

Voices: Jesus died for those we call our enemies

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Violence is one of those features of the world we no longer recognize so much as simply live with. School shootings, international wars, political killings and suicides now are just background noise to the daily hum. The wars and rumors of wars barely register notice.

But let us suppose violence is not a blessed feature of the world, not part of what God intends for creation.

If we begin from this very bland presumption, a lot of things we assume as necessities for creation come into sharp relief. Instead of being background noise, they become signs of contradiction to God and offenses to the life in which the people of God are intended to share.

This is complicated further by the paucity of Baptist thought on the matter beyond the occasional appeal to Romans 13: Because governmental entities commend violence, it must be commendable.

Much needs to be done to remedy this situation, particularly in a violent world like ours. But even the best education on this question cannot forget questions of violence are, for the Christian, matters of theology as much as they are social policy.

This brings us to [this week's comments](#) by Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth.

Warfighting words

Speaking to a room full of top military officials this week, Hegseth laid out an agenda for America's military future, one departing sharply in dramatic ways from the last 75 years. As with any speech, much of the text of his was for the people in the room, filled with marching orders and new directives to modernize America as a warmaking country.

For context, the years since the Second World War have been ones of [ascendant international laws of war](#), rules that exist to moderate and mitigate violence, even if many of them are openly violated.

In his comments, Hegseth addressed issues of combat readiness, and took issue with past policies of promotion, religious accommodation and gender identity. To the outside observer, it could be simply a laundry list of procedural changes.

But within the speech is a distinctly different vision of how this new age of war is to be fought:

"We also don't fight with stupid rules of engagement. We untie the hands of our warfighters to intimidate, demoralize, hunt and kill the enemies of our country. No more politically correct and overbearing rules of engagement, just common sense, maximum lethality and authority for warfighters."

For Hegseth, this is precisely because the people in the room represented a kind of people who he at one point called "created in God's image," but later refers to as those who "kill people and break things for a living. You are not politically correct and don't necessarily belong always in polite society."

It is easy, in appealing to a text like Romans 13, to simply say the government is able to do as it wishes and to walk past these sentiments.

But let us look again: These statements allow us, as Christians, to see what is behind the curtain in the otherwise mundane list of orders for top military officials.

The operating assumption behind turning America's attention away from peacekeeping and restraint and moving toward a focus on lethality is the people doing the killing are just those kind of people already. They are, for Hegseth, loving children of God created to kill and destroy.

Demonic nature of war

In his fifth-century masterpiece, *The City of God*, the church father Augustine described the Roman army as those whose “peace will not be everlasting” and stated “the earthly city is generally divided against itself by litigation, by wars, by battles, by the pursuit of victories that bring death with them or at best are doomed to death.”

His description of Rome throughout the book is one of an empire that wages unbridled wars, drunk on the worship of the goddesses Injustice and Victory.

Baptists are not quick to speak about angels and demons, but it is with good reason we ought to, particularly when it comes to violence. For if the final enemy—of both God and creation—is death (1 Corinthians 15:26), then what are demons but those entities that justify death, celebrate the destruction of life and encourage humans to bake death into our very structures of living?

By Augustine's lights—and by Scripture's—to promise safety and security through unrestrained violence—through the willing proliferation of death and the dehumanizing even of our own soldiers—is the work not of the wise or the just, but of the demonic.

A different way than war

For the people of God, it is not permitted to think of even our enemies as anything other than those for whom Christ has died.

As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:

“For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. So, from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer.”

The “message of reconciliation” Paul invites the Corinthian church into just after this is not reconciliation of the soul alone, but of the whole person. Those Christ has died for are meant to be raised up again, body and spirit.

The Christian just war tradition—thrown out in the trash in Hegseth’s comments—holds, above all things, war is for the sake of peace, correction must be the intent even if fighting occurs, and war is lamentable and to be mourned. For there is never a case when an enemy is anything other than one for whom Christ has died.

We routinely struggle to name violence not just as a problem for flesh and blood, but of the powers and principalities. We grasp vainly to name it, not just as a lamentable problem for civic life, but as that which the demons celebrate, for it brings more of God’s creation into the grips of Death.

It is time for Christians to shake off the slumber we are accustomed to surrounding violence and to say once again Christians are those bound to working for a better and different peace—with God, with our neighbors and even with our enemies.

Such a calling invites us to a very different kind of preparation, into a very

different kind of way.

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The views expressed in this opinion article are those of the author.*