

Can soldiers be saved? Luther's example: Luther's example

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [June 14, 2003](#) issue

During the war against Iraq an interviewer asked me where I got some of the theological ideas that called more for repentance by “our side” than triumph over “them” and theirs. I told him that they came from Martin Luther—though my views are milder than Luther’s were.

In 1526 Luther wrote *Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved*. He said, as did I to the interviewer: “I back our troops.” Luther answers the question “When can a soldier fight in a war?” by saying when the war is one of “lawful self-defense” and “when an attack is made by someone else.” Aggressive war is of the devil.

Luther plays the role of a soldier and asks, “Suppose my lord were wrong in going to war,” that is, suppose the war is not in “lawful self-defense” in response to an attack. Luther answers, “If you know for sure that he is wrong, then you should fear God rather than men, and you should neither fight nor serve, for you cannot have a good conscience.” But if you do not know or cannot find out, better obey and fight.

God is on our side, we are regularly told. But Luther states that a nation should never fight in the spirit of a crusade or a holy war. Keep “the church” out of it, he insists. In 1529 Luther published *On War Against the Turk*. Let me be efficient and simply quote Martin Brecht: Luther “was most offended that the war against the Turks was said to be a Christian undertaking.” Without doubt, the Muslim attacks “were illegitimate.” The emperor had to defend his empire against these attacks, but “war against the Turks was a purely secular matter, not a crusade against unbelievers.”

What should Christians do during such times? Repent. Pray. Worship. Sing. Pay taxes. Luther grew ill when he learned that Muslims were nearing Vienna, but he still accented the need for repentance by his side. In *Army Sermon Against the Turks* he again insisted that military action had to be seen as a secular struggle, not as a religious crusade. If a Christian lost his life while fighting to defend his country after

an attack, he died for a just cause.

After 1540 and the Muslim advance in Hungary, it was time for new comment. Brecht reports that Luther “did not see that he was in a position to pray for a victory over the Turks, but only that as many people as possible might be spared. A requirement for participating in the Turkish war had to be one’s recognition of his own sin, for which the Turks were the punishment.”

Luther saw the Muslim advance and aggression in apocalyptic terms; he criticized Islam but also blasted the papacy. His agenda led him to attack what he called the “wild and true ‘Turks,’ namely, greed, usury, arrogance, arbitrary morality, tyranny of those in high places, unfaithfulness, evil.”

When the elector specifically asked Luther to pray for him as he led the imperial army against the Muslims in 1542, Luther obeyed and prayed in his support. Brecht states, however, that “it became evident that Luther’s fears that the campaign would only waste money and deserve ridicule were correct.” Luther prayed for success against the Muslims and against “the oppression of the church by the nobles.” Because he saw the war as a punishment, he also prayed, “God punish us graciously.” In Luther “triumphalism in regard to the Turks was lacking.”

Analogies across the ages are always imperfect, and when we turn to the Christian past for moral clarity about present issues the result is often confusion and puzzlement. Still, in our present circumstances, Luther’s example is worth pondering.