

Can Christians Kill?

A Critique of Tony Campolo's Position

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Introduction

At the foundation of this present age, God offered the first human beings a choice between two diametrically opposite ways of life. The first way, represented by the tree of life, was freely available to them and led to eternal life through faith and obedience to our Creator. The second, represented by the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, was advocated by Satan and led to sin, suffering and death.

Ever since our first parents made their fateful and fatal decision in Eden, humanity has struggled with the consequences of knowing (first hand) both good and evil. Beginning with the death of Abel, we have been confronted with the horrific problem of homicide. As families grew into nations, the problem escalated into the ominous specter of war. Over the centuries theologians have debated what the Christian position should be on this issue. Some have felt that the use of deadly force is necessary at times to deal with these issues. Others feel that it is inconsistent to resort to killing if one maintains that it is morally wrong. The purpose of this paper is to present and analyze the position adopted by Tony Campolo on this subject.

Campolo's Position

Basically, Campolo's position is that a Christian may not kill under any circumstance; this would include killing in military service, capital punishment or even in self-defense.¹ He uses four arguments to support this position; each one will be summarized below.

His first reason for this conclusion is that Jesus set us an example and that He would never shoot at His enemies or drop bombs on them. Campolo relates a story from his youth when he was interviewed before a draft board and was asked if he would have a problem shooting at the enemy or dropping bombs on them. Since his guiding principle in life is to do whatever Jesus would do if He were in the same situation, his conclusion is that Jesus would not engage in armed conflict and that His followers should not either.

His second argument is based on the principle of progressive revelation. Although Campolo admits that God condoned and even commanded killing in the Old Testament, he feels that the Sermon on the Mount now takes precedence over the Law of Moses. This position allows him to maintain a high view of Scripture without being inconsistent with his principles. The Law of Moses, in his view, was a necessary first step in guiding humanity to spiritual maturity. For Campolo, Christ's command not to resist evil (Matt 5:38-39) and to love our enemies (Matt 5:43-44) now supercedes earlier guidelines about war, capital punishment or retributive justice.

His third argument is based on the principle that whatever we do to another human being we do to Christ; therefore, we are bound to help others and not harm them. Campolo cites Jesus' teaching that charity done to "the least of these My brethren" is actually done to Christ (Matt 25:40).² Campolo feels that Christ is referring to all humans in general in this passage. He acknowledges that his interpretation is not universally accepted. Others feel that these "brethren" are limited to other Christians. He defends his position by noting that when Jesus taught this to His disciples, there were no Christians as yet. Therefore, these "brethren" must be understood in the larger context of humans in general. Consequently, killing any human is the same as killing Jesus.

¹ Tony Campolo, *20 Hot Potatoes Christians are Afraid to Touch* (Dallas: Word, 1988), 162-169.

² All Scriptures are quoted from the New King James Version unless otherwise noted.

His last argument is that passive resistance is a better alternative to violence even if it is not immediately effective. Responding to the criticism that passive resistance is ineffective in stopping evil, Campolo notes the example of Ghandi who used passive resistance against the British in India. He also cites the example of Danes who successfully resisted Hitler's persecution of the Jews during World War II. He admits that this path does not always work swiftly; sometimes it even requires suffering or death on the part of those resisting evil. But, he maintains that it is a better alternative than becoming a murderer as well.

To underscore this point, he concludes his essay with the story of a young Christian monk who visited Rome. When he observed the spectacle of gladiators fighting to the death in the Coliseum, he leapt into the arena to stop this insanity only to be killed in the attempt. The result was so shocking that people ceased conducting the games altogether. If the power of one voice can bring an end to that kind of violence, Campolo argues, then surely our many voices can bring an end to all killing everywhere.

Analysis

Is Campolo correct? These are large and complex issues that cannot be ignored. Many Christians will face questions related to conscientious objector status, jury duty in a capital case, police work as a vocation or end-of-life medical decisions for a sick parent or child. While humanity in general has followed the example of Adam and Eve in taking to themselves the prerogative to decide right and wrong, Christians must look to God for answers on moral questions. This section will examine each of Campolo's arguments in detail to determine whether or not his position is biblically sound.

His first argument is a simple syllogism based on shaky foundations. His first premise is that being a Christian means doing whatever Jesus would do if He were in our situation facing our options. While this seems reasonable, it is generally understood that it carries a number of caveats with it. Jesus taught many things during His lifetime. Some were intended for specific individuals in specific situations while other instructions were more general. Similarly, His actions were sometimes intended as enduring examples for everyone while at other times they reflected His unique authority and mission as our Savior. A better way of expressing this premise is to say that Christians should follow Jesus' instructions as they apply to a particular situation. This distinction has an important bearing on Campolo's second premise.

While he is certain that Jesus would not shoot at people or drop bombs on them, the Bible is very clear that "in righteousness He judges and makes war" (Rev 19:11). During His human lifetime, Jesus held no political power and even resisted the attempts of others to make Him a king (Matt 4:8-10, John 6:15). After His resurrection, however, He told the disciples, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth" (Matt 28:18). Paul explains that the world is now living on borrowed time; while God previously overlooked humanity's ignorance, He "now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained" (Act 17:30-31). Humanity's self-assertion against God's rule, which began in Eden, will be forcibly terminated (Rev 11:15-17). Resistance will be futile (Rev 19:19-21, Zech 14:1ff). All humanity will be assimilated (Isa 2:1-4, Zech 14:16ff) or annihilated (Isa 66:23-24, Luke 19:27).

Until Christ returns, Christians are to wait patiently for Him to bring about the kingdom and delegate positions of authority to His servants. Jesus made it clear that, although He was born to be a king, His kingdom has not yet been established on the earth (John 18:36). Christians do not

establish His kingdom through carnal warfare (2 Cor 10:3-5, Eph 6:12) but are given authority at His return (Luke 19:11ff, Rev 5:10, 2 Tim 2:12). Until then, Christians are to live as sojourners and pilgrims in this world (1 Pet 2:9-11, Heb 11:13-16), announce His gospel message to the world and follow His instructions regarding life in this present age.

Because Christians are citizens of the kingdom of God, military service is incompatible with the Christian calling. Although Christ is not opposed to the use of force on moral grounds, it would be inconsistent with God's will to serve in the army of an earthly nation today. Paul reminds us that Christians "are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (Eph 2:19) and that "our citizenship is in heaven" (Phil 3:20). While some might point to Paul's use of his Roman citizenship in legal proceedings, the point is that Christians have no vested interest in maintaining or overthrowing the political systems of this world. It is not in our "vital national interests."

In addition, Paul says, "do not become slaves of men" (1 Cor 7:23). While military service is not slavery per se, the principle still applies. A soldier must obey orders without question and, if need be, die carrying them out; as Campolo discovered in his draft board interview, the military is unconcerned with obeying God's will. Therefore, while Campolo's argument could be better expressed, he is essentially correct in pointing out that military service would inevitably lead to conflict with God's will for Christians at this time.

Campolo's second argument (based on progressive revelation) has a more biblical foundation but his conclusion is too broad. Campolo correctly observes that the Mosaic Law was an expression of God's love and justice appropriate for the time in which it was given; he also correctly notes that Christ did not abolish what God had given but fulfilled it in its final form. In each instance, Jesus made the requirement of the law more stringent; murder and adultery must be avoided even in our hearts and minds (Matt 5:21-32). Where the Jews had relaxed the criteria for divorce, Jesus tightened it. This leads to an important distinction.

While Jesus' instructions do make greater ethical requirements of individual Christians, they do not nullify the collective exercise of civil law. Indeed, rather than nullifying the prospect of capital punishment, Jesus made it more ominous (Matt 5:22).

One must be extremely careful at this point to understand the distinction between the Old and New Covenant. The Old Covenant was the constitution of the civil nation of Israel, which functioned as a physical forerunner of the greater spiritual reality that was to come. The church exists as scattered individuals living within (and under the authority of) the various nations but not as a functioning civil government. The church certainly does police itself, but not with the threat of capital punishment (1 Corinthians 5).

God still expects those that He has placed in positions of authority to carry out their respective duties as He has ordained. God abhors anarchy and confusion (1 Cor 14:33). Although He is allowing humanity to live contrary to His ways, He has ordained civil authority for the purpose of keeping order (Rom 13:1-6). God's stated will to humanity on the subject of murder and capital punishment is quite clear (Gen 9:6). Mosaic Law serves only as a refinement to this principle and is consistent with the operation of capital punishment during Christ's Millennial reign (Isa 66:22-24, Mal 4:1-3). The concept of not resisting evil and of "turning the other cheek" (Matt 5:39) is not a prescription for unleashing the world's convicts upon society.

Therefore, Christ's instructions in the Sermon on the Mount must be understood in context. While an individual Christian is not to resist evil or seek revenge, he or she is still obligated to report criminal activity to the proper authorities (Lev 5:1, Rom 13:1), and the state is still obligated to prosecute criminals with retributive justice (Rom 13:4). With respect to civil cases,

Christians should be willing to be defrauded for the sake of peace (Matt 5:40, 1 Cor 6:1-8). However, Jesus' admonition to "turn the other cheek" does not preclude fleeing from persecution if the option is available (Matt 5:39, 10:23).

While Campolo sees Jesus' teaching to love our enemies as something new, it actually is firmly grounded in the Old Testament. The quotation "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy" (Matt 5:43) is not found in the Hebrew Scriptures but was another perversion of God's original intent. God's original instruction was "You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your neighbor, and not bear sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD" (Lev 19:17-18). Charity towards foreigners (Lev 19:34, Deut 10:19) and even towards one's enemies was commanded (Exod 23:4-5, Prv 25:20-21). Thus, the righteous were to "Seek peace and pursue it" (Ps 34:14).

Campolo's third argument (that all people are Christ's brethren) also suffers from an overly generalized conclusion. While it is true that Christ's disciples were not yet Christians, in that they had not yet received the Holy Spirit, Christ clearly tells us that His brethren are those who do "the will of My Father in heaven" (Matt 12:48-50). Referring to His disciples, Christ also said, "He who receives you receives Me" (Matt 10:40-42). It is highly unlikely that Christ was referring to humanity in general when He spoke of "the least of these My brethren" (Matt 25:40).

While this may weaken Campolo's position, Christians should not engage in military service if only to avoid accidentally killing another Christian or other innocent civilians. If Christians take up arms in the various nations in which they live, eventually one of them would end up killing "one of the least of these My brethren." Ironically, the armies of the earth will deliberately fight against Christ when He returns (Rev 19:19-21). Imagine trying to justify military service to Jesus Christ under those circumstances. Ultimately, Campolo's argument is immaterial since all humans are made in God's image, and therefore, murder is wrong (Gen 9:6).

With respect to capital punishment, however, Campolo's position is rendered inert. Since a Christian should not commit capital crimes, it is unlikely that a Christian sitting on a jury would have to send another Christian to death row (1 Pet 4:15). Given the distinction drawn earlier about the respective roles of the individual Christian and the state, it would not be wrong for a Christian jurist to sentence a criminal to death if the crime warranted such punishment and the system of criminal justice was sufficiently fair. Currently, those are highly debatable issues. Also, Christians hold to a moral code that the world generally ignores or actively subverts; therefore, one wonders if a trial lawyer would even want a Christian sitting on such a jury. Similarly, Paul expressed reluctance about judging those who are outside the body reinforcing the notion of separation from the world as sojourners and pilgrims (1 Cor 5:12-13).

Campolo's final argument is really directed against those who say that nonviolent, passive resistance is ineffective in stopping evil; therefore, it is not really germane to the question of whether or not a Christian can kill. However, for those who argue that there is no other way to stop the killing except through the use of force, it is an effective reply.

At this point, the debate has become pragmatic, and pragmatism is not a valid framework for deciding morality. The only opinion that matters is God's opinion. In that respect, Campolo rightly observes that adopting "a nonviolent posture in a violent world may get us crucified, but it is only those who are willing to be crucified in following Jesus who can fully call themselves His people."³

³ Campolo, *20 Hot Potatoes Christians are Afraid to Touch*, 167.

Ultimately, this argument suffers from an even deeper problem. It is one thing to endure unjust persecution that comes uninvited; it is quite another to stand up against evil and proactively use passive resistance against it. Campolo's story about a young man who tries to stop a pair of gladiators from fighting to the death raises an important question.

Should Christians try to solve the world's problems? Campolo says, "Christianity . . . rejects violence and the taking of life as a means of creating the kingdom of God."⁴ There is a dangerous assumption here that Christians can bring about the kingdom of God without the return of Christ. Although the church does not resort to violence, the kingdom of God will not be fully established on the earth without the forcible and lethal suppression of human self-will.

An examination of the New Testament epistles suggests that the apostles were concerned with building a godly community within the church but were largely unconcerned with pursuing a radical plan for social engineering. The early church was focused on preaching the good news to those who would hear and obey without giving undue offense that would prejudice their audience or bring reproach on the church (1 Pet 2:11-12, 4:14-15).

This does not mean that they were totally unconcerned with helping unbelievers when and where they could, but they did not engage in mass protests or civil disobedience against injustice, exploitation and immorality. Scripture says, "And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them" (Eph 5:11). Also, Paul says that "as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith" (Gal 6:10). And, Scripture says, "Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, When it is in the power of your hand to do so" (Prv 3:27).

The answer appears to be left to each individual. In Campolo's story, no one forced the young man to enter the arena. He could have shouted from the stands or left the Coliseum in protest. His choice resulted in a measurable impact; but it was his choice.

Did one man's death really end gladiatorial contests or was it the accumulated force of many years of Christian preaching on Roman society? And, would that preaching have meant anything if many more Christians had not died under unsolicited persecution to back it up? The solution to the problem seems much more complex than simply shouting in unison for a cessation to all killing.

Conclusion

From the beginning, humanity has been plagued with violence, murder and warfare as a direct result of rejecting God's rule. Through the centuries, theologians have wrestled with the question of whether or not it is ever morally permissible for a Christian to kill.

Tony Campolo has taken the position that killing is wrong no matter what the circumstance; this would include military service, capital punishment and self-defense; however, his arguments are not entirely compelling. While Campolo argues that Jesus would not engage in warfare, the Bible is clear that He will wage war at the appropriate time; Christians do not resort to carnal warfare now because it is not God's will and because God will fight those battles for us. While Campolo argues that capital punishment is incompatible with loving one's enemies, the Bible is clear that the Sermon on the Mount does not nullify the duty of the state to administer justice; indeed, Jesus Christ will also use capital punishment when He establishes His rule. While Campolo argues that killing another human is like killing Christ, the Bible says that only those who do the will of God are Christ's brethren; however, murder is still wrong because we are all

⁴ Campolo, *20 Hot Potatoes Christians are Afraid to Touch*, 165.

made in the image of God. While Campolo argues that passive resistance is an effective and morally consistent solution to killing, the Bible shows that Christ will have to use lethal force to bring the world under God's righteous rule.

In the final analysis, the only lasting solution to the problem is spiritual regeneration. All of humanity's problems began in Eden under the shadow of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; they will only end when humanity turns to God in total submission and embraces the path that leads to the tree of life (Isa 2:1-4, Rev 22:1-5). But, until Christ returns, any progress that can be accomplished is better than no progress at all.

Bibliography

Campolo, Tony. *20 Hot Potatoes Christians are Afraid to Touch*. Dallas: Word, 1988