

What is a Christ-like Response to Military Use in 2022?

By Robert C. Johnsen Canadian Mennonite, June 2, 2022

Psalm 50:1-11, 23, Luke 14:25-32 by Patty Friesen (August 7/22)

As Christians rooted in the Anabaptist tradition, we care deeply about every human being on Earth. We no doubt have felt solidarity with Ukrainians as they struggle against violence and injustice from military invasion. Engaging in constant prayer and giving abundant contributions of spiritual and material aid to victims is very important. Still, we long for doing more to confront the daily monstrosities of military aggression and to support the human beings who face deadly violence. What else can we do?

We can more deeply explore how following Jesus might contribute, not to unrealistic hopes of melting the hardened hearts of today's pharaohs, but to realistic possibilities for changing our way of living in today's international system, because that system made Russian President Vladimir Putin possible, it made the war in Ukraine likely, and now it makes the prompt achievement of an equitable peace difficult and unlikely.

If this war could have been prevented through non-military means, as is certainly plausible, we have a duty to God and to Ukrainians and Russians, to re-examine our way of doing international relations. If we view complicated military, political and economic relations among nations primarily through the lens of military logic, we will be inclined to believe conventional wisdom that the only way to stop aggressive military power is with defensive military power. On the other hand, if we view international relations through an Anabaptist lens of following Jesus in responding to imperial military

power, we discover some other, more promising measures for addressing overwhelming military might.

If implemented, these would enable peace-builders to be both ethically faithful and politically responsible, rather than to be content, as many citizens feel they are forced to be, with emphasizing only one approach. This “following Jesus approach” can be summarized in five statements:

First, Anabaptists believe that it is more important to follow Jesus than to follow the government, any government, if their paths diverge. The basis for this is Jesus’ explanation: “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here” (John 18:36). Yet, he also said we are to live out his kingdom here and now, in this world. This may be one reason our parents taught us: “Be in the world (acting now), but not of the world (not imitating our society).”

Jesus apparently came to this position during his 40 days in the wilderness while facing serious temptations to assume political power, as described in Luke 4:1-13 and Matthew 4:1-11. Jesus responded with a clear “no” to the devil’s tempting offer to put magnificent political power in Jesus’ hands if only he would scale back the reign of God as the highest authority in his life.

If you and I follow Jesus in resisting this devilish temptation to become attached to political power, we would give up our attachment to today’s militarized balance-of-power system, an international system that is far more prone to war than necessary.

Second, Jesus never favoured killing anyone, so neither should we. We should love our neighbours as ourselves, and also love our enemies. This means, at the least, not killing them.

Third, loving and not killing others does not mean that we simply allow violent, evil conduct to occur, or that we become a doormat for ruthless people like Putin to walk all over us. On the contrary, we should strongly resist misconduct and injustice by supporting an expanded rule of law and overcoming evil with good (Romans 12:21). In a nutshell, Anabaptists oppose the violence of war as strongly as they can without using violence to counter it, because that seems in accord with what Jesus did.

As an example, Anabaptists can aid interested Ukrainians (and Russians) to develop effective measures of civil resistance to discourage and possibly reverse Russian occupation. Ukrainians might adapt some measures from the experience in neighbouring Poland, where Lech Walesa and the Solidarity movement with non-violent candle lighting, and prayers in the streets ousted the communist government and authoritarian military in 1989. As Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan have shown, in *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*, civil resistance—although no panacea—actually has worked better than military resistance in ousting oppressive rulers, especially when a large percentage of citizens agree on the goal.

Fourth, in trying to follow Jesus consistently, Anabaptists oppose all military aggression by anyone, including by the American government, if and when it occurs, as it did when the United States attacked Iraq in 2003. That, too, was a “war of choice,” illegal and ill-advised. The two wars are not equivalent, but they are both acts of military

aggression, brought on by our international system, and deaf to scriptural warnings against becoming attached to political and military power.

Fifth, Anabaptists reject killing because they understand that use of violence tends to generate a cycle of further hatred and violence, sometimes erupting years later. Previous wars and political violence in Eastern Europe surely made the current war more likely. Jesus also seemed intent on preventing violent acts from leading to a cycle of more violence: "Those who take the sword will perish by the sword." When Jesus faced betrayal and the prospect of being killed, he and his disciples did not fight or kill anyone to try to help Jesus escape or to save his life, even though he was innocent of wrongdoing and did not deserve to die. So, the familiar argument that we should be willing to kill others in order to protect the innocent seems not to have been a compelling argument for Jesus. In summary, Anabaptists follow Jesus by resisting the temptation to become attached to worldly power and by not killing to oppose adversaries or even killing to express compassion for friends.

Critics often test Anabaptists by asking: If a less violence-prone, global governance approach really could work, can you show how it would solve problems right now in Ukraine? Sadly, it is too late for either a nonviolent approach or a more violent approach with a no-fly zone to quickly restore Ukrainian rights. It is impossible for any approach to take away damage to a house after it has been burning for some time. If one really wants to prevent a house from burning, then one should build a fireproof structure that might use concrete to construct unburnable walls and clay tiles on the roof. Similarly, if one really wants to prevent war and invasions like the

Ukrainians have suffered, then plans for dependably maintaining peace need to be built before fire begins.

These would include peacebuilding initiatives, such as strengthened international law and multilateral law-enforcing institutions, verifiable and enforceable arms control and disarmament measures, international economic integration and preplanned sanctions to constrain outlier governments, and detailed worldwide arrangements to resist any illegal usurpation of power and stop initiatives toward military aggression.

Within countries, we keep peace through a legal system with help from representative government, checks and balances, and carefully overseen institutions for law enforcement. We could keep peace internationally in analogous ways, but we do not. Not because it would be impossible, but because we have lacked willingness to put such a peaceful legal system in place. We see a tiny part of what could be done by observing the influence of economic sanctions and international law in resisting aggression in Ukraine now.

As long wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Vietnam and elsewhere have demonstrated, war has lost much of its ability to produce good political outcomes, even against weaker military opponents. This may yet be demonstrated in Ukraine, because, win or lose, Russian officials have surely undermined their goal of bringing the Ukrainians willingly or joyfully into a positive relationship with Russia.

Peacebuilders of diverse theological persuasions and faith traditions are coming to believe that, if enough people choose, they can model a way of living that shows how to loosen human attachment to the power of armies, how to transform the existing militarized international system. We would remind Orthodox Ukrainians and Orthodox

Russians about their non-violent, religious heritage in Jesus even as we continue to remind ourselves about our non-violent religious heritage in Jesus here this morning. For us as Anabaptists to make a deeper commitment to live as such a transformative people could be one part of our calling to respond to the violence in Ukraine. Let us pray: Holy and righteous God, you created us in your image. Grant us grace to content fearlessly against evil and to make no peace with oppression. Help us, like Jesus to work for justice among people and nations, to the glory of your name. Amen.