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MINISTRY TO MILITARY

Church finds lessons in serving service personnel

BY ANDREW GARNETT

Jesus taught his followers to love their enemies, and to acquiesce to a violent person instead of resisting (Matt 5:38-45). Jesus discouraged his followers from violence when he was arrested and executed by Roman soldiers (Luke 22:47-53), and Jesus explicitly renounced violence as a tool of his kingdom (John 18:36).

With this beginning, we might expect the churches that sprang up after Jesus to shun violence — and particularly to shun the Roman army, which was responsible for Jesus' death.

In fact, the first Christians displayed a complicated relationship with the army. The evolving relationship between the early church and the Roman army contains valuable lessons for our relationship to service members today.

OPPOSITION

In the early church, the majority of Christians likely felt hostility toward the Roman army.

Celsus, a second-century Greek philosopher, wrote an anti-Christian treatise that included the charge that Christians shirked their civic duty by refusing to participate in public life and serve in the army.

Origen, an early Christian theologian, sought to counter Celsus. Tellingly, Origen did not dispute the accusation. Rather, he argued that Christians benefited the Roman Empire not through military service but through their prayers and their holy lives.

Christian aversion to the army sprang from several factors.

First, serving in the army involved the possibility of warfare, and the bulk of Christians remained opposed to violence.

Second, most provinces of the Roman



Empire did not have any force we would equate with law enforcement. Therefore, soldiers were sometimes assigned duties we would classify as "policing" today.

In this capacity, soldiers did everything from chasing bandits to executing criminals to arresting Christians during periods of persecution. All of this would have been problematic for many Christians.

Third, many church leaders were opposed to service in the army because of its religious dimensions. Today, when military service is secular in nature, it is difficult for us to conceptualize how religious the Roman army was.

Yet there was a deep religious dimension to army life. The army drew recruits from across the empire and beyond, making it a melting pot for all the religious diversity of the ancient world.

Beyond the varied religious beliefs within the ranks, soldiers would also have participated in pagan religious practices mandated by the army. Soldiers were obligated to observe dozens of different festivals in honor of Roman gods and deified emperors, sacrifices were performed before battle for the pleasure of the gods and the purification of the army, and the standards each unit followed into battle were endowed with religious power.

This deep-seated paganism probably made soldiering a disagreeable profession for many Christians.

SUPPORT

Yet through the early centuries of the church, a counter argument was probably building. When soldiers came to visit John the Baptist, he did not tell them to abandon their profession.

Rather, John urged them to be the most faithful and honest soldiers they could be (Luke 3:14).

While Jesus spoke against violence, he did not tell a centurion to abandon his career. Instead, Jesus commended the centurion's understanding of faith — an understanding based on his military service (Matt 8:5-13).

Presumably, this line of thought arose either among Christians who were converted while in the army and wanted to stay in the ranks, or among lay Christians who were already believers but wanted to enlist. It is easy to imagine reasons why Christians might have been attracted to the service.

For all the hardship of the army, there was also job security — which was better than the hardship without job security that characterized the life of most of the empire's inhabitants. The army also carried with it the possibility for career advancement, and potentially a relatively comfortable retirement.

For a lower-class person (as the majority of Christians were in the early centuries), there were certainly upsides to the army. Christians were serving in the army by the late second century, and Christian soldiers became increasingly common as the centuries passed.

This shift in Christian life is reflected first in the church orders — documents drawn up to explain church structure and give practical guidance for pastoral care. At the same time Christian theologians were still writing strongly against service in the army, the church orders seem to give indirect evidence that the situation was shifting.

The earliest church orders were generally more hostile toward military service, while later ones imagined soldiers participating freely in the life of the church. This suggests that Christians were increasingly found within the army, and churches had to change their practices to account for this.

As the centuries passed, theologians began to make arguments supportive of military service. By the fifth century, service in the army had become widely accepted for Christians.

APPLICATION

Perhaps the most significant implication of the early church's relationship with the army is the realization that disagreements over military service are not new.

Individual congregations often have markedly different attitudes toward service — with conservative churches often more supportive of service, while liberal-leaning congregations tend to be more skeptical.

Awareness of past differences does

not in itself bridge the gap between conservative and liberal attitudes toward the military, but it gives some comfort in knowing that our struggles are not new. The early church was also divided on the issue.

Second, we should be realistic about the ability of churches to shape Christian behavior. Throughout the early period, most church leaders advocated against military service, but lay Christians increasingly chose their own course of action. It is a helpful reminder of the church's inability to compel Christians to moral behavior.

The church and its leaders should speak truthfully about their convictions, and there is nothing wrong with trying to convince others of what is believed to be true. However, past precedent suggests that there is little to gain from being absolutist.

A third suggestion follows closely from this one: regardless of our own ethical convictions regarding war and

violence, it is helpful to take a pastoral approach toward members of the military.

Pastoral approaches toward Roman army members seem to have been more successful than the rigorist denial of the military life. Likewise, today, a particular church or minister might feel uneasy about some activities a service member performs in the service of our country.

We do well to remember that early Christian soldiers faced difficult moral questions when they served, and their church leaders did not always feel ready to endorse the lifestyle of a soldier. Yet soldiers and church leaders increasingly found ways to relate spiritually to one another.

To follow the path of the early church may mean we ask ourselves: "If a person is already serving in the army and engaging in these kinds of activities, how can we best care for their soul?" **NFJ**

—Andrew Garnett is pastor of Hampton (Va.) Baptist Church.

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