The phrase “Just War” is often used by politicians, the media, history teachers, and church leaders in discussions about a possible war. However, we do not often hear the actual criteria of just war theory—or see how it is applied. As Christians, we must understand the just war tradition that has been the main moral language in both secular and religious debates about war if we are to evaluate the reasoning offered by political leaders. This resource can help you and your group to examine just war thinking, and as well, to explore Jesus’ teachings about peace. (See What is Christian Peacemaking for a good companion session.)

THE JUST WAR CRITERIA

Before a war:
1. The war must be a LAST RESORT. Every effort at negotiation and arbitration must have been tried.
2. The war must have a JUST CAUSE — to protect the innocent and defend against unjust demands and threats of force.
3. The war must waged by a LEGITIMATE AUTHORITY.
4. It must be FORMALLY DECLARED.
5. It must be fought with PEACEFUL INTENTIONS. It cannot be waged by a crusade mentality, self interest, or pride, but must be for the well-being of all people.
6. There must be a reasonable HOPE OF SUCCESS. The goals must be achievable without squandering the life and property of the people.
7. The means used must be PROPORTIONATE to the ends sought. War mustn’t cause unnecessary destruction that outweighs the final good the war seeks to achieve.

During a war:
1. NONCOMBATANTS must be given immunity. No harm is to be done to those who can do no harm (i.e. civilians).
2. PRISONERS must be treated humanely.
3. INTERNATIONAL TREATIES and conventions must be honored.

After a war:
1. The defeated are to be shown MERCY. This includes assistance with rebuilding what has been destroyed.

If we made full use of the principles of just war, the quality of our moral deliberation about conflict would be greatly improved. These criteria can help us think critically of the tendency of any society to justify its own violence. They can also help us to confront the various effects of violence and to encourage us to be creative about alternatives.

But as Christians, we must also critically examine these criteria in light of the Christian ethic of love, forgiveness, and the sanctity of every human life. We look to Jesus, who lived a life of love and taught his followers to use nonviolence as they struggled for justice. For many Christians, Jesus’ message calls us to transcend just war thinking and to embrace alternatives like Just Peace thinking and Christian Nonviolence.

In the past our justifications for war have been flawed. One example:

Following the Spanish-American war, the Philippines were handed over from Spanish to US control. When Philippine citizens resisted, the US went to war against them from 1899-1902.

At the time, Filipinos were depicted as an uncivilized people who would benefit from the hand of the US government and Christianity. Victory, it was said, would also open up new economic markets. To growing protest at home, the US army wiped out dozens of towns. An estimated one-third of the population was killed.

What was once considered a justifiable war is now seen by most historians as a bloody war of self interest.

In fact, it is difficult to find a war that was not considered just by the leading political and religious figures of the day.

The debate about Iraq has included almost no discussion of an important alternative to war. Consider: In the last 60 years, two-thirds of the world’s people experienced change by nonviolent movements that were successful beyond anyone’s expectation. They worked against some of the most ruthless regimes of the century: apartheid in South Africa, Ceausescu in Romania, Marcos in the Philippines, the Nazis in Denmark and Norway.... The most successful route to “regime change” of our time has been absent from the debate about Iraq! We owe it to ourselves, the Iraqi people, and our future to examine the power of this option. [For more on this alternative and the Wall of Hope with further examples; see www.LutheranPeace.org.]
1. **Deciding for ourselves:** Whether or not a war meets Just War criteria, violence has drastic consequences for us as humans, and for our society, our earth, and our faith. Use these quotes and bible texts as discussion starters for a deeper exploration of the gospel call to be peacemakers. Can be used in small groups or all together.

1. **Applying the criteria:**
   
   **War with Iraq: January 2003**

   For this activity, set the calendar two months before the war with Iraq. Break up into small groups, and assign each group one or several Just War criteria below. Each group has the task of applying their criteria to Iraq, and deciding whether the war did or did not meet that standard. Share the questions below, and encourage the group to ask questions of their own. After 10-15 minutes, have each small group share their conclusions. Invite the rest of the group to raise questions too. Conclude with a group reflection on the main question: Is this war just?

   1. **War must be a Last Resort:** Did we try negotiation and nonviolent intervention before using violence? Are there any alternatives we haven’t tried?
   2. **War must have a Just Cause:** What is a just cause? Who has authority to decide? What if both sides think their cause is just?
   3. **War must be waged by a Legitimate Authority:** What role should the UN play? How do citizens give their government authority?
   4. **War must be Formally Declared:** Has the US Congress declared war? What should the process be? What are the pros and cons of the US process so far?
   5. **It must be fought with Peaceful Intentions:** How could war affect the long-term well-being of people in Iraq, the US, the world? What might be our motivations?
   6. **There must be reasonable Prospect of Success:** What is the goal? What could be the costs and for whom? Who decides what success is?
   7. **The means must be Proportionate to the ends:** What does proportionality mean? Will the goal outweigh the destruction?
   8. **Noncombatants must be given Immunity:** Will the lives of civilians be protected? How will this be done?
   9. **Prisoners must be treated Humanely:** What does humanely mean? What should their rights be?
   10. **International Treaties must be Honored:** Are we breaking any international agreements? How would we find out? Why should we honor such agreements?
   11. **The defeated are to be shown Mercy:** Are we confident the US public supports the cost of reconstruction?

---

**The Christian and Just War Thinking**

1. **War must be a Last Resort:** Did we try negotiation and nonviolent intervention before using violence? Are there any alternatives we haven’t tried?
2. **War must have a Just Cause:** What is a just cause? Who has authority to decide? What if both sides think their cause is just?
3. **War must be waged by a Legitimate Authority:** What role should the UN play? How do citizens give their government authority?
4. **War must be Formally Declared:** Has the US Congress declared war? What should the process be? What are the pros and cons of the US process so far?
5. **It must be fought with Peaceful Intentions:** How could war affect the long-term well-being of people in Iraq, the US, the world? What might be our motivations?
6. **There must be reasonable Prospect of Success:** What is the goal? What could be the costs and for whom? Who decides what success is?
7. **The means must be Proportionate to the ends:** What does proportionality mean? Will the goal outweigh the destruction?
8. **Noncombatants must be given Immunity:** Will the lives of civilians be protected? How will this be done?
9. **Prisoners must be treated Humanely:** What does humanely mean? What should their rights be?
10. **International Treaties must be Honored:** Are we breaking any international agreements? How would we find out? Why should we honor such agreements?
11. **The defeated are to be shown Mercy:** Are we confident the US public supports the cost of reconstruction?

---