

The Geneva School

Called to Serve:

Why Military Service is Both Viable and Valuable for the Christian

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by

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Exordium

Remain calm. This may be one of the most important missions of your life, but you are prepared. Everything should go according to plan. You're inside of your UH-60 BlackHawk helicopter with your team, and you're in charge. Your mission is to eliminate your assigned targets, and only your assigned targets. Every other man inside this aircraft is under your command, and you are responsible for the completion of this mission and the success of your operation. Your gunman is ready at the trigger. Minutes feel like seconds, and before you know it, your gunman successfully eliminates your targets. However, this gunman, whether it's by mistake or misinterpretation of command, kills 3 innocent civilians along with your intended targets. Your mission is not only considered a failure, but families are now devastated that their family members have been killed by the military that is supposed to protect them. It is completely undeserved and tragically unalterable. It is true that your team member physically pulled the trigger, but he *was* under your command. Would you take responsibility for this error, or blame it on your gunman? Whose fault is this, and how do you address this tragedy?

This was the scenario posed in my first ever senatorial nomination interview. This interview was part of the process to receive a nomination from a senator to the U.S. service academies. This question was difficult to answer, and although I knew I felt the call to serve in the military, I was forced to wrestle with whether or not I was ready to be placed in situations like the one stated above.

Those Christians who have felt the call to military service have likely had a similar struggle with whether or not it is a viable career path for them. Those who are in the armed forces are putting themselves in an environment that is both more dangerous than a "typical" occupation, but you also have the added responsibility of protecting your fellow citizens.

These are just two of the many reasons that Christians may be intimidated to serve in the armed forces.

Narratio

The relationship between military service and the Christian life has been debated throughout church history. Many have struggled with whether or not the man who seeks to fulfill his vocation of citizenship through service in the armed forces is able simultaneously to serve God faithfully. Many have claimed that the very concept of a “Christian soldier” is antithetical in and of itself. These pacifists believe only a hypocrite could claim to be serving God while also serving his nation in the military. The idea of turning the other cheek is incompatible with participation in war. Isn’t the military just a “you hit me, I hit you back” organization?

Others have claimed that military service *is* a viable career path for the Christian, as long as the soldier is not idolizing his nation, letting his patriotic zeal for his country dethrone his love for God. Many, however, have not taken one side definitively, but are on the fence. Those believers who feel the call to military service are stuck with many questions that make it seem impossible to tell whether or not they are making the right decision. For example, many wonder if it is idolizing their nation to commit themselves to serving it potentially to death. Shouldn’t God be the only thing we devote ourselves to in such a way? Thou shalt not murder, what makes it different for the soldier? Questions like these are all branches from the foundational question of whether or not the Christian *can* and *should* serve in the military.

Throughout church history, many have pointed to scriptural passages like the Sermon on the Mount, and used them to support their pacifist views about the war involvement of

believers. Now, before I continue, I think it will be helpful to define certain terms. When I use the word pacifism, I am referring to the opposition to war and the opposition to participation *in* war.¹ The early church has often been described as nonviolent, generally opposed to war, and therefore possibly pacifist.² Many believed it was not lawful to fight as a Christian.³ Author Roland Bainton put it this way, saying, “The age of persecution down to the time [of] Constantine was the age of pacifism to the degree that during this period no Christian author to our knowledge approved of Christian participation in battle.”⁴ No Christian author! Not a single one! Needless to say, it was a widely accepted conclusion that service in the military opposed a ‘christian lifestyle.’ Causes for this pacifist perspective included a fear that it would cause many to make an idol of their nation, leading to competing loyalties. Many also had this “aversion to bloodshed”⁵ that prevented them from joining any sort of military force.

However, over the decades, many have shifted away from this pacifist position and adopted a more pro-military standpoint. Now, that is not to say that the proponents of this take are pro-war. Pro-war and pro-military are *very* different. I would much rather have a pro-military gunman in a tank than a pro-war gunman. Now, even with this general decline in pacifism, especially within the church, there *have* been several cultural shifts in favor towards and away from the military. After 9-11, there was a surge of American patriotism,

¹ Childress, 10.

² Childress, 10.

³ Jean Michel Hornus, *It is Not Lawful for Me to Fight: Early Christian Attitudes Toward War, Violence, and the State* (North Dakota: Herald Press, 1980), 370.

⁴ Roland H. Bainton, “The American Historical Review,” Volume 66, no. 1 (October 1960): 74-84, <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr/66.1.74>

⁵ Childress, 3-4.

but after Vietnam there was a steep decline due to disillusionment about government policy and the seemingly futile American involvement in the war. The withdrawal from Afghanistan was another blow to American pride and patriotism. Additionally, many may not even see the need for a military force, and thus be unfavorably disposed toward it. As a nation, we are very comfortable. We have a good economy. As years go on, less and less people are directly related to veterans, and thus may not feel called to uphold any sort of military legacy.⁶ Needless to say, there has long been debate over the viability of military service, especially for the Christian.

Propositio

I will be arguing that military service for the Christian is not only a viable career path, but a valuable one for three major reasons.

Divisio

First, service in the armed forces is a viable, that is, a permissible career path for Christians to pursue, as proved throughout Scripture. Second, the benefits the military provides are unique in that they cannot be found in other careers. Third, the military is in need of principled personnel to uphold its integrity.

Confirmatio

First, service in the armed forces is a viable and permissible career path for Christians to pursue. As I said, throughout church history, there has often been dispute over how to approach this issue. However, as the church expanded and arguments over Christian participation in war continued, the dominating belief became that Christians *were* permitted to serve in the military. Such reasoning included that serving one's country was an act of preventing harm, promoting the common good, and overall providing protection to the nation

⁶ Reeves Valentine, interview by author, Orlando, February 19, 2025.

one was serving. Even in the early, some may say “pacifist” church, there was still what author James Childress calls “a relative justification of war.”⁷ Childress explains, “What made [pacifistic] positions...difficult to maintain was the recognition of the justification of the institution of war in a fallen world...War as an institution was recognized as justified and even necessary in a fallen world and, in principle, some wars were recognized as just.”⁸ Even in the early church, many recognized that coercive, sometimes violent, military force was necessary for the preservation and perpetuation of peace.

And still, for any unconvinced Christians who need further evidence that it is a permissible career option, there are examples throughout Scripture that point us to this truth. If we look at David, a soldier from the Old Testament, we can see a clear example of someone who faithfully followed God while participating in war as a service member for his earthly nation. Biblical examples like this can ease our concern that military service may not be a viable career for a Christian.

Now, I concede that David was not a perfect soldier who made the perfect decisions in every single situation. One needn’t look further than 2 Samuel 11-12, the story of Bathsheba and David’s abuse of power to kill Uriah. However, stories like this show that it is not military service itself that is intrinsically evil. This is proved throughout 1st and 2nd Samuel where David is praised for his military valor. The danger only occurs when one abuses their authority in the military, as David did in killing Uriah. Abuse does not rule out proper use.

So we can see that military service is permitted for the Christian; second, it is *good* for the Christian because the benefits the military provides are unique in that they cannot be

⁷ Childress, 10.

⁸ Childress, 10.

found in other careers. For example, serving in the armed forces requires an extreme submission to the authority of your commanding officers. When you suddenly only have four basic responses and submit to a strictly regimented schedule, it can in turn help the Christian man submit to the church, the Bible, and ultimately God more effectively, having had the lived experience of military-level obedience.

Additionally, it requires that you adopt a communal mindset with the men you are facing death with, which can translate to helping you form bonds with your congregation. It establishes a basis for how to form strong relationships. The military is one of the most diverse institutions, where working alongside people of different worldviews, ethnicities, and backgrounds informs how you can connect with other Christians who are different from you. In a culture and society that is more individualistic than ever, joining an institution like the military characterized by a collective, fraternal, “for the greater good” approach chafes against the individualistic, “me first” approach of modern culture. I had the opportunity to interview a former serviceman and current elder of St. Paul’s Presbyterian Church, Reeves Valentine, who explained how the diversity of the military helped him in connecting with fellow believers. He said, “As a western society, we’ve always had an individualistic and rebel bent, less collective in our identity and our thinking...and one of the greatest things about the military is that fraternal bond and joint sacrifice. That willingness to die for one another. That common objective that you all are working towards that is hard, dangerous, but important. All of those things are good to break you out of a society and culture that will tell you to follow your heart, do what you think is right, and that your purpose is to self-actualize.”⁹

⁹ Valentine Interview, 2025

In the military, you have the opportunity to learn about forming unique bonds, which are potentially stronger than those bonds you may form with your teammates on a sports team, your debate club, or your office coworkers, et cetera. In few other institutions are you putting your life in the hands of the men you're working alongside with. There is something special about military fellowship. There is a reason why the service academies' alumni, such as the Long Gray Line of West Point, are some of the most connected in the world.

Another benefit unique to the military is the extreme expansion of your aperture for suffering helps you as a parent, coworker, and member of the church, as you will be able to better respond to problems having experienced extreme struggles in the armed forces. It is no doubt that the problems you face in the military will be intense and require you to keep a level head in extremely stressful scenarios. Even just military training, without actual combat where real lives are at risk, is incredibly demanding and stressful. When you go through experiences like this, it equips you with perspective. Thus, the unique experience of serving in the military helps a Christian grow in the communal parts of Christianity, the submissive parts of Christianity, and the demanding parts of Christianity, thus providing you with substantial growth for your spiritual life.

Third, you should consider joining the military because it is in need of principled personnel to uphold its integrity. I bring up this point for two reasons. First of all, due to the rising issue of sexual violence within the military, the enlistment and commissioning of more principled soldiers and officers could help in reducing that trend. Secondly, having an integritous man behind the trigger is infinitely better than having a rash, blood and guts kind of guy behind it.

In regard to the rising issue of sexual violence within combat zones, vessels, and the like, I *will* acknowledge that it is likely an issue of policy. With the recent integration and rise in the number of women in all areas of the military, there has been a corresponding rise in the sexual crimes and violence in each area of the military. Elizabeth Mesok, in her article about this issue, writes,

By 2011, mainstream national and local press began publishing stories about women who were raped by their comrades in service, coverage which picked up in response to a class-action lawsuit brought against the Pentagon.¹⁰

Legislative battles are being fought and lawsuits are being filed in an attempt to alter female involvement in different sections of the military, but that is a whole other issue. However, even though some sort of combat exclusion policy could be helpful, or even just an “extension of military equality...treating all individual soldiers as equal in their capacity to labor”¹¹ in order to reduce this problem of sexual violence, the military as a whole would still benefit from the integration of more principled men. With this, there may not be a need for women to be excluded from combat vessels and the like. Those women who want to serve but are afraid of rape may be put at ease if more principled men served. After all, because sexual crime rates in the military would fall drastically, women could potentially have *more* opportunities in the armed forces.

Additionally, the presence of more principled personnel would be beneficial because of the nature of the job. Because the men involved in any branch, whether it's artillery, armor, aviation, or even intelligence, are continually making decisions that might involve killing, it is important that those men “pulling the trigger” are principled and involved in combat for the right reasons. Those individuals who join the military for love of their country but *also*

¹⁰ Elizabeth Mesok, “Sexual Violence and the US Military: Feminism, US Empire, and the Failure of Liberal Equality,” *Feminist Studies* 42, no. 1 (2016): 43, <https://doi.org/10.15767/feministstudies.42.1.41>

¹¹ Mesok, 44.

love for God and ultimate submission to Him, will be much more likely to make the right decision when it comes to violence.

Refutatio

Of course, at this point, some disagree with the assertion that the Christian soldier is justified in participating in war. They may argue that war is a violent and murderous institution, therefore Christians should not participate - stay out! Now, I agree that war is violent. That is a very good point by my opponents on this subject. I also concede that the military can involve itself in a way that is unnecessarily violent and harmful. However, the key distinction to make is the difference between war, and the actual military that participates in it.

So, while war is a fallen part of our world, the military is still needed to preserve peace. This is why serving in the U.S. military is a great career path, because the military is, at least *in theory*, a great institution. Throughout scripture, we see how an armed force is needed to defend a nation from harm to preserve peace. Again, in Samuel we see how God uses the military to deliver his people. However, the assertion that the military is a good institution *does* depend on the way the military operates as a whole.

The ends of a justified military force are to deter evil and promote the peace of the nation it defends. The ends of an unjustified military force are numerous, but might include to claim power, prove their dominance through pointless killing, and unethically harass and pillage non-threatening foreign nations to expand their domain. However, many see all military force as totally unethical and *never* justified...no matter the ends. They will claim that military force is only ever used to achieve power, more power, and then also more power. However, just because the military is involved in war, does not mean it is wrong, if it

is used correctly. Self-interest is not always a bad thing, and sometimes circumstances demand that one ‘bad’ be committed to prevent a ‘worse.’ John Howard Yoder described this as the paradox of the best sin to commit.¹²

We also see that there is a time for war in Scripture. In Ecclesiastes, we read, “There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every matter under heaven....A time to love and a time to hate; a time for war and a time for peace.” A time for war! It doesn’t get much clearer than that. It is clear that we live in a fallen world, but it can be slightly less clear that combative forces are sometimes necessary. However, if we truly understand the nature of a justified military, we can see that we sometimes must choose a “better evil” to keep from the worse one.

Now, in determining that the military is a good institution, even if war is not, many may then argue that, in fact, serving in the military and serving God is still like “serving two masters.” This has been one of the more recurring arguments against Christian participation in the military throughout history. Luther phrased the issue as such:

“Whether the Christian faith, by which we are accounted righteous before God, is compatible with being a soldier, going to war, stabbing and killing, robbing and burning, as military law requires us to do to our enemies in wartime? Is this work sinful or unjust? Should it give us a bad conscience before God? Must a Christian only do good and love, and kill no one, nor do anyone any harm?”¹³

Luther then goes on to explain that the vocation of a soldier *is* “godly and right,” but he concedes that it “can nevertheless become evil and unjust if the person engaged in it is evil and unjust.”¹⁴ However, many will dismiss this and say that war involves killing, and we are commanded not to kill, therefore soldiers are disobeying God in that sense. They might

¹² John Howard Yoder, “How Many Ways Are There to Think Morally about War?” *Journal of Law and Religion* 11, no. 1 (1994-1995): 88, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1051625>

¹³ Martin Luther, *Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved*, ed. Robert C. Schultz, trans. Charles M. Jacobs (1526), 3.

¹⁴ Luther, 3.

also say that submitting yourself to the authority of your nation and commanding officers displaces your submission to God as the ultimate authority.

Pacifists will often claim that what soldiers cite as patriotism is just a form of idolatry wearing a red, white, and blue mask. They may cite verses like Matthew 6:24, which reads, “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other.” (ESV). They also may bring up the Sermon on the Mount, the golden rule, the “turn the other cheek” doctrine. And the issue with this argument is the misapplication of private rules for the individual to the public institution of the military. It can be easy to interpret biblical teachings about turning the other cheek as absolute. However, an important distinction to make is the difference between private and public actions. James Childress writes, “In private actions, precepts such as “turn the other cheek” apply, but in public actions other standards apply...Within public roles, both superiors and subordinates can describe their actions as necessary for public safety and hence without sin.”¹⁵ The two are not subject to the same imperatives.¹⁶ The soldier has the authority, within a divinely authorized context, to take the lives of other men. That soldier does not carry that right outside of his office.

Another example of a common objection to Christian military service can be found in the writings of 3rd century author and theologian, Tertullian. In Chapter 37 of His *Apology*, he writes,

“But now inquiry is made about this point, whether a believer may turn himself unto military service, and whether the military may be admitted unto the faith...One soul cannot be due to two *masters*—God and Cæsar...For albeit soldiers had come unto

¹⁵ Childress, 14.

¹⁶ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 169.

John, and had received the formula of their rule; albeit, likewise, a centurion had believed; *still* the Lord afterward, in disarming Peter, unbelted every soldier.”¹⁷

This is a perfect representation of a quick argument for pacifism. Notice that he cites men in the Bible like John, Peter, and the Centurion. However, his argument against their military service is flawed.

Tertullian’s argument can be addressed by looking at the passages which he himself brought up. Tertullian mentioned the centurion in Matthew 8, let’s go to Matthew 8. If we look there, we read about a Roman soldier who asks Christ to heal his paralyzed servant. The centurion says,

“Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I too am a man under authority, with soldiers under me...When Jesus heard this...”

He said, “No, you’re a soldier and have served your nation before me. How dare you?” No, Jesus “marveled,” saying, “Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith.”

Tertullian also references Luke 3, where crowds, tax collectors, and soldiers are asking Jesus what they should do. In verse 14, we read that, “Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what shall we do?” And he said to them...” Put down your swords and resign from military service, it is distracting you from serving me faithfully. No, he says, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.” As with my previous point about David and Uriah, here we see another example of how the main concern regarding military service is *how* it is conducted, not simply *that* it is being conducted. It is not simply military service itself that is problematic, only the way one uses their authority, for the good *or* for the bad.

¹⁷ Tertullian, *On Idolatry*, (203-211 CE), Chapter 19.

One last person that Tertullian mentions is Peter. In Acts 10, Peter speaks to Cornelius, and he does not rebuke him, saying “You murderer!” This is just another example where it seems like, if the Bible wanted to clarify that, in the new covenant, pacifism is the only way to be obedient, it could have been done in any of these places. In fact, there are multiple soldiers throughout Scripture that seemed to be more worried about their conduct and godly behavior than about the fact that they were military soldiers.¹⁸ In short, in Scripture, there is ample opportunity to debunk the legitimacy of military service.

Furthermore, the assertion that serving in the military as a Christian is exclusively like serving two masters, and therefore one should find another job, is intellectually dishonest. The risk of serving two masters comes up in nearly every vocation, and in every area of human life. The carpenter could idolize his craft of making tables. The vocalist could idolize a perfect singing voice. Even a pastor could idolize his rhetorical skills in delivering a message. Put simply, the risk of idolizing your craft comes up in nearly every vocation, not just military service.

Peroratio

Looking back on that interview question I mentioned earlier, the issue of whether or not military service is viable for the Christian is a complex one. We can look at Scripture, analyze the arguments of the early church, and hear the stories of former service members who testify to the fruits military service has bore in their spiritual life. However, even knowing these things, it is still difficult to face the truth that you may be in situations that force you to commit violent acts, even if they are justified.

If you, personally, are not yet convinced of the benefits military service holds both as a career in and of itself, and as a way of contributing to the growth of your spiritual life, I

¹⁸ Valentine Interview 2025.

want you to know that I too was once on the fence about this. It may seem contradictory to say that the military can be one of the most beneficial organizations for the Christian to participate in. However, to conclude, I would like to give one final comparison. As Christians, we are called to love and serve our neighbors as ourselves. Sacrificially serving our neighbor means putting their well being above our own, and the military is one of the only places where you sign off to put your own life at high risk for the protection of your fellow citizens and preservation of the community as a whole. This is what the soldier promises to do. Similarly, "...even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

I am not seeking to convince you of the value of a career in the military because of the accolades, honor, or glory that may come with it. I am seeking to convince you that true sacrificial service in the military is one reflection of the way Christ, although worthy of all glory and honor, subjected Himself to humiliation on a cross, a punishment that is the very antithesis of glory and honor, so that through his sacrifice we might inherit eternal life. In a similar way, we have the opportunity to love our neighbor by risking our own life for their protection. "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends."

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