

Chapter One

Christians Don't Start Wars, They Try to Stop Them



When you start a war on false pretenses and then act as if your deceptions are justified because you are doing God's will and that your critics are either unpatriotic or lacking in faith, there are some of us who have given our lives to teaching and preaching the faith who believe that this is not only not moral, but immoral.

If the whole, terrible, wretched truth could be known about the Iraq war—in one blinding, bloody moment like looking into the sun without blinking—anyone with a conscience would turn away and vomit. In the moments that follow, in the empty, clarifying calm that comes just after, such a person would begin to feel something else. The sadness would be joined with righteous indignation, because it is impossible to love the world and not hate what destroys it.

For every fallen soldier, for every dark-eyed Iraqi girl and boy, for every wailing mother wandering in the carnage of the latest bombing, the only truly religious response to an unnecessary war is rage. Until we feel it, and do not for a moment confuse our fears with our faith, there can be nothing that approaches righteousness in us.

Even though we are not allowed to see the flag-draped coffins coming home or the true horror that is this tragic misadventure, we can see it in the “imagination of our hearts.” And because we can, there should be “neither rest nor tranquillity,” as Dr. King would

say, “until justice rolls down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream.”¹

It is one thing to be dragged reluctantly into the horror that is war to stop a tyrant like Adolf Hitler. It is entirely another to have already decided on “regime change” in Iraq for personal, political, or economic reasons and then to engineer civilian consent through an elaborate hoax.

Former Treasury Secretary Paul O’Neill removed any doubt about when the Iraq war was planned when he turned over nineteen thousand internal memos to former *Wall Street Journal* reporter Ron Suskind. Suskind’s book *The Price of Loyalty* revealed that at the very first National Security Council meeting, held just ten days after the inauguration and eight months before 9/11, the topic of conversation in the Bush administration was how to get rid of Saddam Hussein. O’Neill put it bluntly. “It was all about finding a way to do it. That was the tone of it. The President saying, ‘Go find me a way to do this.’”²

One memo was marked “Plan for Post-Saddam Iraq,” and another was titled “Foreign Suitors for Iraqi Oilfield Contracts.” After campaigning against “nation building” and overextending our troops during the Clinton administration, Bush did exactly the opposite. The most overtly “religious” president in U.S. history, running to “restore integrity to the White House,” had already decided on a preemptive invasion of Iraq and then went in search of a reason to give the American people for sending their sons and daughters to die. It wasn’t about the oil, of course.

The first premise for the war was to protect us against the “imminent threat” represented by Iraq’s possession of weapons of mass destruction. There were none. Next we were told that Iraq and al-Qaeda were “operationally linked,” but that wasn’t true either, as the administration has now admitted. So this war in search of a reason moved into yet more abstract territory. We were “defending our freedom,” even though it was never threatened. And we were “spreading freedom and democracy throughout the region,” even though life in Iraq is now more desperate, more deadly, and less hopeful than ever.

History will record this war, and the lies that led us into it, as one of the great foreign policy blunders in American history. The most amazing fact of all is that the president still has his job. To add insult to death, the Bush administration has co-opted the sympathies of the Christian Right by representing itself as a crusader for Christian moral principles. Yet this war does not begin to satisfy the requirement of the church's just-war theory. What's more, individuals who prey on our fears or bear false witness can never call themselves faithful.

Anyone who still doubts that a new American military imperialism was on the drawing board long before 9/11 and waiting for what neoconservatives called "a Pearl Harbor moment" has not read a word put out by the Project for the New American Century (PNAC). The brainchild of William Kristol and Robert Kagan, PNAC aimed to put the United States back on a course toward "global leadership" where America accepts its "unique role in preserving and extending an international order friendly to our security, our prosperity, and our principles."³ From its inception in 1997, the Holy Grail of the group was to remove Saddam Hussein from power.

Someone once said that "the opposite of love is not hate; it's fear." If that's true, then Bush policy adviser Condoleezza Rice employed it masterfully when she raised the most frightening specter to the modern mind. Before the war, she said, "The problem here is that there will always be some uncertainty about how quickly [Saddam] can acquire nuclear weapons. But we don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud."⁴

Never mind that we have yet to find a smoking gun, polls consistently showed that the choreographed lie linking Iraq to 9/11 worked, as polls indicated that two-thirds of the American people bought it at first. Now we are left to wonder what the real reasons were, and that is a much more complicated matter. Was the son trying to finish his father's business, or was a wealthy oilman surrounded by other wealthy oilmen simply seizing control of the world's second-largest supply of sweet crude? This much is certain: a trusting and patriotic nation was hoodwinked.

To press the point that our “enemy” was beyond redemption (which is a strangely un-Christian idea), Bush’s clumsy public disclaimers about not meaning to disparage a whole race or religion could not compete with the broad brush of his “evildoer” rhetoric. Again and again we were told that 9/11 was the result of the fact that “they hate our freedom,” rather than allowing for the possibility that the attacks grew out of a pathological hatred toward the West for centuries of anti-Arab policy and a militant effort to globalize Western cultural and religious values. For the average American listening to the president speak, the message was as clear as it was fallacious: *an Arab is an Arab is a terrorist, and this is a holy war.*

But never fear. We have a free press, do we not—protected by the Constitution—to save us from just such an abuse of power? Think again. If anyone still doubts that we live in perilous times, just consider that after the nation finally learned the identity of Deep Throat, whose secret testimony in the Watergate scandal brought down another president who abused the executive branch, a judge ordered two reporters to reveal their confidential sources, and Judith Miller of the *New York Times* went to jail rather than comply. *Time* magazine management then caved in, claiming that “no one is above the law.” Had those reporters been named Woodward and Bernstein, or had the *Washington Post* caved in, Nixon would never have resigned in disgrace, and the nation would never have known the truth.

Now the question is a deeper and more disturbing one: do people even want to *know* the truth? Desiring the truth would require that we be honest about ourselves and our complicity in the evils we deplore. It would mean taking stock of the ways in which we have turned greed from a deadly sin to an American virtue and coddled rampant individualism with a therapeutic vengeance.

It would require that we refuse to allow media outlets to be entertainment subsidiaries of major corporations so that we get independent journalism again and not right-wing “infotainment” or electronic voyeurism. Had Fox News been around in 1974, the Watergate scandal would have been the subject of a round-the-

clock smear campaign, with Bill O'Reilly and Sean Hannity calling it an "outrageous attack on the presidency, our nation, and the values we hold dear." Viewers would then have been invited to call in and register their anger, answering the question, "Should this investigation go forward or not? You decide."

Rush Limbaugh tells his "ditto-heads" that Democrats (and implicitly everyone on the Left) "are more fearful of Christians than they are of al-Qaeda."⁵ But it would be more accurate to say that most of us fear war more than we fear sex, which appears to be the only grounds for impeachment these days. To the Right, lying about sex (a sin of weakness and shame) is apparently far worse than lying the whole nation into an illegal war (a sin of malice and hubris). Sad as the Clinton scandal was (and exceedingly stupid), it looks particularly tame now by comparison to the bloodletting and terrorist quagmire that the occupation and civil war in Iraq has become.

The Christian Right, which gave George W. Bush his margin of victory and celebrated it as a sign that God had triumphed over White House wickedness, seems to have accepted war as inevitable if regrettable and sex as regrettable if inevitable. These were not the priorities of Jesus, of course, but when was the last time anybody asked, "What would Jesus do?" and regarded it as anything other than a rhetorical exercise?

Jesus didn't talk much about sex. He forgave a woman caught in adultery and reminded her would-be executioners that they were hypocrites. He did not shame her. He also reminded the self-righteous that you can commit adultery in your heart, which Jimmy Carter, perhaps the most authentically Christian president ever, actually confessed to—only to be mercilessly mocked by conservatives.

If you hope to find scriptural support for our culture's obsession with what everyone else is doing in bed, you will be very disappointed. What Jesus did talk about was the failure of public piety to manifest itself in meaningful private compassion. What he warned us about repeatedly was the power of money to seduce and to enslave. It was both a hazard and an obligation. But what made him explode with anger

was the sin of talking about God all the time and being publicly observant while maintaining systems that oppressed God's people and robbed them of their dignity. For Jesus, there was no hypocrisy like *religious* hypocrisy.

He healed the sick, with or without insurance, and welcomed the outcast—turning the first-century world of power and privilege upside down. The ease with which he moved among sinners and forgave them caused his critics to accuse him of moral relativism and cheap grace—the same fears that grip many in the Christian Right today. Without strict rules and swift judgment, they tell us, the world as we know it will come to an end. Spare God's rod of judgment, and the whole of Creation will be spoiled. Where Jesus says “fear not,” the message of the Christian Right is just the opposite: “Be afraid. Be very afraid.”

It was no mere slip of the tongue that caused the president, only a few days after 9/11, to refer to his war on terrorism as a “crusade” before his handlers moved quickly to apologize.⁶ The truth is, that was a rare moment of uncensored honesty. He does indeed believe that his mission is holy and that this war is approved by God. He believes that God has called him, though clumsy of tongue like Moses, to find and fight for the chosen ones against a world of infidels.

But so has every crusader, in every age, believed that his cause was holy. When Bush says, repeatedly, that we must “fight them *there* before we have to fight them *here*,” he is confusing Christ with Machiavelli. Preemptive killing, after all, is about as far from loving thy neighbor as one can get.

The sad truth is that in the name of protecting us from terrorists, we have now accelerated the pace at which the world is training terrorists. Thanks to the increase in terrorism around the world since the war began, we have lost personal freedoms at home, not “protected them,” as the president says ad nauseam. According to a CIA report, Iraq is now the destination of choice for terrorists, where they receive on-the-job training to export their “skills” around the world.⁷ Reacting to the deaths of their innocents by pledging to kill ours, the temperature in the terrorist ovens of the world just keeps rising.

One might expect something more out of a “born-again” president than “we’ll get you before you get us.” “Bring ’em back dead or alive” strikes a deep chord in the American psyche, but it hardly sounds like a man who claims that Jesus is the most important influence on his life. Indeed, the president’s taunting West Texas rhetoric, like “Bring ’em on!” makes a strange sound when compared to “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

In the end, nothing could be more *irreligious* than to use fear and loathing of the “enemy” and a commitment to vigilante violence as a way of protecting ourselves. We know that in every religious system in the world, true faith is about *breaking* the cycle of violence. When Jesus was arrested in the garden of Gethsemane, the apostles, some of whom were still zealots, drew their swords and offered to fight back. Jesus would have none of it and ordered the weapons put away.

Admitting mistakes and apologizing have always been regarded as signs of weakness in the Bush family, much less “turning the other cheek.” The elder President Bush is famous for having said, “I will never apologize for the United States of America. I don’t care what the facts are!”⁸ What works is fear. Tell the people that you are protecting them, and they will give up their firstborn child. Tell them that you are at war against a new enemy and that you alone have the means and the resolve to defeat that enemy, and they will surrender their freedom, their common sense, and their most basic assumptions about morality.

To silence your critics and sidestep the charge that your method of fighting terrorism not only doesn’t work but contradicts the life and message of the Lord, the Bush administration has cloaked the entire misbegotten enterprise in the language of divine destiny. Following in the footsteps of Rome (whose Caesars were considered Sons of God), you must insist that the peace you bring, the *Pax Americana*, is the blessed by-product of an iron fist and that it is better to be feared than to be loved.

Using the rhetoric of “us against them,” you can even utter aloud the most dangerous false dichotomy ever to fall from the lips of any occupant of the White House: “Every nation in every region now has

a decision to make. Either you're with us, or you are with the terrorists."⁹ Such simplistic moral thinking, and Bush's constant use of the word *evil* to demonize the "other," could not be more diametrically opposed to the ministry and message of Jesus.

Wearing religion on his sleeve and patriotism on his lapel, this son of wealth and privilege has mistaken power for righteousness. The Jesus who is reputed to have helped him stop drinking and carousing is much more than a divine personal trainer. He is the radical teacher of an alternative and subversive wisdom. That wisdom, at odds with the power structure of his time and ours, would place Bush in the role of the rich and the merciless in most of the New Testament parables.

Besides, Christianity is not just about reforming bad habits. It is a call to become the beloved community of "resident aliens." Christian morality is not simply a religious strategy for reforming and enriching the individual but rather a call to self-sacrifice in dismantling unjust systems in the world that oppress the neighbor. It's not "all about me"; it's "all about the other."

New Testament scholar Marcus Borg has reminded us that Jesus was a spirit-person and a social revolutionary.¹⁰ He challenged official religious rhetoric, bombastic public prayers, and the insidious way that the rich and powerful use religion to bless whatever it is they are up to. Despite what some on the Religious Right and others in the power-of-positive-thinking megachurch movement have done to the Gospel, it has never had anything to do with how to get rich. There are, however, numerous warnings about the futility of serving two masters and forgetting that compassion is what marks the truly religious human being.

By constantly using the word *evil*, Bush is only doing what fundamentalists of every stripe have done for centuries—demonizing first what you can exterminate later. If you can turn the Prince of Peace into a warrior and preach that your chosen war for the chosen people is approved by God in order to protect a chosen way of life, then you can justify all wars. But only if you *silence the prophetic tradition*.

By launching an unnecessary and disastrous war and causing the deaths of countless thousands, George W. Bush has turned the essential religious disposition upside down, driving a stake through the heart of every religious tradition's fervent prayers for peace. At their center, peace is the singular obsession of all religions. Every saint has lamented war and called on us to wage peace. Each regards violence as a form of separation from God. All have asked the question, in one form or another, if every war is fought "to end all wars," then why is it that war never ends?

To make matters worse, the rhetoric of the Christian Right, which often distorts the views of some evangelicals, condemns both the faith and the patriotism of those who disagree with them. The message is as pervasive as our love affair with yellow ribbons: "real" Americans and "real" Christians support the troops and keep on shopping. In fact, many of us—more than they know but will soon realize—support the troops by wanting to *bring them home alive* and consider shopping to be a necessary but not a religious experience.

In the either-or world of the saved and the "left behind," the sanctified and the "heathen," the Bible believers and the "secular humanists," there seems to be no middle ground. That familiar bumper sticker inscribed AMERICA: LOVE IT OR LEAVE IT always left me feeling that there must be more than just two options. What if you love it so much that you want to fix what's wrong and make it better? That's how a true parent loves his or her child and how a true patriot loves his or her country.

Such simplistic thinking, such moral laziness, has preceded all the world's most hideous atrocities. Whether the Inquisition, the Crusades, or the murder of Matthew Shepard, the idea that God commands us to convert others to our way of thinking by any means necessary is a cardinal sin. To believe that the lives of others are not as important as our lives is the genesis of all cruelty and reflects our refusal to see the image of God in all people. "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Matthew 25:40).



When you live in a country that has established international rules for waging a just war, built the United Nations on your own soil to enforce them, and then arrogantly break the very rules you set down for the rest of the world, you are doing something immoral.

When the United States agreed to be the permanent home of the United Nations, it represented one of the truly hopeful moments of the twentieth century. Born out of the ashes of two world wars and dedicated to the idea that human slaughter is not inevitable when nations are talking to one another, the UN was a symbol of the possibility of peace. It was built to provide a forum that the modern world had never known—an international forum to establish universal standards for human rights and exert collective pressure on nations to solve their problems diplomatically instead of going to war.

The Right has hated it ever since. Under President Ronald Reagan, the United States began withholding dues and tried to “starve the beast,” a term first coined by David Stockman, Reagan’s budget director, and now championed by Grover Norquist. The term is most often applied to the federal deficit, which is allowed to explode in order to justify reduced spending, especially on social programs. Those who despise the UN, like Jesse Helms, took a similar approach, hoping to weaken the institution or force it to adopt our reforms by choking off its funding.

The John Birch Society (an ostensibly Christian organization whose purpose was to stop the spread of communism) has called for the United States to get out of the UN in countless billboard and newspaper ads and to stop sharing our divinely sanctioned power with two-bit dictatorships. The idea that America should participate in any forum that allows open dialogue, including criticism of the United States by other countries, is a violation of the unilateralism that the Radical Right believes is our manifest destiny. As

Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.) once put it, we should not “subcontract” our foreign policy to the UN.¹¹

Fundamentalists of all stripes love a bully pulpit but hate a roundtable. Why share power when you are right and everyone else is wrong? Who needs dialogue when your monologue is sacrosanct? Why let false prophets into the room when you can bolt the door and preach to the choir? Or to put it in terms that any good John Bircher can relate to, why let Cuba, for God's sake, spew its propaganda on the banks of the East River when every single last soul on that God-forsaken Communist island is going to hell anyway?

True fundamentalists, whether in religion or in politics, have no interest in sharing power. They seize it and then exercise it on behalf of those who need to be controlled. To reach a consensus requires compromise, and compromise has a whiff of weakness about it. To the patriarchs of the Christian Right, the smell is distinctly feminine. Winner-take-all means giving up nothing. Real men don't do roundtables. They plop themselves down at the head of the table—which is ironic, given specific instruction by Jesus to do otherwise. He taught his followers to take the lowest seat and hope that someone might invite them to move up (Luke 12:7–11).

When Bush the Elder got ready to wage the first Gulf War and repel the invasion of Kuwait (a country essentially created by the West to control the flow of oil at the mouth of the Persian Gulf), he sought the backing of the United Nations and got it. According to the rules for waging war set down by the UN, Iraq's invasion of a sovereign country could be met with force under international law. Once the mission was completed, the president knew better than to go to Baghdad, because that exceeded the mission approved by the UN. It would also spell disaster, as he explained in a book that highlights the difference between father and son:

We should not march into Baghdad. To occupy Iraq would instantly shatter our coalition, turning the whole Arab world against us and make a broken tyrant into a latter-day Arab hero. Assigning young

soldiers to a fruitless hunt for a securely entrenched dictator and condemning them to fight in what would be an unwinnable urban guerrilla war, it could only plunge that part of the world into ever greater instability.¹²

The elder Bush, an Episcopalian, seemed to look at the world in a more nuanced way, while the son's born-again approach favors a cosmic battle between good and evil. Besides, critics of the elder Bush had once called him a wimp, and for a son who lived in his father's shadow and suffered the loss of his younger sister, a kind of macho intransigence may have been a powerful way to differentiate himself from his dad. No one would ever call him a wimp. As for the Gospel's paradox of "finding strength in weakness," this is not a popular option in West Texas.

In the run-up to the war, the president's taunting and dismissive comments about the United Nations betrayed his impatience with anyone foolish enough not to agree with him. After all, who needs to share power when you are the world's only superpower? "Onward Christian Soldiers" means exactly that, and Bush reminded us all, again and again, that we did not need to get "a permission slip from France" to defend ourselves.

This anti-French sentiment worked well at first, even though it was childish and made American legislators who suggested renaming french fries "freedom fries" look ridiculous. But in the end, it was an international public relations disaster. After no weapons of mass destruction were found, no links to al-Qaeda, and no "imminent threat," we were found guilty only of blaming the French ambassador for being smart enough to oppose the war that we were stupid enough to start. Conservatives may dislike the French for other reasons (those funny-looking berets and those uppity women, for example), but they are not the "enemy" because they disagreed with our decision to invade a sovereign country in violation of international law.

Today's Christian Right, and the political Right that it legitimizes, lives by a double standard that is almost stupendous in its au-

dacity. Rules are for other people to live by. Lies are what other people tell. Sex is what other people have. When confronted with the painful truth that the Democratic presidential candidate, John Kerry, was a bona fide war hero running against a privileged Texas playboy who was AWOL from the National Guard, these great defenders of Western moral values couldn't care less about "bearing false witness." Presidential adviser Karl Rove, although he makes no explicit claim to being a Christian, is the dark political genius behind the Bush political dynasty. The tactics he employs on behalf of a "Christian" president indict the whole administration. After all, what is Christian about character assassination? There is no biblical text that says, "If you don't like the message, smear the messenger."

All that matters in the end, however, is winning. Fundamentalists are "true believers"—in religion, politics, or both. They seem unconcerned by whether anything they say or do is logical or verifiable. From pretending that "intelligent design" is a scientific theory to pretending to care about the United Nations, it's all in a day's devotional. As George W. Bush made the case for going to war against Iraq, we got a glimpse into the way his mind works. To put it in the language of logic, he is unfazed by the fallacy known as a non sequitur: he repeatedly called on Saddam Hussein to stop ignoring UN resolutions while at the same time claiming that the United Nations itself was "irrelevant" for failing to authorize the invasion he had already decided to launch. That is, it was a crime for Hussein to ignore the UN but merely pathetic for the UN to ignore Bush!

The last time—the *only* time—that the United States went to the United Nations to accuse another nation of possessing weapons of mass destruction was in October 1962. In the face of skeptics and Soviet denials, Adlai Stevenson, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, presented unmistakable photographic evidence of nuclear missiles being constructed on Cuban soil. When French President Charles de Gaulle was asked if he wanted to see the photos that brought the world to the brink of nuclear war, he waved them off, saying, "No, no, no, no. The word of the President of the United States is good enough for me."¹³

Not anymore. With good reason, much of the world has now lost the trust that is essential to international diplomacy. Hypocrisy, after all, is a form of dishonesty. When the president quotes the United Nations Human Rights Commission on Iraqi violations, he conveniently forgets that the same commission has criticized the human rights records of American allies, only to have them summarily dismissed by U.S. officials. While repeatedly condemning Saddam Hussein for violating UN resolutions, Bush seems unaware that they do not begin to compare with the number of Security Council resolutions currently being violated by American allies, including the most extensive violator, Israel.¹⁴

There is no doubt, of course, that Saddam Hussein was playing games with the weapons inspectors and thumbing his nose at the UN. What is remarkable, however, is what we now know about how *effective* the UN was at containing Iraq. Even with all its imperfections, the UN was not only not “irrelevant” but managed through embargos and sanctions to isolate a tyrant we had once befriended and armed against Iran and virtually eliminated his ability to threaten his neighbors, much less the United States.

That’s why the Bush approach to making war against Iraq left the United States looking like a hypocrite. If the Gospel’s highest calling is to love the neighbor, then what are we to make of a professing Christian president who *dismisses* his neighbor? Faith is supposed to elevate the worthiness of the stranger and make us see the face of God in every human being. But this president sees his neighbors as servants, not as children of God. If they serve us properly, they are rewarded. But if they have a mind of their own, they are rebuked. If humility is a sure sign of faith, then what is petulance but a sure sign of its absence?

Building the United Nations was itself an act of faith. It was born out of the hope that together we could put obstacles in the way of nations that are tempted to act unilaterally. After the bloodiest century on record, the UN was determined to try to prevent nations from going to war against other nations that had not invaded them or any other nation. To do this, we established the Security Coun-

cil to render judgments on the war rationales of its fellow nation-states. Bringing the war-making machinery of tyrants out of the darkness and into the light was the UN's most important mandate.

That's why it was particularly embarrassing, and a disaster in the eyes of the rest of the world, to have the UN's founding nation thumb its nose at the organization it had established for the express purpose of trying to keep other nations from doing exactly what it was about to do! Using the rhetoric of divine sanction and suggesting that nobody will protect us if we don't protect ourselves, Bush proved that international rules are fine when they work in our favor but "quaint" when they don't. In so doing, he disgraced the office by taunting those who disagreed with him and suggesting that the UN is relevant only when it follows his lead.

Forever preaching to the world about "freedom" and "liberty" and the "march of progress" that God desires for every last human being despite the best efforts of the "evildoers who hate freedom," Bush acts as if we own the franchise on such virtues and that we alone know what is best for other nations, even if they don't know what's best for themselves. Such arrogance is the antithesis of faith and brings to mind a text that is surely familiar to him: "Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye but do not notice the log in your own eye?" (Matthew 7:3).

