kingdom Not of This World, but Spiritual, Heavenly, and Divine.* The tract was very well received. Dodge followed it with another piece in which he answered certain criticisms of his argument. He became the center and leader of a growing group of friends, supporters, and inquirers. By 1812 they were ready to form a peace society in New York, but the outbreak of war led to a postponement. Dodge then prepared a book-length manuscript, *War Inconsistent with the Religion of Jesus Christ,* which was published in 1815 after the end of the war with Britain. In the same year the New York Peace Society was organized—perhaps the first of its kind in the world. Out of this effort and one similar to it in Massachusetts a little later came the American Peace Society.

We would expect to find that the church has had much to say on both sides of the issue—defending our nation's use of military force "upon just and necessary occasions," and encouraging and assisting all realistic efforts to build international peace and world community (including the role of conscientious pacifism).

Overt endorsement of "defensive" war by the church has almost always occurred in periods of national emergency, when war was a threat or an actuality. But when is any war not said to be "defensive" by all belligerents? Even Napoleon claimed that his Russian campaign and the siege of St. Petersburg were a "defensive" military action.

For example, when the Spanish-American War erupted in 1898, it appears that most (if not nearly all) Presbyterian clergymen, and Presbyterians generally, like the great majority of Americans, quickly endorsed and upheld their Government's resort to arms and violent military action to relieve Spain of her holdings in the Caribbean and Pacific.

Dr. Henry Van Dyke, minister of the Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City, and Dr. William Davis, of the Church of the Redeemer in Germantown (Philadelphia), were among influential clergymen who preached and prayed for a rapid American victory. Dr. Van Dyke's pro-war pamphlet *The Cross of War* was widely distributed and read. The General Assembly in 1898 affirmed the loyalty of Presbyterians to the nation and their active support of the war. Before the end of the year, however, the war was over, and the church quickly turned its attention to other matters.

A few years later, in the summer of 1914, Europe fell apart. World War I pitted Germany against Russia on one side and France, England, and Belgium on the other. In the month of August, called "one of the most frantic and terrible in the history of mankind," a million men died on the western and eastern fronts.

In America most of the churches and churchmen lined up behind their Government, first in endorsing preparedness, then in blessing America's support of the Allies (against Germany), and finally in validating U.S. entrance into the war as a belligerent.

One revealing account of what churches and churchmen, including many Presbyterians, said and did in the fifty-one-month duration of the war was entitled *Preachers Present Arms,* written by Ray H. Abrams. Abrams could find only seven Presbyterian clergymen who condemned the war on grounds of Christian pacifism.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, we can find only a slight hint of actual repudiation of war as a means of national policy. Let us note that in 1913 the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church of North America endorsed a strong declaration against war and the increase of armaments.

There was improvement in the quality and realism of the church's concern for peace in the period of reaction to World War I. The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. in 1919 called for support of the League of Nations, appealed to members of the U.S. Senate to ratify the peace covenant, and encouraged President Wilson in his efforts "at home and abroad, to establish the principles of a just and enduring peace." Throughout the 1920's, the church, through actions of its General Assembly and efforts of its leaders, endorsed and supported every attempt to bring nations together to work for international peace and order.

A high point was reached in 1929 when some sixty nations signed the Paris Peace Pact repudiating war. The Pact failed, as we know, in its avowed purpose, but it provided incentive for a strongly supported effort among Presbyterians to remove the "just" war clause from Chapter XXIII of the Westminster Confession of Faith. It is quite a story.

The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., in 1932, 1933, and 1934, approved strong pronouncements against war. "We abhor war," said the General Assembly. "We believe that aggressive warfare is contrary to the will of God." "As a church we seek peace and will pursue it." "We pledge . . . to teach the coming generation of the cost and curse of war, to saturate them with a passion for peace." "Christians cannot give their support to war" as a means of national policy.

And then, in 1935, some seventy presbyteries joined in an overture to the General Assembly calling for steps to be taken to amend the Confession of Faith (Chapter XXIII, paragraph 2) by eliminating the offending words, "wage war upon just and necessary occasions." A committee was established to study the matter and report to the General Assembly in 1936. The committee in due time proposed a revision of the section in question without the "just" war clause. The proposed revision was supported by the General Assembly and transmitted to the presbyteries for their approval. In the 1937 General Assembly, the Committee on Polity reported: "That in as much as two-thirds of the 279 presbyteries is 186, Overture A [on amending Chapter XXIII of the Confession] having received only 183 affir-

mative votes, has not been adopted."

A majority of the presbyteries, and apparently a majority of those voting in all the presbyteries, supported the amendment—an astonishing result, but not enough to change the Confession.

In 1938 another overture was offered to remove the "just" war phrase, supported in the General Assembly, and sent to the presbyteries. The number of presbyteries approving the overture this time was 168, as reported to the General Assembly in 1939—again a majority of the presbyteries, but not the required two thirds, and the amendment failed.

In the heat of debate in presbyteries on the proposed amendments to remove the "just" war clause from the Confession of Faith, a 48-page pamphlet *The Christian Attitude Toward War,* by Dr. Loraine Boettner, professor of Bible at Pikeville College in Kentucky, was sent to every minister and church. The text was an eloquent defense of the traditional stand of the church on war "upon just and necessary occasions." This on one side, and the rapid rise of Hitler on the other, surely influenced the vote on the amendments in many presbyteries.

Well, a lot has happened since 1939. The story should be told of the period through which many of us lived and labored—World War II, the development of atomic weapons, the cold war, the United Nations, the Korean conflict, and then, and now, Vietnam. How shall we ever measure the church's failure, the church's faithfulness, in this amazing new age?

We have something now, of course, that we did not have before the mid-sixties—the Confession of 1967. Here we have new help in dealing with the issues of war and peace: "God's reconciliation in Jesus Christ is the ground of the peace, justice, and freedom among nations which all powers of government are called to serve and defend. The church, in its own life, is called to practice the forgiveness of enemies and to commend to the nations as practical politics the search for cooperation and peace."

The Johnson Foundation, Racine, Wisconsin, has responded to a proposal initiated by the Department of Church and Society, UPCUSA, to conduct a series of regional Ecumenical Peace Action Consultations. The Johnson Foundation is providing financial support for two consultations in 1973, the first at Racine, the second in the Southeast. The consultations will be sponsored by a consortium of denominational agencies and the National Council of Churches.
