

## War & Peace: Christ's Controversial Claims In Matthew 10:34

By: Keith R. Keyser

*“Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword”* (Matt. 10:34). At first glance, this statement seems incongruous with the popular conception of Jesus Christ. No doubt guided by Hollywood's unhistorical and imaginative depictions, He is often pictured as insipid, blandly noncontroversial, or benignly accepting of anyone and anything. Modern thinking reduces Him to a supremely tolerant ethicist: one who condemns those people and things that society's conventional wisdom deems as bad, while simultaneously excusing individuals from their personal guilt. In short, Jesus is modern man's psychoanalyst, guru, confidant, and all around “buddy”, who will by no means challenge or offend contemporary sensibilities. Needless to say, this is a caricature of the true Messiah, whom the Scripture describes as a “stumbling block” (1 Cor. 1:23; cf. Rom. 9:32-33). The Lord Jesus' own words reveal His controversial claims and actions, which even today offend the natural man.

### Isn't God a peacemaker?

Christians may also be confused by this stark verse, however, bearing in mind that Isaiah calls Messiah “the Prince of Peace” and the epistles speak of Him as a great peacemaker (Isa. 9:6; Col. 1:20). What is more, Christ Himself called peacemakers “the sons of God”, thereby implying their likeness to the Father who delights in peace and will eventually cause it to prevail in the new heavens and new earth (Matt. 5:9, NKJV). Walter Kaiser agrees, saying:

One thing is certain: Jesus did not advocate conflict. He taught his followers to offer no resistance or retaliation when they were attacked or ill-treated. ‘Blessed are the peacemakers,’ he said, ‘for they will be called sons of God’ (Matt. 5:9), meaning that God is the God of peace, so that those who seek peace and pursue it reflect his character...Individuals and groups formerly estranged from one another found themselves reconciled through their common devotion to Christ...if Simon the Zealot and Matthew the tax collector were able to live together as two of the twelve apostles, the rest of the company must have looked on this as a miracle of grace.<sup>1</sup>

The Gospel offers “peace with God” to those who receive justification by faith (Rom. 5:1). Likewise, Paul's habitual greeting in his epistles is “grace and peace”, thereby combining the two common Hebrew and Greek salutations into a theologically cogent expression of

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<sup>1</sup> Walter C. Kaiser: *Hard Sayings of the Bible*. Downers Grove, IL : InterVarsity, 1997, electronic ed., Logos software, S. 378.

Christianity's essence (1 Cor. 1:3). In what sense then does Christ bring the sword rather than peace?

### **Cry havoc, and let slip the dogs of war**

The Lord Jesus' word choice evokes images of combat, and rightly so, for people in this fallen world are at war with their Creator. As He sent His disciples forth as heralds of the kingdom, He warned them of the adversity that they would face. They would experience the same opposition that their Lord faced. As He assured them: "The disciple is not above his master, nor the servant above his lord. It is enough for the disciple that he be as his master, and the servant as his lord. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more shall they call them of his household?" (Matt. 10:24-25; cf. John 15:20-21). Spiritual conflict often leads to physical persecution. Alexander MacLaren noted this regarding the world's response to Christ: "He is first King of righteousness, and after that also King of peace. But, if His kingdom be righteousness, purity, love, then unrighteousness, filthiness, and selfishness will fight against it for their lives".<sup>2</sup> To serve Christ will inevitably lead one into spiritual warfare; thus, the Lord metaphorically speaks of weaponry. Similarly, Ephesians 6:17, and Hebrews 4:12 describe the Christian's armaments, likening God's word to a sword. Likewise, Revelation 2:12 pictures the Lord Jesus wielding His blade against the false teachers in Pergamos. Evil and falsehood must be met with severe countermeasures, rather than compromise.

### **Means and Ends**

The Lord's bellicose-sounding terminology also reflects the division that His controversial claims engender among men even to the present time. One is either for Him or against Him – neutrality is not an option! Two well-known apologists express it this way:

...the immediate consequence of Christ's coming was to divide those who were for Him and those who were against Him - the children of God from the children of this world. But, just as the goal of an amputation is to relieve pain, so the immediate effect is to inflict pain. Likewise, Christ's ultimate mission is to bring peace, both to the human heart and to earth. Nonetheless, the immediate effect of His message was to divide those in the kingdom of God from those in the kingdom of Satan.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Alexander MacLaren, , *Exposition of the Scriptures: Matthew*, electronic edition, Rio, WI: Ages Software, 387, n.d.

<sup>3</sup> Norman Geisler & Thomas Howe, *When Critics Ask: A Popular Handbook on Bible Difficulties*, Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1992, electronic edition, Logos software; no pagination, comment on Matt. 10:34.

Therefore, His coming drew a clear line of demarcation between His adherents and opponents. The ire of the latter group was aroused by the unwavering purity and truth of the One Who is described as “the light” (John 1:7-9).

### **Conflict Resulting In Perfect Peace**

At Christ’s second coming His sword will be the prominent accoutrement on His person. His prominent weapon is linked with His word, just like Hebrews 4:12. Revelation 19:15 asserts that “a sharp sword” will proceed from His mouth, showing that peace will only come on earth after the Lord subdues His enemies. C. H. Spurgeon aptly described the battle in this way: “Christ is the great Peacemaker; but before peace, he brings war. Where the light cometh, the darkness must retire. Where truth is, the lie must flee; or, if it abideth, there must be a stern conflict, for the truth cannot and will not lower its standard, and the lie must be trodden under foot”.<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere in Scripture, the evocative metaphor of Christ’s enemies being made His footstool is used (e.g. 1 Cor. 15:27; Heb. 1:13). Like Joshua instructing the Israelite leaders to put their feet on the necks of the vanquished Canaanite kings, so the Lord will put down all opposition beneath His feet (Josh. 10:24).

After thousands of years of inviting people to be reconciled to Him, the Lord will come to forcibly establish His kingdom. If some have not received Christ’s gracious salvation by then, it will not be because they had no opportunity, nor because God was not willing for them to be delivered from wrath unto eternal life. From the first century to the present time He has been entreating men to come to Him, offering pardon in exchange for unconditional surrender. Sadly, some will never willingly bow the knee to the King of kings Who once became the Man of Sorrows.

### **Peace With Honor**

The modern age celebrates tolerance as the greatest virtue. Christians are urged to embrace other belief systems and “alternative lifestyles” (a euphemism for sinful behavior). While it is true that the Lord Jesus loves humans and wants to save them, His approach is no “peace at any price” tactic. He never achieves peace at the expense of righteousness. To declare peace without removing the underlying cause for hostility – human sin – is a delusion. The New Testament makes it clear that Christ never advocated physical compulsion or temporal combat to advance His kingdom (John 18:36). Nonetheless, the Lord’s exclusive and admittedly controversial claims are non-negotiable. Jesus clearly taught: “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one

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<sup>4</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening : Daily Readings*. Complete and unabridged; New modern edition. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006: evening meditation, December 28; electronic edition, Logos Software.

comes to the Father but by me” (John 14:6; see also Acts 4:12). True peace comes from being in a right relationship with God the Creator through His Son, which then leads to a lifestyle that pleases Him. No matter what the spirit of the age proclaims, believers must adhere to Christ and His teaching. Now more than ever they need to wield the spiritual sword of God’s word in the great conflict in which they are engaged: both in Gospel witness and in the doctrine held up by the Church.