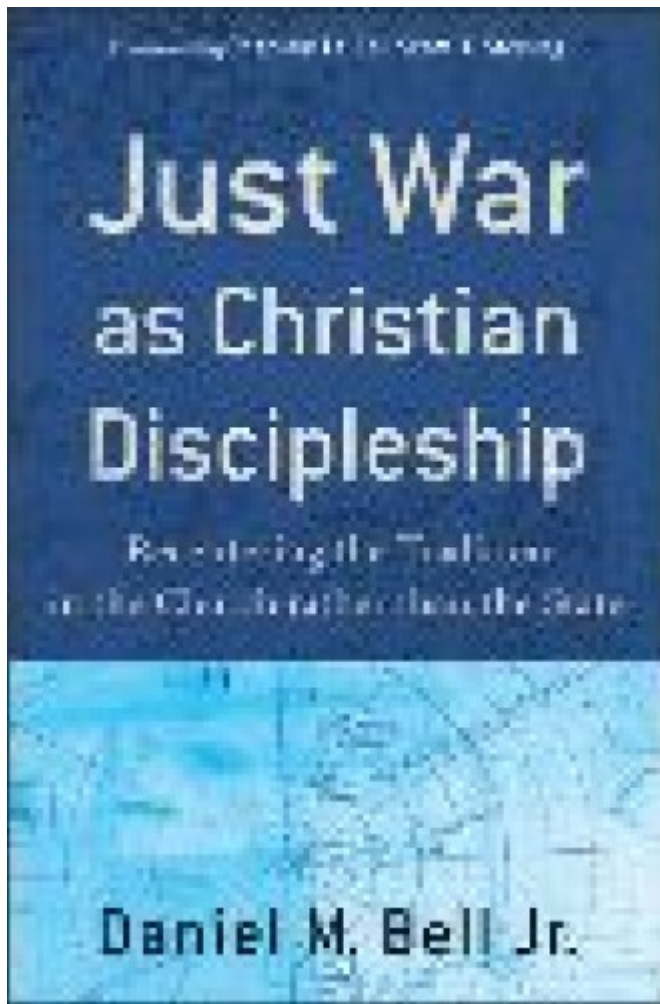


Just War as Christian Discipleship: Recentering the Tradition in the Church Rather than the State

By [J. Milburn Thompson](#) in the [June 29, 2010](#) issue

In Review



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Daniel M. Bell Jr.

In the foreword to *Just War as Christian Discipleship*, Lieutenant Colonel Scott A. Sterling, an army chaplain, recounts a conversation he had with a female officer in Iraq who was eager to make moral sense of her combat experience. Is it right that we are here? Are we doing any good? Should we have invaded in the first place?

The United States is fighting wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, yet many Americans are isolated from the moral questions raised by these conflicts. The country as a whole has not been asked to sacrifice much for them. Some suggest that the U.S. should intervene to protect human rights in other places, such as Zimbabwe or the Darfur region of Sudan. Faithful Christians cannot be indifferent to the moral questions raised by U.S. military incursions and by genocide and oppression anywhere on earth. What does it mean to be a faithful disciple of Christ in the midst of wars and rumors of war?

Daniel Bell signals his intended audience by dedicating his book to the bishops of the United Methodist Church. He is writing for the church to revive the just war tradition as a way of Christian discipleship. Bell does not discuss particular wars, nor does he engage in the debate over pacifism and just war. Instead he argues that Augustine understood just war to be a way of loving one's neighbor and one's enemy, a positive understanding that was developed by medieval theologians such as Thomas Aquinas and Francisco de Vitoria, who saw war not as a lesser evil but as a positive way of following Christ. The modern understanding of just war tends to tear it from its theological roots in the Christian community and replant it in more superficial political ground. Bell wants to return to the rich theological foundation of the just war tradition.

After tracing this history in the first two chapters, Bell contrasts what he calls Just War as Christian Discipleship (which has medieval theological roots) with Just War as a Public Policy Checklist (the modern, secular version). Just War as Christian Discipleship (CD) sees war as a distinctive Christian witness to justice and love and a manifestation of faithful discipleship rooted in the Christian community. In this way of thinking, just war norms guide Christians in serving God and their neighbors and guide the church in following Christ. Just War (CD) is based in Christian community and in the virtues that make up Christian character.

Just War as a Public Policy Checklist (PPC) focuses on laws and rules rather than character and community. It uses just war theory as an instrument of public policy and is based in reason rather than faith. It calls on heads of state to meet the criteria for a just war and on soldiers to obey the rules of just war, and it tends toward a permissive and lax interpretation of just war norms—it is a just war theory without teeth.

Bell continues this contrast as he examines just war norms, such as legitimate authority, just cause, right intent and proportionality. For each norm, he spells out the implications and challenges for the church of viewing just war as a matter of Christian discipleship.

For example, Bell argues that Just War (CD) does not regard self-defense as a just cause for war. Instead, just cause is other-directed; we must understand it in terms of neighbor love and the common good. Bell discusses just cause in terms of repelling an unjust attack, recovering what has been unjustly taken and restoring the moral order by punishing an offender. This perspective sees humanitarian intervention as a responsibility rather than a problem (although the other norms also have to be met), and, as Bell acknowledges in his concluding chapter, it may result in more wars, not fewer. Bell insists that according to Just War (CD), the right intention for war is to restore a just peace, and that such a war is an expression of love of neighbor and love of enemies; it is a limited war, fought with a mood of regret mixed with a clear desire for the common good.

Bell draws a sharp distinction between Just War (CD) and Just War as a Public Policy Checklist regarding the conduct of war. The norm of discrimination means that warriors cannot directly intend to kill noncombatants. The principle of indirect effect, however, is used by Just War (PPC) to permit significant “collateral damage” in the destruction of a legitimate military target. But Christian discipleship requires that soldiers protect noncombatants and avoid foreseen and likely civilian casualties, no matter the military benefit of an attack. In like manner Bell ties the norm of proportionality to the purpose and intent of a just war. This means using the minimum force necessary for accomplishing the objective.

There is no doubt that Bell recovers the theological basis of the just war tradition and that Just War (CD) is a challenging and insightful vision of that tradition for the contemporary church. Never theless, I want to raise three concerns about Bell’s position and project.

Bell rejects the idea that just war is a lesser evil and embraces Augustine's notion that war is a political good and a way of Christian love. Indeed, Bell contends that consequentialist ethics is a modern adulteration that is foreign to the Christian tradition. It seems to me that the idea that war is a lesser evil and that war is a political good are both found in Augustine. And proportional thinking is not foreign to the Catholic moral tradition with which I am most familiar. War may sometimes accomplish good, but war is manifestly and objectively evil. It may not be sinful, but it is evil. It involves killing, destruction and suffering. Contrary to Bell, a logical presumption against war has long been part of the just war tradition.

Furthermore, Bell seems to pit the church against a corrupt, self-interested and feckless world. Perhaps he is right about that, but will the church's Just War as Christian Discipleship stance be able to influence states regarding the morality of warfare? Is Just War (CD) realistic?

Finally, Bell wants the church to form just warriors. But doesn't the gospel call for Christians to be peacemakers? Repeatedly in response to Bell's vision of Christian Discipleship I wondered why he did not go one step further and call for a nonviolent witness that would involve the same virtues and the same commitment to justice, but perform a kind of enemy-love that does not involve killing. Bell is very perceptive about the demands of Christian discipleship, but perhaps he should root his vision in the teachings of Jesus rather than in an interpretation of Augustine and medieval theologians.